



EAT
THE
RICH

PREDATOR POINT

KENDRA MORENO

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PREY ISLAND



*Bare your teeth and sharpen your claws,
little rabbits.
It's time to become the predator.*

ONE



BILLIE

I thought I knew the rules of the game.

I haven't been on Prey Island in months now, but the moment I'm standing in my office with the four men who fought beside me, I'm right back there, running through the trees, my hands covered in the blood of those who dared hunt us. I've spent the last four months trying to forget everything but them, trying to heal. I'd almost started thinking they weren't going to show up and that the time on the island was just a blip in their ocean, a memory they'd rather forget. But no matter how hard I might try, I could never forget them.

No matter how badly I tried to scrape the nightmares from my mind.

You can't dispel the nightmares completely when there were happy moments in between them. Creed, Row, Jiro, and Achilles changed a part of me on that island, claimed me there just as I claimed them, and now here they are after four long months, inviting me to join them in our retribution.

I thought I knew the rules of the game, the struggle of it, but never has an answer been easier.

Now, after their announcement, we stand in this office that I built with blood-stained money, staring at each other awkwardly. I'm not sure what to do, what to ask. Hell, I'm not even sure where we stand. Sure, they came to find me, but that could just be because I'm a valuable tool. No one has said a word about a relationship. And that's if something like that can even exist in the real world. In a frenzied survival mode on the island, yes, but here, where there's judgement and the Hound Society keeping an eye on us, it's difficult to imagine we can just operate the same. We're five completely different people and society doesn't like dynamics shifted. I don't care about society, but... it can certainly make things hard.

The urge to throw my arms around them is strong. I want to wrap myself around them and hug them so tightly, none of us can breathe, but there are varying emotions in the room even now. Do I hug them? Do I give them space? Do we pretend the part where we fell in love on the island never happened?

Row seems genuinely happy to see me, his eyes bright as he stands over on the other side of the desk explaining how he had to hire a private investigator to find me, to find the others. He's dressed as perfect as always, in clothing that costs what most people make in a year. My eyes don't miss the tiny little Hound Society pin on the lapel of his suit jacket, the gold of it flashing in the dim light briefly.

Creed seems happy but unsure of what to do. His hand twitches toward me as if he wants to touch me, but he stops himself at the last moment, as if he thinks I might rebuff such attempts. I wish he'd just decide so I can be wrapped in his bear hug. He's dressed in jeans that hug his ass perfectly, boots that belong on a ranch, and a tight-fitting button-down plaid shirt. He cleans up well.

My hand begins to shake, so I curl my fingers into my pant leg to hide it.

Jiro is as aloof as I remember, mysterious as he stands in the corner perusing my shelves. There are all kinds of knickknacks there, mostly things some of the girls have given me. Crystal, aptly named, collects crystals and keeps bringing me pretty stones to decorate my shelf. I don't complain. My shelf has never looked better. But now that Jiro is there silently studying it all, I'm self-conscious. They've never seen any part of me besides Survival Billie. This is all just as new for them as it is for me. Jiro dressed in a form-fitting suit, foregoing a tie to leave the throat open, revealing hints of the tattoos beneath. His hands are in his pockets, as if he's at ease, but there's a tension in his shoulders that keeps the shaking in my hands constant.

And Achilles, poor Achilles. He stands against the wall, close to the door, looking uncomfortable. I swear I can see sweat on his brow as he looks everywhere in the room except

at me. Like he doesn't want to be here. Even with the loose beanie on his head, the jeans with rips and tears, and the tight well-worn t-shirt, he looks just as attractive as I remember. If only he'd meet my eyes.

So, I hold back because I'm unsure of where I stand. I'll let them make the move if they want to, remain where I am until someone reaches for me. And if they don't, well, then I'll hold onto the good memories.

Prey Island had been a nightmare. We'd bonded in our joint survival, but now that there is no one officially hunting us, now that it's regular life again, I don't know what that'll mean for all of us. I don't know what it means for anything.

"So, what now?" I ask, glancing between them when no one says anything. The awkward silence is starting to get to me, my brain filling in the space with lines they might say to me. No matter what they actually could say, what I imagine will always end up being worse.

"Well, we haven't figured that part out yet," Creed answers with a shrug. "Figured we'd wait until our group was complete before we set anything in stone."

I nod, understanding, but... I hesitate. What now? Do I just tell them I want them to stay? Do I offer them some food? Instead, I glance toward the door. Achilles avoids my eyes quickly.

"Well..." I breathe, confused, but hopeful. "Would you like to see my club?"

TWO



I'd built Prey Island quickly and from the ground up. When that money had hit my account and there were so many zeroes, I'd nearly spiraled at the impossibility of it. Even had I wanted to forget the island, I couldn't because there were fifty million reasons there to remind me it happened. At first, I thought maybe I could go back to the old club with Holly and work for Sam, but I'd walked in one night and immediately turned around to leave. The memories of being grabbed, of fighting, of how unsafe it was there, came crashing down on me, and I'd ran. Holly had come after me, trying to console me, but it was a stark reminder of why I couldn't go back to dancing for someone else.

I'd always dreamed of having my own club anyway. It was an easy enough decision.

And because I'm a petty bitch, I took it too far.

Prey Island was born out of anger and determination. It was built with blood money that I earned with my own blood and others. The logo I use is a mockery of the one on Row's lapel, a challenge and a test. The girls are the predators here, the ones who stalk along the patrons like leopards in the jungle, their eyes looking for their next meal. Each and every one of them is far safer here than any other club they've ever worked at. The security is not only vetted extensively, but they're handpicked by me. If they have any sort of macho man, alpha-hole mentality, they don't get hired. If they look at the girls funny when I conduct an interview by the stages, they're out. Once their extensive background check comes

back, they then have to show me how adept they can be at handling situations. Only after all those tests do they get hired on, and we have plenty of them now. They stand around the room dressed in dark suits that help them blend into the atmosphere. Not a single one of them focuses on the dancers. Instead, they look at the patrons, at their habits, their mannerisms, anticipating trouble before it begins.

Each one of them is strong enough to toss a motherfucker out on their ass.

The club has strict rules on conduct. The moment a dancer feels unsafe is the moment action is taken. No one is allowed to walk to their car alone. The security guards take turns walking them out, help them in the cars, make sure their doors are locked before they return back inside. Each girl is reassured a car whether they own one or not. A purchase I didn't mind at the time. None of them have to take a bus to work.

And perhaps the rule that is most heavily enforced, only one male patron in the private rooms at a time. There are panic buttons all over the back rooms so at any time, the dancers can press one if they're in trouble. The security guards stand at the entrance to the rooms, making sure no one extra sneaks in. It's the one rule that can't be broken by anyone but me, and even then, it would be a rare event with only the men with me. If a security guard lets it slip, it's immediately termination.

Besides all that, the security cameras here are top notch, so strong they can give exact facial details of all patrons. What happened to me won't happen to anyone else. I've made sure of it.

Because of the safety of Prey Island, word got around. Dancers line up to work here, so we're never short of girls on stage. They come for the safety, but they stay for the atmosphere and the money. Here, they hold the power. They choose their schedules. They get stipends for their outfits. They're allowed more creative freedom. The other night, a dancer did a Wednesday Addams number. It was the coolest shit I've ever seen.

“I like the way you’ve modified the symbol,” Jiro comments. Above the stage is a large neon sign of my version. The wolfhound is in blue, the rabbit in pink. I’d thought it a nice touch, too. He glances at me, his dark eyes burning into my soul and reminding me why I cared so much for him before. He’s a mystery, sure, but he’s a beautiful one. “You mock them, and they haven’t shown up?”

I shrug and glance away from him back to the stage where Crystal strides up in a witch hat and carrying a broom. The longer the club is open, the more creative they get. I can’t wait until they get completely comfortable.

“Every now and then, someone sketchy shows up and looks like they’re checking things out. It’s never the same person and there’s nothing that overtly tells me they’re with the Hound Society, but I know. It’s a feeling, the way they look at me, like I’m some idol that intrigues them. Not a one of them has done a damn thing though. They know about the club. I’m sure they’re keeping tabs on everything I do and say, but I imagine they consider it not worth the trouble of attacking since I’ve kept my mouth shut.”

“Perhaps they think it plays into their legend,” Creed comments, glancing toward Crystal as she starts to dance with the broom. His brows shoot up before he quickly glances away.

“None of them ever stay for a dance,” I add. “They just come in after paying the cover charge, walk around, and leave. I assumed I wouldn’t be the only one they’re watching.”

Creed nods. “We’ve all been followed, too.” He focuses on me. “Sketchy dudes, sometimes in suits, sometimes in casual clothes, just sit at the end of my driveway sometimes. I guess they think they’re going to get some juicy tidbits out of watching me shovel manure and scrub down the horses. I started tossing nails out there where they like to park. Nothing quite like seeing the suited bastards try to figure out how to change a tire.” He laughs at his antics, and I can imagine how funny it is to watch just like he says.

Jiro nods in agreement. “They’ve checked in on me, too, though less than Creed. I’m a little more difficult to access with my ... associations.”

Because Jiro is with the *Yakuza*. Of the group of them, Jiro is likely the most dangerous, though I’m not sure if that can really be measured. Certainly, if Jiro wanted though, he has his own organization behind him. I don’t know if they’d ever willingly take on the Hound Society—even there, they’re talked about like ghosts—but it’s interesting to remember.

Achilles, sensing everyone is sharing their insight, only shrugs. “I keep moving. This is probably the first time they’ll get to check on me. I’m good at slipping away.”

Finally, I glance over at Row with raised brows. His eyes meet mine, unflinching, and I’m reminded of his strength. It’s easy to see his suit, see the watch on his wrist worth ridiculous amounts of money, and think him useless, but he’d survived on that island with us. There’s a part of Row he hasn’t released yet, a part that belongs in the society he now calls his.

“I’m a Hound now,” he murmurs as answer, and it’s all the answer I need. Of course they’re keeping tabs on him, because he’s in their circle, owned by them now, which means none of us should really trust him. Not even after the island.

Instead of giving into that voice and reminding myself all that he’d given to protect our found family in the midst of danger, I take a step toward him and hold out my hand. There’s no hesitation from him like there might be the others. It’s the first time I reach out and there’s this collective sigh that goes around them, as if that makes things a little better.

Smiling, I look up at him. “Enough talk of the bastards who tried to kill us for now. Let me show you what I’ve built since you’ve been away.”

His smile lights up the room and reminds me that there’s a predator there behind the boyish charm and the perceived weaknesses.

Lucky for him, or unlucky depending how you look at it, there’s one in me, too.

THREE



I'd chosen to build Prey Island quickly. Apparently, the more money you have, the faster things can be built.

Imagine my surprise when I'd managed to get the club up and running in a few months. The contractor I'd worked with had been amazing, though that's because he was paid heavily to be so pleasant. With a few nice donations to the city, permits had come quickly. But I didn't build it all alone.

The person I'd asked to come work with me was Holly. Through all the time since I came back, she's been nothing but an amazing friend. She's been there for some of my worst nightmares, staying the night so someone was there to comfort me when I woke myself screaming. She's spent time with me when I've stayed holed up in my apartment in the beginning, afraid to go out because of the men in suits watching me. She's been the one to really be there for me when I needed someone, just as she always has been. It was an easy decision to ask her to come in as my manager. She oversees the club when I don't, her eyes on every part of the business. She's smart, far smarter than the last club ever gave her credit for. Hell, she has a degree in entrepreneurship of all things. She's so smart, I wonder why she didn't do anything else with her time before this.

That is until I realized she already had three other small side hustles, building them. I'd been ashamed to realize I hadn't gotten to know her as deeply as I'd like to. Now, we're far closer than before, to the point I couldn't imagine what it would be like without her.

As I lead my men through the club, showing them everything I'd managed to build, she ends up bouncing over, her bright eyes taking in each of them excitedly.

"Billie!" she exclaims and then drops her voice. "Are these the men I think they are?" she asks quietly, just loud enough for me to hear her over the music. When I nod, she brightens and focuses on all four of them. A few shift uncomfortably at her perusal. "Oh, Billie has told me so much about you!"

Jiro raises his brow. "She has?"

I can hear the question in his tone, wondering if it was wise to tell Holly when we're being watched, but the decision had been made for me rather than me making it. Apparently, I'd started talking in my sleep during some of the nightmares and she'd gotten enough to realize just how bad things had been. I'd broken down one night over a bottle of wine and told her just how much had happened and how much I missed them, so she knows everything and has been sworn to secrecy. She knows it isn't just a little thing, that it's a life or death secret, so she keeps it.

Holly smiles brightly at them before pointing to Creed. "Creed, the Navy Seal, I assume." She focuses on Jiro. "Jiro, the... brave one." I'd told her the truth, but she knows she can't say exactly what he is here in such a populated place. "Row, the rich Hound," she continues, pointing to Row with a bright smile before focusing on Achilles. "And Achilles—"

"The charmer," he says, grinning at his interruption, but just because Holly is bright and bubbly doesn't mean she's a pushover.

"The asshole," she finishes with a raised brow. "Always the asshole."

Achilles' eyes widen in surprise, as if he could never understand why he's just relegated to the asshole and nothing else. I snort at the look on his face, at his genuine surprise.

"Come now, Achilles. You didn't think I'd lie, did you?"

His eyes flicker over to me before he rolls his eyes. It's the first time he's really focused on me since we left the office,

and it does something to my insides, makes them twist and flip. Though he rolls his eyes, at the corner of his lips, the ghost of a smile twitches. Progress. He's getting more comfortable.

Holly tucks a strand of loose hair behind her ear at our interaction, her smile bright, and the ring on her finger catches the stage lights. It reminds me again of the recent news, that her man, Mark, now the head of security at the club, proposed. We'd been ecstatic, had gushed over the beautiful yellow diamond ring, before she'd asked me to be her maid of honor. I'd cried, then she'd cried, and now here we are. As the manager, she doesn't have to dance anymore unless she wants to, which just means she and Mark sneak into the private rooms at the end of the night after their shift is over every now and then. It's cute they think I don't know what they get up to, but they never let it interfere with work or safety, so it's fine. I trust Holly with anything.

"Anyways, Holly," I murmur, leaning in so she can hear me. "I'm going to head out for the night and take care of some things. I know I don't usually leave early but—"

Holly waves away my words with her hand in the air. "Of course, Boss." She winks at me and leans in to whisper. "You head on home and get reacquainted with these stallions. I've got everything here."

"You're sure?" I ask, glancing over at security and nodding to let them know I'm leaving.

"Positive. Let me know if you need anything. I'll come over with a knife and stab an asshole if they get frisky before you're ready."

Laughing, I hug her close. "You'll be the first I call when I need to shank a bitch."

"I better be," she grins. Then she shoos me. "Now go on. Get. I'll take care of everything here."

And so, I turn and smile hesitantly at them. "We can go to my place to talk without all the music. It's more secure."

And then the nerves hit about taking them to my modest sanctuary. But I've never been a coward. Any bit of fear of these men was gone the moment we survived Prey Island. Them seeing my apartment isn't the worst thing that could happen.

Right?

FOUR



The moment I open the door, all the bravado about my apartment not mattering goes out the window. It shouldn't, because honestly, these men had seen me at my smelliest. Shit, they'd been close enough to watch me pee if they'd wanted. But none of that matters as I slowly unlock my apartment door and push it open with the barest hint of hesitation. I don't outwardly show it, though. Instead, I stride inside and toss my keys on the little entryway table like I always do, hang my bag on the hook, and gesture to my apartment.

"Welcome to my humble abode," I declare, gesturing for them to come in.

At least I'm a clean person. There are no takeout containers laying around or clothes that need folded hanging anywhere. Hell, I dust religiously most of the time. I've never needed anything more than a one-bedroom apartment, so it's not a mansion by any stretch, but it's still spacious enough to have a small dining nook and a decent sized kitchen. However, the moment the four large men step into the space, it suddenly feels a little claustrophobic.

"Is anyone hungry?" I ask suddenly, wanting to distract from the feeling. "I haven't done a grocery run yet so there's probably not enough food in the fridge to feed all of us, but I can order some takeout."

"Food would be amazing," Row groans, rubbing at his stomach. "Are there any good pizza places around here?"

“I have just the place!” I declare and immediately click open my phone to do an online order. Online orders at this place usually arrive faster than when I call in. “Umm ... what kind of pizzas does everyone like?”

“Anything but anchovies,” Row offers before glancing at the others.

“Meat lover’s,” Creed says with a shrug. “I like my protein.”

“Hawaiian Bar-B-Que,” Achilles adds. “And have them put some jalapenos on there.”

When I glance at Jiro, he shrugs. “I’m not picky.”

So I end up ordering four different pizzas to make sure everyone gets what they want. When I go to put in a card number, Row slides me his instead. I hesitate, but put in the number. He’s rich enough that a pizza order shouldn’t make a big deal.

Then, once the order is in, I tuck my phone away and immediately shift on my feet. Now that I have nothing to do with my hands, things grow awkward. “Make yourselves at home,” I murmur, gesturing to the couch.

Creed takes my words to heart and sits on the couch. Row does the same on the other side. It’s strange to see such masculine men in my very feminine apartment. I mean, there’s lots of pink and neon lights and girl boss type shit. Everything is soft. Even the pillows on the couch are fuzzy.

“What’s this?” Achilles asks, pointing to my house plant.

My original plant had died a slow death when I’d been kidnapped to Prey Island. When I’d come home, he’d been a goner. I’d tried to revive him but ultimately, I’d admitted defeat and thrown it out before purchasing a new one. The new one sits in the same pot, but I’d added a two to the end of the name.

With a smile, I point to him. “That’s Keanu Leaves,” I say nonchalantly.

Achilles raises his brow, but Jiro chuckles and says, “The *famed* Keanu Leaves?”

I nod, but then realize what I’m saying and shake my head instead. “Well, the second. The first one died while we were on the island, so I had to replace him. May he rest in peace.”

“You named your plant Keanu Leaves,” Achilles mumbles. “Ridiculous.”

“I think it’s hilarious,” Row counters, smiling at me, and I appreciate his attempt to cancel out Achilles’ judgement. It’s difficult enough that the asshole is looking around my apartment like I’ve just put him in a really disgusting cage. Funny considering we’d literally been in cages on that plane.

“There’s a balcony,” I finally point out to him when he starts tugging on his collar and looking like he needs some air. I don’t know what’s gotten into him, but things are awkward enough without his incessant tugging.

Relief flashes in his eyes at my words. “I’m gonna stand out there for a second and get some fresh air.” He immediately goes to the door, tugs it open and steps outside, closing the door except for a small sliver behind him. Jiro’s eyes follow him, but no one addresses it.

“So…” Creed murmurs, glancing around. “I like your place. It’s very… feminine.”

I laugh. I’d certainly made it a home. Above the TV sits a neon light in the shape of pretty lips. The walls are painted a pale pink instead of the sterile white they’d come with. Pictures of places I’d like to go hang on the walls. There used to be tropical ones up there from some island, too, but now that spot is empty. I’d had to remove them after they kept causing me to freeze and hyperventilate. Apparently, PTSD is a bitch and though I can’t tell my therapist exactly why I needed to remove them, we’d agreed they needed to go.

“I wanted it to be comfortable,” I finally say. And it is. It’s as much of a haven as I could make it.

“It’s small,” Jiro adds. “There’s not enough security here.”

“There’s more than you realize,” I argue, but I don’t elaborate.

After Prey Island, I’d needed to feel safe. Just because you can’t see all the security doesn’t mean it’s not there. I’d made sure to hire a security company that made things discrete. I wanted them to be there, but not to focus on them and be reminded of why I needed extra safety measures. I needed some safety when I’d felt anything but safe. It went a long way to helping me heal in small increments.

We all fall into silence, and I stand at the kitchen counter shifting on my feet, suddenly not knowing what to do with myself. We all feel eons apart from each other. We’re all standing or sitting separately in my apartment, awkwardness in the air. Now that there’s no longer an immediate threat, I’m not sure how to handle this, how to bring up things. My therapist would tell me to air everything out, put it all out there, but she doesn’t understand. Our relationships were built in the midst of survival. We grew closer out of necessity and fell in love with bullets exploding around us. Now that there’s none of that, it’s almost...too calm. Still, not a single one of them has touched me and I could really use a bit of touch.

“Would it be...” I start and then have to clear my throat. “Would it be improper to give you all a hug?”

Creed jerks and blinks over at me in surprise. “Of course, you can. I just thought you’d like a little space.”

Immediately, I launch myself at him, my arms curling around his shoulders and holding him close. I’m practically sprawled on his lap as he wraps me in a bear hug that’s full of nothing but warmth and comfort. It makes me feel better instantly and I soak him in. For the first time since I came home, I feel truly safe there in his arms. Only after I’ve absorbed his warmth fully do I release him and look over at Row. He holds his arms out for me and I move off Creed’s lap to settle in Row’s, letting him wrap me tightly.

“I missed you all,” I breathe into his chest as he holds me, desperately holding onto him like he might disappear if I don’t.

“I missed you, too, Billie,” Row murmurs into my hair as he rests his chin on top of my head. “We all did.”

Slowly, I retract myself from his arms and look over at Jiro, not sure if I should throw myself at him the same way I did Creed and Row. He always holds himself so still, so stoic, that I’m never quite sure where I stand. When he nods at me, I stand and walk into his arms, wrapping myself around his middle. He’s so tall, my face presses into his chest, but it’s a great hug. His hug is less tight than the others, as if he’s afraid of hurting me, but I don’t feel any less comforted.

“If you want a hug from me, you gotta come out here,” Achilles calls from outside through the crack in the door.

I laugh and let go of Jiro before sliding open the door and stepping onto the balcony.

“You miss me, too?” he asks with a raised brow.

I hold up my hand and make the little bit symbol, making him snort before he holds open his arms. I immediately fall into them.

“You know you missed me the most. Just admit it.” When I don’t answer, I can feel his scowl rather than see it. “Fine, I might have missed you.”

“I missed you, too, you prick,” I say as I hug him. “Even if you’re delusional.”

A knock comes from the front door and every single one of us tenses. My heart rate kicks up before the person knocks again and calls out, “pizza delivery” through the door. I relax and push my fear aside.

“Can someone get that?” I ask, holding Achilles just a little tighter, just in case he decides to fly away on me. Of the four men, he’s the one I worry about the most.

The smell of pizza hits me a second later and my stomach growling separates us.

Achilles comes inside, but leaves the balcony door open.

As if at any moment, he might just need to escape.

FIVE



Four boxes of pizza sit on the table between us, the lids open, and the pizzas slowly being demolished. I have to say that Achilles' choice is my favorite. The flavors work together in a way that I don't expect and I'm a fan. Jiro avoids it, instead going for the plain peperoni I'd ordered. I'd guessed correctly that he'd prefer something more minimal.

"So, tell me again why it took so long to come see me," I finally say after we've started slowing down on the pizza.

Four months. It has been four long months since I'd last seen them and I'd been driving myself crazy about it. Part of me was starting to think they'd forgotten about me, that they wanted to forget the island and everything on it. I would understand if that were the case even if it would hurt. There are parts of the island I wish I could forget, too. But still, I'd assumed they'd show up sooner if they were going to. At the three-month mark, I'd started being less hopeful. I'd stopped looking for them in a crowd and instead focused on the club. And now here they are.

"None of us knew any information," Jiro murmurs. "We barely knew each other's names, let alone addresses."

"I hired a private investigator," Row says. "All I had was names, descriptions, and the city in which you flew into. I hadn't thought to ask for any other information and had paid to circumvent some parts of the flight process in favor of making sure everyone got home okay. I had to find the others first before I came for you. Took a whole month to find this

asshole,” he says, jerking his thumb at Achilles. “Apparently, he doesn’t stay in any one spot for long.”

Achilles doesn’t comment, just eats his pizza in silence and sweats, as if he can’t stand to stay in the apartment. Weird that I hadn’t noticed his discomfort for small spaces before. Then again, it’s not like we were living in a house on Prey Island.

“And once I found them,” Row continues. “Then we all joined together and waited for the P.I. to find you. Thing was, I didn’t need him for that. I got smart and asked around in the society. Found out about the club faster than anything else.”

“So they’ve for sure been keeping tabs on me,” I nod. I’d expected it, especially with the watchers constantly being around, but now I have confirmation that I’m not crazy.

“They’ve kept tabs on all of us. It isn’t every day that five people escape Prey Island alive, let alone together.”

“It’s also not every day a Hound helps four prey get off,” Creed points out.

Row shifts. “Yes, well, they weren’t happy, but survival is survival and there are no rules against it. Some of them have started saying I was playing a very elaborate game, a creative one. I received no punishment for how I chose to hunt so I stopped worrying about it.”

Nodding, I take another bite of the pizza in my hand. I wait until I’ve finished the bite before I ask the question no one else is seemingly brave enough to ask. “So ... how do we do this? Taking them down. I assume you four have a simple plan at least already?”

Jiro shakes his head. “No.”

Creed shoots him a look, as if annoyed, but elaborates. “We have an in with Row. That’s about as far as we’ve gotten. We figured it would be best if you were with us to discuss how best to mess with the fuckers.”

I glance between them, noticing all the little quirks I hadn’t had the pleasure of seeing before. Like how they eat pizza. Achilles puts two pieces of pizza together and eats it like a

sandwich. Jiro eats it like you're supposed to, but I get the feeling he'd use a fork and knife if offered the utensils. Row holds his up above his head like he's back in college and getting the full effect of the cheese. Creed squeezes his pizza together and eats it folded after he dips it in ranch. Despite noticing all these new details, despite the uncertainty between us, I still feel safer than I've felt in a while.

"I don't really have space for everyone to sleep..." I start, frowning around the room. Sure, I have a couch, but my bed is a queen. It's not like the other three can sleep there. Both Creed and Jiro won't even fit comfortably on the couch I don't think.

Creed waves my words away. "Pretty sure Achilles will set up his hammock out on the balcony. And I've slept on worse things than a floor."

Jiro nods. "The floor is fine."

"I have pillows and blankets. Let me grab them," I say, standing up after wiping my hands.

"I'll help!" Row offers and follows me through the doorway into my room.

I have plenty of pillows because I like a lot of them on my bed. I immediately start grabbing some and handing them to Row before opening the closet and digging out all the extra blankets I have. Some of them may not be big enough for the bigger guys.

"You have so many pillows," Row laughs, dutifully taking the stack I hand him.

"Look, if a girl wants to build a fort, she's gotta have plenty of pillows." I tuck some of the blankets under my arm and turn to look at him. "Don't come after my pillows."

He tilts his head, a silly smile on his face that makes my heart skip a beat. "The last four months were agony for me," he admits softly. "It took everything in me not to immediately find you."

"Why didn't you?" I ask, honestly wanting to know the answer. Of all the guys, it would have been easiest for him to

come see me.

He sighs. "I'm being watched constantly. I may be a Hound, but I've already proven my loyalty isn't with them. They can't do anything about my title now, but they can do plenty against you. That's why..." He pauses and clears his throat. "I think you should marry me."

I blink in surprise. We're standing here with pillows and blankets up under our arms, and he asks something like that? "Uh..."

"The Hound Society can't touch immediate family. It's part of the rules. It would protect you," he offers as a reason. A very understandable one, but...

I glance down at my arms full of blankets and pillows. "This might be the least romantic proposal I've ever gotten."

His brows arch. "Have you gotten a lot?"

Shrugging, I shift my load. "Of course. Drunk dudes propose all the time in clubs. Especially when your tits are out and in their face."

Snorting at my description, he shakes his head. "Ouch. And they were still more romantic than me, huh?"

I grin. "Well, you kind of declared the marriage thing while we're grabbing pillows and blankets for the other three men I also love. Also, it wasn't really asking. More like suggesting a plan." I tilt my head. "Do you have a ring?"

He grimaces. "You know what? Forget I asked. Next time, I'll ask a little better."

Snorting at the blush that rises on his face, I shake my head. "I don't think it's necessary just yet, but we'll talk about it, yeah? But I'm looking forward to whatever you might come up with." Winking at him, I walk out of the room with my blankets as if he hadn't just asked me to marry him. I toss the blankets and pillows on the couch.

To all the guys, I say, "There's only a single bathroom. Toilet seat goes down after you use it. I swear if someone leaves it up and I go to pee in the middle of the night and fall

in, I'm waking each of you up with my wet toilet bowl ass and then shoving your face in it."

Jiro chuckles and glances over at Creed. "Best remember that, cowboy."

Creed grimaces, but I only shrug.

"Otherwise, *mi casa is su casa*. Now, I'm going to go take a shower."

And then because Row takes that moment to drop all his pillows on the couch beside the others and his face is still red with embarrassment, I grab a handful of his shirt and drag him after me.

SIX



My bathroom is the best part of my apartment in my eyes. It's not small, though it's not large either. The double vanity makes it so I rarely use one of them but the decent stand in shower is nice enough. It would be awesome to have a tub, but the really nice shower makes up for it. Once I draw Row inside, I close the door.

"You know," I say as I reach into the shower and turn the water on so it'll warm up. "I thought rich people were more uppity about this sort of thing?"

Grinning at me as he starts to unbutton his shirt without hesitation, he raises a brow. "You mean the fact that you have four boyfriends?"

"Well, no one has really put a title on anything—"

"I'll put a title on us right now," Row declares. "I'm definitely okay with being one of your boyfriends."

"No problems with it?" I ask, unsure if he really means that.

He drags his shirt off and drops it to the ground despite it probably costing a fucking fortune. It reveals all his muscles in all their glory, making my mouth water. "Why would there be?" he asks, leaning forward to cage me against the sink. My heartrate spikes. "I'm here with the sexiest woman alive, pressed against her—"

"But we're not on the island anymore," I point out. "Things didn't fade for you?"

“If anything, I want you now more than ever,” he groans, running his hands down my sides. “I’ve missed the goddess who fucked me on the bank of a river while we were being hunted.”

He reaches up and circles my neck with his hand, resting it there.

“What happened to the mouse?” I breathe, pressing back against him.

“Oh, I was never the mouse, Billie.” He leans into my ear. “I’ve always been the Hound.”

It’s the first time I’ve truly seen him fully drop his mask, and the man underneath isn’t as tame and soft as he’d made it seem. Somehow, that thought only turns me on even more, that he’s a man of layers, of secrets.

When he leans back to look in my eyes, I can’t help but tease. “Would you still bear the title of boyfriend if you’ve proposed to me? Wouldn’t that make you a fiancé?”

He laughs, his hard length pressing against the V of my thighs. I want nothing more than to spread my legs and let him take me right now, and I plan on doing just that in a moment. The steam of the shower begins to spill from the top of it, making the room humid.

“You didn’t say yes,” he points out, leaning forward to nip my chin.

“I didn’t say no either.”

He stills, looks into my eyes, searching. The slow smile that pulls at his lips does things to me I haven’t felt since we were on the island. “Let’s get these clothes off.”

He reaches for the fastening of my pants and deftly pops it free before doing the same to his. We both focus on kicking them off before he’s dragging my shirt over my head. With quick fingers, he reaches behind me and pops my bra free in a way only experience can do. I’m not wearing any underwear and he growls when he realizes I’m fully naked. My own eyes drop and linger on his cock where it stands proudly between us.

“Get in the shower,” he commands, dragging me over to it. He pulls the sliding door open and ushers me inside before following and closing it again. The warmth of the shower spray hits me and heats my skin even more. The moment we’re in the spray, he wraps a hand around the back of my neck and drags me into him for a feverish kiss.

The first touch of his lips makes me so wet, I can feel the pulse between my thighs. When his tongue sweeps inside my mouth, I nearly come undone. Those fingers thread into my now wet hair and hold tightly, directing me. He’s gentle, far more gentle than the others, but it’s one of the endearing qualities about him. Despite his clear penchant for darker thoughts that he hides behind a mask, he’s careful to not hurt me.

I’m not made of porcelain, however, and it’s been four months.

Reaching between us, I grip his cock in my hands and squeeze, making him jerk against me. He hisses between his teeth as I start to stroke, pumping him with the help of the water.

“I’ve yearned for your touch since we’ve been apart,” he growls against my skin as he ducks down and presses his lips against my neck. “I’ve dreamed of this a hundred times.”

“It’s not a dream now,” I pant, stroking him faster. His hips jerk with my movements, desperate for release.

His hand suddenly snaps out and grabs my wrist, stopping me from stroking him. “If you keep doing that, I’m going to spill in the drain.”

“And?” I tease, leaning in to run my tongue along his earlobe.

“I plan on spilling inside you.” He pulls my hand from his length and turns me, facing me toward the wall. “Hands on the wall, goddess, so that I can worship you.”

I do as he says, expecting his length to press against me. Instead, once I’m braced against the wall, I feel his hands

along my ass, smoothing there, caressing. And then he kneels down behind me.

“So perfect,” he breathes. Water has to be splattering him in the face, but he doesn’t seem to care. “Spread those legs for me.”

I don’t protest as I follow his direction, spreading my legs apart, opening myself up to him. I look over my shoulder, desperate to see what he’s doing. When our eyes meet, his gaze turns teasing. With our eyes held on each other, he leans forward and runs his tongue from my clit all the way up, making me jerk against him. Then he buries his face in my pussy and starts to suck. My legs start to shake immediately, my hands slipping against the tiles on the wall. His hands run up the inside of my thighs as he swirls his tongue, dragging me higher. The feeling in my lower stomach builds fast, shoots high, and crashes down.

I’m embarrassed that the orgasm hits me so quickly. My legs shake as I come against his tongue, as I cry out my release and slip a little more on the wall. He chuckles against me, the vibrations going straight to my clit and making me leak.

“Someone has missed me just as much,” he purrs before licking me one last time and standing. “You taste just like I’d imagine a goddess would.”

I look over my shoulder again at him. “Do I get to taste you?”

“Later,” he groans. “Right now, I need to fuck you until you think about saying yes.”

He presses his cock against my entrance and I push back against him, forcing him to slip in a little faster. His fingers grip my hips as he works his way in. I’m so wet, it’s not difficult. Fuck, I’m so ready that I thrust back against him, like a dog in heat begging to be taken.

“So eager,” he groans. “So ready.”

“You don’t have to be so gentle,” I growl, fighting against his hold on my hips. “I’m not delicate.”

“You mistake my movements for gentleness,” he growls, before reaching up and circling my neck. He jerks me backward, forcing my back to arch. He leans in as he seats fully inside me, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “When you have no idea of the violence it’s taking to move slow.”

“Let the violence out,” I rasp, my fingers touching the wall but doing nothing. He’s holding me back by my neck, his other hand snaking around to cup my breast and offer support there, too. “I don’t need you to hold back.”

His fingers tighten on my neck, decisions flickering in his eyes. Then he kisses me roughly and starts to move. “Whatever the goddess wants.”

There’s nothing gentle about him this time. He bends his knees and fucks up into me, making me cry out with the pleasure of his thrusts. His hands grip me tightly, the one on my neck cutting my air off slightly, the one on my breast using it to fuck me harder. I shake with the force of his thrusts, my thighs and ass taking the brunt of the force. The hot shower water splatters us, my hair hanging wet around my shoulders as he drags me through the motions.

He jerks out of me in a swift movement that has me mewling in disappointment, but he spins me around and slams me against the wall. “I want to see your ecstasy,” he growls, before jerking my legs up and entering me again.

I scream my pleasure as he fucks me from the new angle, as he fucks me just as hard, pinning me back against the corner, holding me up with one hand. His other hand wraps in my hair and drags me forward for a kiss. Our tongues tangle, desperate to get closer, hungry for more. When he breaks the kiss and cups my cheek, I blink open my eyes to meet the bright whiskey color of his.

“I love you,” he grunts, and then his hand is on my throat again. “Next time I ask you to marry me, you’ll say yes.”

“What makes you so sure?” I pant, gripping his shoulders tightly. My nails are probably digging in, but he doesn’t complain.

“You’ll say yes,” he repeats. He slams inside me harder. “And I’ll keep asking until you do.”

In my mind, I’ve already said “yes” a million times, but he doesn’t need to know that, not right now, not when he’s very much the Hound over the mouse. I’m enjoying it too much.

With his powerful thrusts and his soft moans, I spiral for the edge. “Oh god,” I cry, my legs beginning to shake where they wrap around him.

“Yes,” he snarls. “Come for me, goddess.”

I jerk against him, my head thrown back as the orgasm rocks through me, taking me out. He moans with me, jerking hard into me, riding me through the orgasm before I feel his cock start jumping inside me. His warmth fills me, and I moan at the feeling of it, at the primal feeling that overcomes me.

I want to wear each of them like a brand.

We pant against each other, trying to get our bearings. Carefully, he sets my legs back on the ground, his arms around me in case the shaking means I won’t be able to stand. He holds me against him.

“I love you,” he breathes. “I’ve loved you since the first moment I saw you on the screen, flicking off the cameras.”

A surprised chuckle leaves my lips. “I love you, too. Hound *and* mouse.”

He holds me tighter at my words, his face buried in my shoulder, before he leans back and sighs. “What do you say we actually take a shower now?” The lopsided grin he flashes at me only makes me fall a little bit more.

“Turn around,” I command. “I’ll wash your back, and then you can wash mine.”

He presses a quick peck against my lips. “Deal.”

And something that had been panicked before settles, and everything feels a little bit more right in my world.

SEVEN



I wake up woven between Creed and Row where they'd made their way into my bed. I don't know at what point Creed appeared. I only know that I'd felt strong arms pulling me against him in the middle of the night, woke up in a brief panic, and then settled back in when I realized who it was. Row had snored softly on the other side, tucked in against me. I slept better in their arms than I have since I came home.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I sit up and stretch, trying my best not to wake the others up as I do so. When my shoulders no longer feel the strain of being sandwiched between two large men in a queen size bed, I glance down at Creed beside me. He looks so peaceful as he lays there, his face free of worry lines, the short beard trimmed on his jawline begging me to run my hands along it. I don't know how long I stare at him, but it must be long enough to catch his attention.

"If you look at me much longer while I sleep, I'm going to think you're planning on cutting out my kidneys," he grumbles, his voice still husky.

Laughing, I press a quick kiss against his nose. "I didn't know you were awake."

"Of course, you didn't." He cracks his eyes open the barest amount. "Row still snoring?"

"Yep."

He sits up and stretches, his large arms flexing as he does so. It makes me want to lick them. "Wake him up. We should

spend the day figuring out what the next step is.”

Turning over, I gently push at Row’s shoulder. When he doesn’t react, I shove a little harder.

“What?” he groans.

“Creed says to wake up.”

He cracks an eye open, his face etched in a grumpy mask. “What bloody time is it?”

“Seven in the morning,” Creed answers cheerfully as he climbs from bed.

“Mother of God, let me rest in peace.” Row covers his face with a pillow. “Waking up at the ass crack of dawn. Blasphemy.”

Climbing from bed after Creed, I stretch some more and follow him on wobbly legs into the living room. My first realization is that no one else is sleeping. Achilles is sitting on the couch, watching TV, a cup of coffee in his hand. The TV screen flickers with some documentary about meerkats. Achilles seems really into the show. When he realizes we’re in the room, he holds up the coffee mug.

“You need better coffee. This shit has so many preservatives in it,” he grunts.

I scowl. “You could have gotten your own.”

In the kitchen, Jiro is moving around the stove, stirring things in skillets. Groceries are scattered across the counter, as if he wasn’t sure where to put things away. The smell of bacon and eggs hits me a second later.

“Do you need any help?” I ask, watching him. He’s wearing my pink frilly apron over his button-down shirt and slacks, his sleeves rolled up. Good god, he’s never looked so sexy.

“I’ll take care of it,” he answers with a glance over his shoulder. “You can relax.”

The door to the balcony sits open, the curtains blowing in the breeze every now and then. I can see Achilles’ hammock

hanging from the railing and a hook he probably screwed into my wall to hold it, the bastard. But my mind latches onto the open balcony.

As if he can't stand to be shut in completely.

"We're being watched again," Jiro comments as he flips bacon. "There were three different men watching me when I went to the store." He turns to look at me. "Your apartment is too much a risk being in the city. It's too easy to watch you without suspicion."

"And where else can we go?" I ask with a raised brow. I really don't expect him to have an answer.

"Creed's Ranch," Row grumbles as he stumbles into the room in nothing but a pair of pajama pants. My eyes trail down his body, taking in his sleepiness, and something about the way he runs a hand through his hair and yawns endears him to me. "It's remote, has a long driveway, and it's more difficult for them to blend in."

Creed nods. "He's right. We should head out that way as soon as possible."

"To Tennessee?" I clarify, staring at them. When Creed nods, I sigh. "I can't just up and leave. I have a business to run," I start, every excuse in the book popping up, but when I think about it more, I shake my head. "Actually, never mind. Obviously, if we plan on taking them down, we'll have to leave at some point. Can I have today to get some things in order, though? I was lucky enough to come back to a home before, but I want to make sure things run smoothly while I'm gone this time."

"Of course," Jiro nods, putting food onto plates. I watch as he throws some eggs, bacon, and even a couple of pancakes on a plate before setting it on the counter and gesturing for me to eat. "We'll leave in the morning. It's a twenty-hour drive—"

"Drive?" I interrupt. "We can't just fly?"

Row shakes his head. "Too easy to track, too easy to arrange for a plane to go down. A car trip is better." He settles in the seat next to me at the counter.

“I don’t have a car. Don’t really need one here,” I point out.

“Leave that to me,” Row declares, taking a mug of coffee from Creed as he pours it. The mug he gets is a Boss Bitch one Holly gave me after I opened the club, and it makes me laugh. Creed has one that’s covered in flowers. The one he settles in front of me is one with an alpaca on it. Achilles is using a mug that says, “Go get ‘em, Tiger,” with a lipstick-wearing tiger on it. There’s nothing quite as sexy as men comfortable in their own sexuality. I’d once dated a douche bag who was scared holding one of my girly mugs would make him gay. Thank god I’d gotten rid of him long before Prey Island.

“I need to go to the club,” I announce.

“Breakfast first,” Jiro commands, his eyes on me. “We go to the club at your normal time, so no one suspects any crazy plans. Instead, after you eat, work on packing up the things you may need.”

When he hands me a fork, I raise my brows at him. “Yes, sir.”

The heat that flickers in his eyes as he hands out plates to everyone else almost makes me ignore the food and eat him instead.

Almost.

After all, Jiro turns out to be an amazing cook and I wouldn’t want his hard work to go waste.

EIGHT



By the time I'm due to open up the club, I have a suitcase packed with all my comfiest clothing, all my toiletries ready, and I even have Keanu Leaves all ready to go. At two in the afternoon, the five of us take a cab to my club, squeezing inside so that we all fit. When we get there, Holly is already waiting in her car, spreading hot pink lipstick across her lips in her rearview mirror. When she sees us, her eyes brighten and she waves as if she hasn't seen me in years.

She's always like that; bright, bubbly, beautiful.

Holly is one of those people you're just happy to be around. Her personality is bright, her smile contagious. You could never be mad at her, not only because of her smile, but because she will literally burst into tears. The first time she thought I was upset with her, it had taken me nearly an hour to calm her down and reassure her it was all okay. By the time she was calm, I realized I wasn't annoyed anymore that she'd broken the key off. Sneaky, sneaky Holly.

"Hey, y'all!" she exclaims, climbing from her car. "Things go alright last night?" She wiggles her eyebrows knowingly and my face flushes.

"Splendid," I reply, grinning. "But I do have something I need to talk to you about."

I unlock the doors and let her inside before gesturing for the guys to follow. Once we're in the club and the door is closed, I take Holly's hand before she can go put her things away.

“I have a favor to ask,” I tell her.

She grins. “It’s happening, isn’t it?” she asks excitedly. “I know you said you wanted to kick their asses, but now that these four have showed up, I bet things are moving!”

I nod even as I watch the others wander off in the club to give us space. Holly squeals and lowers her voice. “Did you have dirty reunion sex last night? Tell me about it. I bet it was hot!”

Laughing at her excitement, I pull her further away from the others and whisper, “Just with Row. We’re still adjusting.”

Her excitement makes me smile. It’s infectious. At least there’s one person who believes in me.

“I always knew you were a badass,” Holly gushes, setting her purse on the nearest table. “I told Mark you were a badass, but he didn’t believe how much.”

“Which brings me to the real stuff,” I sigh and grab the manilla folder from my own bag. I hesitate before handing it over to her, watching her brows furrow in confusion.

“What’s this?”

My voice doesn’t waver. I’d practiced the line in the mirror this morning. “If I don’t come back, if something happens to me, the club and all my assets will transfer over to you.”

Holly’s head snaps up from where she’d flipped open the folder. Her eyes are wide with surprise. “Billie, what the hell? I can’t accept—”

“You will,” I say confidently. “This is only if I die. I want to make sure someone keeps sticking their middle finger up to the Hound Society when I’m gone. I know you can handle this while I’m away. You’re capable and Mark is here to help.” I roll my bottom lip between my teeth and grimace. “I just wanted you to know there’s a chance I won’t be coming back.”

Holly looks between me and the folder before she turns through the pages, reading the information there. Inside of it, I’d placed a contract, a will, a living trust, and all the information needed for every part of keeping the club running.

I can see her distress at the thought of me not coming back and she's hiding it behind reading the papers.

"I've set up the apartment and stuff to pay automatically while I'm gone. There shouldn't be anything to worry about."

She meets my eyes. "Keanu Leaves?"

"I'm taking him with me."

Holly nods. She understands what this is all about. When I'd had panic attack after panic attack about the plant dying, she'd been there to reassure me it was just a trauma response. There'd been a lot of those responses in the four months since Prey Island. Even now, loud sounds can make me flinch or even duck. The moment someone moves toward me that I don't know, I freeze. I'd nearly stabbed someone the first week at the club because they'd tapped me on the shoulder. It had been the wakeup call I'd needed, and I'd gone to a therapist seeking help. I could only say so much, but the therapist seemed to understand that there were things I wouldn't say. Still, we'd made progress.

"You can't die," Holly says suddenly, her voice stern. "You kick their asses, remind them how much of a badass you are, but you come home. I can't have my wedding without you."

I drag her into a hug. Her arms hold onto me tightly. These same arms kept me from falling apart when I came back. I owe her so much.

"I plan on being right beside you to hold your flowers for it," I say into her hair. "Don't you worry. This is all just back up in case something goes wrong."

The door opens just as we both turn and more of the workers start streaming in. Their eyes go to the four intense looking men in the room and then to me.

"They're with me," I call. "Just tell them to move if they're in your way."

And then there isn't as much time for talking as we go about setting things up for the opening in a few hours.



Paperwork. The worst part about owning my own club is the mountains of paperwork that never seems to end. File this, print that, keep everything. Ugh, it's the worst. The guys are out in the club, hopefully enjoying themselves, while I finish up all the things I need to. At the end of the night, I'll be giving Holly all the keys and passwords, the final step before I'm free to go.

God, it seems like such a dream.

I'd imagined fucking things up for the Hound Society a million times. Hell, I'd even hoped they'd show up when I opened the club, some sick, twisted part of me wanting them to witness my resentment. I almost expected the Grand Master to make an appearance, but of course he wouldn't. No one so important would appear at a gentleman's club in Colorado. It was a silly thought then but it makes even less sense now. I'd barely had any interaction at all with the man.

Once I finish all my work, I stand and leave my office, my brows going up when I find all four guys standing along the wall rather than enjoying themselves. On the stage, a dancer sways back and forth, her tits and the piercings through her nipples displayed nicely. Some man howls at her before throwing twenties.

Achilles is watching her closely, his eyes taking in the men swarming the stage. Creed is looking anywhere but at the stage where she dances, his face slightly flushed. Jiro only looks toward the door of my office and then at me once I open it. Row is blushing, his eyes flickering between the ceiling and the woman on stage.

"You can watch her," I laugh, finding humor in their discomfort. "Neptune is an amazing dancer. One of our top earners."

Row glances at the stage with my words and then quickly looks away again.

Achilles looks over at me and raises his brow. “Didn’t you say you were a dancer?” he asks, a challenge.

I snort. “If you want me to take my clothes off, all you have to do is ask,” I tease.

His eyes light up, heat in them as he glances at the stage again. “Why don’t you get on up there and show us what you can do,” he says, leaning in. In my ear, he whispers, “Freya,” as if he needed that word to set the tone.

I don’t go by that name anymore. Too many memories of Hounds calling me that name and wanting to hunt me are attached to it now, but I can see the challenge in his eyes. He’s goading me, thinking he can play some sort of game he’ll win. He wasn’t there when I’d had to dance on the island. He wasn’t here when I’d had a panic attack the first time I’d attempted to dance again. This time though, I’m not alone. I have my rocks with me.

“Looking to get a public hard-on?” I ask with a grin. “Because I can arrange that.”

“Maybe I am,” he murmurs, pressing a hand against the wall near my face and boxing me in. “Maybe I want to see just what it is Creed and Row witnessed on the island.”

I shrug and glance over at Holly when she comes strolling up. “Fine. Holly, can you let Paul know I’ll be going up in five?”

Holly smiles brightly. “Sure thing!”

“Have a seat, boys,” I tell them, pushing them toward the stage. “And remember, here, in this club, you’re the prey.”

Then I leave them to the show of Neptune blowing a twenty off her pussy. The men are dumb enough to think it’s her actual pussy blowing it off, but it’s a simply trick of her huffing air up her stomach while she pulls a yoga pose with her legs in the air. Still, they eat it up and I grin at the hoots and hollers.

Nothing makes money quite like tricking men into thinking they’d ever stand a chance with someone like Neptune.

In reality, she'd chew them up and spit them out.
Just as all boss babes do.

NINE



I t's been a while since I've put on a dance outfit. After my first couple of failed attempts at returning to dancing, I'd stopped trying. I still have all the outfits, keep them in the club even in case one of the other girls has an emergently rip and needs to borrow one, but tonight, I don't need any of my old ones. I go for something extra special, something I'd had made just for this club and in case my men ever came calling. I'd had this plan all thought out, that I'd hide as they looked for me and come out on stage for them, pretending I didn't know they were there until I crawled across the stage. Circumstances have changed now, but the piece is still too gorgeous not to put on.

Covered completely in sparkles that shine in the light, the outfit I wear is more akin to a string bikini, but that's not the highlight of the get up. As I look in the mirror, I put the special sparkly rabbit ears on my head. Then I carefully pin the matching rabbit tail bedazzled with jewels above my ass. I study it all together in the mirror.

"This is silly," I sigh, watching my reflection carefully. There are some scars I can't cover up on my body, many of them earned by my survival on the island.

"I think it's hilarious," Holly muses. "Even more so when you reveal the surprise."

Because they're not just rabbit ears. They're special.

"I should have said no," I grumble, goosebumps rising on my arms at the chill in the changing room.

“But then you wouldn’t have gotten the chance to wear this cute number you’ve had prepared since the club opened,” Holly teases. “And where would the fun in that be? Now go drive them mad. Make some money.”

She playfully spanks me on the ass and ushers me out of the room, her clipboard in her hand as she double checks which girls are here.

As I walk toward the stage in my stripper heels, I hear Paul, the DJ, start his announcement.

“We have a very special treat for you all tonight. Our very own, Freya, is taking the stage for the first time in our club. Get your big bills ready, gentleman. Goddesses deserve your sacrifice.”

And then music starts. Rock, just like I like it.

As I stroll out on stage, my eyes go right to the four men sitting at the base of it, their eyes riveted on me. Achilles looks amused by my rabbit ears, his brows raised at the sight. I can almost hear his thoughts, that I’d told them they were the prey and here I am dressed like just that, but in due time he’ll understand.

As I wrap my fingers around the pole and stroll around it, more men come forward, eager to throw money at me, to see it all. Creed adjusts himself in his seat, clearly already bothered. Jiro is stoic, just the same as always, as he watches me closely. Row looks enamored, his lips parted in arousal.

I’ve been a dancer for a long time, so even though I haven’t danced on stage in a few months, I’d still practiced, my muscles remembering the movements. I shake my ass and climb the pole like the best of them, spinning around it and dragging shouts of excitement from men who will never get to touch me.

My men get that honor.

As the song hits a crescendo and drags me to the ground, I clack my heels together and crawl along the stage, coming in close to Row. He leans on the stage, his eyes bright with excitement as I single him out first. I wrap my fingers around

the tie he wears and drag him in, bringing his lips so close, he can feel my breath. He thinks I'm about to kiss him, but before he can hit home, I shove him back in his seat and he howls in frustration. I know he'll punish me for that later.

I put my finger under Creed's chin, and he lets me guide him forward. He's prepared for me to shove him back, but I do the opposite, grabbing his head suddenly and jerking his face into my tits, rubbing against him.

The crowd goes wild, jealousy in many of their eyes.

When I reach Jiro, he watches me with his dark eyes, his face a mask of ease. I'm tempted to try and shake it up. I reach for him, and he comes forward willingly, but instead of allowing me to grab his head, he takes my hand and presses a kiss against my knuckles, his eyes on mine the entire time. I flush, nearly losing my momentum at his chivalry, but I gather my wits and pull my hand back before I turn to Achilles. I grab his hand and run it down my body, between my breasts, letting him stroke along my stomach before placing it on my rabbit ears.

"Always the prey," he muses. The music is so loud, I can hardly hear him over it, but I read his lips just fine. He runs his tongue along his teeth as if he wants to eat me.

Using his fingers, I jerk the rabbit ears off my head, revealing the tiger ears behind them. I reach behind and unpin the rabbit tail until it unfurls into the striped tail I wear proudly.

"Never the prey," I correct him as I bring his hand to my mouth. I'm sure he thinks I'm going to suck his finger. Instead, I bite down. Hard. He curses and jerks back, a promise of retribution in his eyes.

The song comes to an end, and I stand wearing only the bikini, the tail, and the ears, money still raining down on the stage in appreciation of my number. I hadn't even had to take my top off. I wink at the men around me before Holly comes up to help me down.

“Make sure the girls get to split all that between them,” I tell her as someone else goes to sweep up the money. After all, I don’t need it.

As I come around the stage over to the guys, Row’s eyes take my outfit in. “How much for a private dance?” he asks, grinning.

I laugh and take his hand, dragging him toward the rooms. Achilles, Creed, and Jiro follow, their eyes on me and me alone despite other girls getting ready to take the stage.

The guard at the entrance of the private rooms is Holly’s fiancé, Mark, a large and gentle guy that turns into a brute when one of the girls are uncomfortable. He’s a sweetheart, and when I come strolling to the rooms with four men in tow, he holds up his hand. “Only one person in the private dance rooms at a time with you,” he says, reminding me of the rules.

“I’m well aware, but they’ve asked for a private dance.”

He narrows his eyes. “The rules—”

“Are here for protection, yes. But I’ll never be safer than with these four.” I lean in. “It’s them, Mark.”

“*The* guys?” he asks, his brows raised. “Holly said they were here, but I wasn’t sure I believed her.” He looks back at the guys. “Thanks are in order for saving our girl.”

Row snorts. “She saved us plenty of times. Billie isn’t a damsel in distress.”

“No,” Mark says. “She’s not.” He glances at me again. “You’ll press the button if you need me?”

“Of course,” I tell him, smiling gratefully.

“Room four is open,” he answers with a nod and lets us by.

The rule had been a hard one set after my abduction. We don’t take any chances here. I appreciate that he’d been prepared to go to battle to protect me.

We stroll inside the room and I close the door behind them, watching as they take their seats.

“So, we’re doing this?” I ask, grinning.

“Are we allowed to touch?” Row asks, his eyes on the tiger ears as he unbuttons his coat.

Grinning, I flip the switch for the mood lighting. “Only if you earn it,” I tease.

Row settles on the plush couch, his eyes on me. “Deal,” he says before patting the couch. “Have a seat, fellas. Something tells me we’re about to have our minds blown.”

TEN



The rules of private dances go as follows.

One, only one customer in the room at a time. We don't take any chances with our girls anymore.

Two, the money is paid upfront.

Three, there's no touching the girls, but they can touch you.

Every single one of those rules get broken when I bring my men in. The rooms are set up as many are. A circular plush couch sits like a halfmoon in front of a tiny stage. There's a pole on the stage to give the girls something to swing around and work on, but much of the private dances are spent on the couches.

Music filters in through speakers above us, the soundproofed walls keeping this music from clashing with that outside. In here, it's more of a pop sexy style of music but that's okay. I don't need my usual music to really set the mood. I can do that all on my own.

Climbing onto the stage, I spend the first minute dancing on it, spreading my legs for them, drawing their eyes. Only once they all seem completely hypnotized do I step off the stage and join them on the couch. I straddle Creed's legs, opening myself above him. His hands immediately go to my hips after a brief hesitation to make sure I'm okay with it and help me grind against his hard cock I can feel straining in his pants. I dance on him, touching his shoulders, his chest, clenching my fingers in his hair. When I lean down, he grabs a

fistful of my hair and drags me down for a hard kiss, his tongue tangling with mine briefly before he lets go and groans.

“Fuck,” he says, staring up at me. “You’re so beautiful.” And then he grabs me by my hips and lifts me, sharing me with Jiro sitting next to him.

I hesitate on his lap at his stoic expression. “Is this okay?” I ask him, careful not to move without his permission. He nods and I settle deeper onto his lap.

His hands don’t ask for permission like Creed’s did. He settles them on my hips, knowing the game of no touching doesn’t apply to any of them. I grind against him, feeling him stir beneath me. Creed watches me raptly, enjoying the show as much as he enjoyed the dance. Jiro lets me lead the dance, lets me choose where to touch him. His hands stay on my hips, holding on, holding himself back from taking me right here.

“Does this make you like me less?” I whisper in his ear when I lean down and run my tongue along the pulse in his neck.

“Nothing could ever lessen what I feel for you,” he murmurs.

His hands move then, going to the tie at my top at my back. He pulls it loose before coming around to cup my breasts. I press them into his palms, moaning at the feel of his rough hands against my nipples. He kneads them, caresses them, making me wet between my thighs even as his cock hardens between us.

“I’m tempted to fuck you right here in front of the others,” he rasps, looking up at me from beneath his lashes. “Let them see what savagery I feel for you.” He runs his hands down my body and behind to run along my ass. “I’m tempted to tattoo my name right here, a claim on your flesh the others can smear their seed over.”

“I like that idea,” Creed muses from beside him. His eyes meet mine. “All of it.”

Creed, the voyeur, happy to be a part of anything as long as he’s a part of it.

Jiro cups my hips and lifts me, helping me settle myself onto Achilles' lap.

Achilles immediately tilts his head back and looks up at me through half-lidded eyes. His hands grip my thighs tightly as I start to move. His cock is already hard beneath me, but he doesn't make a move to take it out, to let me play, so I continue to dance. Row sits beside him, his eyes drinking me in, eager for his own opportunity, but patient.

"Neat trick you pulled off out there," Achilles says, his eyes on the ears and tail. "You have it planned for a while?"

"Maybe," I grin, grinding against him. I run my hands along my body and up over my breasts, drawing his eyes.

"You planning on dancing again?" he asks.

But I don't answer. The truth is I hadn't planned to return to dancing at all. After Prey Island, I hadn't been able to get back on the stage. The only reason I'd been able to tonight was because I feel safe with my four men there at the bottom of the stage, their eyes on me. They'd given me that courage, but if they hadn't been there, it would have been a different story. My panic attacks would create hallucinations, until I'd think I was seeing Hounds in the crowd, Hounds I'd killed, Hounds I remember. Terrible people. Then I'd start seeing the images of dead prey. I'd decided those hallucinations I've witnesses are no longer worth it. I miss dancing but it's not so bad to be behind the scenes running things. I still have to heal that part of me.

But Achilles doesn't know that. He doesn't know my struggle after I came home. A bead of sweat appears on his forehead just as it always does when the room is closed. I focus on it, move, dancing on his lap. I lean forward and lick it off, making him tense beneath me. When I lean back again, his expression changes. I suppose it's because I don't answer his earlier question. It's not because I'm ignoring it. It's only because I don't want to explain how damaged I am, how much trouble I've had after Prey Island since they're all clearly fine.

His eyes harden, his fingers clenching on my hips to stop my movements. I stare down at him in surprise even as the

others tense.

“How many assholes do you do this with every night?” he asks suddenly and the mood in the room plummets.

I freeze, my heart beating so loudly in my chest, I can hear it in my ears. The music seems to fade into the background as I stare down at him.

“You touch them like this, too? Do you fuck them if they pull out enough money?” he continues.

The others hiss in anger, but I don't let that same anger fill me. Instead, it's hurt. Hurt that he'd look at me like this. Hurt that he would spit those words with so much venom. He doesn't know my story, or why I've stopped dancing, but even if I hadn't, it doesn't give him a right to talk to me like that.

I can see his shaking, the sweat on his brow, so I push his hands off my hips and stand, staring down at him. Slowly, I readjust my bikini top, covering myself so that I'm not showing anything. Pain starts filling me faster than I can keep it back. It takes everything in me not to let the tears well at the judgement I can see in his eyes. That judgement is mixed with something else, something just as potent.

Fear.

I take a deep breath and meet his eyes. “You're the only asshole here,” I reply sadly. “Just you, Achilles.”

And then I turn tail and run before I cry in front of him.

I can't show that weakness. Not for the beast that is Achilles.

It would give him too much power.

ELEVEN



CREED

“**Y**ou hurt her!” Row snarls, coming at Achilles the moment the door closes behind Billie. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Achilles scowls and adjusts himself, standing to meet Row’s anger. “She’s a stripper. What the fuck do the rest of you think she does when we’re not here?”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Row hisses. “Who cares what she does to make money? Even if she did still dance. If you’d have read the report I sent you—”

“I don’t need to read a fucking report to call it like I see it. Just because you fuckers are okay with her fucking each of you doesn’t mean I should be okay with her fucking other strangers!”

The room goes silent at the savagery in his voice, at the way he pants with anxiety and frustration. I stand and stare at Achilles in accusation.

“She never hid that she was a stripper,” Row points out, fury in his voice. I don’t blame him. Hell, I’m tempted to sucker punch Achilles right in his stupid mouth. We all have trauma. We all have fear. It’s no excuse to lash out at Billie.

Achilles hisses in frustration, but this time, it’s me who speaks.

“You really are an asshole,” I say, bringing his attention to me.

“Yeah, well, I never pretended to be anything else.”

“Neither did she!” I growl, stepping forward. “She’s been open and honest with all of us, survived just like we did, waited for us, yearned for us, and you’re going to come in here and fuck everything up like that?” My face pinches in barely restrained anger. “I knew you were bitter, but I never thought you were so stupid.”

“Fuck you!” Achilles snarls. “This is such bullshit—”

Jiro stands then and the room falls silent. The man always seems to carry this presence, as if at any moment he could decide to kill you. It’s the way he carries himself, like some villain taking everything in, and yet he’s on our side. Though he’d been prey like the rest of us, Jiro is anything but. He’s a cobra waiting to strike and when he stands, nothing but intention rolling off his shoulders, I watch. I don’t know if he’s going to stab Achilles or hit him, but I hold my breath. I won’t stop him from doing either.

“This is new for all of us, especially Billie,” he begins. “But taking it out on her is a coward’s move, Achilles.”

Achilles scowls. “Fuck you, you intolerable ass crouton.”

I blink in surprise. “Dude, what are you, ten?”

“Jesus Christ!” Achilles growls. “Will you just leave me alone?”

“No, because you fucking hurt her feelings over your own insecurities!” Row snarls. “I could care less if she fucks other people as long as I have her. If you don’t want to be here, then leave!”

“Maybe I will!”

“Good! You fucking prick!”

They continue to argue, the volume slowly growing the more they continue on. Jiro seems unconcerned, his eyes watching Achilles closely. When I can’t take it anymore, I slam my fist against the pole, sending a metallic ring through the room. At some point, the music had turned off, but I don’t know when.

“Shut up! Both of you!” I shout. They pause, their eyes on me. “I won’t lose her because of your issues.” I jab my finger into Achilles’ chest. “Not after all we survived. Either get it together or get out.”

Achilles looks between the three of us, seeing that we’re all against him, before he scowls and storms out. I don’t know where he’s going, but I don’t really care right now. He’s going

to have to come up with a mighty good apology after that. Fucking asshole.

I sigh. “Fuck, we’re in trouble if we can’t even get along.”

But Jiro shakes his head. “He’s hiding his trauma, afraid of it. He’ll figure it out.” He meets my eyes. “Let us just hope he doesn’t figure it out too late.”

Because if he loses Billie, he’ll regret it for the rest of his life. But if he hurts her so badly that he loses her so completely, he’ll deserve it.

Fuck, he’ll deserve every bit of it.

TWELVE



BILLIE

The bar seems as nice of a place as any to drown my sorrows away. It's the first place I go to get away from the look in Achilles' eyes. He's an asshole, but deep down, I know he doesn't really mean all the shit he said. Clearly, there's more to the prick than we've delved into, but it's not my responsibility to heal him. He'll have to do that himself.

That doesn't mean it didn't hurt when he'd said those things, though.

Which is why I'm now holding a glass filled with whiskey.

I used to like the fruitier drinks, things with cutesy names that came frozen with an umbrella and sugar on the rim. When I came back from Prey Island, however, those didn't get the job done. They were too soft after what I'd survived. I need something harsher, more brutal. So, whiskey it is.

I feel him beside me before I see him. Creed has a presence about him that drags your attention to him. Most would attribute it to his size—he's a big motherfucker—but I happen to think it's because of his aura. Of my four men, Creed has a brightness about his presence that makes you turn and pay attention. It makes sense that he was a Navy Seal until he couldn't stomach fighting stupid wars for rich people anymore. In the beginning, I bet he thought he was helping people more than anything. I wonder how that felt to realize he wasn't helping the people he wanted to.

"Hey," Creed says as he leans against the bar beside me.

I glance over at him, blown away by his looks yet again. He's also insanely attractive. Though he's not as cut as the others, there's something about big boys that really do it for me. He's the best cuddler. He has a softness to him while also a hardness at the same time. His height has him towering over me. Plenty of women in the club glance over at him in the

hopes of finding him unattached. When he starts talking to me, most of them look away.

“Hey,” I reply, looking back down at my drink.

For a few seconds, no other words are exchanged between us. I can feel him trying to think of the words he wants to say, to find exactly what will fix the situation.

“Look,” he finally starts. “He’s an asshole, and he’s dealing with some shit, just like we all are.”

“I get that,” I reply carefully. We’ve all got our demons. Fuck, if Achilles didn’t have demons by this age, I’d wonder what was wrong with him. People don’t survive something like we did without developing new traumas and that’s not including whatever happened before the island.

Creed nods and looks at the bartender, gesturing for a beer, before glancing back at me. “The rabbit to tiger thing was cute,” he murmurs. “I’d almost prefer you to wear the ears all the time.”

The corner of my lips twitch at his attempt. “You a furry?”

He tilts his head. “A what?”

“Pet play then?”

He stares at me. “Are those things I should know about?”

I shrug. “There’s plenty of people into both. Nothing wrong with them.”

He thinks about it for a second as the bartender sets his bottle on the counter. He takes a sip before he studies me closer. “Well... are you into them? If so, I’m willing to test them out.”

His response is endearing. He doesn’t seem to know much about either, but he’s willing to do what I ask. Hell, if I asked him to wear a bridle and saddle, he probably would. He’s that sweet.

Shaking my head, I chuckle. “I’m not a furry as far as I know. It did feel sexy to play the tiger and the rabbit for the

four of you though. Maybe I'll let you buy me a collar and call me a good kitty."

Those eyes flash with interest. "A collar, huh?"

I point at him with my glass. "I said maybe. And if I'm going to wear a collar, big guy, that means you get one, too."

Lips splitting into a grin, he taps his glass against mine. "Deal."

I blink in surprise, staring at him for a moment before I remember what Achilles has said and it sobers me back up. "You think this is going to work?" I ask.

"The plan? I think once we figure out the details—"

"No, not the plan," I interrupt, looking down into the whiskey in my glass. "Us."

He falls silent before he grimaces. "No matter how hard I've tried over the years, I'm not much of a fortune teller, Billie."

Sighing, I throw back the rest of the whiskey and set the glass back on the bar. "The four months we were apart, every single day, I waited for the four of you. Every. Day. I'd convince myself I saw you, here, on the street, at the coffee shop. And now here you all are, and I don't know what to do." I shake my head. "Something grew between us on that island. It's still there. But can it still work without the fear and survival we dealt with?"

"I think so," Creed answers. "I wanted to look for you these four months, but I don't have the same resources Row does. Once he found me, that hope grew, and I waited impatiently for us to come after you. I think we can make it, but things like this, they take work. I'm no expert on the family we made, but I know what I feel." He moves closer. "I love you, Billie. However things have to work, I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me to."

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. "I never hid who I am, what I am. I never lied. I could have, but I chose not to," I point out, shaking my head. "I both know you all so deeply, and I don't at the same time. We have so much to learn about

each other still. Achilles can barely even stand in the same room as me half the time it seems. Jiro is as aloof as always. Row, well he's eager enough and you're here. But... what's going to happen when we march back into that place? Are we going to fall apart?"

Creed takes my hand and presses it against his face, his eyes earnest and sad. "We know you never lied. We know, little tiger." He sighs. "We're here, even Achilles, but these things take some adjustment. Like you said, we have so much to still learn about each other. I don't know how you like your eggs—"

"Scrambled," I interrupt.

"What side of the bed you like—"

"Whichever is further from the doorway."

He smiles. "How many pillows you like?"

"As many as possible," I answer, my eyes crinkling. "I really like pillows."

"Hell, I don't even know how you like your coffee—"

"Sugar and creamer, preferably those obnoxious flavored ones that come out each season."

He smiles and presses a kiss to the palm of my hand. "What I mean is, none of us expected this to be easy. We never expected to survive the island, yet here we are. No path worth taking is paved. This is all new. And yeah, Achilles is an asshole, but he lashes out because he doesn't know what he's doing. That doesn't excuse it. I expect you to make that fucker apologize. But... we're here. We aren't going anywhere unless it's with you."

Sighing at his words, I reach forward and drag him into a hug. His arms come around me, wrapping me in a safety net that eases something inside. Creed gives the best hugs. "Thank you," I sigh into his chest. "I needed that."

He squeezes me gently and then lets me go. "What do you say we head back to the apartment if you've handled everything here? Get some rest for tomorrow?"

Nodding, I let him lead me from the club. Jiro and Row appear as we're headed toward the door, as if they'd been watching from afar. Achilles is nowhere to be seen. I look through the crowd, worried, but Row takes my free hand.

“He’s a big boy. He can take care of himself and find his way back home.”

And so we leave him, letting him work his way through whatever he needs to.

My chest aches the entire time.

THIRTEEN



We've been at the apartment for a few hours. The lights are off except for a few small night lights throughout the kitchen and living room. Those are all new. Apparently, I'd developed a hefty fear of the dark with my PTSD. Which is interesting because the only bad thing that happened in the dark on the island was the coconut crabs.

And the sharks.

It hadn't taken me long to figure out which of them were causing the trouble. I don't know if I'll be able to swim in the ocean ever again. It hadn't seemed like a problem in Colorado. If we're going back at some point though, it might be an issue.

Creed is already snoring softly on the couch. He doesn't quite fit on it, his legs sticking out over the end by a foot. I'd used a couple of blankets to make sure he was completely covered. Luckily, we don't plan on staying here for too much longer. He'd never survive sleeping on that couch for weeks.

Row is on the floor, his eyes closed. He's not snoring so I doubt he's actually asleep.

Jiro is in the kitchen, sipping a mug of tea. I'm not sure where he got the tea from since I don't drink it, but the way he's standing casually, watching me, makes my core clench. Still, as I'm watching him, I'm preparing to psych myself up to go over and talk to him. We have things we need to discuss, and I feel like there are things I need to learn about him. Right now, he always feels just out of reach, as if he's holding himself back.

Finally, I stand, and his eyes follow me. Before I can take a step toward him, however, there's a soft knock on the door. I pause, glancing toward it before looking back at Jiro. Creed and Row don't wake up with the noise. Jiro tenses at the sound and before I can move toward it, he's setting his mug on the counter and walking on silent feet toward the door. He leans in, peers through the peep hole, before he relaxes and meets my eyes.

"It's for you," he whispers.

Before he can withdraw back to the kitchen, I grab his hand to stop him. He looks down at me, into my eyes, and it's as if he looks right through me.

"Are we okay?" I ask softly, watching him.

He studies me before he finally nods. "Emotion like this, it doesn't come easy for me, little rabbit. I'm... working on it."

"You'll come to me when you're ready?"

"Of course." He leans down and presses a kiss against my forehead, squeezes my hand, and then retreats back to the kitchen.

My eyes linger on him before I face the door. Taking a deep breath, I wrap my fingers around the knob, unlock it, and pull it open.

Achilles stands on the other side, his chin tilted down, a sheepish look on his face. I open the door wider and lean against it, crossing my arms, my face serious as I study him. He studies me just the same, looking me up and down, before ducking his head a little further, meeting my eyes beneath his brow.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, softly, just loud enough for me to hear.

I continue to study him, to take him in, and I can see he means it even if those words he'd said to me had felt like shit. I can at least hear him out. After a minute, I open the door completely and gesture for him to come in. His shoulders relax, as if he'd thought I might have told him to leave. He comes in and nods to Jiro where he stands in the kitchen. Jiro,

in answer, tips his mug toward him the barest amount, his eyes watching Achilles closely.

Finally, Achilles offers his hand to me. “Can we talk?”

I slide my hand into his immediately, no hesitation. I want to hear what he has to say, to give him a chance. He leads me out toward the balcony where his hammock is set up, but he unclips it to give us more room to settle in the two chairs I have out here for Holly and me when she comes over. He closes the door behind us, giving us some privacy.

I hear Jiro from inside before the door shuts completely say softly, “be on guard.”

Achilles nods even though I doubt Jiro could have seen.

We’re silent for a few moments as we take a seat in the chairs and look up at what we can see of the sky. We can’t see that many stars here because of the light pollution. Not like on Prey Island. The sky had been alight with stars there.

“I have a hard time with closed in spaces,” Achilles finally says. He’s not looking at me, his eyes on the sky.

“Claustrophobia?” I ask, staring at his profile.

He shakes his head. “Yes and no.” Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes as if to block out his words. “I suppose it’s considered that now, but it’s not a fear I always had. It developed when I was around twelve.”

I’m staring at him too intently, I know, but he’s not looking at me. “What happened when you were twelve?”

Understanding this will be a story of some traumatic event that happened to him, I steel myself against whatever he might say. Trauma is a hell of a thing, and for something to make him have trouble with being inside, I assume it has to be something big.

He sighs again, but he doesn’t reach out to touch me, doesn’t look at me, as if he’s afraid to. He opens his eyes, though, staring at the sky intently. “My parents, they’re the conservative type. Real Bible thumpers. The kind that if you don’t believe in what they believe in, then you’re going to hell

and their morality is saved no matter how they treat you. If you don't think like them, you're wrong. You name it, they were it. Racist, sexist, homophobic. I can't even begin to talk about some of the hateful shit I grew up hearing, but besides all that, they also believed in harsh punishments. A way to steer the Lord's sheep in the proper direction."

My fingers tighten in my pajama pants, but I don't say anything, knowing he needs the separation to keep going.

"At first, I just got the belt, but as I'm sure you can imagine, I was a stubborn kid."

I snort at his words. Stubborn is probably an understatement but it still doesn't excuse how he was treated. Though he doesn't reach out to me, I finally reach over and rest my hand on his leg because he needs it. I offer comfort and he doesn't shrug it off.

"I was getting bad grades in school, but not because I was being unruly. Apparently, I have ADHD and I didn't know it. Was having a hard time focusing. The school suggested I be tested for learning disabilities and my parents lost their mind." He closes his eyes again. "Apparently, no child of theirs was going to be... well, I'll spare you the word. They believed it just meant the devil had a hold of me, that I needed it worked out, so, their solution was to pull me out of school, lock me in my room, and force me to write Bible verses over and over again until the demon left."

I gasp, a gentle thing that I hope isn't audible, but he shakes his head as if to counter my horror.

"It was shitty, yeah. They brought food for me, but I wasn't allowed to leave. They took everything from the room, TV, games, even books. All I got was the Bible, my bed, and a bucket in the corner."

I hesitate, not wanting to ask but also needing to know. This explains his need to have open doorways, to be outside, to have fresh air. It explains all of it.

"How long?" I finally rasp.

Finally, he glances over at me, his eyes filled with hatred for a past he carries. “The first time was a few months. The second a few weeks. The third time, they started beating me to help the process along. They’d make me kneel on dry rice while I read the scriptures out loud. If I made a sound of discomfort, I’d have to start again.”

I’m sure my face is stretched into an expression of horror. The abuse he suffered. Fuck, it’s no wonder he acts the way he does.

He shrugs. “The moment I was of age, I left. Learned to live off of just myself and the land, and kept moving. The feeling of four walls around me grows suffocating the longer I’m in them.” He hangs his head. “I lashed out at you. I’m sorry. I know you’re not anything I’ve implied, and even if you dance and do your job, I don’t care. I’m an asshole. I know I am. And sometimes, it’s hard to be anything else.” He tilts his head back. “Sometimes, I think what happened on that island should stay there, but then I think of you and I change my mind.” His eyes focus entirely on me finally, his eyes penetrating. “I’ll try to be less of an asshole, but I might slip sometimes. When I do, just smack me or something. I’ll deserve it.”

I bite my lip, my fingers clenching on his leg until his fingers take mine and spread out the tension there, threading his through mine.

“Have you ever seen a therapist for all that?”

He snorts. “No. Four walls, remember. I’ve never found a therapist who will hold a session outside.”

Studying him, I squeeze his hand in reassurance. “We’ll figure it out, after all of this.” I smile at him. “Together.”

Sighing, he presses my knuckles to his forehead. “Why do you have to be so amazing?”

“I’m not,” I disagree. “I have my own issues, too.”

We stare at each other, and as we do, the tension between us seems to amp up, the urge to kiss him taking over my mind and staying. He shared a piece of himself with me, and I’m

grateful for it. He's apologized to me. He still has to apologize to the others, but this is a start.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

"I forgive you," I reply, smiling.

"How can you just forgive me so easily?" he asks. "If you said some brutal shit like that to me, I'd probably hold a grudge."

I shrug. "I just can. I understand. Shit, we haven't even gotten into the trauma reactions I have. Just you wait."

"You going to stab me in my sleep?" he asks, grinning.

"Maybe." I bump my shoulder against his. "But you'd deserve it."

He stares at me, lingers, and then his eyes fall to my lips and the tension between us on that tiny ass balcony skyrockets.

My heart beats in my ears.

FOURTEEN



“You know,” he rasps, the glacier blue of his eyes shining in the street lights. “I really liked the ears.”

“Which ones?” I ask, my fingers tightening in his.

“Both.” He leans over and captures my chin, holding me still for him. “I’m forgiven, right?” When I nod, he adds, “Does that mean I can fuck you now?”

“Please,” I breathe.

His lips press against mine, their softness moving against mine in a slow, consuming kiss that drains the air in my lungs. It’s like I’m carefully being suffocated but I like it. I want it. I yearn for it.

His fingers are still rough on my chin, holding me still, and as he kisses me, his other hand reaches up and strokes along my collarbone, sliding down into my tank top to cup my breast. When he breaks to trail down my neck, to drag his teeth against my tendons there, I curl my fingers into his shirt.

“You didn’t bring any rope, did you?” I ask.

He chuckles against my skin. “Unfortunately not. Don’t worry though. I’ll still fuck you just enough that you scream my name.”

“We’re on the balcony,” I point out as I thread my fingers into his hair. He jerks my tank top down and sucks on a nipple, swirling his tongue around it until it pebbles.

“And?” he asks before moving to the other one.

“The neighbors will hear. There’re probably people on the street.”

“Then let them hear,” he growls. “They can stroke themselves to the sound of you crying out your pleasure.”

Fuck. Oh, fuck. My pussy clenches between my legs, a desperate need for him slamming into me so violently, I’m not sure how much more I can wait.

“Undress,” I rasp. “Please.”

“Oh, I like it when you beg,” he groans. “It sounds so pretty.”

“It’s not begging,” I counter. “Just manners. I can say please and thank you all I want.”

He groans again. “Will you thank me when I’m buried deep in your cunt? Will you ask me to pretty please fuck you harder?”

“I…” Well, shit. Maybe. I’m at that point now if he doesn’t start removing clothing.

“I imagined fucking you so many ways in the last four months,” he says as he leans back in his chair and jerks his shirt off. He reveals his tattoos down his side, the great stag drawing my eye. “I imagined taking you rock climbing and fucking you while we were suspended high off the ground. I imagined fucking you beneath the stars in the middle of fucking nowhere, your screams echoing off the mountains as I rode you to completion. Hell, I’ve even imagined tying you up on a bed like a hog and using you until you’re begging me to come.” He unzips his pants and frees his cock, letting it stand proudly. “I don’t have a single bit of fucking patience for any of that right now. Bring that sweet cunt over here and ride me.”

I stand and he shoves my chair over so we have more room, but he stays seated and strokes himself as I jerk my bottoms down and off. He doesn’t give me time to pull my tank top off. Instead, he jerks me forward and spreads my legs wide over the arms of the chair so I’m kind of hovering over him.

“Oh, yeah,” he groans, stroking a finger through my folds and feeling the wetness there. “You’re so fucking wet for me, aren’t you? I bet you like the thought of me hog tying you, don’t you?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I breathe, running my hands along his shoulders, his neck, stroking.

“I wonder if I can make you drip onto my cock,” he grunts before jerking my tank top down around my breasts, letting them spill out over the top of it. “Would you like me to tell you all of the things I want to do to you, little rabbit?”

“Yes,” I say, sitting on top of the chair arms, floating above him. I reach between us and stroke the head of his cock, relishing the hiss of air between his teeth. “Tell me.”

He leans forward and bites at my breasts, nipping, making me desperate for him. “I’d love to fuck your throat, to make you gag on my cock just before I come on your tongue. I wanna watch as it drips from the corner of your lips, as you lean back to catch your breath just before one of the others slams inside and repeats the process.”

“Oh, god,” I groan, stroking my own hands over my breasts and squeezing.

He strokes a finger along my seam and purrs. “I bet you’ll love being sandwiched between us, each of us taking our turns with you, pleasing you, focused entirely on you. Which of us will fuck your ass, do you think? I hope it’s me. I want to fuck this sweet ass so hard.”

My breath stutters and I can’t help but start grinding despite having nothing to grind against.

“You know what I’ve always wanted? One of those saddle benches where you strap someone down and they can’t move while you fuck the shit out of them. You’d look so pretty begging for my cock, strapped down like that. I’d fuck you so hard, the bench would rattle and you—” He stops and grins. “Would you look at that?” he purrs, stroking his cock. “You’re dripping right where I want you to.” He rubs his tip along my entrance, through the wetness there, spreading it. “Oh, that’s

such a good girl,” he groans and then lifts his hips to press inside me.

“Fuck,” I hiss, holding onto his shoulders tightly as he stretches me wide.

“Feel like begging now?” he groans as he bottoms out.

“No.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he growls. “I’m going to fuck you hard anyway.”

And then he’s doing just that, fucking up into me while I sit spread across the chair arms, my pussy spread open for him. He slaps against me, holding onto my hips while he fucks me, dragging cries of pleasure from my lips as he picks up speed. He’s relentless, as desperate as I am, as he leans in and savagely bites at my skin, leaving small hickeys behind.

“Yes,” I cry as he pistons inside of me. “Yes, just like that!”

“Tell me you forgive me,” he snarls before wrapping an arm around my lower back, leaning me back so he can hit a better spot inside me.

“I forgive you,” I cry, hanging on, my body tightening, preparing to shatter.

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you,” I rasp. “I love you so fucking much.”

“Good,” he snarls. “And don’t you forget it.” His cock moves fast inside me, stroking me higher, turning me inside out as I clutch at him. “Now come.”

I shatter, my release dripping down his cock as he continues to fuck me, as he strokes inside of me while I shake and moan, my head tilted back.

“Oh yeah. Fucking beautiful,” he groans and then slams inside me and stills. His cock jumps inside me, warmth coating my insides, all while I shake in his arms. Before I’m even finished, he’s wrapping his arms around me in a tight

hug, holding on as if I might float away. “I’m sorry,” he says softly. “I’m sorry I said that shit.”

I run my hand through his hair in comfort. “I forgive you.”

“I don’t forgive me, though,” he admits, his face still buried in my chest. “I don’t forgive me.”

I hug him back just as tightly. “That’s okay. I’ll forgive you enough for the both of us.”

He laughs and leans back, his eyes a little shiny but otherwise, there’s no sign of his anxiety. “It seems like we’re always fucking high up. Rooftops, balconies. At this point, it would be a shame not to fuck on top of a mountain.”

Laughing, I press a kiss to his forehead. “We definitely need some rope for that. Maybe I can tie you up next time.”

His eyes crinkle. “You could string me up by my ankles and I wouldn’t care.” He hesitates. “Thank you.”

I frown. “For what?”

“For loving me.”

The vulnerability, the anxiety, makes me hug him again.

Later, he sets his hammock back up and we both cuddle into it, falling asleep beneath the sky, and my god, is it perfect.

I sleep without nightmares despite the sounds of the city around us.

FIFTEEN



Holly appears the next morning the same time as the sun rises. I don't know how she manages to close down the club at two in the morning, deal with the stress of closing, and still be at my apartment so early, bright and happy. She's like a literal fucking rainbow as she squeals when I open the door and throws herself into my arms.

"I'm not ready for you to leave," she cries, hugging me so tight, I almost have trouble breathing. Then she lets me go and holds up a bag. "I brought you all donuts for the ride," she declares. "I didn't know what everyone likes so I got a couple of everything they had."

My eyes bug out at the large boxes of donuts in the bag. Jesus, it certainly looks like she got a few of everything.

She sets the bag on the kitchen counter and takes off her coat, shrugging out of it before draping it over the chair there. Then she turns around and looks at all of us with our baggage. "God, the five of you look beautiful together."

Somehow, Holly saying that makes me blush despite the raunchy shit some of the guys say to me. Her compliment hits me in a different way from theirs.

Glancing between all of us, I realize we do look like an interesting group. Row with his pristine, rich boy swagger, his hair pushed back like he's ready to walk a runway at any moment. Jiro who looks like he belongs on a stage or in the mafia, his suit just a pristine, everything pressed and ready to go. Achilles who wears sweatpants, a beanie, and a t-shirt with

holes that looks like he's had it for a few years too long. He's put together and clean, but has all the hipster vibes. Creed with his Levi jeans and button down, plaid shirt that leaves a few buttons open to reveal the light smattering of hair on his chest. And then me, wearing yoga pants and a baggy shirt so I'm comfortable for the ride. We must make a strange group and yet Holly thinks we look great together. I wonder what we look like through her eyes, what she sees.

"Do you have everything ready to go?" she asks, glancing over everything, her eyes lingering on Keanu Leaves where the plant sits next to my suitcase. "I see our favorite plant is all packed and ready to go."

I nod. "I think we have everything. There wasn't too much."

"Says the woman with three suitcases," Achilles grumbles.

I narrow my eyes on him. "I need every single thing in those suitcases."

"Sure you do."

Smacking him on his arm playfully, I focus back on my friend, my face falling into a serious expression. "Which brings us to something important. We don't know the plan yet or what we're going to be walking into, but I know, at some point, I may make a call to you and ask for some girls to help."

It's a thought that has crossed my mind, that Row had once mentioned the girls who were well paid on Predator Point. I don't know if that would be an option or not, or if we're going to need to come up with a different plan, but it's crossed my mind that if the girls were willing, it could work.

"Of course," Holly answers, her smile bright. "If you call, I'll put out a request with the girls, explain just how much is at stake. I'd come myself if Mark wouldn't have a fit. He'd want to be there and throw the cover." She laughs, clearly in love with her man. He would never stop her from going, but he would definitely insist on being there to protect her.

"We don't know the plan yet. We still have to think through all the options."

Holly picks up the bags of donuts and passes them to Creed, watching happily as he opens the top box and starts picking through the donuts inside. When her face grows serious, I know she's about to drop something important.

"The four of you better take care of my girl," she commands, her voice hard despite the higher pitch. "She's my maid of honor and my best friend. If she doesn't make it back in one piece, I'm gonna make one of you fuckers wear the dress." But her eyes water a little. "She better come back in one piece."

Creed laughs at her warning, but it's Jiro who bows to her.

"We will protect her with our lives, just as she will protect us." Jiro glances at me and I smile, grateful that he knows I would do the same for them.

She smiles brightly at him, happy at his proclamation. Then she comes over and wraps her arms around me again, squeezing tight, holding me together just like she'd done when I needed her most.

"Be safe," she orders in my ear. "Or I'll whoop your ass." She squeezes one more time and lets go, leaning back to look me in the eyes. "And bring them all to their knees, jelly freeze."

A crooked smile pulls at my lips. "I'll do my best, Bucharest."

A game we'd started playing when I'd been deep in the panic attacks. They'd brought me out of some of the worst one, a simple rhyming game that distracted from the panic.

And that's how I leave my best friend on my doorstep, dragging the suitcases to an SUV Row had arranged, and climbing inside. Twenty hours we'll be stuck in it.

I wave to her as we pull away from the curb, leaving behind Colorado for Tennessee.

A new adventure. A new danger.

But at least I'm not alone.

At least I have my guys with me.

Oh, and Keanu Leaves. I can't forget about him.

SIXTEEN



I can't remember a time I went on a road trip this long, especially with four men. It seems like a good idea, that is until they start complaining about how often I have to pee. Seriously. Some of us can't just pinch it off when we have to go.

I'm sitting in the back middle, right between Jiro and Achilles. Creed is driving this section, his eyes on the road, one hand on the wheel and the other arm resting on the window edge. Country music plays on the radio that he'd selected, some man singing about a back road and his dog and the love that left him there. It's a sad song, but Creed murmurs it under his breath as if it's happy. Row sits in the passenger seat, his head tipped back as he takes a nap.

We've been on the road for about six hours now. At least we'll have this memory, along with so many others now. Most of the ones from the island had been bad, running, nearly dying, but there's a lot of good ones mixed in, too.

Jiro is still acting aloof, his head turned toward the window. He'd been reading a book earlier, but he must have gotten bored of that and decided that staring out the window is a better option. I wonder what he thinks of Colorado, if he hates it. I wonder if I'll ever get to see where he's from, his country and home.

Achilles is tapping away on a handheld game, his eyes riveted on the screen. I don't know where he got it from, but I suspect Row gave it to him to keep his mind off the car ride and how long we'll be here.

Reaching over to Jiro, I try to take his hand, but he pulls his away before I can thread mine with his. I glance at him sharply, a little hurt, but he shakes his head.

“These hands are covered in blood, little rabbit,” he murmurs, soft enough to not be heard over the music.

“All of ours are. Touch me anyway,” I command.

He hesitates, but this time when I reach for his hand, he doesn't pull back, letting me thread my fingers through his. Smiling brightly at him, I look in the rearview mirror.

“We should play twenty questions. Get to know each other better,” I declare.

Row jerks awake at my voice, his eyes looking around rapidly before he realizes we're still on the road. He stretches and yawns, looking over his shoulder at me.

Achilles groans. “I'd rather take a nap.”

“I'll play,” Row replies, reaching forward to sip at his coffee from the cup holder. It's probably cold now considering we stopped over two hours ago, but he only winces and drinks more to wake up.

Achilles stays out of it, preferring to play his game, but we all start taking turns asking questions.

“What was your favorite type of toy as a child?” I ask Creed.

His face falls into deep concentration. “Shit, I don't know. Probably the Tamagotchi, but fuck, I killed it so many times. I had a whole collection of them. They don't warn you that it's hard to keep ten of the things alive at the same time.”

I snort. “Okay. Your turn.”

“Umm... okay. Row, which of your thousand houses is your favorite?”

Row laughs. “The one in Venice. It overlooks the ocean and a canal. During Carnival, the cobblestone streets are packed with people in costumes and masks.”

“Oh, I've always wanted to go to Venice,” I lament.

“I’ll take you all at some point,” Row replies, smiling at me. “Maybe we can go during the Carnival.” He looks in the mirror. “Jiro, what is your favorite food?”

“Ramen,” he replies. “There’s a place near my house that has the best kind. The shit here doesn’t even compare.”

“You’ll have to take us sometime,” I say, smiling at him, but his smile falls.

“It’s... not exactly safe where I’m from, but perhaps one day.”

I nod. “Your turn.”

He glances around the car before settling on me. “Billie, if you could choose a superpower, what would you choose?”

“Easy. Mind reading. That or being able to speak to animals. I was obsessed with Dr. Dolittle when I was a kid.”

He nods as if that makes sense and glances out the window again. I follow his gaze and see the gas station. “Oh! Stop at that station! I have to pee again.”

A collective groan goes up in the car, but Creed dutifully pulls over into the large station and parks at a pump. “Might as well get gas,” he says, hopping out to take care of it.

“We need snacks, too!” I declare. Mostly for me, but I’m going to get them a whole host of things too. “I’ll grab those first and then ask for the key. It looks like the bathrooms are around the side. There’s a line right now.”

Indeed, there are already two women waiting in line, dancing with the need to go to the bathroom. I grab Row’s hand and drag him inside with me, only letting him go when I start grabbing things. I fill my arms with snacks, trail mix, chips, candy, anything I think they might like, at least one of everything. Then I grab drinks and pass them to Row when he comes around the corner to help. I head up to pay, prepared to pay with my card, but Row stops me and hands cash over to the cashier.

“Too easy to see,” he comments about my card. “They probably already know, but just in case.”

“Can I have the key for the bathroom?” I ask the cashier when the woman I saw earlier hands it back to him. He immediately drops it on the counter for me, completely bored with his job. In fact, he keeps flipping through the old magazine in front of him.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Row, rushing to go to the bathroom now that it’s starting to feel like an emergency. I quickly relieve myself, breathing a sigh of relief, and set about washing my hands. My eyes look bright in the mirror, certainly brighter than they’d been before my guys had showed back up. Once I finish up, I go to open the door and nearly stumble back when two men stand there, blocking my way. They’re both dressed in black suits, sunglasses on their faces, channeling Men In Black like a couple of champs. They’re tall as fuck, too.

I scowl. “Who the fuck are you?”

“We suggest you head back to your apartment,” one says, his eyes hidden behind those aviator sunglasses.

My eyes drop to the pins on their lapels, a familiar symbol looking back at me, and I raise my brow. “And if I don’t?”

They don’t respond, but the answer is clear, so I scowl. “Tell the Grand Master he can go fuck all the way off. He doesn’t control my life.”

I move to push past them, but one of them grabs me around the neck, squeezing tightly as they both come inside the bathroom with me, the door closing behind them. It’s unexpected, but I fight, kicking out at them, trying to pry his fucking sausage fingers from my neck. I’m a split second from pulling the knife from my hip before the door slams open again and Jiro appears. I’m choking for air one second; the next, the hand is gone from my neck and I’m stumbling backward as the fight breaks out. It takes all of five seconds before the two goons are bleeding out on the floor, Jiro standing there in the fluorescent light, his hand dripping with blood where he’d stabbed the fuckers with a large blade I never saw him carry. My eyes are wide and I’m panting hard enough for it to sound too loud in the small bathroom.

“Come on,” Jiro says calmly. “We’re leaving.”

“We can’t just leave them here,” I hiss, staring at the bodies. “We’re not on the island anymore. That’s murder.”

Jiro looks at me and then stalks forward, his eyes hard. “Island or not, I am the same.” He reaches up and cups my face with the bloody hand, smearing it on my jaw. “Are you still okay with it?”

I stare at him. I really take him in, the threat there, the feeling of still warm blood on my jaw that I’ll have to wash off before we leave this room. “Yes,” I finally breathe.

He leans down and presses a hard kiss against my lips, taking control. It turns frenzied, desperate, but before we can go any further, the door bursts open again and Creed is standing there, staring down at the men on the ground. “Fuck!” he growls. “We need to get out of here. Wash your damn hands and face and get the fuck out.”

Jiro wipes my face with his clean hand and quickly cleans up, taking care of my face further before he ushers me out of the small room, locking it behind us. He throws away the key rather than taking it back inside and we hurry after the others. I barely have time to open the door before I’m being shoved in and Creed is speeding away, leaving the bodies and the trouble that comes with them behind.

We’re all silent for a bit before I look down at the bags Row had set in the back. “Well, I got snacks for everyone.” I grab some of the trail mix out and pass it to Creed who looks down and hands it back. “Can’t have that. It has peanuts.”

I pause. “You’re allergic to peanuts?” He nods so I hand it to Achilles instead. “Deadly allergic?”

“Yeah. I carry an epi-pen.”

Jesus. I hand him some chips instead after checking the label. “Anyone else have any allergies I should know about, so I don’t accidentally kill you?”

Achilles raises his brow as he looks down at the peanuts and doesn’t open them, as if worried they’d somehow still infect Creed. Row holds his hand up at my question.

“Oh, me. I’m lactose intolerant. It won’t kill me, but it’s not pleasant.”

I nod and store that information away for later. “Good to know.” When I think better of it, I grab the trail mix from where Achilles set it down and roll down the window. Then I toss them out.

“Hey! I might have eaten that later,” Achilles growls.

“I don’t want the dust to get him. No peanuts.” And then I shove a can of pringles toward him instead.

“Do you know how many preservatives are in this?” he asks. I scowl at him, so he holds his hands up in surrender. “Didn’t say I wasn’t going to eat them,” he grumbles before opening it. “Just putting poison in my body is all.”

And then we all happily crunch on the snacks despite the fact we’d left two dead men behind at that gas station.

Somehow, it doesn’t really bother me that much.

In fact, I forget all about it an hour later when we all start singing with the radio.

SEVENTEEN



As far as road trips go, this one isn't that long. Going from Colorado to Tennessee isn't a giant trip but by the time we reach Creed's ranch, after stopping and making our way there, we arrive just as the sun starts peeking over the horizon. It makes the first moment I see his ranch a monumental event, the first rays of the morning touching the tops of the trees and spreading.

Creed's Ranch is beautiful. That's the first thing I notice. As we pull into the long driveway, driving over a cattle guard that rattles my brain after such a long ride, I take in all the details. There's an open gate with an M on it. The driveway is long enough that the house looks small from the road until we get closer. Fencing runs along the sides of it, keeping in horses that run along it as we drive up the gravel.

"How many horses do you have again?" I ask, watching a beautiful black and white horse run alongside us.

"Eight now," Creed says proudly as he drives. He glances at me. "I rescue most of them, foster a few others. I've been diving more into rescuing them since I came back from the island. I started with three."

The house we drive up to is covered in stone and far fancier than anything I expected from the gruff man. He tends to prefer no fuss things, so I assumed the house would be simple. Instead, it boasts landscaping around the front of it, as well as a paved walkway, and even yard ornaments. The road before the garage is paved, and that's where he parks the SUV before we all open the door, get out, and stretch.

“This is beautiful,” I murmur, staring at the house I never expected.

“Thanks,” Creed replies, glancing at me. “My mom helped pick things out. She said it would benefit me when I finally bring a woman home. I guess she was right.”

The ranch is pretty much in the middle of nowhere. The last town we passed was about an hour back. When I’d asked, the nearest town further up is about twenty minutes.

“I’m impressed,” Achilles announces, looking around the yard. “How many acres is this?”

“A hundred,” Creed replies as he starts unloading bags.

Achilles whistles before the front door opens and we all turn toward an older woman that strolls from inside. Her smile is bright, her hair grey and pulled up primly in a bun. Her eyes are the same ocean blue as Creed’s. She wipes her hands on a dish towel as she walks down the walkway.

“Is that who I think it is?” I ask Creed, glancing at him and then down to my clothes. I’ve been riding in the SUV for a day. I need a shower and new clothes, but here I am about to meet someone important in smelly yoga pants. Fuck, I could have at least put on fresh deodorant.

“My mom,” Creed answers, confirming my fears.

“I’m not dressed to meet your mother,” I hiss, trying to smooth out the wrinkles in my shirt.

“You’re home!” his mom announces. She immediately wraps Creed in a tight hug. “And you brought company!”

“I brought company,” Creed answers, grinning. “Mom, meet Jiro, Row, Achilles.” He grabs me and drags me closer. “And this... is Billie.”

His mom claps her hands together. “Oh, I’ve heard so much about you, darlin’.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Montgomery,” I say, smiling despite my panic at my outfit. “I’m sorry I’m not dressed properly for our first meeting.”

“Nonsense,” she says, waving away my words. “I know you’ve been travelin’. And you can call me Debbie. No need for formalities. You might as well be family.” I smile gratefully at her. “And look at the others! I’d kill to have your cheekbones, Jiro. My lord, you are pretty.” I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jiro blush before, but there’s a slight tint to his cheeks as he bows his head. “And Row, how do you look like you came off the runway after a road trip? I swear, boy. Tell me your secrets.”

Row grins and steps forward, taking her hand to press a kiss against the back of her knuckles. “Good genes,” he replies with a smile.

Debbie snorts. “More like money. We’d all look like deities if we could afford to.” She turns to Achilles. “You look like you could use some food, Achilles. Come, come. I’ve got some bacon ready to be cooked. Fresh stuff. None of that shit from the supermarket. I know how you like your fresh food.”

Achilles’ face brightens. “That sounds amazing, Debbie.”

She giggles and takes my hand. “Come along, darlin’. Let’s get you settled. Creed will get your bags.”

It’s then that I realize she’s wearing a shirt with a cow on it, some cute flowers around its head. “I like your shirt,” I tell her. “So cute.”

“Thank you!” Her face brightens, infectious, and it makes me miss Holly. “It’s about time Creed brought home a quality woman. I swear I was starting to think it would never happen. I would have been fine if he decided to bring home a man. Just someone.”

“Mom,” Creed groans from behind us, but there’s a smile in his voice, as if he’s used to this talk.

“You know I just want you to be happy, son. Anyone have any food allergies I need to know about besides Creed’s peanuts?”

“This one is lactose intolerant,” I say, pointing at Row.

“Oh, good. No vegans then. I have the hardest time with that one. We love our butter here, but if you were, darlin’, it

would be fine. I'd find a way. Just would need a recipe book that doesn't call for meat and cheese in everything."

Once inside, I take in just how pristine and pretty it looks inside.

"Have you been cleaning again, Mom?" Creed asks her as he sets down bags in the living room. "I told you that's taken care of."

"Nonsense. I knew you'd be bringing someone special home, so I took care of everything. You're terrible about dusting."

I laugh and move further into the house. Then I turn and watch as Creed hugs his mom again. It's endearing to watch the way they react around each other, the clear love in their eyes. Not a lot of people have that kind of connection with their parents. Once they finish hugging, Debbie lets him go and comes around and hugs all of us in turn. Jiro stiffens in the hug, not sure how to handle it. Achilles stiffens too, but then relaxes into it. Row takes her up in a bear hug happily. And then she comes back to me and hugs me tightly. I hug her back just the same.

"Thank you. All of you, for bringing my baby back home," she says quietly, and I realize Creed told her at least some of what happened.

"He did a lot of the work," I murmur, glancing away.

"Psh! He told me what happened, and how the four of you helped." She chucks my chin. "He told me how you held them all together like glue, darlin'. I can never repay you for what you did for my boy, but I can try." She smiles. "First, lemonade! I'll get y'all a glass."

After we're all forced to sit on the couch with lemonade that tastes better than anything I've ever had, I watch as Debbie goes to work frying up bacon.

"Can I help?" I ask, but Debbie waves my question away before I can get the words out.

"You're a guest. You just relax."

“You’re a guest, too, Mom,” Creed reminds her as he moves around the kitchen, insisting on helping.

“Yes, but I’m your momma so that doesn’t count. You youngins just rest. We’ve got this.”

Row grins. “I like her. She’s great.”

I frown. “You know, I didn’t even think to ask about families. My parents, well, I never met my dad and my mom died right after high school. Cancer.”

Row shrugs. “Well, you’ve met my dad. My mom, she’s around when she wants something from him. We don’t have a close relationship. She had me and signed over all rights to my dad before jetting off on the allowance my dad gives her. Every now and then she shows up and pats me on the head like I’m a dog, tells me how promising I’ve become. What she means is that if something happens to my dad then I’ll be the one to take over her allowance.” He rolls his eyes. “I don’t really consider her a mom.”

Taking his hand, I say, “I’m sorry,” because it feels like it needs to be said.

“Don’t be. I had nannies that were far more maternal than her. I still grew up with some nice people. Linda was my favorite. She still sends me birthday cards.” He smiles at the thought, and it eases something inside of me to know he still had love coming from somewhere.

I glance over at Jiro, but I don’t say anything because I know his story with his family. I reach out and take his hand when he eventually says for the benefit of the others, “I have no living blood family.”

When Achilles clears his throat, I realize I know his story, too. “Billie already knows but... my parents are alive but we’re... estranged. They’re not great people.”

Row nods. “I get that, man.”

“You don’t,” Achilles says. “Not really, but it’s all good. They’re just... very religious.” Row blinks in surprise. “I cut them off a long time ago. Less stress for it.”

“I have a sister, too,” Row adds suddenly, as if remembering. “Well, half-sister. Same dad. We don’t get along too well honestly, rarely even see each other, so I didn’t think about it. She got away from my dad as fast as she could, and we haven’t really spoken since then. My father doesn’t really care much to find her since I’m his pride and joy.”

With those last words, we settle back into silence as we watch Creed and his mom cook. He has all the skill, moving around like a chef in the same way his mom does, and I smile at the sight.

“So Creed is the only one with a loving family member left.”

“Looks like it,” Achilles murmurs.

“Think she can be the mom for all of us?” Row jokes, but there’s some hope in his eyes that makes me sad for each of their struggles and loss.

“I bet she’d be happy to be,” I whisper. “I bet she’d be ecstatic if you asked.”

Row nods and smiles gently. “I’ll ask her later after she gets to know us better. It’s probably weird if I do it now, yeah?”

I nod. And then we all settle back into the couch. I sip my lemonade.

Fuck, this really is the best damn lemonade I’ve ever had.

EIGHTEEN



We spend the day figuring out sleeping arrangements. Creed has two guest rooms. His mom is set up in one so that she doesn't have to drive home in the dark, and he gives Achilles and Row the other when Jiro decides he can sleep on one of the couches. Creed insists I sleep in his room and that he'll sleep on the other couch, but when he leads me into it and sets my bags in there, turning to leave once he does, I gesture for him to come sit on the bed with me.

"Your mom is really great," I tell him.

Creed bumps his shoulder against mine and smiles. "Yeah, she is. She's been my rock since I was born."

I tilt my head. "Dad not around?"

"Nah, he died in a car accident when I was five. It's been just me and Mom since." He hesitates and glances toward the door. "I'll give you some privacy if you'd like to take a shower and get ready for bed."

"Don't," I say, grabbing his arm. "I don't need privacy."

He pauses, studying my face. "Are you sure? We don't have to rush things along."

"Positive," I nod. "Come on."

Creed's shower is just as fancy as the rest of his house. It's literally a dream. Waterfall showerhead, extra sprayers on the walls so you don't get cold, plenty of space. I've never imagined having a shower like this to use.

Creed turns on the shower to let it warm it before turning to me. He gently helps me undress, running his rough hands along my skin and bringing goosebumps up along his path. Once I'm naked, he gently pushes me toward the shower before he efficiently and quickly stripes his own clothes off. When he climbs inside, it suddenly makes sense why his shower is so big.

It's made for big men.

He steps close into the shower spray, soaking up the warmth as we both just stare at each other. The sheer magnitude that I've missed my guys should scare me. That I'm capable of such intense feelings for all four of them should make me run in the other direction.

Apparently, I've developed a taste for danger.

"I'll wash your back, you wash mine?" Creed asks with a grin, holding up a loofa.

"Deal," I giggle, turning my back to him.

I feel him move to soap it up before his hands are on me with the loofa, carefully scrubbing and washing until I'm covered in soap. He soaps up my arms, my legs, my ass. He spends an extra amount on my ass. Before he turns me and does the same to my front, stroking along my breasts, amping my arousal up, stroking between my legs briefly, before moving me back into the water.

I take the loofa from him once I'm rinsed off and repeat the whole process on him, needing to stand on my tiptoes to reach his shoulders. I run my hands along his body, lovingly tracing him and the tattoos he has. He doesn't have nearly as many as Jiro, only some he clearly got during his years in the military, but each one tells a story.

Including the one I haven't asked about, a scattering of dog tags clustered together with names and numbers. It isn't hard to garner what it's for, that it's friends he lost.

Turning him, I stroke the loofa across his chest, down, down, down to where his cock is standing erect between us.

With hands covered in soap, I drop the loofa and stroke him, drawing a groan from his lips.

“You’re supposed to be washing me,” he chastises, but his voice is husky with his pleasure.

“I am,” I tease. “I’m just making sure this part is extra clean.”

He hums in his throat as I continue to stroke him, as he gently pumps into my hand. When he can’t take it anymore, he growls and pushes me back, stepping into the stream of water to rinse himself away.

“I was going to wait until bed for this,” he grumbles. “But I can’t wait another second to be inside you.”

“Yes,” I hiss, hoisting my leg up to help him as he backs me against the shower wall.

He immediately reaches down to support me, one hand under my ass so that I can wrap my legs around his waist. His cock dances at my entrance, ready for me. When he uses his other hand to position it properly before easing inside, I press my head back against the wall, my lips open on a gasp as he stretches me. God, he feels good. So fucking good.

Once he’s inside me, he grabs my hands with the other hand and pins my wrists above my head, holding me there, as he starts pumping his hips, stroking inside me, drawing soft little cries from my lips that echo in the shower.

“I’ve missed you so fucking much,” he grunts as he fucks me, as he leans in to run his tongue along my skin. “I’ve missed the way your eyes light up, the way you tease, and this. I’ve definitely missed your sweet pussy.”

Fuck. I’d forgotten how good Creed is at telling me how it feels.

“You feel so good,” I groan, trying to match his words, but I’ve never been amazing at dirty talk. “Like a... Like a...”

He grins at my neck when I attempt to join in. “That’s a good girl,” he purrs. “Tell me how much I’m stretching you.”

“You’re stretching me like... fuck. I don’t know,” I groan. “A rubber band? Those stretch.”

He snorts and then falls into full on laughter, his head thrown back as deep guttural laughs tumble from his lips as he pauses. “I love the fuck out of you,” he laughs. “God, you’re beautiful.”

“I probably look like a drowned rat right now,” I say, smiling up at him.

“The most beautiful drowned rat,” he clarifies, before leaning in to kiss me. “We’ll work on the dirty talk. For now, don’t stress and just say whatever you’re feeling.” He leans in and nibbles my chin. “Like right now, the way your pussy clenches on my cock makes me want to step out of this shower, bend you over the sink so you can see us in the mirror, and fuck you until you come.”

My breath stutters. “Why don’t you?”

That beautiful grin. “Good point.”

He punches the shower off and steps out. The room is a little steamy but the shower mostly holds it all in since it’s closed off. We’re soaking wet, but there are rugs all over the bathroom. Without waiting to dry off, he immediately turns me and presses me against the sink before pressing back inside me, making us both moan in pleasure.

“Look up, baby,” he purrs in my ear. I do what he says, my eyes catching on our reflection, on the sight of me bent over and him behind me. “Now, don’t look away from my eyes.”

And then he fucks me just as hard as he said he wanted to, his hips slapping with my ass, making it shake until I’m crying out. It’s difficult to keep my eyes open but I do, my fingers clutching at the countertop to hold on. He picks up speed just before threading his fingers into my hair and pulling back, making my back bow just a little. My breasts shake with his fucking, swinging in front of me.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking beautiful like this, your lips open in ecstasy, your eyes on mine. You’re such a good girl.”

I never knew I had a praise kink until Creed. The moment he says those words, my pussy clamps around him, begging for more, and he groans.

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I hiss, holding on.

He leans down and whispers in my ear. “Then be a good girl and come for me.”

As if his words are the only thing I needed, I shatter, the orgasm spilling over and making me spasm around him as he continues to stroke inside me.

“Oh, god,” I moan, shaking as he presses me up against the counter.

“Yes, just like that,” he encourages. “Your pussy feels so good milking me. I’m going to spill any second now. Would you like me to come? You want me to pump you full?”

“Yes,” I rasp, pushing back against him. “Please.”

He hums and pulls me back harder by my hair, bending my back. I keep my eyes on his in the mirror just barely as he pounds inside me. He reaches up his other hand and grabs my breast, squeezing, using it as leverage.

“Who’s a good girl?” he growls in my ear.

“I am,” I pant, winding tight again.

“That’s right,” he grunts, his cock starting to jump. “Now come for me again.”

His cock twitches and I feel the first spurt of his warmth. That’s all it takes before I’m tumbling after him again, crying out, desperately grinding back against him as our juices mix and start to run down my legs. We’re both panting as he lets me lean back against the counter, his fingers running over my skin in comfort. He pulls out and grabs a washcloth, cleaning me back up tenderly before cleaning himself and lifting me into his arms.

“I can walk,” I mumble, sleep starting to pull at me.

“For now,” he muses. “But I have just the thing to fix that.”

Anticipation has me blinking up at him, ready all over again.

“I love you,” I breathe, running my hand along his bearded jawline.

He looks down at me with the brightest eyes, so much adoration on his face, it makes my heart throb. “And I love you,” he answers, just before tosses me on the bed and crawls up after me.

When we finally fall asleep, it’s with me cradled in his arms.

Again, the nightmares don’t come for me and I get the best rest I’ve had in months.

NINETEEN



The weather the next morning is perfect. The temperature is in the seventies, not too hot and not too cold. The scenery out the back windows is beautiful. The sight of the mountains Creed lives beside—and owns—is the perfect scene to drink coffee with as I look out. I’m wearing one of Creed’s massive shirts, having come out after his mom left to go check on her own house. I’d only woken up after she was gone, but she’d left a message with Creed to reassure me that she’d be back in a few days and to call if we need anything.

That’s how I’m sitting at the dining table, wearing only the large shirt and underwear, when Row comes stumbling from the guest room, rubbing sleep from his eyes. When he walks past the front door, he narrows his eyes out the window.

“There’s a car parked at the end of the driveway,” he comments, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “Black one.”

I lean over and look out the window on the other side of the house, seeing the black car sitting at the end of the driveway, too. There’s only one, but it sticks out like a sore thumb out here in ranch land. “Looks like the Hound Society knows where we are officially,” I muse. It’s unmarked, no distinct details besides it being black, but it’s pretty obvious there shouldn’t be anything for a car to stop right there for. Either they’re stupid or they want to be seen.

Creed sighs as he moves around the kitchen. “Looks like it’s time to throw some more nails down. Bastards.”

But Jiro sets down the mug of tea he'd been drinking and straightens. He's not wearing his suit coat today, only the slacks and a black t-shirt. It does something to me to see him in more casual dress, makes me want to jump him right here, but I refrain. When he sets down his mug though, I pay attention.

"Why not take care of the matter permanently?" he asks.

"What?" Creed responds, glancing at him. "What do you mean? I can't call the cops."

"You don't need to involve law enforcement," he replies before moving toward the door. He pushes through it before he starts walking down the walkway, leaving us all gaping after him.

I stare at him with wide eyes before standing up, my coffee forgotten. I move to go after him, but Creed shoves a pair of rubber boots at me as he does the same, pushing through the front door roughly.

"What the fuck is he doing?" he growls. To me, he says, "Put those on. Trust me. You don't want any sticker burrs in your feet."

Luckily, the shirt I'm wearing is long enough to be a short dress, so I run out in that and the too large boots, stumbling after Creed as we both rush after Jiro. He's already halfway down the driveway and I can only go so fast in the boots, my feet literally shuffling around inside them. I bet these are Creed's. It doesn't slow Creed down, however. He jogs after Jiro at a pace I try my best to match with floppy boots.

Row steps outside behind us with a mug and watches from the porch, seemingly unconcerned with everything going on. He lets the door close behind him before taking a sip of his coffee. He reminds me of Nosy Betty, a neighbor I used to have who loved to watch everything happening but never got involved.

Achilles had still been getting ready and there was no time to warn him something was happening. At some point he'll come out and realize we're not in the house.

Jiro moves fast, far faster than I expect, as he practically power walks down the driveway. By the time we're a quarter of the way down the driveway, he's already almost to the car. I hear Creed curse as he picks up speed, but I can't go any faster with these fucking boots. I hiss at the struggle of them and push myself harder, making my calves strain. I'm about halfway down the driveway when Jiro closes in.

The driver rolls down the window, some douche bag who grins at Jiro as he stops. Even from here, I can see the Hound Society pin on his lapel as I get my morning cardio in.

"Hey man," the guy says cheekily. "We just broke down and—"

He gets no warning. Jiro doesn't warn anyone, not us, not the guy in the car. He reaches inside the window and slams the man's face against the steering wheel so hard, it honks the horn. Something savage inside of me purrs at the sight of the blood that starts dripping down the man's face. I hope his nose is broken.

Creed whistles at Jiro as he closes in, his face twisted in anger, apparently trying to stop Jiro from hurting them further. I don't know why he bothers. It's not like the guys don't deserve it.

The passenger of the car climbs out as Jiro comes around.

"Hey fucker!" the man says. "I suggest you go back inside."

He pulls a gun, but Jiro is there before he can so much as raise it, hitting the gun from his hand so hard, I think I hear a bone crack as I stumble up the gravel driveway, finally reaching the end of it. For fuck's sake, someone needs to get me a four-wheeler or something. A bike would even be better than running all the way up this thing.

Jiro cocks back his arm and punches the second man in the face. I hear bones crack for sure this time. The man goes limp, but Jiro fists his shirt so he doesn't fall backward and punches him again, and again, and again. Creed lurches forward and

tries to pull Jiro off the guy, but Jiro just shoves Creed back despite his size and keeps hitting.

“That’s enough,” Creed snarls as I slide to a stop, panting and sweaty.

This time, Jiro listens and steps back, dropping the guy to the ground. Creed picks him up, opens the passenger door, and shoves the knocked-out asshole back inside. He slams the door before telling the driver still holding his nose, “Get the fuck out of here.”

The car starts and the wheels spin out as he tries to get away fast. We all watch it go down the road and disappear around a curve. I’m breathing hard with the effort of running down the driveway in boots meant for Creed’s feet, my hair a mess around my face as I watch Creed turn toward Jiro.

“What the fuck was that?” Creed growls, glaring at Jiro.

Jiro only looks back at him coolly. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the island. There are laws here. Laws we have to follow. This is my home.”

Jiro raises his brow. “They aren’t following the laws. Why should we?”

“Man, I swore an oath to protect and—”

“Yeah, and how is that holding up for you?” Jiro suddenly snarls in his face, there faster than I can follow. “Is your country protecting you in return? They taking care of you? How about the PTSD you clearly have but won’t tell anyone about?”

Creed’s face shuts down. “That’s not the point.”

“It should be,” Jiro says, straightening his shirt. “I didn’t make the same oaths as you. I didn’t ask to follow them. I fixed the problem.”

“And what if Billie would have gotten hurt?” Creed spits, running a hand through his hair in frustration. My eyes go to the spots of blood on the ground and then to the blood on Jiro’s knuckles. He seems unconcerned. I tense at Creed’s

question, realizing it's a valid one. We could have been shot. But also, Jiro has a point, too.

Jiro looks over at me with the question, studying me wearing nothing but the large shirt and the boots, before looking away. "Then they would have died," he murmurs.

And then he starts walking back up the driveway, leisurely, as if there's not blood on his knuckles and splattered on his shirt, as if he didn't just nearly beat a man to death.

"Jesus Christ," Creed growls, shoving his hair back. "What are we going to do with him?"

I shrug. "They deserved it."

Creed growls at me. "We should at least try *not* to be criminals."

"We're not criminals," I say, looking up at him. "But we *are* the predators now, and we need to act like it."

He raises his brows at me and shakes his head. "Come on. I'm not going to make you walk back in those boots. Hop on my back and I'll carry them."

I smile. "It's been a long time since I've gotten a piggyback ride." Carefully, I jump onto his back when he offers it, the boots falling off my feet easily. He bends down and picks them up, carrying me back up the driveway and toward the house. When we get back up there, Achilles and Row are standing on the porch.

"What exactly happened?" Achilles asks, his eyes still half-lidded with sleep.

"Oh, Jiro beat up the Hound Society dudes. They left," I offer helpfully as Creed lets me slide down his back and stand on my own feet again.

Row laughs, clearly amused by it all and not nearly as concerned as Creed is. Achilles just shakes his head.

"Just as long as he doesn't bring the cops around here. That's all we need."

“Why?” I tease. “You got a record?” Achilles meets my eyes but doesn’t answer, letting the question linger in the air. “Well... alright then,” I grumble, ducking back inside.

I need a hot shower after all of that.

To burn away the sweat and the satisfaction at seeing the blood Jiro drew from the assholes stalking us.

I should probably burn that away quickly.

TWENTY



“**Y**ou know what we need tonight,” I declare the next day.

Things have still been tense between Jiro and Creed. They’re barely talking to each other. Jiro because he rarely talks anyway, but Creed because he’s genuinely annoyed with Jiro. Considering we have a variety of personalities here, it’s understandable that there will be arguments. Considering this is the first one, it takes everything in me not to step in between and try to fix it myself. They need to hash it out between them. I get both of their points. On one hand, Jiro is right. The more we let them get away with following us like that, the more they’ll do it. He didn’t kill them, though he might have if Creed hadn’t stopped him. On the other hand, if he had killed them or caused too much trouble, it could bring the cops down on us and I can guarantee they’ll be in the pocket of the Hound Society. They have people everywhere it seems and we don’t need to get locked up in jail.

Row and Achilles seem fine enough if not a little bored. Achilles is enjoying the wide-open spaces and hanging out outside. He has his hammock strung up between two trees, the perfect place for him to relax when inside is too much. Row lounges around in casual clothes still worth more than my entire wardrobe and taps away on his phone, handling business his father sends his way. Apparently, he still has to work.

“What’s that?” Creed finally asks from where he’s sitting at the table going over receipts for some kind of equipment.

“A movie night,” I say, smiling brightly. “You’ve got streaming services, right?”

Creed tilts his head. “Yeah, I do. They’re all logged in on the TV.”

“So, it’s settled. We’re going to make popcorn and watch a movie. We’ll sit on the couch, maybe eat some ice cream, and spend some quality time together.”

“Are we not already spending quality time together?” Achilles groans from his place in the kitchen. “Why do we have to watch some chick movie?”

“I didn’t say we have to watch a girly movie,” I say, offended.

He raises his brows at me. “No? What do you want to watch then? Let me guess, a romcom?” He mocks excitement. “Oh, boy, I’m so excited to watch the movie where she gets the guy after they have embarrassing things happen to them. Because that’s how real life is.”

“Fuck you,” I growl. “Just because you’re bitter and jaded doesn’t mean the rest of us have to be.”

“I like romcoms,” Row throws in. “They’re the best.”

“Thank you,” I growl with a gesture toward him. “At least one of you is cultured.” I glance at Creed. “Are you opposed to a romantic comedy?”

He grimaces. “Of course not.”

I snort. “You all are lame. We could be watching Dirty Dancing right now and be loving it. Instead, you wanna complain.”

“No one is complaining,” Creed argues.

“I am,” Achilles spits back. “I’m definitely complaining.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine. Whatever. Don’t have a movie night with me, you pricks.” I move over to the kitchen and throw some popcorn in the microwave, hitting the buttons far more aggressive than need be. The microwave actually moves with the force, pushed back tighter against the wall. I stand there

and stare angrily at the popcorn bag as it turns, waiting for the pops to start.

Someone sighs behind me. “Fine. We can watch whatever you want,” Achilles grumbles.

“No. I don’t want to anymore,” I huff. I jump when the first pop comes and scowl at the microwave, as if accusing it of my PTSD. The second pop comes, and I’m prepared, glaring at it angrily. I’m so tired of these reactions, of being afraid of the dark, or rather what I can’t see in the dark. I’m tired of jumping at any loud noise, of needing reassurance. I’m a strong fucking woman. I need to start acting like it.

Strong arms come around me, holding me as more pops fill the air. I glance over my shoulder to find Jiro hugging me and I settle into his hold. No words are exchanged as the popcorn starts popping faster, his warmth settling inside me and easing my anger at myself.

“We all feel it,” he whispers in my ear. “You’re not the only one with the struggles, little rabbit.”

“It’s bullshit,” I scowl. “We escaped. That should be the end of it.”

“Every experience stays with us, builds us. It’s a part of your history now, but it doesn’t have to be the only thing that builds you. Healing comes with time.”

I huff and hit the button to open the microwave when the pops get longer than two seconds apart. There’s nothing worse than burnt popcorn.

“We don’t have time,” I murmur.

“I know.” His hands run along my hips. “But it’ll still come with time.”

I grab the popcorn and turn in his arms. “You couldn’t pay me enough to get back in the ocean right now,” I say, staring into his eyes.

“Same,” Row announces from the couch. “Fuck the ocean.”

I laugh because what else is there to do. We'd all been shaped by Prey Island and not in good ways. It makes me feel a little better to know the ocean thing isn't just me. Unfortunately, the dark has seeped into that fear. Every time I'm in the dark, I see a dark ocean suddenly lighting up around me, revealing the dozens of sharks circling us. And then they're gone as the darkness consumes them, as we're left to wonder if we're about to die.

"Go pick out a movie," Jiro tells me, gently pushing me toward the couch. "I'll get the ice cream."

"I don't want to force you all to watch something you don't want to," I grumble. "It's okay."

"We're watching the movie, little rabbit," he says more forcibly. "Go pick one."

I scowl. "Whatever."

But I wander over to the couch and sit next to Row, offering him popcorn. He takes a handful happily and tosses his phone on the table to watch as I start scrolling through the choices. I hesitate over a romcom I like, knowing Achilles will make fun of me for it, but eventually I select it anyway. Just because he's an asshole doesn't mean I need to change anything about myself.

Achilles appears over my shoulder and grabs a handful of popcorn before leaping over the couch and settling beside me. "I love this movie," he says.

And there's not even any mockery in the words.

I stare at him. After all that, he likes this movie?

But when he glances at me, I see the apology in his eyes for being negative and realize he doesn't really like this movie. He's just settling down to do something together.

For me.

Smiling as Creed and Jiro join us, I settle deeper into their warmth and pull the blanket over Row and me, happy to be spending this time together. Jiro hands me a bowl of ice cream and I take it, smiling down at the vanilla bean flavor.

None of them complain again. We just enjoy each other's company.

Eventually, I fall asleep laying across Row's lap, my eyes growing so heavy, I can't keep them open. I feel safe, so safe.

My dreams don't even trickle into nightmares. Another night free.

TWENTY-ONE



I'm woken up at the ass crack of dawn. Literally.

The sun is barely shining through the curtains when Creed comes into his room where someone had placed me and shakes me awake. I scowl up at him when he shakes me again after I turn over.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snarl. “It’s barely six in the morning.”

“Time to stop being a freeloader,” he teases. I don’t take it personally. I know I’m not a freeloader in the slightest. “There’s work to be done on the ranch.”

“So wake up one of the others,” I grumble, trying to dig my way deeper into the bed. “It’s too early for this shit.”

“Nope.” He jerks the comforter off me, washing me in cold air and I curl into a ball. “Ranch work starts early. Get up.”

I sit up, my face pinched in annoyance. “I’m going to stab you.”

“You can try,” he laughs. “Come on. Get dressed.”

I manage to drag myself out of bed and get ready for the day, wearing a pair of comfy jeans and a t-shirt. When I pad out there in socks, he holds up the too large boots again.

“We’ll have to get you some proper boots next time we go into town,” he says apologetically. “But you’ll definitely need some boots for this.”

Jiro is standing in the kitchen, sipping tea. He toasts it to me when I stumble by.

“Do you ever sleep?” I grunt at him. “And why don’t you have to help?”

“I’ve been helping every morning since we arrived,” he replies. “All while someone has been sleeping.”

I shoot him a glare. “Whatever.”

But as it turns out, I end up enjoying the work.

We go out to the stables and let the horses out into the pastures. First, we clean out their stalls, scrapping out their droppings and pushing it into a pile in the corner where Creed apparently stores it for fertilizer. After we finish that, the sun is higher in the sky, and I’ve worked up enough sweat that I’m no longer annoyed about being woken up so early.

“You do this every day?” I ask as I set the shovel back where it goes.

“The stables get cleaned out once every couple of days,” Creed answers. “I have a guy who comes out once a week to help out with taking care of the horses, but mostly, I enjoy doing it all myself.”

“You don’t have to get a regular job while you’re out here?” I ask. “Now that you’re not a Navy Seal?”

He shakes his head. “I own a couple of companies. Invested well. Mostly, they cover life expenses and this place easily. I don’t have to do much but check in every now and then.”

I raise my brows and study him. “I didn’t know that.”

“You didn’t ask,” he teases. “it’s not a huge deal. It just lets me focus on my ranch rather than worrying about where the next paycheck is coming from.”

“That makes sense,” I nod, wiping my forehead on the back of my arm. “What else do we need to do?”

He smiles crookedly. “Wanna meet the horses?”

I brighten, following after him to the pasture. A few of the horses run up immediately, prancing up like they're walking on a runway. A couple of them stay out in the pasture, preferring to keep distance between us. I'm new, so I understand.

The first horse I'd seen, the black and white, immediately comes up and dances around Creed before pressing her face into his hand, demanding pets. "This here is Gertrude," Creed says. When I give him a look at the name, he shrugs. "She came with the name, was already trained to respond to it, so I left it. She'd already been through enough at that point."

I reach out toward her, and she happily pushes into my hand. "She's so sweet."

"She is," Creed nods. "You'd never think she'd been abused before I got her."

"Abused?"

"Her previous owners would refuse to feed her because she wouldn't let them ride her. They thought depriving her of food and water constantly would break her. It didn't. But it did give her a lot of health problems. When the rescue reached out, I didn't hesitate. She was about a hundred pounds lighter when she came to me."

"She looks healthy now," I comment. "Apparently she's thrived with you."

He beams at the horse as she whinnies. "She's a good girl."

Something inside of me unfurls at the way he calls her a good girl, and like he knows, he glances at me, and his smile turns a little wicked. But he doesn't act on it, instead gesturing to another horse that comes up. This one is light brown, his skin riddled with scars. "This one is Spartan. Don't let him get behind you. He'll kick the shit out of you just because. Bastard has gotten me a few times."

The horse shakes his head as if arguing.

"Don't try to be charming now," Creed growls at him. "Just because we have company. I know how much of a dick you are. I've got the scars to prove it."

Despite his words, Creed pats the horse gently, giving him the love and attention he asks for.

“And there’s eight of them,” I muse. “You said not all of them are rescued?”

“I have two I purchased on my own before I was able to start rescuing them. Ambrosia over there, the massive Clydesdale out in the pasture, and then Larry is the painted horse just behind Spartan. Larry is an attention whore so if he tugs on your hair to get your attention, just smack his nose. He’ll leave you alone.”

“Aww,” I say, reaching for Larry. “I don’t mind giving you attention.”

The horse prances through the herd happily and leans down so I can pet his head. Each of the horses have their own personalities, their expressions beautiful. And watching Creed love on them and introduce them all makes my fall even more in love with him. They say if you want to really know a person, watch how they interact with animals, and that’s true. He’s perfect, good.

And yet here we are, about to drag him into some evil shit again.

Leaning into him, I press a kiss against his lips, knowing I’ll have to offer him the opportunity to sit our plan out at some point, but wanting to keep this moment happy between us. The kiss is gentle and sweet at first, but then it turns a little more feverish.

Up until my hair gets tugged.

I laugh and turn to Larry when he whinnies at me.

“Yes, Yes. I’ll give you attention, too,” I tell him, rubbing his neck. “You really weren’t kidding.”

“Nope. He’s an attention whore,” Creed laughs. “He’s a great horse though. You should see how fast he runs. We can —”

“It’s almost noon. You two need to eat.”

I turn and meet Jiro's eyes, realizing I'm hungry just as he tells us we need to go in. My stomach gives a grumble and I grimace. He'd come out to fetch me, knowing I'd be hungry about now.

There's a tension still between Creed and Jiro. Creed scowls at Jiro, but I pat his chest. "I'm pretty hungry," I tell him.

"Then you'll eat," he says, pushing me toward Jiro. "We could both use something."

And so, I take both of their hands and tug them back toward the house.

Larry lets me know he's displeased, so I call over my shoulder that I'll be back later.

Just in case he understands people speak.

I know how it is to want attention and not get it.

TWENTY-TWO



The first thing I realize when we get inside the house is just how dirty I am. Looking down at my clothing, after having swept the horse stalls and hanging out with the horses, I'm covered in dirt and grime and probably manure.

"I need to take a quick shower," I murmur with a wince.

"You take one first and then I'll jump in," Creed replies, gently pushing me toward the bathroom.

I raise my brow. "You don't want to join me?"

He leans down and presses a kiss against the top of my head. "If I join you, Billie, you'll never get to eat lunch."

Snorting at his words, I pat him on the shoulder. "Understandable. I'll be quick."

And I am. I make quick work of soaping up and removing the grime before washing the sweat from my hair. I scrub until I feel clean again before dressing in comfy clothes and coming back out, giving the bathroom over to Creed. When I come out, however, it's to find more than Jiro in the kitchen.

"Billie, darlin'!" Debbie exclaims. "That son of mine got you working your behind off?"

I laugh and move into the kitchen to give Creed's mom a hug, absorbing her warmth. "Not too bad. I just helped him clean the stalls this morning."

"Psh!" she says, patting me on the cheek. "You're a saint to help him with all that. Did you meet the horses?"

Nodding, I move forward to help her unpack the groceries she has sitting on the counter. Jiro is already on the side chopping some tomatoes and lettuce. “They’re all gorgeous. And so well taken care of.”

Debbie beams. “Creed takes great care of them babies. I remember when some of ‘em first arrived. Poor things come as nothing but skin and bones most of the time and scared out of their wits. They thrive here.”

It makes something inside my chest bloom at the way she talks about Creed and his horses. It’s easy to feel how proud she is of him and spending time around Debbie makes me miss my own mom. She used to give great hugs, too.

Creed is still in the shower I assume and I’m not sure where Achilles and Row are so it’s just me, Debbie, and Jiro in the kitchen.

“Can I help do anything?” I ask, moving forward.

“We’re making sandwiches,” Debbie says. “Nothing fancy, but we need to toast the bread, if you wanna get to work doing that?”

“Absolutely.” I pick up the loaves of bread and move over to the fancy toaster, popping a few in and settle back against the counter.

Jiro continues to cut the lettuce quietly, a small smile spared for me as he glances over.

“How’re things going?” Debbie asks suddenly, looking over at me with crinkled eyes. “My boy treating you right?”

“Yes ma’am,” I answer honestly. I’ve never felt more taken care of than I do here. I’m constantly looked after. I’m never alone. This much love and safety has never surrounded me quite like this. “Besides scooping manure this morning, he’s been great.” I laugh and wink at her, letting her know I’m joking. I really don’t mind helping with the horses.

She smiles. “I can’t believe he’s got you out there scooping horse poop. That man.” She shakes her head. “He does love those horses, though. When he disappeared, when you all did, I knew something bad had happened. He would have never left

the horses to fend for themselves. Luckily, I came over that same day and saw he was missing. Sent me into a fright.”

“You must have been so worried,” I murmur. I hadn’t had a mom to panic over my disappearance, but Holly had gone into a whole hunt to find me. When I’d shown back up, she’d nearly cried with relief. So I can imagine how Creed’s mom felt.

“Of course. A momma worries,” she muses, glancing over at Jiro. “Jiro, honey, you’re doing amazing.”

Jiro smiles at her, happily chopping away.

“You talk about our disappearance like you know most of the facts. How much did Creed tell you?” I ask. When the first round of toast pops out, I grab the finished pieces and drop them on a plate before popping a new set in.

Debbie stops what she’s doing and looks over at me, her face serious. “I originally asked him not to. All his years with the Navy, I really worried, and honestly, some of those stories were too much for my heart. But I realized this time was different. He left out the parts that would put me in the most danger and I know I can’t ever repeat anything he ever said outside of these walls, but he told me enough to understand y’all went through hell.” She comes over and touches my arm. “I’m really glad the five of y’all made it out and I owe you something monumental for giving my boy a real reason to survive that.”

“Oh, I think it’s the other way around,” I say, shaking my head. “I got off that island because of them.”

Jiro glances at me, something flashing in his eyes, but before he can say whatever it is he wanted to, Debbie bumps her shoulder with mine.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, darlin’. You captured the hearts of not just my boy, but all four glorious men.” She leans in closer and whispers. “Realistically, I don’t know how your vajayjay is keeping up. Mine would be sore as a pig after being hit with a hammer.” I snort out my laughter, slapping a hand over my mouth to try and stop it, but Debbie

only wiggles her brows at me. “Regardless,” she continues. “I’m thankful for you. And also a little jealous.” Winking, she returns to the plates before her, grabbing the toast I’d finished and layering meat and cheese over them—except for the sandwich for Row— leaving them open faced before she prepares to pop them in the oven.

Face flushed with amusement, I glance over at Jiro where he settles the toppings to the side and looks over what else there is to do.

“You slice those veggies like you’re classically trained,” Debbie comments on Jiro’s chopping. “Did you ever go to school for culinary work?”

I glance at Jiro, my brows raised as I realize he does cook like he knows what he’s doing. The few times he’s made meals at my apartment and here, they’ve always been amazing.

Jiro leans over to wash his hands in the sink before smiling over at Debbie. It’s the most I’ve seen him smile, as if he genuinely enjoys being around Debbie. I don’t blame him. She’s a treasure.

“Yes. At some point, I imagined myself a chef.” He glances at me, his eyes tracing my face. “Unfortunately, duties to my... family came first.”

“Oh, you have family?” Debbie asks excitedly. “I’d love to meet them.”

He shakes his head. “Not blood family. These are... more like a brotherhood.”

Her brows raise. “I won’t ask you anymore about that. Clearly, it’s something you’d rather not talk about, but just know, if you want to be a chef at some point, you have the skills for it. Hell, I’ll happily let you practice on me. Momma likes her food.”

Jiro’s eyes crinkle. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good.” She leans closer to me. “I like him. A man who can cook can win any woman’s heart, dear.”

Chuckling at her teasing, I continue my task until I have a pile of toast high enough that Debbie tells me to stop. Then, together, we all start assembling the sandwiches together. When she sticks them in the oven, we spend the next few minutes making up a new pitcher of lemonade. I follow Debbie's instructions, and when she sips the lemonade that's more sugar than lemon, she nods and pats me on the shoulder.

"Excellent job, Billie." She grabs the sandwiches out. "Now we just add the toppings and lunch is served."

As I stand there with her, laughing and joking, enjoying the time, I realize with a pang this won't last forever. Eventually, we'll have plans to go after the Hound Society and Debbie could be in danger. I'll have to bring it up to Creed about her needing some extra protection. I can't bear the thought of something happening to her.

Once we finish the sandwiches, Creed appears back from his room wearing sweat pants that practically highlight the snake in his pants and a t-shirt. My eyes fall to the outline and I flush, glancing away quickly.

But not quick enough for him not to catch me.

He rushes forward and takes the plates from him mom, helping, all while winking at me and making my blush brighter.

Deciding it's more fun to dine out on the patio, we settle all the plates on the table out there. Row is already sitting at the table with a few papers in front of him. He cleans them up when we appear, making more room. Achilles comes jogging up from the yard, his face stretched into a grin at the sight of food.

"Debbie, you make the best food," he gushes, claiming one of the sandwiches.

"You charmer, you," she gushes. "Such a good boy."

I guess not even Achilles can be an asshole to Debbie.

We dig into the sandwiches, the flavors bursting on my tongue. Fuck, I didn't know sandwiches could taste so good.

I'm happily munching on my sandwich and drinking my lemonade when I hear it.

I swallow my bite, my brows furrowed as I tip my head to the side. "Do you all hear that?"

Jiro freezes, focusing on the sounds around us. Before he can answer, it's Creed who growls and stands up. "That sounds like a drone."

The moment he says that, the small flying machine appears in the sky before us, coming closer, the buzz of it growing louder the closer it gets. Creed disappears inside the house for a moment while I stare at the camera on the bottom of it. I scowl, annoyed that the Hound Society can't leave us alone.

"Fucking Hounds," I grumble, setting my sandwich down.

I don't know what we can do about it. It's not like any of us can catch the drone.

But apparently Creed didn't get that memo.

He appears out of the house, a large rifle in his hands. I barely have time to blink in surprise before he lifts the gun and fires. There's little warning. The loud blast makes me jerk and cover my ears, my heart rate shooting so high, the edges of my vision blacken just a little.

"Son!" Debbie chides as she reaches out toward me. "Billie, it's okay."

But I'm shaking. It takes me far too long to uncover my ears and blink away the feeling of fear that comes with gun shots now. It takes even longer for my heart to settle down.

"I'm sorry," Creed murmurs with a wince. "I didn't think about it."

I wave away his words. "It's fine. Did you get it?"

He nods and gestures out to the yard where bits of plastic and mangled bits of the drone lay scattered across the yard. "I got it."

"Good." I take a deep breath. "Let's finish our lunch then."

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Row asks, watching me closely.

But I only nod and take another bite. I don’t want them fussing over me or even realizing just how unpredictable my PTSD can be. It’s mostly because I hadn’t had warning of the gun shot. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. It’s just a part of life now and that’s okay.

My eyes trail back to the pieces of the drone on the grass. Creed will probably go out there and throw it all away at some point, but I can’t help feeling as if there are a thousand eyes on us no matter where we go.

A thousand eyes on me. Watching me. Wanting me.

A thousand eyes.

TWENTY-THREE



A few days go by, and we all fall into a sort of routine. We wake up and I help Creed with the horses and things around the ranch. Sometimes, the others join in. Sometimes, it's just Creed and me. Achilles spends his time exploring the wilderness like Crocodile Dundee, coming back with interesting bits he finds. When he starts bringing me back rocks, I collect each of them and settle them in Keanu Leaves' pot. There's a nice growing collection of colorful rocks in his pot now, interesting ones, that Achilles adds to every chance he gets. Every time he brings me a new one, it makes me think he's a penguin trying to impress, so I gush over each and every one just to make sure.

In case it's more important to him than he'll ever tell me.

Jiro spends a lot more time with the horses than I realize until I catch him talking to Larry out in the stables. Once, I caught him reading to them from a book and the horses seemed to love it, all standing around and listening with their ears perked up.

Row splits his time between spending time with me and working on business things he has no choice but to take on as the heir to his family. His father continues to send him busy work and paperwork that needs taken care of. I asked him if he needed to go into some office to take care of things but he insists everything is fine so I don't question it too much.

All in all, we settle into a happy little routine where we rotate around each other like a solar system. One that has lots of sex and all the cuddles, but still a system.

Sometimes, I can sense the tension in our group. Jiro and Creed are still moving around like they're sizing each other up. Though the Hound Society hasn't been lingering at the end of the driveway as much, Creed still insists that following the laws are a better option. Every time one of the black cars finds its way to the end of the driveway again though, Jiro only has to walk out on the porch and it pulls away.

Apparently, they got his message. I'd say his method worked.

Besides that, the more that Row takes business calls and switches into his masked Hound mode, I can feel the growing distrust. The Hound Society, though not lingering, have practically tripled their presence. The more that Row does business, the more they appear, and I can tell there's a bit of suspicion despite the trust we'd all built on the island.

Hell, I'm pretty sure the delivery driver who dropped off a package for Creed yesterday was Hound Society with the way he kept eying me.

The more the Hound Society watches, the more their eyes linger on Row, at the Hound in our midst, and I don't know how to handle it.

Until one of the black cars ends up pulling into the driveway and coming up to the house.

As a unit, we all step onto the porch, our eyes narrowed on the black Mercedes that rolls to a stop. Two men in suits step out, dark sunglasses on their faces, just as the ones before. Clearly, these aren't the same guys that Jiro beat the shit out of since their faces are intact. Jiro moves to step forward, probably planning on teaching them another lesson, but Creed stops him with a hand on his chest and a warning that Jiro clearly doesn't accept. Before a disagreement can bust out or for things to turn violent, Row is stepping forward instead, his face schooled into the perfect mask.

"What can I help you with, gentlemen?" he asks, his face transforming to one of indifference. Today, he wears casual clothes, but he still looks as pressed and presentable as always. "This is private property."

The men glance at Row and then to the others. “We’ve been instructed to bring a bill to you for the loss of three drones in the last week.” He pulls a paper out and passes it to Row.

Row nods and reads over the paper, studying it. “Are you aware those drones were trespassing on private property?”

“We are.”

“Then you’re also aware you have no rights to bring a bill to us. Just as there is a right to protect privacy and home, there’s a right to shoot down drones that come looking in our windows.” Row folds up the piece of paper and hands it back to the man. “Return to sender with a message that we won’t be paying for the drones. Have a good day.”

The guy pops open his mouth and glances over at where I’m standing with my arms crossed. “We’ve been instructed to deliver the message and—”

“Consider the message delivered and denied,” Row answers. “If your boss has a problem with it, you can talk to my lawyer.” Row glances at the trash can. “But, as a sign of my good faith, I can return the drones.”

The man’s eyes brighten until Row pulls a chunk of brutalized plastic from the can and tosses it to him. “What is this?” the man asks, frowning.

“Unfortunately, the drones suffered damage,” Row offers with a shrug. “Have a good day.”

The men hesitate. “But—”

“Have a good day,” Row says more forcibly, and I tense at his tone, at the way he leaves no room for argument despite these men trying their hardest to complete their task.

When they turn around and leave, Row doesn’t move until they turn back down the driveway, turn onto the road, and disappear. Only then does he turn around, his mask falling away until he looks like my Row again, but I can feel Creed, Achilles, and Jiro studying Row a little closer.

The Hound is still here, in our midst, and we’ve let him in.

The tension increases and it drives me crazy, but I don't say anything. I trust Row. I think I do, but the way he slips that mask on so easily makes me shudder. It would be so easy for him to keep an eye on us, to feed information back to the Hound Society he supposedly never wanted to be a part of, and yet, he seems to fit right in. They own him now. It would be nothing.

I trust him.

I swear I trust him.

But the others slip just a little bit.

No one brings it up. Not yet, but Row notices the tension and his mood shifts from amused at the suited men to a sour disposition. His face falls.

"I don't think they'll go through the trouble of pursuing that. It's just an intimidation tactic. Nothing more," he says roughly, before he pushes past the others and steps back inside the house, leaving us all standing here.

Eventually, we all go back inside, but the tension makes me want to scream.

TWENTY-FOUR



Two days later, Jiro finds me where I'm sitting on the porch swing flipping through an old magazine.

"What are you doing?" he asks, taking in my fuzzy socks and thick blanket. It's a little chilly today so I needed the added warmth.

"Reading a magazine," I reply. "Duh."

"Go get dressed in loose, but comfortable clothing," he commands.

Raising my brows, I study the sweatpants and t-shirt he wears. "We going somewhere?"

He comes over and takes my blanket. "It's time you learn better self-defense skills."

"Oh?" I stand and stretch, setting the old magazine on the swing and facing him. "Thinking I can't survive whatever's coming?"

Jiro's eyes are dark, like liquid pools of onyx, and just like every time, they drag me in, beg me to swim in their darkness. When he looks at me now, I shift my weight, uncertain if I want to take him on or not.

"You did good on the island. You're a fast learner, but there is plenty you must improve on. Especially, if we're going to walk among the Hounds."

I grin excitedly. "Will I be able to move like you?"

He looks down at my clothing, at the yoga pants and loose t-shirt and seems to realize I'm already in comfortable clothing. "Perhaps after years and years of training," he finally says.

Scowling, I take the blanket from him and fold it up. "We don't have years."

"No, we don't," he agrees. "You won't need shoes. Come on."

Jiro leads me through the house and out to the back yard. We settle in a large patch of soft grass, facing each other. Digging my toes in the soft grass, I cross my arms and wait for him to tell me what to do.

"Okay, now," he says, taking me in. "Remove your socks and toss them aside."

"It's cold out," I argue, but when he stares at me, I grumble and strip them off before putting them off to the side. "Please don't tell me I need to get naked, too."

His eyes sparkle. "If you want, that can be arranged."

"No, thank you," I grumble. "My nipples are hard enough to cut glass as it is."

He proceeds to walk me through various movements of how I should react when I'm attacked. I learn to plant my feet, to use my size and speed to my advantage, and that there's no way I could ever stop Jiro if he wanted to kill me.

That last part is kind of a turn on.

When I start to shiver with the cold seeping in through my feet and my hands, Jiro takes it all into account and we move inside. He pushes the table in the living room out of the way, giving us a square to work with. There won't be any full flipping, but at least it gives us more room and it's warm.

"Can I put my socks back on?" I ask, rubbing some warmth back into my hands.

"For now," he agrees. "But you'll have no traction."

“As if I stand a chance against you anyways,” I shoot back, pulling my socks back on. I sigh at the warmth around my cold feet and straighten. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“What do you do when someone grabs you from behind?” he asks, coming from behind me and wrapping his arms around mine.

“Stomp on their foot as hard as I can and run my elbow back into their stomach or chest. Then run,” I parrot back.

“Good. Do it.”

I stomp my foot, missing his on purpose, before ramming my elbow back against him. He moves before I can get him good, but he doesn’t release his arms around me.

“Now what?” Jiro breathes in my ear. “If it doesn’t work, what do you do?”

“Use my weight and flip him.”

“Show me the motions without doing it.”

I plant my feet, grab his arms where they’re folded across my chest, and bend over almost to flipping him. I keep from doing it fully so that he doesn’t slam against the floor. We need to invest in some good mats if this is going to be a common practice.

“Good,” Jiro murmurs, and then his hands tighten before trailing up to my breasts, kneading them through my shirt.

“Is this part of the training?” I ask, leaning back against him. “How to react when some fucker grabs my tits at the club?”

“Do you want to know what I would do, or do you want Creed’s way?” he asks, his breath fanning across my neck, sending my pulse skyrocketing.

“What would you do?” I reply, tipping my head to the side to give him access to my neck. He rewards me with a tiny nibble there before tracing a soothing trail with his tongue.

“I would bury a knife in his stomach, a big one. I’d wait until I ran out of blade before I twisted, cutting up his organs

to the point of no return,” he purrs, his hands continuing to caress. His right hand finds my pebbling nipple through my shirt and rolls it between his finger and thumb. “Then, I’d make sure he was looking in my eyes as I jerked the knife up, as high as I could go, before pulling it out and leaving him there to bleed out.”

My pussy grows wet with his description and I’m not sure what that says about me. Apparently, I’ve learned to yearn for blood, to make those who hurt me pay, because as Jiro continues to describe just how he’d kill a man for touching me, it makes me want to fuck him. I rub my thighs together in arousal before pressing my ass back against him. He’s as hard as I am wet, and a small moan slips from my lips.

“Are we still fighting or are we working toward something else?” I ask, practically panting as he drops his hand down my stomach, caressing, slipping beneath the band of my yoga pants and teasing my pussy lips.

“Does the idea of violence arouse you, little rabbit?” he purrs, just before he dips his finger inside and finds the moisture there. “It seems like my little rabbit has developed a taste for blood.”

I hiss as he strokes a finger through my wetness, spreading it, touching without going where I want him to. “I didn’t take you for a tease.”

“Oh, I can tease. Especially when you make such pretty sounds for me,” he murmurs. “Especially when you’d happily fuck me in a pool of blood.”

The imagery makes me press back against him harder, desperate for some sort of release that he’s purposely not giving me, his finger stroking everything but my clit. “So what if the thought of you slicing a neck turns me on?” I ask, reaching up to grab the hand at my breast. “You like that.”

“Oh, I love it,” he purrs. “Just as much as I love you.” He jerks my yoga pants down to my thighs with one hand, leaving me bare to the chilly air. “I like the idea of laying you down in a pool of blood, watching as it stains your hair with rust.” He strokes along my ass before I feel him shift behind me. “I like

the idea of painting symbols across your skin in blood, spelling my name there.” I feel his hard length prob against my entrance before he roughly shoves me down over the arm of the couch, leaving my ass in the air as I grasp at the couch and try to keep my balance. “I like the idea of coming across your stomach and running my hands along it, mixing it with the blood, covering you in violence.”

“Fuck,” I hiss, trying to lift myself up onto my elbows, but his hand shoves my head back into the couch. I’m leaking, desperate for him to fuck me. The arm of the couch presses into my stomach, my legs dangling off the other side, my toes no longer touching the floor now that he’s shoving my face into the couch.

“You like that, don’t you?” Jiro asks, running his other hand along my ass, caressing, trailing closer to where I want him. His cock presses against my skin, too far away from where I want it. “You like the thought of me defiling you, of dirtying your purity?”

“I haven’t been pure for a long time,” I rasp, my toes curling as he presses a finger against the seam of my ass before running down, rubbing my wetness around.

“Oh, but you’re practically lily white when it comes to me,” he growls. “You’re going to look so beautiful when your soul is as stained as mine.”

His hand grips my hair, tightening, holding me still even as I try to move. I reach back behind me, trying to claw at him, but his other hand grabs my wrist and pins it against the small of my back, like I’m handcuffed.

“So stubborn,” he murmurs. “So desperate for control and yet so desperate to give it away to me.” He presses his cock against my entrance, but doesn’t push inside. “Beg me to corrupt you.”

“Please,” I rasp, wiggling but unable to move.

“Please, what, little rabbit?” he goads. “You have to be specific.”

“Please, corrupt me,” I whimper as he teases with his cock. “Please, fuck me.”

He chuckles. “Such a good little rabbit,” he says, before he presses inside. He keeps my head pinned to the couch, my arm pinned behind my back, as he fills me completely, stretching me. We haven’t been intimate since he came back. I was waiting for him, but the moment he fills me, it’s like no time has passed at all.

I whimper in need as he settles fully in me. “For someone trying to corrupt me, you sure are being gentle,” I pant, trying to press back against him even as he smashes me into the couch. The tops of my thighs press into the arm hard enough to bruise, but I don’t care.

“I’m letting you adjust,” he says, leaning down to press a kiss against the top of my spine. “It’s the only break you’re getting.”

And then he starts to fuck me like he means it.

I cry out when he pulls out and slams back inside me, his hips slamming into my ass, making it shake as he starts to fuck me with me pinned against the couch. My other hand clenches at the couch, desperate to hold on as he grinds against me, as his balls slap against my clit roughly and drag me closer to an orgasm.

When he lets go of my head and wrist, I immediately go to lift myself up so I can press back against him. I’m crying out in ecstasy as he fucks me against the couch, my eyes closed, and when I lift, his fingers shoot into my hair and grab a fistful, jerking me up and back so I’m floating on the couch arm. His other hand circles the front of my neck, using it to hold me up.

“It seems we have an audience,” Jiro whispers in my ear. “Open your eyes so he can see you gush around my cock, little rabbit.”

My eyes fly open and crash into Creed’s where he stands in the doorway, alone, his eyes heated with fire. I grasp at the couch, trying to hold myself up as my pussy starts to pulse

around Jiro's cock, as the sight of Creed watching rushes over me. I tumble over a second later, crying out, but Jiro doesn't stop.

"That's a good girl," he growls at me. "Have a seat, Creed," he shoots to where the man still stands.

Creed moves over to the armchair while Jiro continues to make me cry out in pleasure. His hand is still wrapped around my throat, but my hand manages to lift some of the pressure there so I can breathe. My eyes stay on Creed as he moves to settle on the chair in front of me, watching Jiro fuck me over his couch. His cock strains against the fly of his jeans, begging for attention, and I lick my lips.

"You like this, don't you?" Jiro asks, changing his angle and dragging me higher again. "Feeling me fuck you while he watches. I bet you wish he'd come over here and let you suck his cock while you take mine, don't you?"

"Yes," I rasp. "God, yes."

"Not today," he growls. "But soon, you're going to take all our cocks at once, little rabbit. And you're going to scream out for us as we paint you with our come."

My pussy contracts around him at his words. I feel him jump inside me, feel him grow closer. I reach up and curl my fingers around his that hold my throat, holding on as my eyes start to roll and I can't contain the soft cries as he fucks me brutally.

"I'm going to corrupt every last part of you," Jiro whispers in my ear just as I hit the top of that cliff and dive right over it. I cry out in pleasure as he starts jumping inside me, his own warmth filling me and extending the orgasm.

I'm panting, my legs shaking as he stays nestled inside me for a few seconds longer than my orgasm. I pry my eyes open and see Creed holding his cock in his hands, stroking himself with half lidded eyes at the sight of us.

"You're not finished," Jiro murmurs, lifting me as if I weigh nothing at all. He stays nestled inside me as he carries me in a weird backward wheel barrel position over to where

Creed sits on the chair. He only comes out of me when he moves to set me on Creed's lap. I can feel his warmth and my own between my legs, as it starts to run down my inner thighs. Creed immediately grabs my hip and directs his cock to my entrance, pumping up inside me, uncaring that I'm covered in another man's come. Jiro stays behind me, jerking my head back to press a brutal kiss against my lips from behind, a strange position that only drags my arousal higher as Creed starts to fuck me.

"My turn to watch, little rabbit," Jiro purrs, before backing up and settling on the couch. I glance over my shoulder, watching as he adjusts his pants and crosses his legs, nonchalantly watching as Creed bounces me on his lap as if he's watching the news. But his eyes remain dark and heated.

Creed groans as he settles on the couch and fucks me harder, enjoying being watched as much as he enjoys watching.

"Soon, we're going to fill all these holes at once," Creed groans. "And I'm going to savor the feeling of you screaming while you come over and over again on our cocks, baby."

I lean back as he fucks me, letting him hit that sweet spot inside me that has me crying out with every thrust. Creed shoves my shirt up over my tits and leans forward to suck a nipple into his mouth before his hands brace on my shoulders and he uses his hold to fuck me harder. I cry out, growing closer with him, both of us moaning our pleasure. Just as I'm about to finish, I feel a hand at the base of my skull. Jiro jerks my head back and presses his lips against mine in a kiss that steals my soul. At the same time, Creed bites down around my nipple, sending a bite of pain through me even as his cock strokes inside me, hitting deep inside. I come apart at the seams, screaming into Jiro's mouth. He swallows the sound, taking it all in, claiming my soul as Creed takes it another way. His cock jerks inside me, adding his own come to Jiro's, filling me with so much that it leaks around him, dripping down my thighs before he's even pulled out.

I'm running out of air as Jiro continues to kiss me, until I slap at him, my chest aching. He pulls back long enough to

look in my eyes before pushing me forward onto Creed where he consumes my lips with his, taking over after Jiro. Jiro, in turn, strokes his fingers along my back, encouraging me. When he grabs my hair again and holds me still for Creed to grind against me, for his lips to kiss mine, it brings a whole new level of wetness between my thighs.

The tension between them disappears.

And as I collapse against Creed's chest, panting for air, everything feels a little more right in the world despite what we're going to have to face.

When Creed reaches between us and scoops some of the wetness into his hand, I watch as he brings it up to my lips. "Suck," he commands. "Taste how much we love you."

I do as he says, sealing my lips around his fingers and sucking, cleaning his fingers of all three of our releases. He groans as I clean them, his eyes heavy with desire.

And then with no more words, he stands and carries me away. My eyes lock on Jiro's as he remains in the living room, his hands in his pockets, his eyes bright with desire. As our eyes meet, he smiles crookedly at me, and I understand exactly what he's doing.

He means to corrupt me, but he doesn't have to try that hard.

I'm diving in headfirst, ready to get as dirty as I need to.

And I've never felt more like myself than I do right now.

TWENTY-FIVE



We need supplies in town. Apparently, once a month, Creed goes to get horse food and hay. We need groceries, too, but Creed also insists I need a better pair of boots that fit, and I have to agree. I'm tired of wearing his massive ones when I help him in the barn. Plus, I could use some better ranch clothes if I'm going to be helping.

After my evening with Creed and Jiro, the both of them seem to have come to a consensus. Some situations call for violence, some call for following the laws, but both are needed. Creed just made sure to repeat that we don't need the cops involved in things and we all agree. That's all we need is to be thrown in jail where the Hound Society can do exactly what they want. We'd be at their whim.

Creed's mom has been great about bringing groceries over to the house but with so many mouths to feed, we've been eating more than we are prepared for. So, groceries are definitely in order. I think everyone is going until Row appears and presses a huge wad of cash into my hand, insisting I pay with it instead of with a card.

"They already know where we are," I point out with raised brows.

"You can never be too careful," he says, rolling his shoulders. "I'm going to stay here because I have to get some work done, but you all have fun and be careful." When he goes to pull away, I grab his wrist, pulling him back to me for a kiss. His eyes flicker when I pull away. but he remains aloof and moody, the distrust from the others wearing on him. I want

to tell him it's nothing to worry about, but I haven't figured out how to smooth things over yet.

I'm starting to worry I don't trust him like I think I do.

It takes forty-five minutes to drive into the town that's big enough to have the supplies we need. We take the pickup truck Creed uses on his ranch, a large dually white truck that has enough room for everything we're going to need. We stop at the feed supply store first and I watch as Creed helps the older man load up a bunch of bags of horse feed into the back of the truck. Creed's arms bulge with the effort so I know they're heavy, but he doesn't struggle. It's sexy watching him load the bags before patting the old man on the back and hopping back in.

"I got you a pair of boots that fit," Creed announces, handing over a pair of black rain boots.

"Finally," I groan. I doublecheck the size to make sure they're okay before setting them on the floorboard. "Now what? Groceries?"

Creed nods and throws the truck into drive. The town Creed frequents isn't a large one by my standards. Apparently, the population is only about eight hundred. Despite that, there seems to be a larger number of black, unmarked cars in town, parked in different places. As we pass, the eyes of townspeople and suited men both follow us, watching our path.

It isn't until we get into the grocery store that I truly feel watched, though. I'm strolling through the aisles, piling food into the cart while the others split up to grab their own things, when I realize the checkout girl is watching me closely. Every time I come out of the aisle to go to the next, her eyes follow me. We shop for about an hour, fill up about three shopping carts full between us, before we decide we're ready to pay. I shove my cart up to the checkout first, tossing the groceries up onto the conveyor belt before moving over to the pay terminal, watching her scan things one by one. The others start piling up the rest of the carts.

The cashier glances between me and the other three with me. When she picks up a container of mozzarella cheese, she pauses and holds it up. “You know cheese goes straight to your ass, right?”

I smile, unaffected. “It’s a good thing my men love nibbling on my ass then. They probably won’t mind it being a little more of a handful.”

She glances at Achilles where he stands next to me with raised brows.

“Would you mind?” she asks, picking him out as the asshole in the group easily. Kind of hard to miss with the way he wears his beanie and his sour expression.

In answer, he reaches over and grabs a handful of my ass, making me jump. “Definitely not. Would you like me to bend her over your cash register and eat her ass right here to prove it?”

The cashier’s face flushes, and she shuts up, finishing the order. Her eyes glance between us and the suited men hanging out outside the windows. Clearly, she’s being paid to learn whatever she can about us, but she’s also clearly from here. She’s young, probably barely in her twenties. When she finishes the order and reads out the total, I hand her cash to cover it. She doesn’t make mention of my ass again, but I worry about how young she is.

I lean closer. “Maybe reconsider whose money you’re taking,” I whisper, meeting her eyes.

Hers widen and she glances out the window again before leaning forward. “Money is money around here. It doesn’t come too easily.” She glances down, ashamed.

I reach into my pocket and take out the remaining chunk of money. Reaching across the register, I act like I’m shaking her hand and leave the money behind. She stares at it with wide eyes before she shoves it in her apron.

“Don’t take anymore of theirs,” I say, leaning back. “It comes with strings attached.”

The girl nods and curls her fingers around the money in her pocket, as if afraid it'll disappear. You'd think I'd handed her drugs though with how jumpy she's being.

We don't exchange anymore words. Achilles, Creed, and Jiro push the carts out of the grocery store and start loading them into the truck, but my eyes trail around the area, taking in every person watching us. Not only suited men, but people of the town who took money to keep their eyes out, people they have in their pockets.

It's then that I realize no matter where I go, no matter what I choose to do, my life is no longer free. They're always watching, always here, keeping tabs. It pisses me off and I find myself growing angry about it, fuming all the way back to the ranch. The forty-five minutes back just makes me want to hit something, and by the time we pull back into Creed's driveway, I've properly worked myself into a panic attack.

"What's wrong?" Achilles asks as I climb from the truck and immediately start stalking away.

I laugh, my heartbeat in my ears. "What isn't wrong?" I throw back. "We're being stalked by a secret society who pays off people in a small town to keep tabs on us," I growl, running a hand through my hair. I'm breathing too fast. I know that. I start hyperventilating and I can't stop it. None of my normal methods are working. When I see a black car drive by on the street, I breath harder despite it not stopping. Fuck, my chest is going to explode. I press a hand against it, trying to calm it, but I can't.

"Hey, hey, hey," Creed coos. "Deep breaths, baby."

"I can't," I rasp, my chest beginning to hurt and my head throbbing.

"You're having a panic attack," Achilles growls. "Stop that shit."

If only it was so easy, I say in my mind, because my vision is starting to grow black and I'm not sure if I can say it out loud.

Row comes out on the porch, his face creased with concern. When he sees what's happening, he comes closer, worry on his face, and my mind latches onto things it shouldn't, and words start tumbling from my lips.

"I can't breathe," I choke. "How can you breathe with him here?" I ask Achilles, gesturing toward Row.

Row freezes, confused as to what I'm talking about, but my panic makes the words tumble out faster.

"What are you talking about, Billie?" Achilles asks carefully, his eyes flicking between me and Row.

My vision darkens further, and I clutch at Jiro and Creed as they try to keep me up. I stumble, panic clogging my throat. I'm going to pass out. I can't stay up.

"He's the reason you were taken to the island," I whisper, barely loud enough for anyone to hear.

But Achilles hears.

And my vision clears just enough for me to watch Achilles turn toward Row.

TWENTY-SIX



ACHILLES

“What?” I snarl, turning toward the Hound when Billie’s words hit me. She’s in a full-blown panic attack, barely coherent, but she would have never said something like that without knowing it’s true. Not when she desperately wants us to get along. “Is that fucking true?”

Row glances between Billie where she panics, clearly torn between making sure she’s okay and confronting me. “Look, man—”

“Don’t ‘look, man’ me,” I snarl, storming closer. “You’re the reason I was taken to Prey Island? You ask for me by name?”

Row’s face twists. “Of course not,” he argues. “I had no choice, but to write something down. All I did was write down the word ‘survivalist’. I didn’t request you specifically.”

“And yet I was taken,” I spit. A survivalist. Any of them, and I’d been unlucky enough to be chosen. Regardless, it filters into my mind that the one responsible for that traumatic fucking experience has been living in the same house as me. I turn toward Billie where she hyperventilates. “How long have you known this?”

“Calm down,” Jiro commands. “Now isn’t the time.”

“Then when is the fucking time?” I snarl, pissed off. I’m so angry, I could rip him to shreds.

“Achilles,” Creed snaps. “It’s not her fault. It’s not Row’s fault. It’s the Hound Society.”

“And he’s a fucking Hound,” I spit, gesturing toward Row. He tenses at the venom in my voice. “He’s probably feeding intel to those assholes right now and we’re letting him live in our house!”

Billie stumbles in Creed’s arms, her eyes wide even if it looks like she can hardly see. Jesus, we’re all fucked up from

that island. She can barely breathe, but at least she killed the dickhead responsible for her being there. None of us got that same luxury.

“I didn’t mean for you—” Row starts, but I shoot a glare at him that shuts him up.

“You’ve known this entire time, that you planned on killing me.”

“No,” Row argues. “I was never planning on killing anyone.”

“And yet here you are, making Daddy Dearest proud,” I say, baring my teeth in anger. “What a perfect Hound you are. How often are you checking in and telling them about us?”

“I’m not,” Row says harshly, his mask slipping on. Billie always talks about it, this weird training that the rich get so they can hide their true feelings. Row pulls it on now, his face relaxing into an expressionless gaze. He even slips his hands into his pockets as if he’s unconcerned.

“I call bullshit,” I reply, stalking toward him.

“No, don’t,” Billie tries, stumbling forward before she loses her footing and Creed has to catch her.

“You can think all you want,” Row answers. “It doesn’t change the truth.”

“That you’re a Hound and we’re the prey.” My words come out more snarl than words, my hands shaking with my anger. “How long until you turn on us?” Row doesn’t answer as if he knows nothing he says will change my mind. “How long until you kill me and finally earn that medal of honor?”

Row stands in front of me, his face emotionless in a way that just pisses me off more. He doesn’t answer, knowing it’s useless, so I do the only thing I can think to.

I cock my arm back and punch him full square in the face. He reels back when my fist connects with his nose, and then he straightens again, blood runs from his nostril. I hope I broke his pretty nose. I hope I lowered his worth.

“You’re an asshole,” Row growls. “I’m not the enemy here.”

“How are we supposed to trust you?” I spit, pulling my arm back again.

Row’s face changes. Instead of the mask he wears, his face morphs into full on fury. He’s scary, far scarier than I’ve ever given him credit for, but I ain’t no bitch. Once I committed to fucking him up, I’m going to do just that.

“I suggest you go calm down,” Row says, watching my arm where it hovers behind me. “I let you get the one hit in as payment for writing down a word that brought you to the island, but I won’t allow you to hit me again.”

“Enough!” Creed growls, but neither one of us are listening. I can hear Billie making a fuss, her soft “stop’s” barely registering.

“Fuck you!” I snarl at Row and swing again.

I get cracked across the face, Row’s fist connecting with my jaw and snapping my head back. It only makes me go savage. We descend into full on fight mode, both of us swinging. It doesn’t matter that he’s holding his own, getting in plenty of hits. I don’t care that I’m going to sport a black eye and a swollen lip. Hell, he could break my arm and I wouldn’t care. My anger only tells me to fight until I can’t fuck him up anymore, until he’s bleeding and covered in bruises on the ground, until I mess up that pretty face.

But Row holds his own.

Fist after fist is swung. He moves as if he’s been trained in some shit, and it pisses me off that he’s never talked about it. As much as I don’t trust him, he’s obviously not been trusting us.

I watch as Row leaves his side open and I’m swinging before I’m conscious of doing so.

And then Billie appears in front of me, her eyes wide as she screams at us to stop. I can’t stop my momentum, not so close, and my fist connects with her shoulder, throwing her backward hard. She jerks back, slamming against Row, and I

freeze, my fingers curled into a fist, a bloody mark on her shirt where I'd ripped my knuckles open.

Fear fills me. *Oh fuck. Oh fuck!*

I rush forward. "Billie—"

But she holds up her hand as she drags herself to her feet, pushing off Row. She's panting, her face ragged. She looks like she's about to pass out, like she's so exhausted she can barely hold herself up. Shit, I know how bad panic attacks can make you feel, and still she stands in front of me after taking a full punch.

"He was just as much a victim as us. He had to pick," she rasps, swaying on her feet. Row reaches out to offer his hand despite the blood running down his face. She takes it gratefully, but she doesn't move to rub at her shoulder. I know she's going to be bruised.

"I didn't mean to hit you," I croak, taking a step forward, but she shakes her head.

"Don't worry about it. We need to stop fighting."

Row's face twists with rage as he glares at me. "While we're airing everything out, I risked everything for the four of you and you still don't trust me," he growls. "I risked my life for you."

"So what?" I hiss back. "We all risked our lives. You're not special."

"Stop it!" Billie snarls, dragging my gaze back to her. "He didn't know you when he wrote down the word. He didn't choose you directly."

"You knew," I accuse.

"I did," she admits. "But what reason did I have to share it? The circumstances between us changed and it no longer mattered."

"That's my decision to make!" I take a step toward her and the three others tense, as if afraid I'm going to hit her again. It makes me freeze because I would never hit her on purpose. Even now, guilt is eating me up at the way she's holding her

shoulder, at the way she barely moves it. “You should have told me.”

She nods. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But it still doesn’t change anything. We’re supposed to be a family.”

“Some family,” Row growls. “You three don’t even trust me.”

Jiro steps forward, pulling Row’s gaze to him. “Then take off the mask. All the way.” Silence. “Take it off,” Jiro says harshly.

I raise my brows and look at Row, waiting.

“I don’t even remember how,” Row admits, glancing away.

Billie reaches out and takes his hand. It both pisses me off and makes me grimace as she winces with the movement. “It’s okay,” she encourages, trust on her face. If she can trust him, why can’t we?

“I’m here for Billie,” Row says eventually. “She’s the reason I’m here despite your sudden distrust when all I’ve done is help.”

“Why?” Creed asks, his face relaxed. I can see him itching to check over Billie and he keeps shooting me glares. I deserve all of them.

“For the same reason you three are,” Row scowls. But when that answer doesn’t seem good enough, he sighs. “I’m just as caught up in her fire, standing close so that some of the warmth might pass onto me.”

“Prove it,” I demand, my shoulders tense.

“How?” Row asks.

“Money—” Creed starts, but I’m already shaking my head before Row interrupts.

“No. Money means nothing to me. Pick better,” he declares, knowing that we’d never believe him if it came to money.

“Give Billie your phone,” Jiro commands.

We'd all seen Row on his phone since he came here, conducting business. I expect Row to blanch, but he instantly fishes the phone from his pocket and passes it to Billie. He doesn't question it. He leans in to press his thumb against it to unlock it and leans back, confident.

Billie grimaces, but realizing we need to see it more than her, she flips through the messages and emails. Eventually, she holds the phone up. "There's nothing in here suspicious. Just business stuff."

I glance at Billie. "And you trust him?" When she nods, I puff out air. "I'm not apologizing for hitting the Hound."

"I don't expect you to," Row says, wiping the blood on his lips away. "Just like I'm not going to apologize for your broken nose."

I reach up and touch my nose, cursing when I realize he's right. "Bastard," I growl.

"Asshole," he shoots back.

And then something shifts in the air between us, an understanding. I move forward and clap him on the shoulder before turning to Billie.

"I am sorry for accidentally getting you. Come on. Let's get some ice on that shoulder," I murmur, directing her inside. "Some ice cream will make you feel better after the panic attack."

"You're an asshole," she says warmly, glancing up at me. "But you're my asshole."

I huff at her, but can't help the smile that curls the corner of my lips.

Fuck, I love this woman.

And that means we're probably all doomed, but I'll happily walk into hell with her.

Into the fire that burns so brightly in her eyes it makes me want to burn with her.

We all would burn for just a single taste.

TWENTY-SEVEN



BILLIE

Pillows and blankets. I go on an adventure through Creed's house, finding every single pillow and blanket I can find. Some of them are in the hall closet, stacked up all nice and neat. I strip the bed I've been sleeping in and all the guest rooms since Debbie isn't here. When I run out of options, I lug the couch cushions off and add them to the pile. While I'm moving around in a frantic motion, the guys just kind of... let me do my thing without interruption. None of them ask what I'm doing or why I'm stealing their pillows and blankets. None of them intervene. I think they just assume I've lost my ever-loving mind.

Maybe I have.

Either way, I need something... wholesome. Something that doesn't feel like a savage interaction, free of blood and violence. I need a palate cleanser, to feel safe. And the best way I can think of to achieve that is...

... a blanket fort...

Jiro is standing in the kitchen, a mug of tea in his hands that he'd set about making while I went on my pillow stealing escapade. Row is holding a bag of peas Creed had thrown him against his eye, trying to decrease the swelling. Achilles is over in the mirror, adjusting his nose and cleaning his face up. Creed just leans against the kitchen counter, watching.

I'd considered helping Achilles and Row clean their faces up, but they're grown men. They can handle the aftermath of a fist fight. I need something else. I need this.

"Okay," I announce, clapping my hands together, and wincing at the feeling it creates in my shoulder. Achilles had gotten me good. "This is what we're going to do."

"Are you building a nest?" Achilles asks with a raised brow. There's still a little bit of blood around the end of his nose but at least it looks like he got his nose straightened out.

I'd winced when I'd heard the crack as he snapped it back into place.

"You ever build a blanket fort?" I ask, facing them with my hands on my hips.

"Yes," Creed answers, but he's the only one. I realize suddenly that the others might have never had such an opportunity. Jiro's parents died when he was young. Achilles' parents seem like they were probably strict. And Row... well, I doubt rich people raise their children to have fun and make a mess. His dad doesn't seem the type to help build a pillow fort.

"Good." I move over to the pile of pillows. "So, what we're going to do is stand up the pillows and use whatever we can to make a tent out of blankets essentially."

"Why not just use a tent?" Achilles asks, studying me.

"No. The point is to build it and then climb inside. And it has to be big enough for all of us to fit."

Row snorts and then winces when it pulls at his developing black eye. "Good luck getting it large enough to fit Creed."

"This seems like something for children," Jiro comments, glancing at the others.

"It is," I say, looking at all of them. When they don't move, I huff. "It's a blanket fort, motherfuckers. Not a bomb. Come over here and help me."

And that's how I convince some of the most masculine men I know to grab pillows and start building. The blankets get draped over the couch and table. When our supplies don't reach far enough, the guys get creative and use whatever they can until we have a sizeable blanket fort strung out in the living room. The ceiling isn't very tall, but it's tall enough for us to crawl into and sit with our heads a little bit ducked down. The blanket fort comes together like a dream, and when it's done, I send them on another mission while I pile the rest of the blankets and pillows inside for us to lay on. They move about getting snacks. You can't have a blanket fort without snacks.

An hour after Row and Achilles nearly killed each other, we find ourselves crawling inside the blanket fort and settling into comfortable positions. Somehow, we all fit and that's a feat in itself. Creed's feet hang out a little, but I make sure to cover his toes with a blanket, so he doesn't get cold. We lay on our backs, staring up at the blankets above us, nestled against each other.

"This," I breathe, relaxing against Row and Achilles on either side of me. "This is the dream."

Achilles glances over at me. "Living in a tent?"

"No," I murmur, shaking my head. "Safe. Comfortable. In love."

He falls silent and a few seconds later, he presses closer against me, as if he wants those things too, as if this blanket fort is healing more than just me.

"The monsters can't get you inside a blanket fort. Them's the rules," Creed adds from the other side. "My mom said so."

"Oh, well if Debbie says so," Row says, smiling. Creed's mom has won over all of us.

"This is... nice," Jiro murmurs, glancing over at me. We're all laying with our heads together in the middle, nestled in close. When Achilles had asked if I was building a nest, he wasn't too far off. That's what it feels like now. I'm warm and clearly, I'm not the only one feeling safe in these confines.

"I love you," I whisper, letting the worlds travel around them so they know I'm talking to each one. We bonded on an island, while trying to survive, and despite the difficulties we've dealt with while together, we've grown closer now. Our relationship is no longer built on just violence and survival.

It's built on something more.

Four voices whisper the sentiment back, their reassurances making the fort feel even safer. We spend the night like that, nestled all together in a great tangle of limbs beneath blankets and pillows. We talk for hours, heal parts of ourselves we didn't know we needed healed, and by the time we start nodding off, we settle all the squabbles between us.

We fall asleep, me nestled in the middle so that I can touch each of them, staying connected. It's perfect, and some part of me knows this is going to change. Whatever happens, some of us may not survive, or worse, things could go south far faster than I plan, but it's okay.

Because for a moment, I got this feeling.

For the first time in a long time, I have no dreams at all, good or bad.

After all, the monsters can't get you inside a blanket fort.

TWENTY-EIGHT



Bright and early the next morning, Achilles decides he wants to take me foraging. He's been going out by himself since we got here, returning every so often with things he swears are great to put on sandwiches. He usually ends up being the only one to add them, but it brings him some semblance of joy, so I never comment on it. I'm just not a fan personally of bitter weeds in my food.

Either way, I rub sleep from my eyes as I tug on my boots and trudge along after Achilles, carrying a small basket. I yawn when he starts talking about all the things native to this area, trying hard to focus on what he's saying and not on how tired I am. Though I got a good night's sleep, I would have liked to get a little bit more instead of being woken up with the sun.

"There's plenty of things you can eat in the wild here in Tennessee," Achilles says, excitedly telling me everything. "Just like there's plenty in other places. These are important things to know if you ever end up in a situation like we did back on the island."

I nod in understanding even if I'm still trying to wake up fully. "How am I supposed to be prepared for all places?"

"Well... you can't be," Achilles answers. "You just have to be as prepared as you can be. If I'm there, you'll be fine."

I give him a thumbs up when he glances at me. and he rolls his eyes. "You didn't have to come, you know."

“You were so excited, I would have never said no,” I answer. “Besides, these are good things to know.” Grinning at him, I take his hand. “So, is this like a date?”

“No,” he counters. “It’s foraging.”

“Together, though. So, it’s a date.”

He rolls his eyes, but he still smiles. “Just come on, rabbit,” he ushers. “First rule, here in the mountains, when the temperature drops, it’s most important to stay warm. Sweating could mean your clothing freezing to you, so you want to stay cool when you’re active and warm when you’re not.”

“That makes sense,” I reason, holding the basket out. I’m wearing a jacket over my clothing right now, but it’s not overly cold here currently. It’s just chilly enough that I prefer a light jacket to nothing at all. Achilles doesn’t wear one.

“The next most important part is shelter. On Prey Island, we didn’t have that option as much because we were running, but if you’re stranded somewhere that you can hunker down, do so. Getting out of the elements is important and here in the mountains, you have a lot more wildlife to worry about.”

I pause. “Am I gonna get eaten by a bear while we’re out here?”

“The chances are unlikely,” he answers. “However, if you see any kind of animal with their young, don’t engage. You’re gonna wanna not mess with any mamas.”

“Stay warm, but don’t sweat in the cold. Shelter is important. Avoid the moms. Got it.”

“You know the importance of water,” Achilles continues as if I didn’t speak. “You’ve got some of the tricks down thanks to your obsession with Bear Grylls—”

“He’s a treasure,” I comment, knowing it pisses him off every time I refer to him.

“Yeah, whatever. Regardless, you still know some stuff, so I don’t worry about that. Just know in addition to drinking water from plants, moss is also a great source if it grows. It’s spongy and soaks it in so you can squeeze the water from it.

Remember, you can't survive without water for long, but you can go without food. Water is the most important resource you need when stranded. Though you won't always have a way to boil the water to purify it, you have better chances with an infection than dehydration."

I nod. "Yep. Bear taught me that."

He shakes his head. "I guess at least he's giving you accurate information even if he stays in hotels every night."

I stick my tongue out at him. "Don't be mad that someone else showed me some of these things before you could."

"Now, the fun part. There's plenty of things you can eat here in the mountains," Achilles says as we walk further into the trees. "Look around you right here. Can you tell me something that's edible?"

I pause, looking around. The trees are tall and swaying here, towering over us. Along their bark, small bits of moss grow but I don't think they look like something I'd like to eat so I focus on the forest floor. When I spot a specific bush, I point to it.

"Berries?"

Achilles smiles. "Good try, but no. Those will give you a terrible case of the shits. Gastrointestinal distress. It's better to not eat something you don't know what it is than to eat it and suffer." He leans down and plucks a small berry from a ground vine. "This is a huckleberry. You can eat these."

I blink, looking at the berries closer. "I didn't even see those."

He nods. "Some of the best edible items are hard to spot, but once you do, they kind of appear everywhere."

"That makes sense," I say, taking the huckleberry and nibbling a bite. I'm pleased at the taste and pop the rest in my mouth. "Okay, what next?"

We wander deeper into the woods, travelling for an hour, and all the while Achilles points out things that could be used or eaten. He really knows his stuff and is super passionate

about it so it becomes easy to just listen to him talk. Normally, he's more focused on being a prick, but here, in his element, he's endearing. The excitement in his eyes when he finds a new thing to show me, the way he holds it up like a trophy, it makes me want to kiss him, to hug him close, to heal the things inside him that he runs from.

That's something we'll have to work on in the future though.

Creed's property is large enough that he essentially owns his own mountains. A couple of small streams cut through his land, and when we come upon one, Achilles smiles.

"Creeks and rivers are the best places to find things. You can always fashion some sort of net or fishing pole if you have supplies and get a fish. Some plants grow exclusively along the banks. And of course, it's a good source for water."

"Of course," I parrot, and his eyes narrow.

"Are you mocking me, rabbit?"

"I would never," I tease, laughing. We've been at this for hours now and I'm starting to get hungry and tired, but he's having so much fun, I can't bear to stop him.

At my mocking tone, he steps forward and backs me against a tree, the bark scratching against my clothing as he cages me in. "Such a naughty rabbit," he chastises before leaning in for a kiss that makes my toes curl in my boots. My hands brace on his sides even as he captures my lips and consumes me. The thing with Achilles is he always kisses like this might be the last time, as if he's not sure I'll be here or not tomorrow. After what we survived, I don't blame him.

He breaks the kiss with a grin, but then he glances down beside me, toward the bank of the river, and his eyes light up.

"Oh! What a lucky day!" He leans down and plucks a mushroom from the soil, holding it up for me to see. "Know what this is?"

I tilt my head. "A mushroom."

“No shit,” he answers, rolling his eyes. “What kind of mushroom?”

Raising my brow, I study it. It’s a yellow brown color but there isn’t much else to go off of. “A mushroom-y mushroom.”

Achilles snorts and shakes his head. “*Psilocybe Semilanceata*, or Liberty Caps.”

My brow furrows. “Okay. You can eat them?”

“Oh yes. See, these are magic mushrooms.” He grins. “The fun kind.”

“Fun kind?” I repeat, staring at the small unsuspecting mushroom.

“Psychedelic properties.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Wanna eat a couple and have high sex? It makes for some of the most euphoric sex you’ve ever had.”

I hesitate. Drugs have never been my cup of tea, and while this is more natural and stuff, I don’t know whether I want to get high out in the wilderness. “I don’t know...”

“Oh, come on. Live a little,” Achilles pushes, his eyes lighting up. “How about this? You can try one first and I won’t have any until you’re okay. Then I can watch over you and make sure everything is good.”

I grimace. “What if I act like an idiot?”

“Then I’ll fuck you until you don’t remember what you were doing,” he replies nonchalantly. “Problem solved.”

Snorting, I study the mushroom. “Does it taste bad?”

“Nah. It’s more like eating spongy grass with a hint of a nuttiness. Nothing crazy. You just chew it up and swallow.”

Hesitantly, I take the mushroom from him. “You’ll take care of me?”

“Oh, I’m going to take care of you,” he purrs. “I promise.”

The heat in his eyes has me leaning in and taking a bite. It’s not a great flavor and I wrinkle my nose immediately, but

if I can stomach cheap vodka when I was younger, I can do this. It still isn't as pleasant as Achilles made it sound. Regardless, I take a few more nibbles before handing it back to him and grimacing.

"It's not a great flavor," I comment.

"It's an acquired taste." He shrugs. "Either way, it takes about thirty minutes to kick in. We can start walking in the direction of the house if you want."

And so that's what we do. At first, I don't feel a thing. My stomach kind of grumbles after eating only a few berries and things, reminding me that it's probably lunch time, but since we're heading back toward the house, I don't make a big deal about it. About twenty minutes in though, I feel something.

"I kind of feel nauseous," I murmur, pausing to brace myself against the tree.

Achilles glances at me sharply. "Nauseous?"

I nod. "Just a little." But the moment I say that, I realize it's growing. "Maybe a lot."

And then I sway, my body feeling suddenly like my soul has been hit out of me and comes back in. I get lightheaded so quickly, I barely have time to grab at the tree, but Achilles is there immediately, bracing me up.

"I don't feel so good," I comment, and then start giggling. "Christ, I don't feel good at all."

"Shit," Achilles grunts. "I don't think you're having a good reaction to the shroom."

When I move, my hands kind of blur slowly and I stare at it in confusion. "I feel so heavy."

"Shit. Fuck." Achilles sounds a little panicked and it makes me laugh. "Billie, mushrooms are hallucinogenic. If you start seeing things, they aren't real."

I laugh again, swaying against him as he starts to try and drag me through the trees. I stumble, my feet moving as slow as my hands. Shit, I think my soul is dragging behind.

“I got you,” Achilles says, holding me up.

I giggle again and then my face heats and the laughter turns into tears. They pour down my cheeks, and I don’t know why but I just feel so sad.

And then shit hits the fan.

I stumble to a stop, staring up in horror at the man hanging from the tree in front of us. He’s dead and rotting, having clearly been there for a little while. When the wind blows, he swings. I’m pointing to him, staring in horror, and Achilles is still trying to drag me forward, toward this dead man.

“It’s not real,” Achilles says, trying to get me to move.

The smell hits me, a sense of rotting flesh that makes me want to hurl. When I glance away in disgust, I find more bodies, shot through with arrows, with bullets. One’s eye is missing, blown off, half of his head gone. Another is dismembered like someone played.

And then they start looking familiar.

I sob, jerking out of Achilles’ arms and stumbling back.

“Billie, it isn’t real. Whatever you’re seeing, it’s a hallucination. We need to get back to the house before you really trip out.”

But I’m not listening. I’m staring in horror at the sight of Row’s body, his ribcage splayed open, his heart gone. His eyes are open in glassy horror, frozen in fear. In the distance, I hear someone bay like a hound, a man.

A hunter.

My instincts take over.

I have to get away. The Hounds are hunting me. They’re going to kill me. I have to run.

Run, run, run.

The baying comes again.

I spin on my heel and take off sprinting into the trees, desperate to get away. I sob, tears rushing down my face.

“Billie! Billie, stop!”

But all I hear is the baying and the sound of gun shots. Someone tries to grab me, and I swing. Their fingers loosen and I’m free.

Run, run, run.

Oh god, I have to run.

TWENTY-NINE



ACHILLES

Fuck.

My jaw stings where she clocked me good, the bruise there from Row already painful until she slammed her fist into it. It disorients me for a matter of seconds but by the time I shake it off, Billie is nowhere to be found.

Fuck!

“Billie!” I yell, moving forward. “Billie! Where are you?” Panic fills me. She’s going to experience those effects for hours at most, but by the time they wear off, she could be halfway to fuck all and lost in the woods. “Fuck,” I rasp to myself, true fear snapping in. If she gets hurt because of me...

I immediately pull my phone out of my pocket and dial it up. Luckily, Creed’s mountain still has signal thanks to a relatively close tower, but I only have two bars. Hoping it’s enough, I dial Creed’s number and listen as it rings.

He answers on the third one. “What’s up?”

“I fucked up,” I rasp, my voice shaking with my panic. “I need you guys out here now.”

Creed’s voice immediately changes, and I can hear him moving. In the background, I can hear Jiro and Row trying to figure out what’s wrong.

“What happened? Is Billie okay?”

“Yes.” But then I grimace. “I don’t know. No. Look, I fucked up really good.”

Creed’s voice turns pure fury. “What did you do?”

“We were foraging,” I rasp, trying to follow the direction Billie went in but I know I’m not as great of a tracker as Jiro. “We found some mushrooms and I convinced her to eat one.”

“You shithead!” Creed growls into the phone. “You do something like that in a controlled environment for the first time.”

“I thought it was controlled. I didn’t take any. She didn’t eat the whole thing. But it hit her and... I don’t know what she saw, but whatever it was wasn’t pleasant. She started crying, sobbing, and then took off into the woods. I tried to stop her and she clocked me hard enough to nearly knock me out.” I grunt when I stub my toe on a log. “Look, I know I fucked up, but I’m not as good of a tracker as Jiro and I’m not leaving her out here alone to panic. I need help. I called.”

“Turn on your location. We’ll be right there.” And then the bastard hangs up.

I click the location on that sends the coordinates directly to Creed and start walking, trying to find her trail. I find a broken branch here, but I’m not as great at understanding which direction it indicates so I don’t make it far before Creed appears through the trees, Row and Jiro on his heel. They have various expressions of fury but it’s Jiro’s dangerous coldness that unnerves me the most.

“Which direction did she go?” he asks, his gaze hard.

“This way,” I say, “but I don’t know where it goes from here.”

He nods and immediately starts tracking, leading us into the woods deeper. I just hope we can find her before it gets dark.

“I can’t believe you would be so stupid,” Creed growls. “She trusted you to watch over her.”

“Look, I know I fucked up. I didn’t know it was going to affect her like that—”

“You don’t start with mushrooms,” Row hisses. “Certainly not the majority of it. One bite. Even I know that.”

“You would know that,” I snarl. “Fucking rich assholes with their drugs—”

“Now isn’t the time,” Jiro hisses from where he leads the way. “Shut up. All of you. What’s done is done. Our job now is to find her before it gets dark.”

I snap my mouth closed because Jiro is right. I fucked this up royally and my fear is making me lash out. We need to find her quick. The temperatures drop at night and she’s not wearing a thick enough jacket to stay warm. She’s smart but if she ends up out in the woods at night because of me, I’m going to feel like a complete asshole. Fuck, she trusted me enough to try it and here we are.

We move for an hour, following along behind Jiro, watching him touch broken sticks and touch the ground. I don’t know how he knows how to track people so easily but it’s something wild to watch. Billie travelled far in her hysteria, pushing through trees, running from whatever she saw, and the longer we go, the worse I feel, until I’m overflowing with guilt.

It isn’t until the sun starts to sink lower in the sky that we find her.

I hear it first, the sobbing, and everything inside of me revolts against the agony and pain in that sound. We find her on the other side of a tree, curled in on herself, completely tripping out. She flinches when Jiro leans in, horror still on her face, her skin red and patchy. She’s been crying the entire time. I move in, pulling her into my arms, holding her tightly, helping her through it. After a moment, the other three do the same, curling around her, walking her through the trip. At some point, she goes limp, exhaustion taking over.

Only then do we stand, Creed lifting her into his arm, and we carry her back to the house in the dark.

I follow along behind them, my head hung, feeling like a grade A idiot.

She’s right. I am an asshole.

And I hate it.

I hate it so fucking much.

THIRTY



BILLIE

The sunshine wakes me up, blinding as it streams through the window. I jerk the blanket over my head and hide, my head throbbing with pain at the brightness of it. Fuck, my head hurts, but not nearly as bad as that time I got drunk off of wine coolers. I had a hangover for days. This just feels like a mild inconvenience.

“Good morning,” someone whispers and I peek over the comforter.

Achilles sits on the end of the bed, his head hung low. The moment I see him, all the memories come crashing back in. I remember everything, the visions, the pain, the panic. I’d run off, hit Achilles, ran until my thighs ache. Even now they ache like I’ve run a marathon. Jesus, how far did I run exactly? Embarrassment fills me. I’d been inconsolable.

“Morning,” I rasp, my throat raw. My eyes are sore from crying, the dryness of them making me want to rub but I know that’ll make them more irritated. I must look like a mess.

He meets my eyes. “I’m sorry for what happened. I should have never encouraged you to eat that mushroom.”

I try to speak, but my throat catches with the agony on his face. I try again, and my voice comes out husky, “It’s okay, Achilles. It was my choice.”

He shakes his head. “I pushed you to it, and then you had a really bad trip. I don’t know what you saw but—”

“I saw you,” I interrupt. “And Creed, and Row, and Jiro. I saw each of you, dead. I looked into your lifeless eyes, into the others as they laid on the ground. I saw bodies hanging from trees, people chopped into pieces...” A soft sob escapes and I cover my mouth to push it back down. “I was back on that island. I was back there and alone.”

Achilles grimaces, but it's Creed who speaks when he appears in the doorway.

"PTSD is a hell of a thing," he murmurs. "Sometimes, when we can't control our minds, those thoughts come flooding back out to haunt us. It takes a long time to heal from something like what we went through."

"How do you do it?" I rasp, a tear falling. "How do you live with those images?"

Creed shrugs. "You don't have a choice, so you do. For years, the things I remember of war, the bodies, the memories of watching friends blown up, of watching children and women suffer at the hands of a war that doesn't have anything to do with them, they haunted me. They still do. I can't escape them and they're as much a part of me now as the memories of Prey Island is." He comes deeper into the room and wipes my tears from my cheeks. "What helps is to remember the good memories you made there, too."

"I'm never going to heal," I sniff. "I'll never be free."

"You'll heal at some point, but those memories remain, Billie. It's a matter of how deeply you let yourself sink into the nightmares that matters." He glances at Achilles where he sits looking solemn. "Achilles made a mistake, and his demons make him pay for it now, but just know, none of us are dead. We're right here with you, and whether we return to those islands or not, none of us are dying."

"You can't promise such a thing," I croak.

"I can and I will," he argues. "We all have the same fears. Any one of us could have eaten one of those mushrooms and had the same reaction." He smiles gently. "Just know you clocked Achilles with a pretty good hit. Made the bruise on his jaw bigger."

I grimace. "Sorry, Achilles."

"Don't be," he counters. "I deserved it."

"I once had a panic attack while sitting on the toilet," Row says when he appears in the doorway. "After Prey Island, about a week after we all went home, I was sitting there and

somewhere in the house, someone slammed a door.” He flushes. “I came running out naked as can be, screaming. Gave the maid quite a fright.” His face pinches. “Not to mention how little I’ve used my pool since I went back, which is to say not at all.”

I nod knowingly. “That’s why I have to have nightlights now. When it’s completely dark, my mind starts seeing things that aren’t there. Had a few panic attacks before I figured that out.”

Jiro appears and settles on the bed near me. “I can’t stand the sight of little girls who look like my sister. I’ve been known to run away from them, my memories of that day haunting me. I’ve done a lot of terrible things, but the ones that haunt me are those where I lose someone important.” He meets my eyes. “I’ve had dreams of losing you.”

I sigh. “It seems we all carry this pain inside of us.”

“It’s a part of us,” Creed nods. “But it’s not the only part. Don’t feel embarrassed that you cracked. We all do. That’s what we’re here for. When one of us cracks, the others hold you together.”

I blink at the sincerity in his eyes, moisture gathering in my eyes again. “Thank you,” I rasp, reaching out to them. They all come forward immediately, wrapping me in their arms.

“No thanks needed,” Creed replies.

But I feel like it is, so I know I’m going to be thanking them for the rest of my life.

After all, they’ve had my heart since we found ourselves on that island.

And they’ll have it until the Hound Society finally catches up with me.

THIRTY-ONE



A few more days pass without incident. We don't bring up the mushrooms again and Achilles is being achingly nice to the point that it's weirding me out. He's not being his usual asshole self and it's so far outside his element, it unnerves me. He instead acts like he's trying to make up for a mistake, which it wasn't much of a mistake at all if you ask me. I chose to eat the mushroom. I'd chose to eat it for a chance at euphoric sex. It had sounded nice. So what if it turns out it wasn't for me?

We've been at the ranch for about two weeks now, passing the time with each other. We haven't really talked about the plan yet, as if we're putting it off until some unforeseen event, but I don't mind. I'm enjoying spending time with them all, learning more about them, growing closer. Our relationship is better than ever as we slowly acclimate to the routine.

But I still have a business to run.

I've been checking in with Holly every few days and today is no different. I wait until I know she'll be awake and call, listening to the phone ring a standard of twelve times before she finally answers. Holly prefers to let her phone ring forever to make sure whoever is calling means to call. If you hang up after three times, she won't even bother looking half the time. It's her way of making sure she talks to people who care.

"Hey girl!" she answers, her voice as bright as always. "Whatcha up to? Getting that sweet, sweet loving?"

I laugh, rubbing my hands on my jeans as I settle into the couch. “All of it,” I reply. “How are things there? Everything okay at the club?”

“Girl, you know it’s fine. We’re handling everything here. We miss you, but I’m glad you’re off on this adventure. Now tell me, which one of them is bigger?”

I snort and glance over my shoulder. Seeing that no one is there, I admit quietly, “Jiro.”

“I knew it,” Holly teases. “And the most important question, how’s Keanu Leaves doing?”

I glance over at the counter where my plant sits and smile. “Thriving. Creed’s mom apparently has a green thumb and I swear he’s twice the size he was when we got here already. I have no idea how she’s doing it. She’s legit only here every three or four days.”

“Meeting the parent. Sounds like you’re in seriously deep.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “Serious doesn’t seem like a big enough word honestly.”

“You deserve some happy, girl.”

But I frown and look down at my hands at those words. The blood is no longer there, but it still stains my hand. It never leaves. Do I deserve all the happy? Especially now that I plan to go spill more blood?

“Do I, though?” I whisper. I don’t really need an answer, but Holly takes it as me needing one anyways.

“Of course you do.” And as if she can read my mind like always, she launches into a whole lecture. “You did what you had to on that island to survive. You’re going back there to save innocent people from suffering the same fate. Killing evil people like that, you’re like a darker version of Batman, girl. It hardly stains your soul when you’re saving others from their evil plans.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I say but I can feel the smile tugging at my lips.

“Of course it does because I say so,” she declares. “I’m going to make you a bedazzled tumbler with the Batman symbol on it so you know I’m serious.”

Snorting at her words, I relax back into the sofa. “You’re the best, you know that?”

“I know,” she preens. “But so are you. But hey! I have to go or I’m going to be late opening up the club. Talk to you later, Glitter Gator.”

“Bye, Glitter... Clitter.”

She snorts out a laugh. “Oh no. That one goes in the retirement pile. I’m gonna go call Mark that nickname now! Bye, girl!”

And then I’m hanging up and smiling down at my phone. Holly never ceases to cheer me up. Her brightness is infectious which means that for the rest of the day, her words echo in my mind and it keeps me smiling even when I don’t need to. Things are okay. Great even. It’s all fine.

I’m still training with Jiro, practicing different maneuvers until it makes me blue in the face. I still help Creed with the horses, with the promise that we’re going to go riding soon. Achilles, rather than taking me out into the woods, has started bringing things back to show me. He avoids the psychedelic mushrooms. Hell, he doesn’t even mention them. And Row, he started showing me documentaries about places he’s been and he promises to take me to each and every one. He hasn’t brought up marriage again, not since that shower in my apartment, but I know it’s on his mind.

Little does he know, I might just be waiting for him to ask again.

My answer would always be yes.

Yes to all of them, even if Row means it for my protection and nothing else.

THIRTY-TWO



CREED

“Today’s the day,” I announce as everyone meanders around the kitchen, in various states of awake and groggy. Not me, though. Not today. Today is a day I’ve been waiting for since I brought Billie to the ranch.

Billie is sitting at the table, a mug of coffee being nursed in her hands. She’s wearing her pajamas still, her hair a mess in the cutest way. It makes me want to take her back into the room and mess it up even more. At my words, she glances up at me, still slightly sleepy despite the coffee she sips.

“What day is that?” she asks before her lips split into a yawn.

“We’re going to ride the horses.” I glance around the room. “All of us.”

Row perks up at my words, his eyes brightening. “All of us?” When I nod, he smiles. “It’s been so long since I’ve been riding.”

Achilles is leaning against the counter, his own fancy coffee filled with natural organic shit set on the granite beside him. I swear every time he gives me shit for my preservatives and toxic food, it makes me grumble about preferring taste over that bullshit. At my announcement, his brows furrow.

“I’ve never been horseback riding,” he comments.

“Neither have I,” Billie shrugs. “I’m sure it can’t be too hard.”

An hour later, after everyone is dressed in jeans and comfortable shirts, her face is pinched with worry. “I take that back,” she says. “This is definitely hard.”

“Don’t worry,” I reassure her as I help tighten the saddle around Larry. “Larry here is a docile horse for riding. He won’t let any man ride him, but he likes you, so he’ll meander around happily.” I glance over at Achilles where he stares at

Spartan “Achilles on the other hand...” An asshole horse for an asshole, right? Seems fair.

I move over to Row where he’s expertly tightening his saddle on Nox, a happy black mare who prefers a more experienced rider. He’s careful not to make the saddle too tight and checks it for sturdiness and safety. Clearly, I won’t need to worry about Row. Apparently, all rich people treat their kids like little rich adults, teaching them to ride horses and play polo and all that shit. I’ll have to ask him about it later.

Jiro surprisingly does a good job getting things ready, but I have to tighten the saddles just a little more, making sure he won’t slip off to the side. His horse, Ranger, is a strong chestnut gelding with a preference for running. Normally, he doesn’t like strangers, but he seems to have warmed up to Jiro with his soft whispers in his own language.

My own horse, Gertrude, stands ready, her hooves pawing at the ground in excitement. Though we’ve been here for a few weeks, I haven’t taken her out as often as I normally do. I’ve been holding off on getting the others to ride with me until we were able to get over our differences. Honestly, horses can sense tension and they don’t like if the person riding them is pissed over something. It’s safer for us to be getting along.

“Okay, everyone ready?” I ask, glancing around the group. Achilles is eyeing his horse warily, as if afraid. I don’t blame him. Horses are dangerous creatures when they want to be, and I’ve paired him with a horse that has the same temperament as he does. Of course, I haven’t told him that. Where would the fun be in him understanding what’s coming?

At the various nods of agreement, I move over to Billie to help her up in the saddle. “Foot in the stirrup here, hand on the horn. Hoist yourself up and swing your leg over.” She does as I say and when she goes to lift herself, I slide a hand under her ass to give her an extra boost since Larry is a tall ass horse. She settles into the saddle comfortably and looks down at me. “Remember all the things I told you about the reigns and stuff. Mostly, Larry will want to follow Gertrude so you won’t have to do much.”

“Got it,” she says, sweeping her hair back into a ponytail while she sits astride Larry. “Everyone else okay?”

Row is in the saddle, his posture so proper it makes me ache. Has to have been polo. I bet he played it in prep school or something. Jiro is also seated in his saddle, his hands rubbing at his horse’s neck in comfort. It’s Achilles who stares at his horse menacingly, not yet in the saddle.

“This mangy beast won’t let me on him,” he growls, reaching up for the horn again. As he reaches, Spartan whips around and tries to bite him. And a horse bite is painful as fuck. He jerks his hand back with a snarl. “Just let me climb up, you dick!”

“Stop, stop, stop,” I say, trying my hardest to keep the laughter down. “You have to approach horses with respect. He’ll never let you on if he thinks you disrespect him.”

“Oh, I’m going to disrespect him,” Achilles growls. “Turn you into dog food when no one is looking.”

The horse looks at him with far too intelligent eyes and I know I have to step in or else we’ll never get anywhere.

“You can’t be an asshole,” I tell Achilles as I come over. “For once, you gotta be nice.”

Achilles scowls. “This is stupid.”

I place my hand on Spartan’s neck and pat him. “Hey, buddy. I need you to let this asshole ride you. I know he’s an asshole, but you know how to handle that. Can you do that for me?”

The horse looks me in the eyes, watching me carefully, before he shakes his mane and faces forward, giving the go ahead.

“Okay, come on, Achilles. Up you go.”

Achilles hesitates, but comes forward, reaching for the horn slowly. When Spartan doesn’t try to bite again, he wraps his fingers around it and settles his foot in the stirrup before hoisting himself up. Spartan paws at the ground in annoyance and turns his head, but I hold up my hand.

“No biting,” I warn him, and the horse blows out a puff of air. “Unless he starts being a real asshole. It’ll keep him in line.”

Achilles scowls at me. “Bastard.”

I grin. “Don’t be such a dick.” And then I head over to Gertrude and hoist myself up. “Everyone ready?” All but Achilles answer. “Then let’s go.”

The acreage I have has always felt like enough, but when I glance back at Billie as she jerkily rides Larry, I can’t help but wish I had more. Being able to go on adventures with her close to home, to ride with her like this, it would be amazing. As it is, I still have plenty of space to really take my newfound family on a trip. The trails that cut through my mountain are well worn from my own riding so it’s easy enough to lead them.

I glance back to make sure everyone is okay and that their horses are following the leader. Billie is right behind me, her shoulders a bit tense, but she’ll relax the longer we ride. Row rides like his father paid a fortune for him to learn, which is probably the case. Clearly, he’s in his element here. Jiro also surprisingly rides well but when I realize he’s simply watching Row’s and my movements, it makes a lot more sense. Achilles is about as tense as his horse, both of them daring the other to make a single wrong move.

“Relax, Achilles,” I call, facing forward again with a smile. “He isn’t going to eat you.”

I hear his hiss of annoyance, but he focuses hard on what he’s doing, trying not to look so clumsy in the saddle. Billie giggles behind me and I turn and take a look at her.

“You good?” I ask, taking her in.

Nodding, Billie pats Larry on the neck. “We’re good. Larry is taking good care of me.” She turns in her saddle to watch Achilles. “I can’t say the same for Achilles.”

In fact, Spartan now seems to be done with Achilles’ stiff posture. The horse has started trotting a little bit harder, putting an extra pep in his step, and I know Achilles is going

to pay for it later if he doesn't learn how to loosen up and move with the saddle. Still, I don't say a word. Let him learn for himself.

"He'll be fine," I reassure Billie, but she meets my eyes like she knows the game I'm playing. She doesn't argue, but there's a sparkle in her gaze. "We'll follow the trail for a little while longer before we head back. I wouldn't want you to get too sore," I tell her.

"Oh?" she asks, grinning. "Not too sore?"

"Not from this kind of riding," I respond, winking at her. "But you'll be sore for a different kind later."

"Promises, promises," she purrs.

We fall into a comfortable silence after that, the only sounds that of nature and our horses traveling over the path. I've never been more content than I am right now.

All because of this new family that found me.

The rest of the ride goes smoothly, and I've never felt more at ease than I do as we turn the horses around and head back toward home.

This is it. This is what I've been missing my entire life.

And now that I have it, I'm never letting it go.

THIRTY-THREE



BILLIE

It's been five months since we escaped Prey Island and it still doesn't feel like there's enough time between now and then. We've all grown since we set foot on Creed's ranch, developing a routine that works. In the mornings, Jiro happily cooks a breakfast worthy of a five-star restaurant while I make coffee. Achilles is either up at the crack of dawn or sleeps in until noon. There is no in between. Row wakes up somewhere in the middle of Achilles' normal times and starts doing whatever paperwork he has to do for the day. I asked him what sort of business stuff he does and he responded with a long-winded explanation that made me realize I don't have much interest in whatever type of things they run, but the business side of things seems useful for my own. I listen regardless of not understanding what he's talking about because of the way his eyes light up. Apparently, Row genuinely enjoys the family business, or at least the inner workings of it. Creed is usually up bright and early, out taking care of the horses and the ranch. Every other morning, I go out and help him, making sure to spend quality time with him the same way I do with the others.

This morning, we're all sitting at the table together, Creed fresh from his chores outside. Jiro made omelets that smell like heaven, the plates sitting in front of us and begging for me to taste, but I refuse to eat until Jiro finishes his and sits down at the table. Only then do we dig in, eating up the omelets and all the extras he'd added to the table.

We're a little cramped with five of us at the table meant for four but it does okay. When Debbie comes over, we usually have to spread out around the house.

"You know," I say after I finish a bite of the omelet. "At some point, we're going to need more space and rooms so it's more comfortable for all of us here. We're making it work but Achilles and Row are still sharing a bed and this table is too small. I can pay for—"

I was about to say I can pay for it. After all, I have a hoard of money just kind of floating around. When you have as much money as I do in the bank, it just kind of keeps growing on its own. But I don't get to finish my thought.

"At some point, I will have to leave," Jiro interrupts, his eyes on me.

I pause, turning to study him closely. "What?"

For a moment, he doesn't respond, as if gathering his words together. "I can't stay forever, Billie," he eventually says. "I will be called back to my country soon. Like Row, I am beholden to the organization that made me."

Hurt fills me, but I do my best to hide it. It isn't fair of me to expect them to stay here, to be with me like this. Hell, this isn't fair to any of them. They all have homes, lives, outside of me, and here I am claiming them like this.

"Of course," I reply, looking down at the omelet that suddenly tastes like ash in my mouth. "I knew that."

He's just as locked in with the *Yakuza* as Row is with the Hound Society. It makes sense that he would have to leave at some point.

Leave me.

Achilles, blissfully unaware Achilles, doesn't seem to realize the weight in the air. "I'm going to probably do something soon, too. I need some more breathing room. Maybe I'll go on a backpack trip across Tennessee. I haven't done that much here."

Creed is watching me carefully, his eyes on the way my fingers clutch at my fork.

Row nods at Achilles' words, adding his own in. "My father has already started hinting at things that need to be addressed in person. I'll have to take a short trip to headquarters soon."

And while Row makes it sound like it's a temporary absence, their words make reality come crashing down on me. I've been stuck in this fairytale, thinking we could live like

this forever, and it's a harsh reminder that we all have lives outside of this ranch. Except for maybe Creed. Hell, I have the club back in Colorado even.

But lately, I've been thinking more and more about how I'm willing to move to Tennessee for them. That I could maybe open another club here and let Holly keep the one back home.

Jiro's phone rings and he glances down at it with a frown. Whoever is on there is either important enough he doesn't want to take the call here or not important at all because he sends it straight to voicemail.

We can't keep playing house like this. I'm over here fantasizing about a nest, about our little family, like I have a say in their lives. I'm just someone they ran into on an island, and we all helped each other survive. There won't be some happily ever after for us. There can't be. Not only will society never accept something like that, but I would be robbing them of their own paths.

That's not my decision to make.

I pull my emotions in tight, hide behind a mask that I've been learning from Row. Block the emotions, don't let them see. Keep everything locked up tight. I won't let them out at all, if only to protect my heart when they leave me.

As I sit in silence, staring at the omelet, I realize no one else is talking either. Only when someone harshly grabs my chin and forces me up do I focus and realize it's Jiro holding me. It's Jiro who looks into my eyes with a fierceness that terrifies me.

"No matter what happens, little rabbit, we belong to each other. No matter the miles."

Achilles nods. "I can't feel caged, but I'll always come back home. You're my home now."

Row smiles. "I'm usually only a private jet ride away."

I choke as I try to force the emotions back, but they come tumbling forward and spill down my cheeks.

“You know I’m not going anywhere,” Creed adds. “I’m as steady as Larry.”

And just like that, the fear is wiped away. We may have lives outside of this, but we’ve created our own home right here, together.

“Thank you,” I rasp, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

Achilles leans over and flicks me on the nose, making me flinch. “I can’t believe you thought you could get rid of us that easily, rabbit.”

I scowl. “Asshole.”

“Crybaby.”

But we lock eyes and smile.

THIRTY-FOUR



ROW

Stalking through the house, I search for the woman that makes my blood boil. I need her with an urgency, need to bend her over and take her, need to hear her soft cries of want and need as we absorb each other. But as I stroll into the living room where I suspect she is, my phone starts to ring. The shrill dinging of the ringtone makes me cringe because I know exactly who that tone belongs to.

My father.

I'm tempted to ignore the call. He'd chastise me for it later, but I don't really care. Another part of me wants to answer it and see what's so important. After all, he's supposed to be on his yacht with some twenty-three-year-old model after his money. The poor woman doesn't know that my father only plays. He'll never marry. His money is locked up tight, though if she's lucky enough to get pregnant, she'll get nice checks for a while.

I'm sliding the little green phone icon over just as Creed comes in the front door, a stack of mail in his hand.

"Hello?" I say into the speaker, watching Billie turn around with a bright smile when she hears my voice. The sunlight is streaming in through the window and through Keanu Leaves' foliage to highlight her and, for a second, it almost looks like she has a halo. It makes me want her even more.

Instead of a greeting, my father asks, "Did you get it?"

Frowning, I focus on the phone call. "Get what?"

But Creed is already standing in front of me, a thick cream envelope in his hand that he holds out. There's no address on it, but I can see my name written in elegant script on one side that probably cost a pretty penny. It's thick and fancy looking, the kind of shit my father uses, but clearly, it's not from him. No, this is the kind of stuff sent out by the Society.

Father is talking on the line, going on and on about... something, but I find myself hitting the red hang up button and focusing on the envelope.

“It’s for you,” Creed says, as if I can’t see my name written across it.

“What’s that?” Billie asks, standing and coming over.

But I’m staring at the envelope in horror, my suspicion growing, knowing it can’t be good. The last time I received one of these was...

“It’s only been five months,” I murmur, reaching out to take the envelope from Creed.

The others come over, curious, but I weigh the envelope in my hands for a moment before I separate the seal and pull out the second envelope. I toss away the first and open the second, before drawing out the thick invitation.

“What is that?” Billie asks again, frowning.

There’s only the Hound Society symbol in gilded embossing and a date on the paper. There’s nothing else but that’s all they need.

“Fuck,” I rasp, staring in horror at it. This changes things. This changes everything.

My phone dings and I glance at the text notification from my father.

They put it to a vote. Because of the success of the last one, there will be a hunt every six months.

“Fuck,” I growl again, setting the envelope down. “It’s another hunt.”

Billie’s eyes widen. “What? But it’s supposed to be every two years.”

“Yeah, well apparently we were endlessly entertaining,” I rasp, turning away to start pacing. “They voted. Majority won.

There will be a hunt every six months.”

“Can they do that?” Achilles asks, his face pinched in anger. “Just change the rules.”

“Of course they can,” Jiro answers. “They create the rules. They can change them at any moment.”

I run a hand through my hair. “I’m required to attend,” I grunt. “I can’t say no unless I’m on my death bed and even then, it’s frowned upon.”

“This is bullshit,” Creed growls, tossing the other mail onto the counter. “This is complete and utter—”

“No,” Billie interrupts, her eyes beginning to sparkle as if she has an idea. “This is perfect.”

My heart stops.

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

THIRTY-FIVE



BILLIE

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” Row asks.

They’re all looking at me as if I’ve grown another head, but the more and more I think about it, the more perfect this becomes.

“It’s perfect,” I say again, just in case they mistook my words for something else.

Jiro is watching me closely, as if he understands the direction of my thoughts. Creed on the other hand seems just pissed.

“And how exactly is this perfect?” he asks, his eyes hard. “More people will die—”

“And all the Hounds will be in one place,” I say, facing him head on, speaking with weight so he understands what I’m saying.

“No,” Creed growls. “Absolutely not. It’s too dangerous.”

“What are you two talking about?” Achilles throws in, his hands on his hips. “You can’t just have psychic conversations and expect me to follow.”

“She wants to go back to the islands,” Jiro answers when I don’t say anything. I stare at him as he speaks, watching the way his lips move. From the way he’s watching me, I don’t think he disagrees with my decision.

“*Go back?*” Achilles spits. “Go back to the bastards who tried to kill us for sport? You’ve lost your goddamn mind.”

“Not to Prey Island,” I clarify. “To Predator Point.”

“Oh, because that’s better,” he counters. “Christ, this is stupid.”

“Every Hound is required to attend,” I say harshly. “What better time than to hit them when they’re all together?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Achilles growls. “We’re not going. It’s too dangerous.”

“We are,” I argue. “Row can’t go alone.”

“He’s a big boy. He can take care of himself,” Creed adds. “Achilles is right. It’s too dangerous.”

I whirl and face Creed. “Think about it though. If we really want to dismantle them from the inside, why would this not be the perfect opportunity. They’ll be trapped on a single island, drunk from partying, and hardly sober enough to realize what we’re up to. We could take them down from the inside.”

“This isn’t a movie,” Creed growls, taking my hand. “We can’t just break into an island that would recognize us the instant we step foot on it.”

Row hums under his breath and we all look at him.

“What is it?” Achilles asks, his ire still very apparent in his voice.

“We may not be able to break into it,” Row says. “But we can certainly walk right onto it.”

Creed steps forward. “Explain.”

“I’m expected there, right?” Row asks. At our nods, he continues. “So, Billie walks in on my arm as my date. I can hire the three of you as security. It would be seen as a statement rather than an act of war.”

“That’s a bullshit answer,” Achilles snarls. “There’s no way they’d let us just walk in.”

“On the contrary,” Row argues. “That’s exactly what they’d do. We’re all practically celebrities to them, especially Billie. If I walk in with all four of you at my side, they’ll think I’m only shoving it in their faces, boasting about what I’ve acquired, and they’ll be jealous they didn’t try before I did.”

My head tilts. “So you’re saying taking us in like that would increase your popularity?”

“One hundred percent,” he nods. “The rich are shallow and incredibly bored. Bringing you in at my side will be anything,

but boring and will stir up the island in the best way.”

“I can call Holly and put out the call for girls. Do you think you could get them on the island?” I ask, already thinking ahead. “I know there are a few who would love—”

“You’re not honestly thinking of going ahead with this,” Achilles argues. “This is stupid, even for you. We escaped that hellhole once and you want to go back?”

“Look,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. “We decided we wanted to take them down. With the girls there, we can learn their secrets, make waves. We can learn more about this Grand Master and figure out where to best hit them from the inside.”

“Someone talk some sense into her,” Achilles spits.

But Jiro only shakes his head. “I think it’s a good plan.”

I beam at him even as Achilles bares his teeth.

“We can stir the pot, take a few key members, and hit them where it hurts,” Jiro adds.

“See! Jiro gets it!” I declare, gesturing to him.

Achilles shakes his head. “You trying to get us all killed again?”

“No, I’m trying to kill all of them,” I reply matter-of-factly. “Think about it. Every six months, they’re going to hunt now. Think about how many innocent people will die.”

“They’re all hardly innocent—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I snarl. “I’m going with Row. I’ve decided. If you want to stay here, you can, but I’m going.”

Achilles stalks over and gets in my face. “Our lives will be on your soul.”

“Good,” I whisper. “That’s where they belong.”

He blinks. “If I didn’t love you, I’d strangle you right here on this table.” He presses closer. “Wrap my hands around your pretty little throat and squeeze.”

“That’s how I like it,” I whisper back.

Heat sparks in his eyes. “If you die, I’m going to fuck your corpse, so you carry a piece of me into the afterlife.”

That shouldn’t be hot. Fuck, it really shouldn’t.

“If you die, I’m going to bring you back and kill you again,” I warn.

He nips my jaw. “Deal.” Then he turns and stalks away with a ragging hard on. “I need a walk to clear my head. Try not to make any more deadly decisions until I get back.”

The door slams behind him as he leaves, and I stand here with the others.

Creed has his arms crossed in annoyance. “I kind of agree with Achilles.”

“Noted,” I say, pulling my phone from my pocket. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a phone call to make.”

THIRTY-SIX



I never thought I'd have to set foot on that cursed place again, and yet here I am with a plan to enter the belly of the beast, and I'm dragging my men along with me. They'll all have the option to stay, all except Row, but I know none of them will stay if I go. I see the opportunity, know that we can use it, and we're running with it. If that makes me an asshole, then so be it.

If we can save just one life from Prey Island, that's all that matters.

And we're not even going back to the nightmare haven of an island we'd been dropped off at. We'll only be on Predator Point, joining in the party there as if we belong. Really, we don't have enough money to rub elbows with such people.

Well, I suppose I do now.

Row insists it won't be a problem and he's already started setting up the specifics that require Achilles, Jiro, and Creed to be on his payroll. Apparently, Hounds can take their own security if they're worried about something, so it's an easy trick to make sure the others are going to be there. Row claims it'll be seen as a massive statement, to come marching in with all the previous winners at his side. Some part of him likes that thought, the prestige that will come with the action. I don't particularly care. My only objective is to find secrets, find out who the Grand Master is, and bring down the Hound Society from the inside. Easy enough. It's only three things.

“When are you expected?” I ask Row later that day, watching him carefully. He’s been on the phone since the invitation arrived, arranging for the security and the girls. Holly is sending three of them and since they’ll ride in with us on the yacht, Row will be paying them heavily. They’ll also be paid five times what he does by the Hound Society for any services they’d like to offer on Predator Point as long as they don’t speak about it.

“Two weeks,” he says, looking at the paperwork in front of him. When I frown and start wringing my fingers together, he tilts his head.

Creed is sitting on my other side, his elbows resting on the table. “You sure you want to do this?” he asks, watching me carefully as if I might explode at any moment. “We escaped. We don’t have to go back.”

I meet his eyes. “If we don’t do something, every six months, people like us will die.”

“But if you decide to stay out of it, you can walk away,” he continues. “Live a normal life again.”

I laugh but it’s without mirth. Pointing at the end of the driveway where another black car is parked, I ask, “Normal?”

He grimaces and doesn’t add anything else. Not that I need him to. I have my own answer.

“If not us, then who?” I ask. Creed rubs his face, but he doesn’t answer. “I’m going. If anyone else doesn’t want to, then that’s fine.”

Achilles rolls his eyes where he leans against the counter. “You’re not going alone, rabbit.”

“I won’t be alone.” I gesture to Row.

Achilles only grumbles under his breath, “Might as well be.”

“Hey, I heard that,” Row growls.

“You were meant to,” Achilles shoots back. “We’re all going to die.”

“Have faith,” Jiro commands as he pours himself a mug of tea.

“Fine,” Achilles sniffs. “I have faith that we’re all going to die.”

Jiro toasts his coffee to Achilles and grins. “Better.”



We spend the next week and a half making plans. Not only do I inform Holly of what’s going on and tell her to get the girls ready, but I help Creed get everything at the ranch ready, too. This time, he knows he’s going to be gone so he makes sure all the food and things are stocked, schedules someone to come out and take care of the horses, and makes sure there’s everything his mom could need here when she comes over. This time, he can at least make sure it’s all taken care of.

We continue to make plans for everything we’ll need, this air of doom hanging over us that won’t go away. I spend the days working with each of them, planning for our absence, and I spend the nights in their arms, curled against them in the hopes that their warmth can burn itself into my memory.

After all, we could very well die on Predator Point.

Everywhere we go, we’re watched. Hound Society goons are everywhere though they keep their distance after Jiro went after another pair of them. It leaves us feeling like we’re celebrities one step away from committing a heinous crime.

Of course, that’s what we plan on doing.

I’m no celebrity, but by the time I’m done with them, they’re going to remember my name.

They’re going to remember the rabbit who swallows the Hounds.

I bet my life on it.

THIRTY-SEVEN



Now that Creed had started taking us horseback riding, it's become a sort of expectation that we take the horses out every couple of days, especially since we'll be leaving soon. This morning is no different. When the sun just barely crests the horizon, both of us are already on our mounts, riding out to the trails that spread out through Creed's property.

I think, when we leave, I'm going to miss this part the most. This time spent with each of my guys, secluded away from assholes and people in general. These moments where I get to see the sunrise while horseback riding as it rises over the mountains. Although I love the club and everything I built there, there's also nothing that beats the quality time you can spend with someone when there are no worries inside your little bubble.

Except for the Hound Society that keeps popping up of course. They're becoming more frequent the closer it gets to the Hunt. Drones are common and if they're not fast enough, Creed drops them out of the sky with his gun and tosses them in the trash. The black car at the end of the driveway leaves the moment anyone steps out the front door to give them something to focus on. But so far, none have stepped foot on Creed's property after the bill incident.

Until today.

Creed and I are leading the horses around a bend, following the trail we've already followed a few times this week. We're laughing about some story Creed is telling me,

about how he once got flung off his horse and nearly broke his arm all because of a mouse. I'm smiling and happy and everything is perfect. But when we come round the curved trail, the men appear, two of them, dressed in hiker gear.

Creed pulls his horse to a stop and Larry follows as we study them. Both of the men simply look like hikers who went down the wrong path and ended up off the public trails, but we both know better. They're too clean cut, too pristine, to be hikers. Their boots are brand new, barely even scuffed up. Shit, there's hardly any dirt on them even. Real hikers, whether seasoned or not, would have dirt on their boots at the very least this far in.

"This is private property," Creed announces, his voice hard. It makes me tense, because that voice isn't one he's ever used with me. It speaks of his time in the military, of shouting at strangers in case they were planning on attacking, of being prepared. I've seen stories, and though Creed never speaks of his time in the military passed the basics, I can only imagine the types of things he's seen. The way he addresses these two men lets me know he sees the same thing I do.

Two men who clearly don't belong on a hiking trail.

One of the men waves and smiles brightly, about as fake as you can get. "Oh, thank god. We've been walking around for hours trying to find a way out of these woods."

"Not hard to follow the trail you're currently on," Creed replies, staring at them. "In fact, it leads right where I suspect you're going."

The man frowns, but he's not as great of an actor as he thinks he is. That false confusion doesn't reach his eyes.

"I'm not sure what you mean—"

"How much is the Hound Society paying you to harass us?" Creed asks, leaning over his horse. As he talks, he pulls a pistol from his hip I didn't even realize he had. The two men's eyes go right to it, linger, before focusing on Creed again. They barely look at me, taking Creed for the bigger threat.

Foolish. I have my own gun on my hip that Jiro insisted I wear when the Hound visits became more frequent.

“We don’t want any trouble,” the second man says, his eyes flickering between us.

“Seems like that’s exactly what you want,” Creed replies, watching them carefully. “I suggest you turn around and go back the way you came.”

“We just need a little help—”

“If y’all were real hikers, you would have better worn boots. Anyone with half a brain knows that new boots give you blisters. So, let’s drop the act, yeah?”

The two men glance at each other as if exchanging some private conversation. Clearly, come to the same decision because both of their faces change from false confusion to menace within a few seconds.

“Okay, alright, you caught us,” the second man says, holding his hands up in surrender.

“No shit.” I can hear the condescension in Creed’s voice, and it makes me smile. “You two are awfully brave trying to get close to the house.”

The first one grins. “What can we say? The money’s good. Great benefits. I’m sure a Navy Seal knows all about that.”

Creed’s face hardens. “This mountain is awfully secluded,” he mentions, as if commenting on the weather. “Would be a shame if two hikers lost their footing and fell to their death.”

The first guy laughs. “We know everything about you, Military Man. You’re not going to kill us. You don’t have that loose of morals.”

The next sound they hear is the safety being turned off on my own handgun. They all look at me with raised brows.

“You willing to take the bet that I’m the same?” I ask, aiming for dummy number one.

They both physically tense, their hands raising into the air slowly.

“Take it easy,” goon one says. “We’re leaving.”

“I suggest you do so with a pep in your step,” I recommend. “Or do you think you can outrun a horse?”

They glance at each other. “The Grand Master sends his regards,” Goon Two answers, meeting my eyes. “He looks forward to meeting you in person, Freya.”

“Tell him he can go fuck himself,” I say, and because I’m feeling bitter at his words, I aim the gun just barely to the right and fire, embedding a bullet into the dirt beside his feet. Larry shifts under me, but doesn’t run away, the horse already desensitized to such things according to Creed. It’s why we’re riding the two horses we are. “Go on.” The two men turn on their heel and immediately start walking away. “Faster,” I call.

They break into a jog.

Once they disappear around the bend, I tuck the gun back into the small holster and face Creed’s raised brow.

“You know,” he says. “I still remember when you had a panic attack over killing someone.”

“Things change,” I shrug, picking up the reins again, and patting Larry on the neck. “I adapted.”

“Just be careful not to let your morals corrode under that change,” Creed warns.

But I’m already shaking my head. “I appreciate the advice, Creed, but I’ve not taken the same oaths as you. I don’t hurt innocent people, sure, but if you think I’m going to let these assholes keep harassing me forever, you don’t know me very well.”

He sighs. “You’ve been spending too much time with Jiro.”

“Admit it, you like it when I take control,” I tease, leaning over to press a kiss against his lips. “Besides, do no harm but take no shit, right?”

He rolls his eyes, but there’s a sparkle there that makes me consider ordering him off his horse so we can fuck out in the

wilderness. “Yeah, yeah. It’s a little sexy, I’ll admit. Especially when you fired the gun. You’ve gotten better at your aim.”

Beaming, I pat him on the shoulder. “I had a great teacher. Now, should we head back? The others will be wondering where the gun shot came from.”

He nods and we turn the horses around, cutting the ride shorter than I would have liked. Larry makes it a point to let me know he’s displeased but I give him an extra apple for the slight.

Only then does he happily let me rub his nose.

Silly, spoiled horse.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Apparently, if we're planning on walking into Predator Point, we're going to need clothes to fit in. Call me dense, but I didn't even think about clothing. But once Row brings it up, I realize I can't show up in yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt. I'll have to compete and blend in at the same time. I'll have to look like I belong there.

Which means ridiculously overpriced clothing that makes me nearly pass out when I see the price tags as the two men roll the racks into the living room.

Apparently, Row called the personal shopper he often works with and flew him and his team out to Tennessee from New York. I don't even want to know how much a favor like this costs, especially when I see just how many outfits are on the racks. Just when I think the first two are all there are, they go back out for more. My eyes bug out of my head when I see the sheer number of clothes.

"Do we need all of this?" I ask Row, staring at them in horror. One of the dresses has a price tag of forty thousand dollars and it's barely a slip of a thing. Some of my nightgowns have more silk than it does and they cost less than fifty dollars.

"You can't walk onto Predator Point looking any less than a goddess, Billie," Row reminds me. "Don't worry about the prices. It's all covered."

"This dress is forty thousand fucking dollars," I hiss.

“For a runway Valentino? That’s a steal.” He shrugs. “Edwardo, make sure you add that to the try on rack.”

Achilles shakes his head where he’s sitting at the table. “Ridiculous waste of money. Imagine how many homeless people you can feed with that.”

“I agree,” Row says. “In this, we have no other option, but if it makes you feel better, whatever we spend today, I’ll donate the same amount to a charity of your choice.”

Achilles perks up. “You’re serious?”

“Of course.” Row meets my eyes. “Are you really going to deny that charity a sizeable donation, Billie?”

Rolling my eyes, I grumble as I carefully flick through the rest of the choices. All of it is extravagantly overpriced, but also gorgeous. “Whatever.”

Row claps his hands together. “Let’s begin then, shall we?”

Apparently, Edwardo’s team is made up of a few people. Row makes them all sign nondisclosure agreements. I don’t think it makes a difference if the Hound Society decides they want to know the information, but I allow them to start choosing dresses and outfits they think will work best on me.

Meanwhile, Creed, Achilles, and Jiro are not immune to Edwardo’s posturing either.

“I don’t really have to wear this, do I?” Creed grumbles, tugging at the dress pants he’s wearing. They’re a little tight across his crouch, but it does nothing but highlight the bulge there.

“As my security, you have to look as pristine as I do. Blend in. So yes,” Row answers as he gets measured for some wildly printed suits. “You can’t outshine us, but you must look expensive.”

“I’m not wearing the tie,” Achilles says, staring at it. Clearly, anything around his neck will trigger his feeling of being trapped.

“Not a problem,” Edwardo announces. “It’s fashionable right now to wear an open neck.”

“Can I come out now?” I ask, making sure the dress is tugged all the way up. “I need help zipping this one up.”

“Yes, yes. Come out,” Edwardo calls. “We will see if this one needs tailoring for your bountiful assets.”

I snort. Apparently, I don’t fit the model sizing, my hips and boobs too large, my shoulders and thighs more muscled, but they bring the clothing a size too big to make sure they can tailor them down. This one, however, fits like a glove.

Stepping out into the living room wearing the golden dress, my guys in various states of undress, they all stop what they’re doing to stare at me.

“Holy shit,” Creed says, his eyes wide. “That one looks like it was made for you.”

“Ah, yes,” Edwardo smiles before helping me zip it up. “This one was at the request of Row. Here.” He comes forward with a large halo looking headband. When he places it on my head, it gives the appearance of a halo of spikes. “Perfection.”

Row smiles. “Exactly the goddess they expect.” He comes forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Look upon your divinity.”

When he turns me toward the large mirror Edwardo brought in, I blink in surprise. I’m not wearing any makeup and my hair isn’t done, and somehow, it still looks like I glow. The golden dress shines in the light, the halo giving me the appearance that Row intended.

“When exactly am I supposed to wear this?” I ask.

“When the moment is right. Now go try on the next one.” He glances at Jiro as he comes out in his own suit. He looks like it was made for him, but then again Jiro prefers suits. “Good. We’ll take all of it, Edwardo.”

Edwardo pauses. “All of it?”

Row nods. “All of it.”

I blink. “Is it all going to be ready in two days when we leave? That’s a ton of tailoring.”

“Of course it will be,” Row says, adjusting the coat on his shoulders. “Money talks.”

Edwardo nods. “Money talks loudly.”

I raise my brow. “I suppose that means you’ve already been paid to report this back to the Hound Society.”

Edwardo pauses as he picks out another dress for me to try, and when his eyes turn to meet mine, I know I’ve guessed correctly.

“I have mouths to feed,” he finally says. “Four children.”

I shrug. “I can’t blame you for that.”

Row narrows his eyes. “That means you’re in breach of your nondisclosure agreement, Edwardo.”

“I know that.”

Row studies him for a minute. “I expect there to be some extra accessories thrown in, Jewelry and shoes for every outfit for Billie. The proper accessories for me and the security detail. Understood?”

Edwardo nods. “Yes, sir. The looks will be complete and packed properly for you.”

Row nods. “I like you, Edwardo. It would be a shame if you couldn’t be trusted.” He pins the personal shopper with a look that would make me wither on the spot. Sometimes, I forget that the golden retriever that I know is still a deadly Hound when he needs to be. He plays the role better than anyone could imagine.

“I won’t speak of anything sensitive,” Edwardo promises. “You can trust me.”

I pat Edwardo on the shoulder. “Good boy.”

He bows his head and returns to work. But we all share a look.

Because we can’t trust anyone but ourselves anymore. Not really.

The Hounds have us surrounded.

THIRTY-NINE



We leave tomorrow. Row has everything arranged and we'll be leaving the ranch with the knowledge that we're going to be watched every step of the way. Even now, they're keeping as close of an eye as possible on us, but while we're in the house, they can't do anything at all. After Edwardo's admission, Creed had checked the entire house for any bugs, but true to Edwardo's word, he didn't leave anything behind.

You would think today would be a day of rest and preparations, but Jiro decides our time is better spent with one last training session. I can't be too mad at him. I actually enjoy training with him, and I've gotten much better. I can break most holds, can evade those I can't, and I've learned a few different ways how to get out of bindings, whether handcuffs, zip ties, or ropes. Jiro has been thorough in my training, and I appreciate it.

"Today, we're going make sure you remember all the holds," Jiro says, moving around me in his usual training sweatpants and t-shirt. While Jiro always looks sexy in a suit, there's something even more sexy about seeing him dressed down. Sometimes, when he gets sweaty, he takes off the shirt and reveals the traditional tattoos that cover him. As it is, I get to see those that climb his arms when he's wearing a t-shirt.

"Haven't we already covered that I know those?" I ask, watching him carefully.

"There is no such thing as too much practice," he replies, coming at me. His arms lock around me and I use my elbow to

break the hold immediately before he can squeeze. “You won’t always have us at your side.” He moves back and starts to circle me again. “The predators will be eager to taste, to test you. Make sure to remind them why you survived their game.”

He comes at me again, swooping in from behind, and I dodge to the side, dropping down and popping back up before he can wrap his arms around me again. He misses and smiles in pride as I straighten.

“They’re not going to like it when we all march in there, no matter what Row thinks,” I point out.

“Oh, they’re going to like it.” Jiro watches me and I watch his feet, looking for his tells. “To them, we’re like a freak show, entertaining, horrifying, and they thrive on drama. But being entertaining doesn’t mean they won’t also lash out. Though I suspect it’ll be mostly verbal barbs first. Just make sure you bite back.”

I grin. “You’re giving me permission to poke the bears?”

He lunges forward but I’m already gone, jerking to the side and spinning so he can’t get ahold of anything. We’ve done these exercises many times, in multiple ways. Sometimes, I keep my hair down, so I practice keeping it away from hands. The moment a hand tangles in my hair, it becomes a weakness.

“Yes,” he replies as he comes after me again. “Make them uncomfortable. Don’t play by all of their rules. It’ll make you more endearing to them. And I suspect this Grand Master will very much enjoy himself.”

I scowl. “The Grand Master. I’d like to bury a knife in his heart.”

“Careful,” Jiro warns. “We don’t know much about him yet. His mystery might be one you’re not prepared for, especially since he seems greatly interested in you.”

“Yeah, well, he can get fucked.”

Jiro’s eyes sparkle as his hands miss me by an inch. “Remember, I’m far faster than many when I’m trying. There will be some who can match my speed. Your best bet with them is to kill them quickly.”

He comes at me then, his full skills in use. I have no time to dodge him, and we both go tumbling to the grass, him on top of me. His eyes are on mine, looking deep into my soul like he usually does. I'm splayed wide open emotionally for him, let him see just how much I love him, how much I'll fight for him.

"I've lost someone before who was important to me," he whispers, his fingers tightening on my wrists. "Don't make me experience that again."

Tilting my head to the side, I study him closer, take in the true worry there. "I will fight with every tooth and nail to survive and bring them down," I promise. "And then we're all going to walk out of it. Together."

We stare at each other silently for a few seconds before he nods. "If anyone can do it, it's you, little rabbit."

"Not alone," I remind him. "I need the four of you with me."

He leans back and lets me up so that I'm sitting and he's kneeling over me. "I'm not so important."

"Of course you are," I growl, grabbing his face in between my hands. "Of course, you are."

I press my lips savagely to his, a reminder that I'm going to fight, regardless of the demons.

No matter if they come from outside our group or from within...

FORTY



All the bags are packed and stacked by the door. Too many bags, the dresses all pressed and ready to go.

Apparently, there's staff on Predator Point who will have the task of getting any wrinkles out, but for now, they're all perfectly packed away. The smaller suitcase has all my comfy clothes that I won't be allowed to wear except for when I'm in the room where no one will see. I won't be able to leave the room without makeup and my hair done, but luckily, there's staff for that, too.

The life of the elites is a lesson in waste and excess.

Row knows exactly what needs to be done, and though he always gives off the appearance of old money, he doesn't flaunt it in the way Predator Point dictates. It makes me uncomfortable that we'll have no choice in the matter once there, but it's what needs to be done. We might as well be in a competition of who can dress the best. The goal is to draw attention to myself without outshining them all constantly. Just being who I am is going to draw attention.

Because I'm about to be forced into a world where appearances matter and I won't be able to take in my own creature comforts too often, I decide tonight is meant for comfort and bonding time. Which is why we're currently sitting at the kitchen table playing Uno.

I slap down a Draw Four card and Achilles hisses from beside me.

“That’s a bitch move,” he grumbles, drawing four more cards.

Laughing, I take a swig of the tea Jiro made me. He makes the best chamomile. “Tough titties.”

Currently, Jiro has the least number of cards in his hands. He plays silently, so I’m sure he’s going to win. My goal is to at least get second.

Achilles grabs me by the back of the neck, his fingers holding tight as he jerks me to him. He presses his lips to mine in a kiss that almost bruises before jerking back. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“Oh, I’m scared,” I tease, jerking out of his hold.

I tense when his hand slides up my thigh beneath the table and rubs at my clit through my pants. I try not to show anything, but it’s not my turn so I just try to stay focused on the cards in my hand. Regardless, fair is fair. I reach over and spear my hand into his sweat pants, grabbing his already hard cock and stroking. He accidentally kicks the table and Jiro raises his brows at us, but we both keep our faces blank.

Row studies his hand and lays down a red card before glancing at Creed. It takes everything to school my features despite my hips starting to slide against the chair.

Creed is looking right at me, his eyes on my face. “If y’all are going to fuck, at least bring everyone else in on it.”

Both Achilles and I pause, caught red handed. I go to pull my hand back, but Achilles growls.

“Fine,” he says, jerking his hand back. I think he’s going to just let it go, but instead, he stands and jerks me up out of my seat. Before I can protest, he’s lifting me with two hands under my ass and sets me in the center of the table, scattering the cards.

“Hey!” I say, trying to hold onto my cards. “I was about to win.”

Achilles grabs my cards and throws them over his shoulder. “We’re going to play a new game now,” he

commands, pushing me to lay down on the table.

“And what’s that?” I ask, already rubbing my thighs together in anticipation. My four men surround me, all of them setting their own cards down and wearing matching expressions of desire.

“Let’s see how many cocks you can handle at the same time,” Achilles grins. Her jerks my pants down and off my legs, being careful to leave my fuzzy socks on. At least he’s mindful of my constantly cold feet.

Creed reaches forward and tugs my shirt off, leaving me naked laying on top of the table and splayed wide. And then they just kind of... stare at me, each of them wearing various expressions of yearning.

“Well?” I ask, glancing at them. “Am I the only one going to be naked or is someone else going to join me?” I grin. “Should I shout ‘Uno’ every time I’m close?”

Achilles laughs and jerks his shirt off in that way that men seem to do so effortlessly. “That’s a good idea. Let’s play sexy uno.” He picks up the nearest card and sets it on my stomach. “Draw two.”

“What’s that going to mean?” I ask, but before anyone can give me an answer, the meaning is clear.

Achilles and Creed both quickly undress, revealing their bodies in all their glory. Both of them are hard, their cocks standing proud as they reach down to stroke them a few times. The table isn’t very big so my head almost hangs off one side while my legs dangle from the other. I never realized it until now but it’s absolutely perfect for this.

Perhaps we don’t need a bigger one after all.

Creed steps up to my mouth, his cock leaking from the tip and begging for me to suck it. “Draw two,” he groans as I pop my mouth open and take him in, swirling my tongue around the tip and tasting him.

Achilles spreads my legs to either side of the table and steps between them before rubbing his cock through my wet folds. He groans at the feeling before pressing inside with a

slow, languid stroke. Both of them move at the same speed, stroking in and out, driving me wild with need because they won't speed up.

“Your turn to draw,” Achilles grunts at Creed.

Creed runs his hand over the table without looking and picks up a card before setting it on my stomach. “Uno reverse.”

Achilles curses and pulls out. “Switch me then,” he growls, gesturing for Creed to step between my thighs. And then they literally switch, like this is a fucking card game.

I take Achilles into my mouth, tasting myself there before Creed presses inside me, stroking at that maddeningly slow speed. Row and Jiro watch, enraptured in their seats, heat in their eyes. Both of them reach out to touch me, to stroke, always slow.

“Draw a card, Jiro,” Achilles commands.

Jiro, as if he already had a card waiting, drops a card on my stomach. I can't see it, but Achilles laughter echoes around us.

“You sly dog, you,” Achilles grins as he grabs my hair and pumps deeper in my mouth. I'm looking up at him with questioning eyes so he has mercy and says, “Draw four, rabbit.”

Row and Jiro both stand and undress, before moving in. Row reaches for a card. “Red seven.”

“Alright,” Achilles nods. “Seven pumps and then we switch.” Someone grabs each of my hands and wraps it around their cocks. “That means you, too, rabbit.”

And we legit play the game that way. Everyone pumps seven times, whether it's into my mouth or my pussy, or it's my hand on their cocks. I can't tell if I like it or not, but when they switch and the number drawn is three, I kind of mew in protest as they switch again.

“This is going to take forever,” I groan, my abdomen tense, but my orgasm just out of reach. Just before I can come,

they move, and their speed is frustrating as hell.

“What’s the matter, rabbit?” Achilles teases. “Something got your tail in a twist?”

“Yeah, you,” I growl. “Can we stop with the cards and you fuck me already? I’m dying.”

Achilles hums and reaches for a card sitting to my side. He settles it on my stomach. “Wild card,” he announces with a lopsided grin. And then he spears inside my pussy and gives up the slow madness.

I cry out as he strokes inside me, my mouth popping open in surprise just in time for Jiro to slide between my lips, rubbing along my tongue. I keep my hands on Creed and Row, stroking them as they pump between my fingers. Their hands run along my body, all of them, touching, kissing, driving me insane. Achilles strokes inside me, fucking me into the table, grabbing my legs and throwing them over his shoulders so he sinks in deeper. Someone reaches between us and strokes my clit and I’m pretty sure it’s not Achilles, but honestly, at this point, I don’t know whose hand is who’s. The moment the fingers starts stroking there, I come, groaning around Jiro’s cock, my fingers squeezing the ones I’m holding.

“Fuck yeah,” Achilles groans. “You’re milking the fuck out of me. Squeeze just like that.” I do as he says even as I tremble and he groans louder, his cock starting to jump. Before he can finish inside, he jerks out, his come splashing across my stomach and the cards that still managed to stay there.

Great. Now we’ll have to throw those away.

But I get no reprieve. The moment Achilles is done, he moves and lets Row take his place. He strokes inside me, moaning at the feeling, and I’m winding up again, desperate for more.

“You look so pretty like this,” Creed groans as he takes over for Jiro. Jiro moves over, slipping into my hand, his cock wet from my spit. “Spread out for us like a feast.”

Creed’s cock presses deep, hitting the back of my throat and going further, holding, until he pulls out and repeats it

again. Achilles settles in my other hand, hardening again despite having just finished, urging me to stroke him faster.

“You’re going to be covered in come,” Achilles purrs, his hands running along my ribs. “Soaked in it.”

Jiro leans over and kisses my breast, trailing up to whisper in my ear. “Just like I promised, little rabbit.”

Oh fuck. I orgasm again, my legs shaking with the force of it as Row strokes inside me, fucking me, using me to bring himself to completion. He jerks out and adds his own release to my stomach, moaning as he does, his fingers clenching on my thighs.

“Good girl,” Creed coos, stepping over, giving my mouth over to Achilles who immediately strokes inside and gags me.

This time, he doesn’t go slow. He strokes inside fast but gentle, careful to give me air when needed. Meanwhile, Creed decides to swap with Jiro, the two of them communicating where I can’t hear. Creed slips inside me, moaning at the feel of it.

“Oh, you feel so fucking good, so wet for us, baby.” His hands reach down to rub at my clit, stroking me higher. “You’re practically dripping on the table for us. Do you like this? Do you like us all paying attention to you?”

Achilles rips out of my mouth just long enough for me to answer a quick, “yes,” before slipping back inside.

“I thought so,” Creed moans before picking up speed, fucking me hard and fast until I shatter around him. He continues fucking me until his rhythm stumbles. Only then does he jerk out and come across my stomach, stroking himself a few extra times above me. I can feel their release dripping down my sides, running along my skin.

Row steps up to my mouth when Achilles moves, far more gentle with his strokes. He starts by rubbing his tip along my lips, teasing, before working inside with long gentle strokes. I glance down as Jiro steps between my thighs, his cock straining for me. He says no words, only meets my eyes, as he strokes inside me with a single push. I’m so wet, he slips

inside fully, spearing me, taking over. His hands grab my calves and push my legs higher, nearly folding me in half as he starts to fuck me. Row's hand cups my chin and forces me to look at him, to hold his gaze as he runs his cock along my tongue.

“So beautiful,” he breathes. “A goddess at our mercy. What would you do if we fucked you until you passed out from exhaustion? Would you beg us to stop? Or beg us to keep going?”

My pussy clenches tightly and Jiro groans before changing his angle and hitting a spot in me that makes me cry out.

Would I ask them to stop? I doubt it. I'm game if they are. But I can't say that with a cock in my mouth so I simply take them, stroking the ones in my hands as best as I can while the other two fuck my mouth and my pussy. I'm a mess of come, my body hungry for more, and as Jiro fucks me with brutal strokes, I shatter again, my legs shaking harder, my cries muffled.

Jiro pumps inside me, shaking my ass with the force of his fucking, until he too reaches his limit and pulls out. He jerks my legs wide and leans up to add his own release to my stomach, pumping his cock until he's spent.

Row pulls out, giving me time to rest so I look down to see Jiro studying me. I watch as he reaches up with his hand and rubs their releases into my skin, spreading it up and over, running along my breasts, my nipples, my sides, coating me.

“You wear us so well,” he purrs, and in his mind, I know he's imagining that there's blood here too, mixed in, a violent sexy mess. “As if you were made for us. For this.”

I'm covered in come. It's smeared across my skin, pressed there, and as I watch him, he lifts his fingers and presses them against my mouth, slipping them past my lips, encouraging me to taste.

“Taste how much we love you,” Row groans. “Just like that. Fuck, I'm ready to go again.”

Achilles laughs and reaches down for a card, holds it up.
“Looks like it’s another draw four.”

My eyes widen and he leans in to kiss my lips, no doubt
tasting their own release.

“You forgot to say Uno, rabbit,” he growls. “Looks like
we’re going to win.”

I refuse to say uno the rest of the night, and when I start
reaching toward exhaustion, Row is right.

I beg them for more.

Again, and again, and again.

FORTY-ONE



We wake up bright and early the next morning to find Debbie already cooking breakfast in the kitchen. The scent of bacon is strong as she sets about making a breakfast fit for an entire family, her eyes red rimmed. The moment I see the sadness in her eyes, I wrap her in a hug that she returns tightly. At the sight, the others all come and wrap us both in their arms, until we're a big ball of love.

“We're coming back,” I promise.

“I can't help it,” she sniffs. “I don't know half of what y'all are walking into and I still know it's bad. You five better stay safe. I'll never forgive you if even one y'all doesn't come back.”

And that's how our morning goes. I haven't had a mother to worry over me in a long time, only Holly, but it's endearing the way she straightens all our clothing, makes sure we eat until we're stuffed, and her promises to take care of everything.

Luckily, the table had been cleaned and sanitized the night before, but I still blush when I turn to it. I blush harder when the card box appears on the window seal where we'd forgotten to get rid of it. At least the cards are in the trash where no one can see what we got up to. Pretty sure I couldn't look Creed's mom in the face if she knew.

When Creed moves to start taking suitcases out when the car arrives, Row stops him and shakes his head. “There are

people for that. Your job now is protection for Billie and nothing else.”

So, we watch as the driver loads all our bags into the literal limo. I’m wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt that cost more than I’d ever want to wear, but even rich people casual clothes have to be something ridiculous. I could have made the fancy rips and stains myself.

When it’s time to go, I look over at Keanu Leaves, the plant now big and strong, far better than when I take care of it.

“You’ll take care of Keanu?” I ask Debbie, blinking at the sudden moisture in my eyes. I hadn’t realized this part will be so difficult. Saying goodbye to the ranch, to Debbie, and even to Keanu Leaves again, leaves me far heavier than I like. This place has become a home. Debbie has become important. And Keanu, the last time I left him, he’d died. I can’t bear for him to die again so I’m leaving him with Debbie despite the anxiety that causes. I just can’t guarantee he’ll be safe on Predator Point.

“When you come back, he’ll be sporting new leaves and twice the size again,” she promises. “I’ve never seen a plant that wants so much water.”

I laugh. “Yeah, he’s a thirsty bitch.” Hugging her tightly, I breathe in the moment, imprinting it to memory. “Thank you for being you.”

She sniffs. “While you’re there, can you make sure to take care of my boy?” she asks. When she leans back, she’s wiping tears from her cheeks. “I know he acts like he’s hard and can handle everything, but that boy will die for you.”

I pull her back into a hug. “I’ll do my best, Debbie. But just so you know, I’d die for them all, too.”

She leans back and cups my cheek. “I know you would, darlin’. I would have traded places with my late husband too if I could have if not for that man over there. He needed a momma.”

“You raised the man of my dreams,” I murmur. “For that, I’m always going to be thankful.”

Debbie chuckles through her tears. “I’ve got everything covered here. You just make sure all five of you come back, you hear? You all give this place life.”

And that’s what we leave with. The limo is all packed and Row looks at his watch, letting us know we need to get going. We all take turns giving Debbie hugs and making sure everything is okay. I go out to the stables one last time with Creed and give Larry one more goodbye.

“Stay out of trouble,” I tell the horse. “And when I get back, I’ll give you as many apples as you want.”

He whinnies as if he understands me, and I kiss his nose. In answer, he lays his head on my shoulder, and my own tears start all over again.

I’m coming back. I have to. If not for Debbie, then for Larry.

Neither of them deserves that kind of heartbreak.

Together, we climb into the limo, wave goodbye to Debbie one last time, and as the car starts pulling away, the horses run along the fence, sending us a final farewell.

My eyes aren’t dry again until we reach the airport.

FORTY-TWO



There's a private plane sitting on the tarmac when the limo pulls up. I don't think I've ever bypassed the airport part of flying and just drove out to a personal plane. Economy always did well for me. But now, I'm getting a whole new experience.

Starting with the man who runs up to open our door for us.

"Mr. Hawthorn. Right on schedule. Please, follow me," the man announces in a way that tells me he's had plenty of practice with rich assholes.

When I step out of the limo, I stare around us, my brows furrowed. "Don't we have to go through security or something?"

Row laughs and ushers me forward with a hand at the small of my back. "Security is for the peasants, darling. We fly without limits."

Achilles snorts when he climbs out after me. "You play that part too well, Row."

The private jet is already running through its checks as we're led onboard. It's luxurious, every bit of it done in cream leather and expensive carpet. I've never stepped foot on something so plush and I immediately worry my shoes are too dirty to wear aboard. Creed on the other hand doesn't even flinch at wearing his dirty work boots. He'd insisted on them for this part so he could be comfortable, but he'll have to change just like I will later. He has to duck to get inside and the moment he sees the seats, he whistles.

“Well damn. You sure this little thing is going to fly just fine?”

“I assure you everything will go as planned,” a man says as he steps from the cockpit. “Captain Kline, at your service. Mr. Hawthorn, all checks have been completed and we’re ready to take off as soon as you are. They’re loading your luggage now.”

Row nods. “Make sure the red suitcase is brought on board. We’re going to need it before we land.”

“Yes, sir.”

The pilot disappears outside to take care of whatever pilots take care of.

“So, we’re going to New York first?” I ask again, because honestly, there’s so much fancy shit going on, I can’t remember what exactly the plan is. If we even have a plan. So far, it’s been mostly get to the island and fuck shit up. That’s the only plan I need.

“New York and then from there we’ll head to the Marshall Islands. We’ll go the rest of the way by boat. Your girls will be meeting us at the Amata Kabua International Airport. I arranged for them to have tickets. They’ll ride on the yacht with us.”

Nodding, I pick a seat and plop down into it. “Sounds good to me. Does this flight include something to drink?”

“Of course,” a woman cheerfully says, appearing from nowhere and nearly making me piss myself. She’s dressed in a blue dress, her makeup done perfectly, her teeth whiter than snow. “What can I get you, Ms. Hirsch?”

I open my mouth and close it, not sure what to order.

“Mineral waters will be perfect to start,” Row offers when I don’t say anything. “Thank you, Juliet.”

Everything moves swiftly after that. Apparently, we do have a schedule to keep and we need to get in the air to keep it. Our red suitcase that Row insists is needed is placed in with us and we take our seats in the cushy loungers.

“We’re cleared for takeoff,” the pilot announces over the intercom and then we’re taking off into the air on a jet that hardly feels like its flying at all. Holy shit, economy will never be the same again.

Once we’re high enough in the air, the pilot announces we can move around and Row immediately unbuckles his seatbelt and stands, offering me his hand. “Come with me.”

I glance at the others, but they don’t seem super interested so I take his hand and follow him through a door in the back of the cabin. Inside is a whole ass bedroom and bathroom combo.

“The rich really do have it all, don’t they?” I muse, staring at the bed and thinking about how I’ve never joined the mile high club.

Row lugs the red suitcase in and drops it on the bed. “We’re all going to have to get dressed before we land in New York. There will be eyes on us once there. Here, this trip, this is the last time we’ll have complete and utter privacy.” His eyes meet mine. “So, enjoy it.”

“What clothing do you dictate I wear, oh Obi Wan?” I ask, moving over to look in the suitcase as he flips it open. Inside are suits and clothing I haven’t seen before. They’re more casual, but clearly far more expensive than anything I might have purchased for myself. “Is your plan to spoil me and keep me pliant and ready for you in your bed all the time?” I chuckle.

“Of course,” he teases back. “But this is necessary. So is this.”

He grabs me, tugging me against him. Just when I think he’s about to tumble me on the bed and have his wicked way with me, he instead turns me toward a large floor length mirror I hadn’t noticed behind us. It’s at the perfect angle to see us.

... and the bed...

Row wraps his arms around me, his fingers tracing along the skin of my arms, tracing up, up, up, to stroke over my shoulders and down between my breasts. My breathe stutters

at his touch, at the way his eyes meet mine and burn in the mirror.

“Are you prepared to walk into this fire, goddess?” he murmurs, stroking me through my clothing. “Are you prepared to burn in your vengeance?”

“Yes,” I breathe, reaching behind me to stroke his thigh.

“You can’t walk in there as Billie, the woman who survived Prey Island,” he continues. “You have to walk in there as Freya, the woman who dismantled their game and comes back to play her own. There will be no friends there. Only enemies. You will no longer be a survivor. You must be the conqueror.”

“I am the conqueror,” I rasp, leaning back. “There is no one else inside me.”

He smiles as his fingers trail up and circle my throat, resting there like a threat. “You must wear that mask like a second skin, Billie. You’re a dangerous animal, a rabbit with teeth, but you’re happy for the wealth you’ve stumbled upon. You have to act like you belong among them. Can you do that?”

Nodding, I stare into his reflection. “I’m going to eat the rich.”

He smiles. “That’s my girl.” The confidence in his gaze fizzles just a little and I furrow my brows. “Which brings us to another matter.”

Reaching down to take my hand, I’m startled by the sudden feeling of cold metal there. I look down and see the telltale shine that only comes with diamonds.

“What is this?” I ask, staring at the sizeable black rock surrounded by smaller pink ones. “Row?”

I glance over my shoulder at him, needing to see his face, but his hand grabs my jaw and forces me to look back at the mirror, back at his reflection.

“I asked you before, and this is me asking again.” The deep breath he takes tickles my neck. “There’s so much danger

in walking onto this island, but even without that, I've never been more sure of anything in my life as I am of this moment. I've spent thirty years looking for someone who inspired something inside of me, who looked me up and down and saw behind the mask. When I found you, I knew this was it for me."

My eyes are wide in the mirror, surprised, but also a little frightened. This time, when I try to turn, he lets me, his eyes on mine as he kneels down before me. A choked gasp comes out of my throat that I'm not too proud of.

"I love the fuck out of you, Billie. I would die for you." He smiles. "I've nearly died for you, and I will continue protecting you in the ways I'm able to. I'll never ask you to change who you are though you're walking into this world wearing a mask. Together, we can be exactly who we want to be, no matter what you choose." He hesitates, looking up at me. "So, Billie, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

I open my mouth and no sound comes out at first. I'm surprised. Row had mentioned this before, but when it never came up again, I assumed it was in the past. Now here he is, kneeling before me, a large ring already nestled on my finger. It's not exactly to my style being as large as it is, but the vintage feel to it is definitely me.

Realizing I've been staring at him for too long, I kneel down before him so we're closer at eye level. "What about the others?"

"I've already talked to them. They understand why it's necessary that I be the one you marry."

I roll my bottom lip between my teeth. "And when is this ceremony?"

"Right now, if you agree to it," he answers, watching me carefully.

The door behind him opens and Achilles strolls in. "You agree to marry him yet? Fucking hell, this is taking forever."

I laugh as the others come in behind him. Jiro looks as stoic as ever, his eyes going to the ring on my finger, but

Creed? Creed looks a little upset when he sees it. He hides it quickly, but not fast enough for me not to see it.

Frowning, I look back down at the ring again. “So, this would be just paperwork for now?” I ask, glancing between them. “Can we have a ceremony after this is all over for all of us?”

“Anything you want, you can have it,” Row confirms, glancing at the others. “This is just to protect you on Predator Point. Legally, you can only marry one of us, but realistically, we can hold all the ceremonies you’d like to tie us all together.”

Glancing at the others, I ask, “Will that be okay with all of you?”

Achilles waves away my question. “I don’t care about the conformities or conventions of marriage. Realistically, I’d marry Row, too. We all could use a sugar daddy at some point.”

Jiro shrugs. “I have no objections. The extra safety for you seems necessary.”

But when I look at Creed, he’s staring at me, his eyes tracing the details of my face. “I won’t lie and say I’m not jealous,” he starts. “If I’m being honest, I’ve imagining marrying the woman I love since I was young. But...” He sighs. “I agree this is necessary. I’d rather you’re safe than my ego stroked. I’ll be okay with a ceremony after all this is finished.”

I can see the struggle that took for Creed to say and when I reach for him, he takes my hand without hesitation. “The first moment we can, we’ll have that ceremony. I would never deprive Debbie of such an event.”

His crooked smile appears and he squeezes my fingers once before letting go. “She’ll appreciate that.”

And then I look at Row. “Yes,” I breathe. “I’ll marry you.”

The smile that lights up his face almost makes all of this worth it. It also almost makes me forget the real reason we’re doing it.

The families of Hounds are off limits while on Predator Point and the world. It won't mean they won't watch me, that they won't attempt to play, but it does mean they can't physically harm me without punishment. The rules are the rules, and this one is a strict one. The only way a Hound can be harmed is if the Grand Master allows it or if they're on Prey Island.

Row stands and pulls me up with him. "Then let us prepare."



Apparently, Row thought of everything. Just in case I said yes, he already has the marriage license ready to go. I have no idea how he managed to get that done while on the ranch but it's there, plain as day. Apparently, Juliet is ordained as some sort of minister and can sign the marriage license for us no problem. It's her who stands in front of us in her pressed blue dress, her teeth almost distracting with how white they are, as she asks us to repeat after her.

"Billie Hirsch, do you take Woodrow Hawthorn the Fourth to be your lawful wedded husband, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, 'til death do you part?"

"Probably going to be richer," Achilles mumbles and Row shoots him a glare.

"I do," I say, trying to stifle my chuckle.

"And do you, Woodrow Hawthorn the Fourth, take Billie Hirsch to be your lawful wedded wife, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, 'til death do you part?"

"I do," he parrots, the corner of his eyes crinkling.

"Then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride." Juliet steps back and nods. "That was about the quickest wedding I've ever officiated."

Laughing, Row drags me in and presses a proper kiss on my lips, dipping me backward the way they do in movies.

“Now let’s hope the ‘til death do us part’ wasn’t literal,” Achilles says when we come up for air.

“Do you always have to be such an asshole?” I ask, grinning at him.

“Of course. It’s expected now. It’s who I am, rabbit.”

Rolling my eyes, I let him throw back the glass of champagne that had been meant for me and think about the fact that I’m now a married woman.

I’m a married woman!

Row leans in and runs his teeth along my neck, sending shivers through me. “Come along, wife,” he whispers in my ear. “We must consummate this marriage properly.”

I raise my brow. “You trying to get me into the mile high club?”

He grins. “It’s a very exclusive club. Only the very best get in.” He tilts his head as he starts to tug me toward the room. “Let’s talk about it while I pour this expensive champagne over your tits and lick it off.”

My pussy clenches and I stumble after him. “Fuck.”

“Exactly,” he purrs.

Creed chuckles. “At least you get a bed for it. Some of us had to fit in the peasant’s bathroom on a regular plane.”

I jerk my head toward him. “What?”

He winks. “Another time, I’ll tell you. You go get dicked down over—”

“Oh, we’re currently over Ohio,” Juliet supplies helpfully.

“Go get dicked down over Ohio. We’ll be here waiting for you when you get back,” he finishes, grinning. “Try not to make us fall out of the air, will you? I don’t trust this puddle jumper.”

And then the door closes behind us and I don’t hear whatever else they say.

FORTY-THREE



We don't spend long in New York. We're there just to refill and then we're in the air again, headed for our final destination.

Final destination.

At least we're not driving behind a log truck. But we may very well be headed to our deaths. The closer we get, the more I'm unsure if this is the right plan or not. Either way, by the time the plane touches down on the Majuro Atoll, it's too late.

We're playing the game now.

The moment the door opens, and we disembark, déjà vu hits me like a one-ton brick. I nearly stumble under the force of it and it takes me a long moment of deep breaths to avoid a panic attack that threatens at the edge of my consciousness. I've done extensive therapy, and walking back to this place of my own free will is a little therapeutic, but my body still remembers what it went through when I was last here.

The anger. The death. The blood.

This time, I'm returning on the other side of the fence, not as prey, but as predator. By choice and on the arm of a Hound.

The moment we step out of the plane, it feels like everyone is watching us. Too many eyes focus on me, watch me, see me. They take in all the details, including the long flowy dress that had a price tag of fifteen hundred dollars on it and the necklace Row had placed around my throat that matches the ring on my finger.

The man who takes our bags, the woman who sells trinkets at the stall a few feet away, another man who peddles the little food stall beside her, they all watch me. Their eyes see only me and it's unnerving. Row's mask is firmly in place so I do the same, tilting up my chin and fanning myself like I'm a pampered princess not wanting to be long in the heat for fear of burning my fair skin.

I play the part well.

Behind Row and I, Creed, Jiro, and Achilles step out dressed in matching suits, each of them wearing a pin dictating their positions to the Hawthorn family. Security. For both of us. And a way to make sure we all make it to Predator Point together.

Row is an expert at wearing his mask, but for me, it's a careful consideration. Every movement, every look, every touch is thought about extensively before I act on it. I have to appear like a money hungry barbie, happy to prostitute myself for one of the men who tried to kill me for a chance at a larger sum of money. I can do that. It's not that hard.

There's a large yacht waiting for us at the docks, larger than the one we'd been on last, but that doesn't surprise me. This one belongs to Row's family and it's obvious they spared no expense. As we step onto the dock and head toward it, a man steps out on the deck that would have made me pause if I wasn't playing the part.

Row's father.

Woodrow Senior.

I hadn't thought to ask, but clearly, he's riding the same yacht as we are. Of course he is. He controls the family business still and he's a Hound. He'll be required to attend as well.

"How magnanimous of you to finally arrive," he declares as he puffs on a thick cigar. "I was starting to think you'd make me wait here forever."

"We're an hour earlier than I told you to expect us," Row replies coldly, no emotion in his voice.

“Yes, well, I’m not getting any younger.” His father finally looks over at me, before glancing at the three men behind us. Only then does any real emotion show through his mask.

Anger.

“What game are you playing here, son?” he asks, glaring at me. I just stare back at him blankly, not bothering to say hello or anything. He doesn’t deserve that from me.

Row tugs me forward again, toward the ramp where men dressed in white uniforms wait to help us onboard. Once on deck, Row gestures toward the door to the interior. “Perhaps we can talk inside, father.”

His dad nods. “Of course. Wouldn’t want any prying ears listening in.”

And that’s how we end up sitting in the fanciest fucking living room I’ve ever been in. The inside of the yacht is all marble, gold, mahogany, and redwood. It probably cost a small fortune for this thing, and these two men walk around it like it’s normal.

My mask almost slips.

Jesus, how can anyone be surrounded by this excess and not stare in awe of it?

Achilles, apparently, doesn’t care about a mask and whistles. “This thing cost some money, didn’t it?”

Woodrow Senior glances over at him with furrowed brows. “You’ll have to train your security better to not speak out of turn.”

Achilles’ eyes dart to him and hold, and I can see the desire to stab the old man swirling there. Hell, I have the urge to let him.

“Anyway,” Senior begins. “Explain why you’ve brought these... these...”

“People,” I supply helpfully, as if he doesn’t know we’re human. I suppose, to him, we’re not.

“Fools,” he corrects. “You’re all fools for playing this game and coming back to this world. I’d have thought once you escaped, you’d stay far, far away.”

This time I do smile, and he stares at me, intrigued. “You don’t know us,” I say sweetly. “Let’s not pretend you do.”

“I know enough, *Freya*,” he says, shaking his head. “And you’re walking to the slaughter.”

I don’t correct his name. I imagine I won’t hear my real name from anyone but my men while on Predator Point. They wouldn’t bother to learn it, not when Freya left such an impression.

“A slaughter,” I laugh, glancing at Row. “As if we were not already there.” I meet Senior’s eyes. “As if I did not fight my way out of it.”

Anger turns his face a deeper shade of red as he watches me. “You play games, son! You should know better than to play games with the Society.”

“I learned from the best,” Row purrs, tilting his head. “You taught me how to push boundaries, to play chess. You wanted a Hound and here I am.” He smiles. “Deal with it or don’t. I don’t care one way or the other.”

Senior stares at him, respect flashing in his eyes even as he shakes his head. “She must be a tiger in bed to have you playing such games.”

I raise my brow. “She has a name,” I purr, leaning in to take the drink the waitress sets on the table for him. Scotch on the rocks. “And yes, your son does enjoy fucking me.”

His brows shoot so far up, they practically disappear. “Your girlfriend is feisty,” he tells Row.

“Wife,” Row corrects, pulling out the marriage license and tossing it on the table between us. “You’ll refer to her as my wife.”

Senior laughs, surprise in his eyes. “Well played, son. Well played.” To me, he turns and toasts the new glass the waitress

passes him. “Welcome to the family, Freya. May you survive to see the rest of it.”

I tap my glass against his. “May you choke on my name.” Then I toss the glass back despite him pausing. In the end, he takes a sip, and I feel like I’ve won something.

Even if it’s small.

Even if it’s the last thing I do before I die.

FORTY-FOUR



The girls arrived about ten minutes after that exchange, Crystal leading the charge onto the yacht, her excitement palpable. I'd already discussed everything with them, that she can't refer to me as anything other than an employer, that this is a dangerous trip, but Crystal's personality is always infectious. The moment she steps onto the yacht in her high heels, floppy hat, and a mini skirt, Row's dad forgets all about our games and focuses entirely on her.

Crystal eats it up, playing the game, gushing about how handsome he is. I know exactly what her type is, and Row's dad doesn't fit it, but the money he flashes is certainly a nice bonus. Unfortunately for him, her compliments are entirely fake. Crystal prefers men with tats and bad boys who are good men. She especially loves ones with piercings and enough baggage to drag them both down.

There are three other girls with Crystal from the club, Polly, Jessica, and Danielle. Each of them introduces themselves by their stage names, just as Crystal does. The less anyone knows about them, the better. This is no different than a job at the club. The only difference is here, the men are powerful enough and rich enough to actually stalk you.

I'd pulled Crystal aside and explained the situation again, letting her know just what to expect, and how dangerous this will be. She'd only smiled.

"Honey, I know danger. I'm here for the money and the drama. My momma called me a whore, so I intend to live up to that," she says, grinning. I snort at her words, but not nearly as

much as at what she says next. “Girl, I will put a twinkie between my cheeks and force a man to lick it off if he pays me enough. This is right up my alley. Don’t you worry about us. We’re prepared.”

I suddenly realize I don’t know as much about the girls walking into danger as I’d like to, but now isn’t the time. Crystal seems to have it managed and with her hair as high as her confidence, she’s going to take care of business.

We set sail shortly after, taking the short ride out toward Predator Point. I can’t help but lean over the railing, watching the blue waves pass us by, taking in the sheer number of yachts in the water. I understand why they don’t do planes, but surely there has to be some suspicion when so many damn rich people show up and go sailing from here. Or perhaps, that’s the point. Everyone knows and doesn’t step in, afraid or uncaring.

My lack of faith in humanity says it’s a bit of both.

It takes only an hour to reach Predator Point and when the islands rise up before us, I tense, images flashing before my eyes. I jump when someone appears beside me, relaxing only when I realize it’s Creed.

“There’s no going back now,” he murmurs, staring at the island where we met and fought to escape.

“No, there’s not,” I reply, staring at the trees swaying side to side. Luckily, we’re not settling there. Instead, we sail past it and head right for Predator Point. For a moment, I forgot we’re no longer the prey.

We’re the hunters this time.

Docking takes a little longer than I expect because we have to wait our turn with so many yachts coming in, but once we’re parked and the crew sets about tying the ship down, I get the full view of what it’s like to come on the arm of a Hound rather than in a cage.

We’d been running before. I remember that it was fancy, but I’d been more focused on getting away from this place

with my life and the men's beside me. Now, I can take everything in completely without fear.

My chin tilted up, I stare at the people disembarking their own yachts, at the extravagance of their clothing, at the way they glance over at us and balk. I'm dressed just as fancy as them, blending in, but my face is easily recognized no matter what I do. Row steps up beside me and loops my arm through his elbow.

"You ready for this?" he asks softly, glancing over at me. His mask is firmly in place but, for me, he lets his emotion flash in his eyes.

"No," I answer honestly. "But I'm ready to make them bleed."

He nods. "Then let's go tear them apart."

People rush out from everywhere to help the ramp move faster, to start unloading our luggage. We do nothing at all, just watch and wait until we can get off. Crystal and the girls are led away, their eyes on me and giving me a small nod. I'll be seeing plenty of them throughout this trip, my group of spies.

After all, a man never has looser lips than when a woman's lips are around his cock.

All eyes turn to us as we step from the yacht and start heading into the main compound. They whisper between themselves, pointing at us like we're a sideshow. Creed, Jiro, and Achilles follow behind us in a pattern that unnerves me, but is necessary to keep up appearances. All of us are recognized. All of us are entertainment.

I walk carefully over the smooth ground with my arm through Row's, my head held high. Senior wanders off to speak to some people he knows almost immediately, his boisterous laugh as fake as the mask on my face.

"He'll spread the news like wildfire," Row whispers in my ear. "Soon they'll know you're off limits and no one will dare try to hurt you."

A man appears before us, dressed in the same red as all the other staff. He speaks with a foreign accent as he gestures for

us to follow him. “I will show you to your quarters. Come, follow me please.”

We’re lead through the massive compound, my eyes taking in the décor that I’d only briefly studied before. Now, I can take it all in, from the chandeliers dripping with crystals to the lush carpet my heels sink into. Nothing has been spared, the inside an extravagant... cage, I realize.

The Hounds are caged here just like the Prey were on the island.

But they don’t seem to care. Their golden cage protects them. The one I was in did not.

“Compliant asshats,” I hear Achilles grumble behind me. “Fucking waste.”

And I don’t blame him. “I agree,” I rasp, loud enough for him to hear, before I plaster the serene smile on my face when too many eyes look my way.

The quarters we’re lead too are just as fancy, some shit I would never in a million years stay in. It’s gaudy as hell, done up like some overdone Victorian bedroom that somehow feels cheap and expensive at the same time. I don’t know how to explain it. Just that the baroque elements clash with the modern ones. We’re given a larger section with three bedrooms and a large, shared space that includes a living area and a small kitchen that we’ll probably never be allowed to use. It looks like no one has ever used it for sure, the appliances sparkling like they just came out of the box. One room will be for us, one for Senior— much to my dismay— and then one for Creed, Row, and Achilles to share. It has bunk beds in their room, like it’s expected that some people show up with security. Row had explained some do, but most go without. It’s up to each individual as long as not more than two per person are here. Since we only have three, we’re apparently okay.

I let my mask slip the moment we’re safely inside the room, the only place we’ll have a small bit of privacy. “I already hate this place,” I grumble, going to the kitchen. The fridge is filled with snacks and booze, and I slam it shut in

annoyance. “So much waste. I bet half the idiots here never even step foot in the kitchen.”

“You would be correct,” Row replies, settling on the couch to rub at his face. “But you’re going to have to strengthen your will. We’re not done today.”

“No?” I ask, turning to him. “We don’t get the night to relax?”

Row shakes his head. “Unfortunately for us, there’s a welcome dinner hosted by the Grand Master in a few hours, and we’re all expected to attend.”

“Fantastic,” I grumble, opening the fridge again. I’m tempted to grab one of the small Prosecco bottles, but instead, I grab a water. I’m going to need a clear head if I’m going to do this.

Especially if I’ll have to look at the Grand Master and not murder him.

After all, the last time I saw him, he was blowing me a kiss as we escaped his island of nightmares.

The fucker.

FORTY-FIVE



Apparently, the welcome dinner is a big deal. It's a bunch of rich assholes all clamoring over each other to brown nose to the Grand Master, just in case the Hound Society would like to invest in their family business or help with some other non-essential bullshit. Regardless, I'm not here to brown nose. I'm here to stir the pot.

And apparently, I'm supposed to be dressed super fancy while I do it.

"Are you sure this dress is okay?" I ask again, tugging at the tightness of it. When the tailor had said I'd look snatched, he really meant it. I feel like I can't breathe in this thing.

"You look pristine," Row says. "Just as they expect you to."

"You look uncomfortable," Jiro adds. "The tailor went too small."

Row glances at me. "Don't let them see the discomfort. They'll assume it's because of them."

"Easy for you to say," I growl, tugging at the side again. "You get to breathe in your outfit. I suppose I won't be eating much."

"Rich women starve themselves," Achilles replies, chuckling at my scowl.

"Then I'm going to eat you after this," I threaten.

His eyes sparkle. "That's a deal I'm happy to make, rabbit."

I turn back forward and take as deep of a breath as this damn dress will allow me. Like everyone else, we're leaving our quarters to head to the ballroom where apparently there are hundreds of tables with assigned seating. We don't get a say in where we are seated and will be led to our spots by ushers. I assume we'll be put in the furthest, darkest corner, the Hound Society not wanting a reminder of the rabbit that bit back.

I'm wrong.

I'm so very wrong.

The moment we walk into that ballroom with Senior trailing along drunkenly beside us, the ushers rush forward and gesture for us to head toward the front. Senior's smile brightens as he goes to follow, but another usher stops him.

"This way Mr. Hawthorn. Your seat is over here."

His face reddens when he realizes he won't be seated with us, fury in his eyes when he realizes we're being led to the main table, but I don't pay him much mind. I'm focusing on keeping my mask in place and breathing as we're led to the table where the Grand Master sits.

"Row?"

"Just act like it's expected," he murmurs softly. "Don't panic. It's fine."

"Your dad is waring with the urge to be proud of you being picked for this table and being incredibly jealous," I comment as we follow the usher.

"You've described his parenting style to a T," he murmurs back. "Now, let's take our seats and get this over with." Row turns to Creed, Achilles, and Jiro and points to a spot against the wall. "Your station will be over there."

Achilles' eyes light up with ire, but Jiro bows the slightest bit, understanding their role in this. The security isn't allowed to eat with their bosses, and right now, that's all they're allowed to be.

"I don't like this," I whisper as they go to take up their posts. They won't be allowed to eat until after, so I'd made

them eat something before, but it still bothers me now.

“Part of the game,” Row reassures me. He pulls out the chair with my name and helps me to it. Only then do I realize the seat beside me is designated for the Grand Master himself.

We’re not only at the same table.

I’ll be seated beside him.

I meet the others’ eyes briefly before I focus back on the gold encrusted dinnerware. The most I can do is look at them without drawing too much attention despite every person in this room knowing I’d been intimate with the four men I surround myself with. I wonder if there are videos of our time together. I hadn’t cared then, especially when I hadn’t known if we’d survive, but I care now. How many of these assholes have seen me naked? How many have stroked themselves to completion at the thought of it?

The lights dim just enough for the doors before us to be highlighted as they open. A man strolls out wearing the same mask I remember.

A mask that’s haunted my nightmares.

It covers all but the bottom of his face, only his mouth revealed. I can see his eyes through the smaller holes there, but the only detail I can make out as he welcomes everyone is that they’re a pale green color. He doesn’t waste too much time addressing everyone, only welcoming them, and urging everyone to partake of the dinner and refreshments, before he looks over at our table excitedly and heads our way.

I’m tense. Fuck, am I tense. The last time I saw this asshole, it was a whole other game. Now, I get a good look as he swaggers up and takes the seat beside me. He’s large, his shoulders wide as if he works out. He wears a suit that’s clearly more expensive than most cars, no tie or bowtie. He leaves the top of the shirt open, exposing a throat that’s either tanned from the sun or natural, I can’t tell. As soon as he sits down, he turns to me, his lips pulled into a smile.

“Oh, how I’ve looked forward to seeing you again, Freya,” he purrs with a bit of an accent I can’t place, his voice much

deeper than I expect.

The moment that voice echoes in my ear, my mask slips. Just a little. “That makes one of us,” I say sweetly, tilting my head.

He chuckles as waiters come forward and place the first course before us. Once they leave, he leans in closer, making me tense. “You’re more beautiful up close than I imagined.”

I glance over at Row, confused, before staring back at those pale green eyes. “I... thank you?”

“Perhaps have your tailor make the clothing actually fit you. Your curves make you stand out. Don’t let the expectations here hide them.” He smiles. “Not that you can. Your breasts look luscious spilling out of your top.”

Beneath the table, my fingers clench in Row’s slacks. What the fuck is going on here? I expected the Grand Master to be cold and calculated. Instead, he’s... flirting with me?

“I’d appreciate it if you’d stop looking at my tits,” I fire back. There are so many eyes on us, people watching curiously, it makes me itch. “They aren’t for you.”

“Everything is for me,” he replies, and though that statement is nothing but ego, he says it so nonchalantly, it makes me think it’s true for a moment.

“Not me,” I counter. “But sure, continue to stroke your own ego.”

His eyes sparkle. “I prefer other things stroked actually, but that isn’t the only reason I placed you here at my table.” He glances at Row. “You’re looking mighty comfortable young Hawthorn.”

Row nods but doesn’t respond, watching carefully. He knows he’s not supposed to interfere, both because it could get us in trouble and because I can take care of myself. He told me how to act, and my spine is what’s going to stir this pot.

“No?” I ask, reaching forward to take a sip of the water before me. “Pray tell, what plans do you have for me?” I purr, falling into this game he thinks to play. He can’t actually be

interested in me, but then again, there are a lot of eyes looking my way, both in lust and curiosity. Fuck, maybe I'm wrong.

He leans in, his shoulder brushing mine when I refuse to back away.

“What game are *you* here to play, little goddess?” he asks, his voice husky. His eyes are bright as they focus on me, as they prod and analyze, searching for a weakness. He won't find them written on my face.

“What makes you think I'm playing a game?” I laugh as I set the water back down and focus on the salad.

“We're all playing games here,” the Grand Master says as he too focuses on his plate. “I am. Young Row is. Each and every person at this table has ulterior motives. In this room.”

I let the smile spread slowly along my lips. “Maybe I just like the money.”

“Says the woman who didn't touch her winnings for a month,” he replies, before taking a bite.

And though it's a harmless enough comment, it's a reminder that this man knows everything about me, that he's the one who has been sending people to stalk us, to spy, to harass. They've all been his puppets and I'll do well to remember that.

“It's a lot of money,” I reply, not skipping a beat. “Forgive me for being cautious at first. After all, people like me don't get such an opportunity every day.”

He focuses on me and the tension between us is heavy. He's right. I'm playing a game, but so is he, and not knowing what it is unnerves me. Still, I tip my chin up and meet his gaze head on, unafraid. If I'm going to die here, I'm going to take as many of these fuckers with me as I can.

Starting with the Grand Master.

He sets his fork down and leans toward me, getting ridiculously close to my face. Apparently, the Grand Master doesn't care about personal space. I could have leaned away,

but some competitive side of me says this is a game I'm going to win, so I remain where I am, watching him carefully.

"If it was the money," he breathes, his breath fanning across my lips and smelling like mint. "Then there are any number of men here worth more than the Hawthorns. Certainly, you can have your pick. Look at how many of them watch you with envy."

I don't take the bait, don't look around to see if he's right about how many are watching me. I can sense a few men nearby straighten as if they think they could ever stand a chance with me. As if I would ever look at them twice.

I grin and lean closer, keeping only an inch of air between us. "Maybe I'm happy with Row's big dick," I reply, not caring to lower my voice.

A lady at our table on the other side spits her wine out in surprise, her napkin barely capturing the spray. I don't turn to look though. I remain focused on the masked man before me.

His lips curl up in a smile and he leans back, clearly amused. "I assume the other three are equally endowed?"

My smile widens and I figure what the hell? If this is the game we play, then I can play back. "If you wanted to be considered in that line up, all you had to do was ask," I tease, taking another sip of my water and watching him over the rim.

He eyes me, watching me as if considering something. None of my men react to my words, knowing I'm not serious, knowing it's all a game and I'm leading it. And besides, if I were to seduce the Grand Master, wouldn't it be a win?

He doesn't confirm or deny that he's interested. Instead, the Grand Master lifts his glass and laughs. "To the most exciting game of chess I've played in years." He clinks his glass against mine. "And to the goddess who strolled back into our midst unafraid."

Everyone in the ballroom holds their glasses up and I tense, finally turning away from the Grand Master to take it in.

They all drink. Every single one of them.

The Grand Master winks at me. “Game on, little goddess. I hope you sharpened your teeth.”

“I wouldn’t have walked in here had I not,” I reply, sweet venom in my voice.

It takes everything in me to focus on my food. The entire time I eat, he watches me, enthralled, and I suddenly wonder if I’ve made a mistake in playing his game.

I wonder if I’ve accidently, again, made myself the prey.

FORTY-SIX



We have three days before Hounds will volunteer their families or themselves for the hunt. The thought of it makes me sick with dread, to think about how they will happily cheer as they volunteer to slaughter innocent people. I've overheard a few seasoned Hounds already talking about how they want to join in the hunt after the excitement of the last one. I can hear them talking with barely contained fervor as we walk past, can hear them talk about how they hope they can find their own Freya, how they can strangle her and watch the life leave her body. Their eyes are always on me, eager. It makes me feel like I need to scrub their gazes off in the shower after every social interaction.

The next morning, we start off with a knock on the door that we've been waiting for. Jiro opens it to find Crystal standing there, her eyes bright despite the fact she likely didn't get any sleep. Apparently, the girls are utilized most at night. They get to choose when they'd like to work and have full power to decline anyone they wish, but judging by Crystal's expression, she's having too much fun.

Once Jiro closes the door behind her, she grins. "Girl, you dropped me into a melting pot of drama. My little soap opera heart is just a pitter patter."

Laughing, I reach for the coffee pot. "Would you like some caffeine?"

"No, thank you," she preens. "I need to sleep after this. These rich assholes kept me busy last night and I suspect it'll

only get worse. Apparently, there's a flood of requests for me." She fluffs her hair.

"Of course, there is," I muse. "You're amazing."

"I fuck real good, too," she teases. "Make their souls leave their body, they say. One of 'em told me I have a magic pussy and called me a witch, so I faked a spell over him and now he thinks he's in love with me." She laughs. "I don't know shit about witchcraft."

"Damn," Row laughs as he takes a mug of coffee from me. "It sounds like you know what you're doing. Which reminds me." He pulls out a wad of money. "If anyone asks, we utilized your services."

Crystal takes the large chunk of money happily and tucks it away. "I mean, if Billie was into women, I would have had my panties off faster than a pig eats a man, but boss lady here is strictly hetero much to my dismay." She winks at me, and I snort, remembering the time she'd made a pass. I've never been more flattered. "Anyways, you brought me here to do a job so here's what I learned."

Crystal then proceeds to list off information indeed worthy of a soap opera even if none of it helps exactly. Apparently, there are plenty of men here cheating on their wives right in front of them and women doing the same. Plenty of them are trying to take down other businesses and targeting other Hounds. She's overheard at least one Hound vow to take out another if they both end up hunting. The list goes on and on.

"Christ, rich people really are just like in the movies, huh?" Creed asks, shaking his head. "Please tell me you're getting paid heavily for their bullshit."

Crystal beams. "Oh, I raked in six hundred thousand this first night, not including what Row just gave me."

Achilles chokes on the drink he'd been taking of his coffee. "You said what?"

Crystal beams. "What can I say? I'm good at what I do. Half of that is tips." She leans in. "Oh, and I got one of them

to do the twinkie thing. Wanna know his name so you can mock him in public?"

"Absolutely," I laugh.

The girls are perfect spies. Crystal gives us the information of the other girls too, making sure we have everything we need before she heads for the door so she can get some sleep. She muses up her hair and smears her lipstick just before she opens it. As she does, she makes sure she speaks loud enough for anyone outside to hear.

"Make sure you request me again," she purrs. "I had so much fun."

She winks at me one last time and disappears.

"You know, I wasn't sure you were correct about bringing the women along at first," Jiro says. "But I'm impressed."

I grin. "No one can resist Crystal. And the others are just as talented as her. She'll have them all sucking the secrets dry."

Everything is going according to plan, but we still don't have anything we can use. It gives me great pleasure, however, to walk past Row's dad and ask him if he wants a twinkie. The way his face reddens makes my day. There are so many ridiculous secrets and yet not a single one can help. I already knew they were petty and all cheating with each other. I already knew they'll take any opportunity to backstab another Hound. Only the Grand Master keeps them in line while here. All bets will be off once they step foot on that island.

Once we're back among the Hounds, playing our parts, the real tension starts.

Row, Achilles, Creed, and Jiro have to constantly play offense as Hound after Hound starts flocking toward me like vultures. Their eyes are heavy on me, lingering, undressing, and plenty of them get up the courage to approach me. For most, a firm "no, thank you" is all it takes. Others require the threat of being beaten to a pulp by one of my men. Either way, I don't get too far away from at least one of my men at any

given time. It feels like the Hounds are just waiting for an opportunity to corner me.

On Predator Point, there's everything you could want to entertain you. A section where girls and guys dance, a casino, bars. They spare no expense. Apparently, there are indoor tennis courts and everything else I don't care about. Whatever makes you happy, it's provided. There are even large conference rooms and such for them to conduct business, make deals, and handle their work while trapped here. You can eat at any hour. You can stay drunk the entire time if you prefer. Drugs are flowing as fast as the liquor and if you want something not readily available, you can have it. There are concierges prepared to help.

It's just one long party that never ends. Just like Row said.

I watch Row wearing his invisible mask, interacting with people he clearly doesn't like or even respect, playing his part to perfection. It's a wonder that I can see through it now, that I can understand the tells that let me know just who he likes and who he despises. There are so very few he likes. Jiro, meanwhile, is at home in his position, a silent presence that hovers around me, keeping most from getting too close. But not all. Some of them don't fear the repercussions of coming too close to the fire.

Throughout the day, I watch Achilles sweat and tug at his collar, his anxiety getting to him more and more. This probably feels like hell for him, and we can't even set up a hammock somewhere outside. He has to sleep in the quarters. Apparently, he'd tried to hang the hammock between the bunk beds and nearly pulled them over when Creed got up to use the bathroom at night. He keeps it together, but I know he'll need some air soon. He'll have to make do with the balconies outside.

Creed is perfect, intimidating for his size alone. He keeps silent mostly, ignoring the women who throw themselves at him. When one of them asks for him to snap her in half like a glow stick, he grimaces and takes a step back. "I'm working and unavailable."

I'm amused by his annoyance.

"I'm sure Freya won't mind sharing," the woman pouts. "Would you, Freya?"

"I do mind, actually," I reply, smiling at her as if I'm not silently stabbing her in my head. "He's mine. They all are. So my spine is the only one getting glow sticked." I tilt my head. "Do you like women? If so, I have a suggestion."

And that's how I get Crystal another client.

The first part of the day is nothing, but this same type of interaction repeated. Either they're interested in fucking me or my men, and honestly, I couldn't have predicted they would be so obsessed with it. We were prey to them before, and here, they want nothing more than to bask in that survival. It's fucking weird.

Then again, I'm fucking a Hound, too, so...

Regardless, none of it is an issue until a particular Hound I've never met steps forward. He's older, greying at the temples in a way that give him the salt and pepper daddy vibes. He's not unattractive but the moment he opens his mouth, he drops from a seven to a zero.

"I bet your pussy tastes as divine as you do, Freya," he says, licking his lips.

Ew.

Row turns and raises his brows at the man. "She's not interested, Eliot."

"I think the lady is," he argues, stepping into my bubble.

"The lady is not," I reply, scowling. "Fuck off."

He looks surprised for a second, but seems to take my "no" as a "try harder."

"Come on, Freya. I know you like it rough. I've seen it." Confirming my suspicions that there are tapes of me fucking my men here. "I watched it just last night again, stroked myself to your cries as the survivalist fucked your brains out."

He reaches forward and grabs my tit. “I’d like a taste of that divinity now.”

Jiro moves forward to intervene, but before he can, I use the moves he taught me, kicking Eliot’s knee out and forcing him to his knees. I have my sharp nails at his throat a second later, scowling down at him.

“Consent, asshole,” I growl, letting him know I’m not happy.

He laughs. “Not on Predator Point. There are no rules here, Freya. If I want you, I can have you.”

I don’t like that answer. I don’t like it at all. But he’s right. There’s no rules here. There’s no law that will come after him or me. Everything is a game. So I react like it is. I don’t care if there are no rules. I have rules. And one of them is don’t touch me without my fucking consent.

“No rules?” I purr.

“No rules,” he repeats, licking his lips again, staring up at me eagerly.

“Good,” I say.

And break his arm over my leg. Just like Jiro taught me.

The snap echoes around us, dropping those close to silence, but it’s not as loud as his scream of pain that ricochet off the walls.

“Don’t touch people without their permission, asshole,” I snap, prepared to snap another arm if I can get ahold of it.

Jiro grabs me and pulls me away from him, shoving the asshole over as he goes. I don’t know where he’s taking me, but a second later, I’m being shoved into a random empty room and his lips are on my neck.

“You executed that move perfectly,” he growls, before turning me and bending me over the desk in the room. “Fuck, you moved so well.”

“I had a good teacher,” I rasp as he jerks my panties off, ripping them so I know I won’t be able to wear them again.

His cock is there a second later, spearing into my already wet pussy. I'm needy for him, breathy with it, and it always seems that we find ourselves here after violence.

Apparently, it's a turn on for both of us.

"I can't wait to watch you slit their throats," Jiro grunts as he fucks me hard. The tops of my thighs will probably be bruised where they press into the desk, but I don't care. "I'm going to paint you in their blood and coat you in my come."

Fuck that shouldn't be so hot. "Yes," I pant, my pussy clenching around him. "God, yes."

He speeds up, fucking me fast and hard, and we come together with the same violence as I'd broken that man's arm. He fills me, combining his juice with mine, and only pulls out once he goes soft again.

"That stays there," he commands when I move to wipe myself up. "I expect it to paint the inside of your thighs so they can smell me on you."

He grabs me by the back of the neck and crushes his lips to mine, claiming me in more ways than one. Then he picks up my ruined panties and tucks them into his pants pocket.

My legs are still weak as he steers me back out the door to rejoin the party. My eyes go right to the Grand Master where he stands on a balcony, his eyes on our door. He takes us in, his eyes bright with desire, and I watch as Jiro takes out my panties in front of him, making sure he sees. He unwraps them and then with a smile that makes me wet all over again, he tucks it into his coat pocket like a handkerchief. I flush, and when I look back at the Grand Master, he's grinning from ear to ear.

That night, for dinner, we're seated in the same seats, but this time, there's a spot for Jiro on the other side of Row. The Grand Master jokes about Eliot's broken arm and about how badly he'd cried.

It's only after we finish dinner that I realize Eliot never came to dinner.

I don't see him again the entire time I'm on Predator Point.

FORTY-SEVEN



When I was little and my mom was still alive, she used to make a big event about the New York New Year's Eve ball drop every year. She'd buy sparkling champagne that I hated but drank so I didn't hurt her feelings, and all the silliest hats and noise makers. We'd sit on the couch and count down with the big screen until it was New Year's and then we'd shout and dance around in our pajamas and make so much noise, Mrs. Helen, our downstairs neighbor, would beat on her ceiling with a broomstick so we'd quiet down.

Counting down to the moment Hounds will volunteer to kill innocent people is a lot like that. In my mind, there's a large screen just hovering over how many days and hours there are until that moment.

Two days, sixteen hours, and twenty-three minutes.

I don't think there'll be any celebrating on my part when the timer counts down to zero though. Not this time.

That number hovers in my mind like a warning, like watching a tornado you know is headed your way. Still, I can't let that anticipation or anxiety show through my mask, so I push it aside. This is happening whether I like it or not. I just have to figure out what to do about it.

I'm standing in the tiny kitchenette area pouring some cereal when Senior's door opens, and he steps out wearing his normal pristine suit. His appearance is as perfect as possible, his hair perfectly combed back, his hands moisturized. I

wonder if it's tiring always having to look so put together. I certainly couldn't do it.

“Good morning,” I say, because I'm nice. Nice people say good morning whether they like the person or not. That's what I tell myself anyway.

The others are still getting ready for the day. Row had swapped places in the room with Creed, letting the big guy sleep in a bed that actually fit his body. Poor guy's feet hang off the bunk bed.

“Good morning,” Senior replies as he strolls up for the coffee. His eyes go to the sugary cereal I'm pouring milk into. “You know that is all poison, right?”

I smile at him. “As if all of our food isn't poison at this point, Senior. I might as well enjoy life while I got it.”

He shrugs and pours himself a coffee. “It's not poison if you pay the right people.”

I set my spoon down with a clank against the porcelain bowl. “So then why don't you use your money and overhaul the food industry then? You're plenty rich for it.”

“Because it's not profitable to be noble,” he replies, taking a sip of his coffee. I don't understand how rich people can sleep at night.

“I think you underestimate how much people in my class are desperate for change.”

“Not your class anymore,” Senior counters. “You no longer belong among them.”

“I'll always belong among them, no matter the money in my bank account.” I take a bite of my cereal. “Now, do you have a reason to linger here or are you just blessing me with your presence?”

He chuckles, as if I'm some side act at a freakshow he can't help but watch. “You're playing a game I don't think even my son sees,” he muses. “He's always been blinded by tits and ass.”

I tilt my head, studying him. “I don’t think you know your own son.”

Senior straightens his suit and sets his coffee mug in the sink for some poor maid to clean. “You’re right,” he admits. “I don’t. But he’s making me proud right now so that’s what I see.”

“Proud,” I nod, raising my brow. “And jealous.”

His face reddens at my accusation, but he doesn’t argue against it, proving my point. “Since you seem to be favored by the Grand Master, this evening, you’ll convince him that I should be sat at the table with you all.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll make your life a living hell,” he threatens. His face is all red and serious, like he means it, but it only makes me laugh which makes him redden further. Like a blushing chicken.

“You think you can do worse than the Hound Society has already done?” I bare my teeth at him like a rabid animal. “Threaten me all you want, but I am not a pawn on your chessboard. I may be legally married to your son, but I can just as quickly kill you right here and still sleep at night.” He laughs, like he thinks it’s funny, so I bring my message home with a knife to his throat. He doesn’t even see me pull it, the twit. I’m pressing it gently against his jugular before he can move, his eyes widening in surprise. “I don’t even think Row would be angry with me if I killed you right now. You want to take that bet?”

Senior laughs again despite the knife on his throat. “Everyone calls you a rabbit,” he muses. “But I see you for what you are now.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, scowling.

“A wolf.”

I blink in surprise. “Remember that next time you threaten me.” I flip the knife away and shove him toward the door. “Now get out of my sight.” And as an afterthought, I add, “Enjoy your twinkies.”

He smiles as he straightens his suit and heads for the door. “Tell my son I’ll see him later.” He exits just as Row comes striding from the room, his hair freshly wet from the shower.

Frowning, Row glances at the door and then at me. “What happened?”

“Oh,” I say, waving his worry away. “Just your dad being a creep again. Nothing crazy.”

As if I didn’t just threaten to kill his father.

Row sighs. “As is his habit. Sorry about that.”

Smiling, I pour him a coffee from the pot. “No worries.” When the others come meandering from the rooms, I pour more for Achilles and Creed, but I start work on some tea for Jiro. “On another note, do we think seducing the Grand Master is a viable option for our plan?”

“You mean fuck him?” Achilles asks as he stretches his arms over his head and yawns. He looks a little less antsy today which is good. He’d been able to get much needed air yesterday.

I hesitate. “If that’s what it took to bring them down, would you be angry?”

Achilles shrugs. “Only if he didn’t fuck you good enough.”

I raise my brow in surprise. “None of y’all would seriously mind if that was the plan?”

Creed rolls his eyes. “As if any of us have to fear for our position in your life. I don’t like the idea of him touching you, but I kind of like the idea of you destroying him with his dick out.”

Snorting at his words, I settle back against the counter and take a bit of my cereal. “Noted. Just so you know, I have no plans to fuck him.”

Jiro nods. “It would be a security nightmare. One of us would have to watch you and I’m not sure how well that will go.”

Pointing at Creed, I grin. “Creed likes to watch. I vote it should be him.”

Creed groans and take a sip of his coffee. “You want to kill me, don’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” I tease.

Our day is mostly spent pretending to enjoy ourselves. Row takes the time to teach me some of the gambling tables and I get to lose a bunch of his money. Turns out, I’m not very good at any of it. The day passes with us mostly wasting time until dinner again, knowing that it’s my opportunity to get closer to the Grand Master. The more he takes an interest in me, perhaps, the more I can learn and influence him. Eventually, I’ll know enough to take him down.

By the time dinner rolls around, I’ve spent my time turning away people offering sex and money for all kinds of things. Jiro, Creed, and Achilles stay busy keeping them back and I’ve never been more thankful for them after someone makes a pass at me for the thousandth time. Jesus, you’d think they’d have better things to do.

We’re seated at the same table for dinner as before, which is no surprise. I’ll be more surprised if we get moved at some point. I settle into my seat with Row to my left and the Grand Master to my right.

The moment I sit down, I focus all of my attention on the masked man. “I’ve been offered all kinds of money lately to tell you of some attendee’s benefits and their business ventures,” I tell him while daintily picking at my appetizer.

“And?” he asks. I can’t see his face, but I assume he raises his brow. It just seems like his sort of thing to do.

“I took the money,” I shrug. “This is me telling you. They weren’t specific in what I had to say.”

His husky chuckle slithers through the air and strokes along my arm. I shift in my seat. “How clever of you, little goddess.”

“You already knew I was clever,” I remind him.

“That I did.” He focuses on me fully. “I saw your cleverness on Prey Island. As well as other... assets.”

Humming under my breath, I take a sip of the wine before me, careful not to drink too much. “Were you impressed with those assets?”

He leans closer. “Oh, impressed isn’t the correct word, little goddess. Enamored, perhaps. Never have I ever wanted something more than the feeling of you writhing beneath me, desperate for release as I hold it from you, as I pound into your sweet pussy and make you scream.” My breath hitches as I stare into his eyes. “The urge to take what I want is strong, but there’s no pleasure in that. I want you to beg me for it, to open for me like a flower seeking water. I want to hold your wrists and claim you so deeply, you’ll never feel the same.”

His fingers brush over mine where they sit on the table. Where his skin touches mine, they leave a trail of fire, burning me, branding me. I don’t pull away.

“How bold of you,” I breathe. “To say such things while I’m seated next to my husband.”

He smiles and leans back as if nothing happened. But my heart is beating rapidly in my chest.

Some part of me, some deep horrible part of me, wants to add him to my list, to conquer him. I want to have that when I bring down the Hound Society. I’ve never seen his entire face, but I certainly feel a draw to this man and his ego.

As if he knows what I’m thinking, he chuckles and shakes his head. “Your mask is slipping, little goddess.”

I glance down at my plate. “Is it?”

And then I continue to eat, playing my role, focusing on those around me.

But my eyes keep going back and forth to the Grand Master, wondering if this is truly a viable option or if he’s playing a game just as much as I am?

The same line keeps repeating in my head over and over again, demanding attention, asking for clarity.

What better way to take down the Society than to take out its leader?

FORTY-EIGHT



One day, two hours, and forty-three minutes.

There's always a twenty-four-seven party happening on Predator Point. Row told us that on Prey Island, but it's different to witness it here. Some people stay constantly drunk, barely stopping for more than a night's sleep. They wake up, drink, get wasted, pass out, and do it all over again the next day. I don't know how they do it. I stay mostly away from the alcohol, preferring to keep my wits about me in a nest of so many predators.

The main ballroom is reserved for the dinners, but there are a few other large ballrooms that house the parties during the day. The casino is spread throughout, inviting people to lose their money, and I'm never more than twenty steps from a bar. Many of the people here spend their time joining in debauchery. It's almost more entertaining to people watch than anything else.

Crystal came in this morning with an even larger hoard of secrets, plots of Hounds planning to take over companies and more drama worthy of the soap operas Crystal loves. Apparently, she's making a shitload of money. If I didn't know how much she loves to dance, I'd be worried about losing one of my star dancers at the club.

"Well, it's almost dinner time. We should go get dressed," Row announces after he's spent the better part of an hour trying to teach me how to play Craps. Like most other gambling, I suck at it.

I stretch and stand. It annoys me how often we have to change clothing despite not doing much of anything. It's all about appearances and dinner dictates we need to dress to impress. Before we can move too far away from the table, an usher appears and passes me an envelope. I stare down at it in confusion, taking in the thick paper it's made out of. My name is written in golden calligraphy across the back of the black cardstock.

"That looks like it's from the Grand Master," Row muses, glancing around. "Let's open it in our quarters."

So that's what we do. I hold it against my stomach until we reach our quarters. The moment the door is shut behind all of us, I flip it open and pull out the fancy stationary with beautiful writing inside.

Please join me for dinner in my quarters, little goddess, and bring your four gentlemen. I look forward to seeing you.

-GM

"What, he thinks just because he's the Grand Master, he can demand my presence?" I scoff.

"That's exactly what he thinks, and it's true," Row replies, glancing at the invitation with furrowed brows. "But I don't think I've ever heard of something like this happening. He always dines with everyone else."

Achilles laughs. "Maybe he's planning to ask for an orgy?"

Snorting, Creed shrugs out of his coat and tosses it aside. "Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised with how thick he's laid it on lately. Hell, yesterday when I was passing him, he told me that I'm a prime specimen of a man as we left the dining room. Who does that?"

"I mean, he's not wrong," I say, grinning. "I don't think that's it however. I'm willing to bet it's part of the game. Some ulterior motive that has him wanting to get us all alone. We

should be on our guard. Pretend it's an honor. All that jazz. Maybe I'll get a chance to kill him."

"Now would be the worst time to kill him," Row says, rolling his eyes. "We have to plan for something like that."

"We may never get another opportunity," I argue, going over to flip through my clothing. I can't help but hover over the custom dress before I dismiss it. I'll save that one for a more important date. Still, I want to look appetizing tonight. I touch my fingers to a silk forest green dress and pull it out. "The five of us against one of him. It's perfect."

"Except we would never leave." Row shakes his head. "They'll kill us on the spot. We can't kill him without having a solid escape plan. Trust me."

"Fine," I grumble, picking out some shoes. "Regardless, we should go into this on edge. He's up to something."

I rethink that statement when we step into the Grand Master's large quarters and take in the table set up with lit candles and the fanciest of china. I glance over at Achilles and whisper, "Maybe you were right, after all."

An usher comes forward and instructs us all to sit. As usual, I'm placed right next to the empty chair reserved for the Grand Master. He appears a moment later, dressed in a beautiful suit that somehow matches my dress. I tense at the realization that he knew what I was going to wear or had someone watching so he could match. Either way, it surprises me and it really shouldn't.

"It pleases me that you accepted my invitation," he says as he comes forward and takes his seat. "I have a beautiful feast prepared for us. Please, enjoy yourselves. This is a special occasion."

"And why is that?" I ask, studying him closely.

He waves his hand and waiters appear with food. He keeps his lips closed until they disappear again. Once we're alone, I twist to face him.

"What is this about?" I ask again, avoiding small talk. I need to know what's happening here, need to play this game,

need to win.

He laughs and holds his fingers to his lips. Then he waves at the security standing at the edges of the room, telling them to leave so that he's alone with us. Where we could kill him easily. I glance from him and to the others, surprised he actually left himself defenseless. Only once they're gone does he start picking at his food with a smile.

"Your girls are working their way through the ranks. At the rate they're going, you'll have enough dirt to take down many of their empires."

I freeze, fear trickling down my spine that something will happen to Crystal and the girls. "What girls?" I ask, playing dumb.

"Don't play dumb, little goddess. It doesn't become you," he says, taking another bite. "Both you and I know you're far cleverer than many of those dumbasses give you credit for. Half of them probably think you survived because of these guys." He smiles at me. "I know different."

"You do?" My voice is a little choked, anxiety hitting me at the thought of the girls getting hurt. I'll have to warn Crystal to be more careful.

"They survived because of you. Because you were there to unite them. You're just as savage as they are."

I stare at him, my fingers clenching in my dress. The others aren't moving, watching the exchange carefully, waiting for any clues as to what I'm going to do. If I attack, they'll help me, but it might as well be spelling their death. I can't. I can't do that.

"What's your point?" I demand.

He laughs. "This game we play, this backward forward step, is highly entertaining, little goddess. And I must say, your beauty makes me think of playing other games."

"Called it," Achilles whispers to Creed beside me and they both chuckle under their breath.

“Is this your way of asking for an orgy?” I ask point blank. I slam my mask back down, vowing to check on the girls after. I grin, playing the game.

“Oh no,” he replies, setting his fork down and facing me fully. “This is my way of asking if I can fuck you, little goddess. While the others watch.”

My grin falls. “What?” I squeak.

“I can have my pick of any woman I want out there,” he adds, as if that makes this all make more sense.

“So pick one of them,” I say quite reasonably.

“I don’t want them. I want you.” His eyes are bright despite the paleness of them. The urge to see his face, to see what he truly looks like is strong, but I can’t do that here.

“Why?” I ask.

“That is irrelevant,” he answers, watching me carefully.

It takes me two seconds of staring at him, of watching the way he watches me, to come up with an answer.

“No.”

He pauses. “Why?”

I tilt up my chin. “Remove the mask.”

“No.”

I slam my hand on the table. “Then don’t ask me to do the same,” I snarl. “Find one of the other twits out there to fuck. I am not a toy to be passed around.”

He hums. “You have the opportunity to seduce the most powerful man on the island and you turn it down.”

My eyes narrow. “Not everything is a powerplay.”

“Isn’t it?” he asks. Then he shrugs as if it doesn’t matter. “You’ll come around, little goddess. And I’ll be holding my breath.”

“Good,” I shoot back. “Maybe you’ll suffocate.”

He laughs and gestures toward the plate. “Try the salmon. It’s divine.”

And just like that, he dismisses the conversation, happy to spend time in my company and nothing more. He holds conversation with the other men, speaks to them as equals, asking questions that don’t probe too deeply, like about the dread of horseshoes with Creed. But then again, he already knows everything. He’s just making small talk.

When we finish dinner and go to leave, he grabs my hand in a bruising grip. I try to jerk away but he holds strong as he brings my hand up to his face and kisses the back of my knuckles.

“Tomorrow is a big day, little goddess,” he murmurs, looking up at me from where he leans over my hand. “I hope it brings back memories.”

This time when I jerk free, he lets go and I turn my back on him.

His eyes burn through my skin as I walk away, but I don’t look over my shoulder.

I wouldn’t dare.

FORTY-NINE



“**H**ow dare he think so highly of himself!” I snarl, pacing back and forth back in our quarters. “The fucking audacity!”

Row shrugs where he sits on the couch watching me work myself into a frenzy. “He’s not wrong. Any other woman here, married or not, would have accepted. Which is why he’s so enamored with you.”

“Though, you considered it,” Creed adds, his eyes heated. “I saw it in your eyes.”

“For the plan,” I hiss. “I considered it for the plan.”

Achilles laughs. “Lying to everyone. Even yourself.”

“He’s the enemy!” I growl, stopping my pacing to glare at Achilles. He’s on the floor in some yoga position, stretching out his glutes.

“So were we once,” Jiro reminds me. “And look how that turned out.”

I shake my head and start to pace again. “You all have lost your ever-loving minds.”

Creed grabs me so suddenly, I stumble before he slams me against the wall, his hand cradling my head to keep from knocking me out. The air whooshes from me at the sudden impact. Staring up at him in surprise, the heated fury in his gaze, it makes me clamp my thighs together with need.

“We’re not saying we want to share you with him, Billie. You’re ours,” he snarls. “He can try to win you over all he

wants. What you say goes. And if you say no, then I'll just fuck you and think about how pretty you would have looked with his cock in your mouth while I fuck you raw."

My face heats and I grow wet between my thighs. Holy shit. Holy fuck. Oh, I'm in trouble.

Row stands and straightens his suit. "I have to go meet my father for some stupid business bullshit. Which one of you is coming with me to keep up appearances?"

For a second, no one answers. Creed is still pinning me against the wall, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Jiro and Achilles glance at each other.

"I'll come," Jiro finally says, grabbing the suit coat he'd laid on the back of a chair.

As he strides past, he strokes his hand along my hips where I appear before Creed. "Pretty little rabbit," he purrs in my ear, uncaring how close Creed is. "I do so enjoy watching you bring men to their knees, but I will return after a bit."

And then it's just me, Achilles, and Creed.

I look back up at Creed. "So you wanted me to say yes?"

"Did I say that?" he growls as he reaches between us and hikes up my dress.

"You said you've thought about what I would look like—"

His lips cut me off, his teeth on my lip with punishing bites.

Achilles snorts. "Should I let myself out or would you prefer me to watch?"

"Stay," Creed growls against my skin. "You can help me remind her who she's fucking with."

Achilles appears on my right as Creed trails down my neck, biting and kissing. I meet his eyes. "I do so enjoy fucking another man's wife," he teases before throwing back the last of his whiskey and tossing it somewhere in the room. The sound of the glass breaking makes me jump before he

grabs a fistful of hair and takes over the kiss while Creed strokes his fingers through my wetness.

“Is this cream because of me?” Creed asks. “Or was it the Grand Master who made you so wet with want?”

I clamp my lips shut. I wouldn't answer even if Achilles wasn't swallowing my voice.

“I bet it's both,” Achilles says as he breaks the kiss. “I bet she's imagining the Grand Master here now.”

“Fuck you,” I growl as Creed kneels before me. He hikes my leg over his shoulder and dives into my pussy, his tongue dancing there and making me squirm.

Achilles' fingers tighten in my hair. “Oh, I plan to,” he rasps. “Will it be my name you call out or the Grand Master?”

“I'm going to slit your throat,” I warn between moans as Creed circles my clit with his tongue.

There's a bite at my inner thigh that makes me jump. “Play nice,” Creed growls before eating me again.

I throw my head back in ecstasy, my eyes trying to slide closed. It opens my neck up for Achilles and he promptly latches on, sucking and biting, leaving marks. “When you finally fuck him, he's going to see these marks. I hope it makes him wild with jealousy,” he says against my neck.

“I never said I'm going to sleep with him,” I gasp, grinding against Creed's bearded face.

“We'll see,” he muses, his eyes crinkling.

Creed stands up then, my wetness smeared all over his face. He wipes his chin with the back of his arm before grabbing me, uncaring what Achilles is doing.

“Achilles, sit on the couch, cock out,” he commands, his voice rough with desire.

“Yes, daddy,” Achilles teases, moving over and doing exactly what Creed says. I watch as he unzips and pulls his cock out, stroking its hard length as I watch, my mouth watering.

Creed sets me on my feet before Achilles, his hand spearing into my hair. With more force than I expect, he forces me to bend over, my hands grabbing at Achilles' thighs to steady myself.

"Fuck her mouth so good, she gags," he tells Achilles.

Achilles grins. "With pleasure."

When Creed releases my hair, Achilles grabs a fistful and shoves me down toward his cock, pressing the tip against my closed lips. "Open wide, rabbit," he coos. "I'm going to fuck your throat like the good little slut you are."

I glare at him even as I feel Creed throwing my dress up over my ass, revealing my smooth mound to his sight. He slaps my ass hard, making me jerk forward in surprise.

"Open," Creed commands of me when I still keep my lips closed. "Suck him deep."

His fingers trail along my ass, touching at my back door, pressing gently, teasing. I can feel his cock bumping against my entrance, begging for my pussy, but he holds back.

"If you don't take his cock, you don't get this cock," Creed warns.

Desperate for some kind of release, for something at all, I growl and pop my mouth open. Achilles immediately shoves his cock inside, making me gag, his hand in my hand forcing me to take him all before I'm ready. My back bows with the force of it even as his other hand goes to my throat and caresses it.

"Relax," he coos. "Relax that throat, rabbit. Let me fuck it." I do as he says, forcing myself to relax, to focus on what I'm doing.

"Good girl," Creed growls, before slamming inside me.

I cry out around Achilles' cock at the feeling of Creed inside me, at the way he starts to pound me until my ass shakes. He growls with each thrust, his fingers digging into my hips with a violence I realize is barely restrained.

Achilles buries both of his hands in my hair, holding the back of my head tightly as he starts to fuck my throat, my saliva pooling around his cock and dripping down.

“Oh, that’s such a good girl,” Achilles groans as he starts fucking faster, harder. “I’m going to paint your throat with my come, make you gag on it even as you scream your release from Creed.”

All I can do is hold on, my eyes watering with the force of their fucking.

“He matched his clothing to you,” Creed growls. “I don’t like that.” He pauses just a split second where I hear a rip and pieces of my dress go fluttering to the ground. “You’ll never wear this dress again.”

As if in agreement, Achilles growls and slams inside my throat, holding my lips against his pelvic bone, making my gag again. “Never again,” he repeats after Creed. “I bet you wish he was here now to fuck your ass, don’t you? I bet you want to be completely filled like the filthy slut you are.”

I can’t answer. Even if I could, I’m not sure what I would say.

I’m screaming my release around Achilles’ cock, and they don’t slow. Creed fucks me from behind, growling profanity and demanding I come again. When my legs grow weak, he lifts them, holding me up completely, fucking me so hard, I see stars.

“One more time, baby,” he growls. “That’s it. “That’s a good girl,” he purrs when I start to clamp around him, my legs shaking. “Fuck yeah.”

I feel him stumble over his rhythm, his cock starting to jump inside me as he fucks us both through it, his groans making my stomach clench. Achilles start to groan at the same time, and he shoves me down on his cock, my jaw starting to ache from the fucking. His cock jumps in my throat as he finishes down it, the warmth coating me and starting to spill from the corners of my mouth to mix with my saliva. Only

once his cock starts to soften does he let me up, his fingers growing soft in my hair.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” Achilles tells me as they both help me to the couch. “I love the fuck out of you.”

I chuckle, wiping at my face even as they both flutter around me, cleaning me up. “Right back at you.”

We end the night with a much needed shower, both of them pampering me like a princess, taking care to ease my aches, to clean me.

The green dress remains in shreds on the floor of the living room for the maids to throw away.

FIFTY



I wake up the next morning with the countdown flashing brightly in my head.

Zero days, ten hours, and fifteen minutes.

Today is the day. Everyone who plans to hunt will write their name in a book and declare themselves. Those who are initiates will do the same. Row explained that some years, there were no initiates at all, and it was only Hounds. That's rare though. There's apparently never a shortage of people who want to join the most powerful Society in the world.

The event won't be until the evening, so we have all day to stew over what's to come.

Row and I are seated at a table for lunch, sitting quietly. There's a somberness to the room that confuses me. Most of them seem excited to hunt, but I realize it's those who are partners of the Hunters that are somber. If their person dies, they'll no longer be protected by the Society, nor will they have that cash cow. I can understand that fear even if I would never allow myself to be so helpless.

I'd ordered some sort of fancy egg salad sandwich and honestly, it's amazing. Row has steak and eggs. We both eat while Row looks through his phone, tending to whatever business he has to deal with. Jiro is with us this morning, a silent sentinel against the far wall, his eyes on us. When he looks over my shoulder and raises his brow, I stiffen, already knowing what's coming.

When the Grand Master takes a seat at our table, I'm not even surprised. Everyone in the room starts paying attention, their eyes on us.

I look over at him with a raised brow. "Have you come to harass me some more?"

He tilts his head. "How will you agree to fuck me if I'm not available?"

Sighing in exasperation, I set my sandwich down. "This is getting ridiculous."

"What's one more man in your stable, little goddess?" he asks, watching me carefully.

I snarl at him. "They're not horses. They're people."

"And yet you ride them every night," he teases, grinning.

Flushing, I look away. "That's none of your concern."

He brushes his hand against my thigh beneath the table and I shift away. "Don't play coy now," he coos.

"Would you just stop?" I growl, glaring over at him.

He's studying me, his eyes sparkling behind his mask. "Are you tempted, little goddess? Curious enough to try me?"

I slide the steak knife off the table. "I'm going to slit your throat if you don't stop it."

He laughs, glancing at the knife and then back to me. "You could try. I'd certainly enjoy the attempt."

"What game are you playing?" I hiss, waring with the urge to hurt him and the need to hear him speak.

"Chess," he replies with a shrug. "Aren't you?"

I stare at him, truly stare at him. I don't know what he looks like passed his eye color and his jawline, but I imagine he's probably pretty handsome to rule over this Society. The urge to lift that mask is strong but I know he'll never allow it.

"What's with this fascination with me?" I ask, frowning.

He leans in and with lightning quick hands, he cups my jaw hard enough that I can't jerk away. Jiro steps forward,

intending to intervene, but Row stops him with his hand, watching closely, silently.

“The fire burning in your eyes,” the Grand Master hisses. “The savagery held in check by sheer willpower alone. The way even now, you hold a knife in your hand prepared to stab me.”

Sure enough, I have the knife pressed into the Grand Master’s stomach, prepared at any moment to shove it deep. Just in case.

“I’ve never met someone so full of life, so full of ... pain,” he purrs. “And I want to taste it, that heady mix of pain and life. I want you to come on my tongue and feed me the very essence that sustains you. I don’t care if your heart belongs to four others. You can make room for one more.”

My face flushes. My pussy clenches and I have to rub my thighs together. I realize just how silent everyone has gone around us, watching this exchange. I jerk my chin out of his grasp only because he lets me.

“You don’t get to make demands of me,” I snarl. “You don’t get to yearn for me. I don’t belong to you.”

Laughing, he boops me on the nose. “Little goddess, everyone on this island belongs to me.”

He pulls out a gun from who knows where and I tense, thinking maybe he’s tired of my attitude. Instead, he points it at some random idiot behind us, another Hound just enjoying his breakfast, and pulls the trigger.

I jump, the sound of the gunshot ringing in my ears. Someone screams. A sob chokes out somewhere. No one moves to aid the man now bleeding out on the fancy carpet.

“See, look,” The Grand Master says. “Now there’s a business out there that will go to this man’s son. The son will thank me. The wife will ask to sleep in my bed. No one will mourn. Is that not ownership?”

I bare my teeth, my ears still ringing. “It’s dictatorship.”

“Tomatoes, tomatoes,” he shrugs. “Regardless of either point, it’s not enough to control it. I want to feel the chokehold you have on your four beaus. I want to feel what it’s like to be caught in Freya’s crosshairs, to be enthralled by her.”

Narrowing my eyes, I wonder if he’s already there. After this show, surely something is pulling him hard toward me. “This isn’t a game you want to play with me,” I warn, the knife still in my hand even if it’s not pressed into his stomach.

He hums, the corner of his eyes crinkling behind his mask. Then he points the gun at Row. Row holds up his hands in surrender, his eyes on the gun. Jiro tenses.

But I smile. “You won’t pull that trigger,” I say, watching him closely.

“You call my bluff?” he chuckles. “Even as I point this gun at your husband?”

I tilt my head. “If you kill him, the chances of getting to fuck me fly out the window. If you harm any of my men, that chance disintegrates. You willing to take that chance?”

“Ah,” he purrs. “But you said my chances are zero.”

“And yet you think your chances are good,” I point out, leaning back in my chair. “Which gamble are you going to take, Grand Master?” I purr his title, watch as he shivers with the sound of it, and I know I’ve found a weakness.

He hesitates and then carefully puts the gun away. “I do so enjoy this game we play, little goddess.” He pats me on the hand that holds the knife. “I look forward to seeing you this evening. Wear something that puts the rest to shame, won’t you?”

And then he stands and leaves as if nothing happened at all.

But my mind is swirling, and my inner thighs are wet.

I’ve never felt more royally fucked in my life.

FIFTY-ONE



Row had, at one point, explained the few rules for the Hunts, but I can't remember all of them now. My mind is running a million miles a minute as the time draws closer for this big grand ball where the Hounds will declare themselves a hunter and kill. They'll hoot and holler, excitement in their eyes to take a human life, many lives, uncaring of the existences they blink out. It makes me sick and makes me want to spill their blood first.

But fucking how?

We have a whole team of people who come in and prepare me. Did you know rich people don't even have to shave their legs? Some barber dude comes in and shaves me completely clean with a straight edge razor. I politely decline the insistence of doing my pussy, doing it myself. No one is getting near that with a sharp blade. No thank you.

Someone does my hair. Another does my makeup. And then they help me get dressed in the gown Row had custom made for me. Somehow, I know the Grand Master will be matching me, as if I did it intentionally. He's playing a game and he's hiding his moves. I don't know what this all means, but I won't be played. I have to win. Fuck, was I ever good at chess?

The guys watch me silently as I remain quiet and stew over the ideas running through my mind. How do I dismantle the Society? How do I take them down? How can I use this newfound weakness of the Grand Master to my advantage?

Will he kill me if I start systematically killing Hounds? Will he relish it? Fuck, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

"You don't have to play his games," Creed comments into the silence as we all prepare ourselves.

Row looks snazzy in a suit jacket that matches my dress, his hair styled perfectly. Achilles, Creed, and Jiro are all dressed in tuxedos, each wearing a bowtie. Poor Achilles tugs at his, desperate for some air. He'll be sweating before long.

"We're all playing his game," I reply, studying myself in the mirror. "Whether we know it or not."

"Relax," Achilles tells me. "We just have to get through the night without punching someone."

Because this is going to be bad for most of us. For Row, this is a normal thing, something he grew up knowing about. For Creed, Achilles, Jiro, and me, this is a repeat of the trauma we'd endured, a reminder that we were once pawns for those people, amusement, nothing but entertainment.

Like this is the fucking Bachelor.

Being trapped on this island is taking its toll on all of us. These people waste and fuck and waste some more. The amount of money spent on this island these weeks alone could end world hunger. The things they could do with such money. It makes me yearn to dismantle it all.

Eat the rich.

Eat them all.

How much damage can we do with the secrets Crystal has found? At least a handful of businesses can be taken down for money laundering and illegal shit. But they'll just start a new business. I could turn some Hounds against the others. But all that is just petty squabbles. If we don't act soon, we're just being compliant, playing into the Grand Master's plan. We need to shake shit up. We need to make things happen.

And right now, we're doing nothing but playing games.

Cat and Mouse.

Fuck!

What would unnerve the Grand Master? What could throw a wrench into his plans?

How much blood will I have to draw to make an impact?

I would drown the world in blood if it would wipe them off the face of the earth.

And maybe that makes me the predator after all.

Maybe all prey have the potential for this violence...

FIFTY-TWO



The dress Row had made for me fits me just like I remember, the bodice cinching me in tight and highlighting my curves. The golden skirt flows out into something worthy of a red carpet around me, touching the floor as I walk. My hair has been settled into soft curls around my face, the goddess crown spikes drawing all eyes to me as I walk into the ballroom on Row's arm. I've been primed and prodded until I feel like my skin has been scraped off and replaced with better, glowing skin. My lips are perfectly plump. If I wasn't a ball of nerves, I'd feel like a million bucks right now.

Fuck, I'm probably wearing a million bucks.

I hadn't asked how much it costs to have a dress custom made, but I assume it's not cheap. Not to mention the jewels Row had placed around my neck, a collar of diamonds that made me gasp the moment I put it on.

I'm tense, anxious, and the moment we walk into the ballroom, and I see the currently blank TVs, my stomach start to roll. Soon, those TVs will be filled with killing, with innocent people dying. They'll put up the Hunters first. The prey will appear as they're taken.

Kidnapped.

Despite being prepared for it, my memories of my time on the island, the trauma they caused, surfaces, and it takes everything inside of me to continue to place one foot in front of the other. Behind us, Achilles, Creed, and Jiro move as a

silent entity, their eyes on the screens just as mine are, their barely contained anger prepared to break out at the smallest scuffle. God, I really thought I was prepared for this, and yet, my heart beats in my throat. Still, we have a job to do and I'm a strong woman, far stronger than the rabbit they make me out to be. I'm dressed like a fucking goddess. I got this.

I take a deep breath, and then another, until my head clears, and I can focus on the sight before me.

Everyone is partying like it's a normal day, as if nothing crazy is about to happen. Plenty of them are drunk, so wasted they sway on their feet. There are a few women who look as distraught as I had felt walking into this, their faces telling me their men are planning to step forward when the time is right. Some of the women look positively gleeful.

Those must be the ones with iron clad prenups in place.

"Relax," Row whispers beside me. "It's all going to be fine."

I glance at him from the corner of my eyes. "You really think that?"

He grimaces. "No. My nerves are a mess, but we can at least dance them away."

Row leads me toward the dance floor where some couples are already moving, pressed tightly against each other as if this is their last chance to do so.

For some of them, it may be.

I've never been a great dancer, but Row has been trained by the best of the best and so all I have to do is follow his lead. He places one hand on my waist and the other takes my hand and then we're twisting and moving along the dance floor. My dress swirls around us, and it isn't until a few minutes later that I realize we've drawn a crowd.

An audience to watch the dance of the rabbit and the Hound.

I can feel one particular set of eyes on me, and it doesn't belong to my men standing against the wall, watching me. He

stands on a balcony, observing the party as if this is his little playground. I suppose to him, it is. As Row and I move, he watches us until I feel his gaze disappear and my shoulders relax for the barest moment.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Row whispers in my ear. “I’ve got you.”

My mind can’t latch onto his words, as if he said them down a long tunnel and I’m only hearing the echo of them. I shake my head to clear it, but it doesn’t help. My skin buzzes with anticipation, with awareness, and when those around us separate like the Red Sea, I understand why.

“May I cut in?”

Row freezes, his head lifting to stare at the Grand Master now standing beside us. The Grand Master holds his hand out toward me, waiting. I can see the hesitation in Row’s eyes, know he’s considering declining, but that could get him into trouble. I press my hand against his chest.

“I’ll be okay,” I whisper.

“You sure?” he asks, his fingers squeezing my side gently in reassurance. When I nod, he steps back slowly and allows the Grand Master to take my hand. The moment he takes my hand, the song switches from something upbeat to a song more slow and sensual. I’m almost annoyed by that.

His hand squeezes my fingers before he pulls me into him, pressing our bodies flush together, his other hand going to my waist and sinking just a bit too low to be proper. But this is an island for debauchery. He’s almost being modest by not grabbing my ass. We begin to sway side to side in a slow dance that rubs us against each other. I’m incredibly aware of every spot we touch, especially the tingling in my hand where flesh touches flesh.

“You wear that dress as if it were made for you,” he compliments, staring down at me with some emotion in his eyes. They sparkle, full of mischief, and I can’t tell if he’s moved or if he’s simply playing.

“It was,” I reply, rolling my eyes. “You know how rich people work.”

He chuckles, the husky sound rolling over my skin and bringing goosebumps up. “Yes, well, you wear it perfectly none the less. I specifically enjoy the crown, a goddess come to mingle with her mortals.”

Here, like this, he almost seems unthreatening. I know that’s foolish, to think he could be anything but dangerous, but with the slow music and his hand on my waist, I’m tempted to do exactly as I said I wouldn’t.

My eyes drop to his lips.

“What exactly am I supposed to call you?” I ask suddenly, forcing my eyes back to his. “Referring to you as the Grand Master is getting old.”

“You could just call me Master,” he purrs. When I scowl at him, he laughs and presses tighter against me. “I have no identity any longer outside of that. A Grand Master forfeits his name when he assumes the mantle.”

I frown. “That’s a little sad.”

“Ultimate power does not come without a cost.” He leans down. “But it brought me to you, so it’s not so bad.”

I stare at the mask that hides his face. No name. No face. No identity. He might as well be a ghost. “What exactly is it you want from me, wraith?”

He tilts his head at my nickname and doesn’t contest it. I suppose he thinks it’s appropriate. It seems unfair that I can’t see his face, that I don’t know anything about him at all, and yet he knows every secret of mine, every detail. Even the handkerchief in his pocket matches the exact color of my dress.

Leaning down, the Grand Master’s lips touch the shell of my ear, sending chills through me. “I want you to belong to me,” he whispers, his breath fanning across my neck. My fingers tighten in his suitcoat where they rest.

“I belong to no one,” I fire back.

He leans back just enough to look into my eyes. “I would belong to you in return, little goddess. Just the same arrangement as you have with your other lovers.” His eyes shine in the low lights. “I know the young Hawthorn married you to protect you. Would you have married him otherwise?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. “I would have married each of them had they asked.”

He nods as if he expected my answer. “That is what I want.”

Confusion fills me. We’ve stopped swaying now, simply standing in the middle of the dance floor, staring at each other. He’s taller than me even in my heels so I have to look up at him, and it infuriates me.

“The loyalty, little goddess,” he rasps when he sees my confusion. “The fire. The family. You protect each other. Even now, each of your men are watching in case I go too far.” He leans in closer, his jaw pressed against my cheek. “But what is too far? Would it be me jerking you tighter against me, my hand clutching at your ass? Would it be me seducing you right here on the dance floor? What if I fucked you right here in front of all these assholes? Would they think it too far then or would they just watch?”

My breath hitches. “I’m starting to think you have an unhealthy obsession with fucking me.”

“Oh, I do, little goddess.” He puts my hand on his shoulder before running his fingers down my arm to my elbow, stroking, leaving behind a trail of goosebumps. My fingers clench at his coat, holding on for dear life. I should walk away. I should leave him to his games, but some toxic part of me wants to play, want to dance on the edge of danger.

“Do you think of me when you stroke yourself?” I ask. “Do you call my name when you come?”

“Every time,” he replies without hesitation. “Sometimes, I imagine you’re there to pop those lips open wide enough for me to fuck your throat until you gag, until your back curls in. I know you’d look up at me and ask for more. Sometimes I

imagine strapping you down to my bed and inviting your other lovers to play so that we all fuck you until every hole leaks with our seed, until you're begging for us to stop, until you cry out each of our names at the same time, a mess of pleasure and begging and lust."

My thighs clench together. Fuck, this isn't the plan. I know the others said they were fine with this, but this feels too close. I had assumed seducing the Grand Master was out of the question, but here he is, practically stroking me through my dress with his words. Holy shit, I'm so wet and I don't know what to think about it.

"You think you know me so well," I growl, my voice thick with my arousal. He notices and it takes everything in me not to kiss him when he stares at my lips.

His chuckle is husky and his hand falls lower, down to the globe of my ass where he squeezes, pressing me tighter against him. I can feel his hard length there pressing against my stomach, begging for attention. He doesn't try to hide it.

"I know everything there is to know about you," he replies, the corner of his lips curling up.

I lean in, press my lips to his own ear. To anyone else, we'd look like lovers, but this is a game we play, cat and mouse, predator and prey. Which is which?

"Except for how it feels to fuck me," I breathe in his ear.

His fingers tighten on me, one at my hips and one on my ass. His grip has just the smallest bite of pain and I like it.

"You tease the wolf, you'll be eaten, little prey," he warns.

"You keep thinking I'm a rabbit, it'll be you who is eaten," I fire back.

His fingers are around my throat before I know what's happening. He moves so fast, I don't even see. The fingers on my hips are gone, now wrapped around my throat even if he isn't squeezing. His other hand bands around my lower back and drags me so tightly against him, I can barely breathe. I know the others are cutting through the crowd, prepared to

take on this man if he hurts me, but I focus on the pale green eyes before me.

I hate that I like this. I hate that the game is starting to get to me in the best way.

“No matter what animal you think you are, Billie,” he growls, his eyes flashing with danger. “You will be mine.”

The song ends and he releases me just as Jiro appears beside me. Jiro reaches out to steady me with a hand at my elbow even as he glares daggers at the Grand Master for daring to circle my throat.

“You can calm down, protector,” the Grand Master tells Jiro. He focuses on me and bows just the slightest amount. “I’ll see you soon, little goddess. It’s showtime.”

And then he leaves us to head for the balcony again, leaving me wet, breathless, and so mixed up in my emotions, I stumble when Jiro tries to get me to walk.

What the actual fuck?

FIFTY-THREE



“Good evening,” the Grand Master begins. I’m standing among the crowd with the rest of my men surrounding me, staring up at him. His eyes find me in the group easily and settle for a moment before addressing the entire room. “Tonight, we begin the real reason we’ve come to Predator Point, a celebration of loyalty, strength, and power.” Cheers go up around us, but I remain silent. There’s nothing to celebrate, no reason to clap. “Tonight, some of you will join the ranks of Hounds, a prestigious title that will bring you into greater opportunities and growth. Some of you will not survive, but that is the price we pay for power. You either earn it, or you fall beneath its weight.”

Row leans in to say something in my ear, but I don’t hear him over the beating of my own heart. I can’t do anything but focus on the man high up on the balcony, on the way he holds himself, the way he moves. He seems to be thrilled at the turn of events, his eyes constantly cutting over to me, and I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t know how to handle this. Fuck.

“Those who have hunted before know the rules, but for those new initiates, you must step forward, one by one, and sign your name in the book. If you have a sponsor, they will sign beside you. You will then write down either a specific name or a type or person you would like to hunt. The sky’s the limit.”

I’m barely listening to his words, barely hearing anything at all as I stare at him. My ears are ringing. I have to do

something to throw him off his game, something unexpected, something that will ensure we throw the Hound Society into true chaos.

“Billie?” I glance at Row when my name filters through the static. “Are you okay?”

I can only nod. My mouth won't seem to work, the static too hectic to let me have complete control. I need to do something, to act now, to shake shit up. This game we're playing, we're not winning. We're only dancing around, pretending we're making headway only to find the Grand Master still pulling strings like we're his puppets. I may be wet from his words, but I refuse to allow anyone to control me.

Jiro is watching me closely, his eyes on my pulse point. I'm not sure what he sees, if he can read my mind, but he doesn't look away. Achilles, Creed, and Row are watching the Grand Master, varying expression of annoyance and anger on their faces. Jiro is more observant, seeing things they don't. I think he sees my decision before I'm even aware of coming to it.

People start throwing their initiations forward so the Grand Master must have finished his stupid speech. I stare at the young men pushed forward, sons who need to make their fathers proud, men too young to die. Each of them smiles hesitantly and signs their name in the book. Though Row is older than some of them, it reminds me of him, of the way he had to go through this despite not wanting to hunt anyone.

I'm hardly paying attention except for noticing the sheer number of people excited to join in on killing innocent people. I'm tense as I watch them write in elegant script in a large book. It looks old, like something a witch would use as her grimoire, but the pages are filled with names, with writing, and it makes me sick. Volunteers start to come forward, showing their interest in hunting again despite not having need to. Their excitement to kill is no different from the dicks who hunt elephants and giraffes for sport. It's pure entertainment, pure evil.

I glance over at my men, at their postures, at how beautiful they are. I never in a million years thought this would be my life, but here we are. My decisions no longer affect just me, but in this, I have to do something. I have to.

It hits me a second later and I roll back my shoulders and lift my chin.

Creed tilts his head in confusion at my look, realizing something is different. Achilles narrows his eyes, clearly not knowing what's happening. Row threads his fingers through mine, gently holding, offering comfort he thinks I need.

But Jiro meets my eyes and shakes his head, just the barest movement, a request and a warning.

But I can't accept it. I can't heed his warning.

I move to step forward and Row's hand tightens on mine, holding me back. The Grand Master glances over at us, watching curiously.

"What are you doing?" Row hisses, his fingers tight on mine.

I meet his eyes, knowing he's going to be angry. All of them will be.

"Playing the game," I reply.

Row scowls. "Billie—"

I jerk my hand out of his and move forward, parting the crowd like the goddess I am.

FIFTY-FOUR



The Grand Master watches me raptly as I move through the crowd. The Hounds around me stumble back, making way for me. The cheering dies and the room falls into silence as I move in my bright golden dress, as it dances around my feet while I walk. My chin is tipped up, my head held high, as I walk as if I was meant to be here.

The large book is at the base of the balcony, below it so that the Grand Master can see it without having to lean over too far. The closer I move, the more he follows my path, watching me as if I'm the main event.

I plan to be exactly that.

When you sign your name, you have to name the person or type of person you want to hunt. That's the rules. You can choose whoever you please, can ask for a pilot or a Navy Seal, can ask for a specific stripper from a club in Colorado. It's ridiculous, but it's how this thing works.

The room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop as I step before the book and stare down at the name already written before mine. They're all elegant script, all clearly trained in proper calligraphy.

The balcony isn't that high up. It gives the Grand Master about three feet of extra height, and when I step up to the base of it and look down at the book, he squats down before me.

"You must have a sponsor, little goddess," he purrs. "If you want so badly to become a Hound."

I curse myself for not thinking of that, for not remembering all of the rules Row had told me. Now I'm standing here looking like a fool, desperately trying to come up with some plan that will help me bypass this rule.

Row appears beside me, his head held high. "I will sponsor her," he declares.

The wraith in front of me laughs. "Sponsors cannot join the hunt, young Woodrow. Are you going to let your Freya go to the island alone?"

Row growls at him and more silence falls at the sound, as if there's another level to the silence we hadn't yet reached before. It's echoing now. My ears start to ring again. Row doesn't reply, clearly not knowing what to do either. He doesn't know my plan, doesn't understand what I'm doing, but the fact that he stepped up to support me anyways means the world to me.

I take his hand, prepared to tell him I'll be fine alone on the island, when someone else appears beside Row and picks up the heavy pen.

"I will sponsor her."

Leaning forward to peer around Row, I stare in surprise at the sight of his father. He signs his name in an elegant signature beside the next blank space. Row is looking at him in equal surprise. Senior sighs at Row's face, but he comes over and pats me on my shoulder.

"I hope you know what you're doing, wolf."

Then he wanders back into the crowd with his glass of brandy cradled in his withering hand.

I stare down at the gift he'd given me and without waiting another moment, I snatch up the ridiculously golden pen and sign my name in a far less pretty autography. It looks more like teenage bubble letters, but I don't care. Row takes the pen from me the moment I go to set it down and signs his name beneath mine, filling it out, joining me in this insane plan.

"You must list who you want to hunt, little goddess," the Grand Master purrs, still watching me raptly, as if he can't

figure out what I'm doing. He hovers over me like a god, as if we're all his minions, and it makes my decision settle deeper in my gut.

I look up at him, meet his eyes, a slow smile pulling at my lips. He tilts his head, and for the first time, I see confusion flash there. He really thinks this is about becoming a Hound, about that kind of power. I don't want it. I don't need it.

No, the power I want is greater.

"Of course," I reply, taking the pen from Row again and leaning over the book.

With that same bubbly handwriting, in the column needed, I write down the words...

...*Grand Master*...

FIFTY-FIVE



The silence breaks, instead filled with the soft murmurs and whispers of the people behind me. No doubt those in front have seen what I've done and they're now spreading the news, talking amongst themselves.

I hear someone ask, "you can do that?" and it's repeated over and over again from behind. It spreads like wildfire, the soft hum growing to a crescendo that now fills the room.

Staring up at the Grand Master, the smile stays on my face. He's gone still, his eyes focused on the book where I'd written his name.

"What's the matter?" I ask him, my voice sweet. "Cat got your tongue?"

I don't ask quietly. This dictates I be very loud and very outspoken about what I've done. The plan demands it, needs it, and when he looks up at me, his own lips split into a grin. As if he's unfazed. When he chuckles, it nearly cracks my bravado.

He stands again, looking out over the large crowd, his gaze alone bringing their murmurs down.

"There are no rules against electing other Hounds," he announces, answering all of their questions. "It has always been so. Hungry beasts are never loyal." He looks down at me again, those eyes glittering dangerously. "I look forward to joining you all on Prey Island." He steps back and gestures toward the book. "Any other takers?"

And then suddenly, more and more Hounds come stumbling forward, their fingers itching for the pen, their elegant script spelling out the names of their rivals, calling forth so many Hounds that I know the line between predator and prey will be blurred. I watch it all unfold, pleased with myself even if the Grand Master acts unafraid, even if my men are watching me with mixed feelings of anger on their faces.

The Grand Master watches me as I step back, a grin on his face. “Well played, little goddess,” he coos. “Well played.”

When my hands begin to shake, I hide them away.

I am a goddess. I am a rabbit with claws and teeth.

Play the game. Eat the rich.

Watch them all burn.



“Have you lost your mind?” Creed snarls sometime later once we’ve escaped to our quarters. “This wasn’t in the plans!”

“The plan has changed,” I murmur, standing so very still before them. I’d kicked off my heels the moment we stepped inside, but I’m still wearing the dress and crown. I watch as the pulse gets more rapid in his neck at my words, as he paces back and forth before me, his anger palpable.

“No shit!” Creed shouts before forcing himself to take deep breaths and calm down. “What the fuck are we going to do now?”

“I’m going to kill the Grand Master,” I say confidently, tipping up my chin.

Achilles shakes his head, his own face pinched in anger. “You can’t do that all alone. You’re too weak.”

“Fuck you,” I growl, annoyed at his lack of confidence in me. But... he might not be wrong.

“I’ll be there,” Row says with a sigh of resignation, clearly not happy about it.

“Fantastic,” Achilles growls, working himself up. “So you’ll both get killed.”

Row scowls at his words, his own anger getting the best of him. “I wrote down Jiro’s name for my hunt, so he’ll be on the island as well.”

Jiro nods. “Good,” is all he says. Of the group, he’s the only one who doesn’t seem upset. There’s no anger in his eyes, but then again, he’d seen my plan in my eyes before I did it. He knew what was coming. Besides, he wants revenge just as much as I do. Now there will be plenty of Hounds to kill and even now, they’re planning slaughter of each other as we speak. All the secrets Crystal brought out, each one she’d given us, now spills into the open as Hounds select Hounds, as they name their rivals.

“And how the hell are we supposed to get there?” Creed asks, running a hand through his hair. “Achilles and I need to be there, too.”

I hesitate before saying, “I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” Achilles snarls. “Did you think some of us might not have wanted to go back to that fucking island? Did you even think about that?”

I open my mouth and close it again when no words come out. I hadn’t thought about that. I’m being an asshole expecting them to just follow me along like puppies. I hadn’t consulted them, hadn’t brought the idea up. Hell, I hadn’t even given them a warning. I’d just acted on instinct. I can see the panic in Achilles’ eyes, see the fear. We’d barely survived last time and here I am, making us all return.

“You don’t have to go,” I whisper. “You can stay here on Predator Point and be the link between the islands.”

“And let you die?” he growls before turning and punching the wall, making me flinch at his visceral anger. A dent is left behind when he moves his fist but he doesn’t seem to care. “Fuck!”

Jiro strolls forward then and grabs my chin tightly, forcing me to look into his eyes. “Are you really prepared to do this?”

I nod despite his hold. “I’ve got this.”

He studies me for a few seconds, his eyes tracing over my face, and whatever he sees, it seems to satisfy him. “Then we do it.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Achilles shouts, hitting the wall again. This time, there’s a bit of blood left behind. “You’ve all lost your fucking minds!”

I jerk out of Jiro’s hold and rush up to Achilles, grabbing his face between my palms, forcing him to calm down and look at me. “Don’t you want them to pay?” I ask, staring at him earnestly, wanting him to understand my reasoning.

“I’d rather you fuck the Grand Master if I’m being honest,” he rasps, his shoulders tense with anxiety. “You think he won’t be prepared? He’s the most powerful motherfucker here.”

“We’ll be prepared, too,” I promise, needing him to see.

He growls in frustration at my answer before kissing me, hard. “If I didn’t love you, I’d fucking strangle you,” he snarls. Then he drags me into a tight hug that I think he needs more than I do. Still, I sink into his warmth.

“First problem,” Row begins, watching me closely when Achilles releases me. “We need to figure out how to get Creed and Achilles over to the island.”

“Second problem,” Creed spits. “The Grand Master is persistent in joining our relationship. Clearly.”

“That’s not a problem,” Jiro points out.

“The hell it isn’t!” Creed snarls, crossing his arms.

Jiro crosses the room to look at Creed head on. Despite Creed being so massive, Jiro is equally as tall, and they look each other eye to eye. “As long as he’s enamored with Billie, he’s less likely to kill her,” Jiro reminds him. When Jiro looks over his shoulder at me, I straighten. “Besides, our little rabbit could very well decide to fuck him instead.”

“What?” I say, staring at him.

When he comes over to me, I’m prepared for him. I think I am.

“You’ve done a good job shaking them up. The Hounds have lost what weak loyalty they had and are now targeting each other,” he says, but then he leans in toward my ear. “But I know how wet you are right now, after your dance with him, little rabbit.”

I freeze, my anxious fingers even going still. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He leans back and studies me, those dark eyes taking me all in and splaying my wide open. “Would you like me to bend you over and prove it?”

Meeting his eyes, I see his seriousness there. If I try to lie again, I know he’ll do it and I’m not sure I’m prepared to be studied like a bug. Finally, I look away. “No,” I murmur, my face flushing.

He nods. “We have an advantage then. This game isn’t simple black and white. We’re working in shades of gray. And we have to operate under the idea that we may not be killing the Grand Master, but controlling him by the end of this.”

Achilles rubs his head, his knuckles starting to bruise. “This is starting to turn into a shitshow.”

I glance at him. “Still okay with being here?” I ask softly.

Achilles snarls at me. “Of course, I am. Just for that, I’m going to fuck you until you scream tonight.” He prowls forward. “I’m going to leave bruises on your neck so when he fucks you, he knows you belonged to us first.”

I open my mouth. I close it again.

Well... fuck.

FIFTY-SIX



JIRO

“We have two days before they go and ... collect the prey,” Row says, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen what they do when so many of the prey are Hounds themselves, so I don’t know how they’ll handle that. I don’t know if they’ll be forced on the plane or dropped off with some sort of extra advantage, but the rules are the rules. Knowing the Grand Master’s penchant for tradition, they’ll likely be caged and dropped with the rest of the prey, given the same treatment even if he’s one of them himself.”

“How many will there be?” Creed asks, his arms crossed as he sits on the couch, his face scrunched up in anger. I don’t know how long he’ll be angry but I find the emotion useless. Anger makes you sloppy. Anger gets you killed.

Row shrugs. “I don’t know but the book had a lot of names. They’re still finishing up the list for the computer screens. I’ll be going in with a tracker this time since I’m already a Hound.” He glances at Billie. “You won’t get anything but the weapons you choose.”

“And Jiro?” Achilles asks, as if I’m not right here.

I already know the answer. No need to ask.

“Jiro will be taken when it’s time for the prey to go,” Row answers, glancing over at me. “The same time as the other Hounds and the Grand Master.”

Billie bites her lip at those words, her eyes filled with worry as she glances at me. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay out there? We won’t be dropped on the island until twelve hours after you.”

I smile at her in reassurance. “I will be fine, little rabbit. There’s no need to worry about me.”

And there’s not. I’ve survived far worse things than a bunch of rich assholes. I would have survived Prey Island on

my own with none the wiser if I hadn't met a savage woman holding her own. She's the reason I stayed.

Creed's anger is a thick entity in the room, rolling off him in waves. Achilles is the same, a muscle in his face twitching every now and then. Row is more reserved to this fate, but he's still tense with emotion. It seems our little rabbit has really stirred the pot.

I've never been so proud.

"We can either steal one of the patrol boats or hide away on the boat that takes y'all over," Creed grumbles. "I doubt the security will stop boats from going over as much as they stop them from coming here. If we steal one, Crystal can drive it back. Apparently, she lives for danger."

Billie looks over at him, her eyes filled with worry at the anger still on his face. "Are you going to stop with the pinched expression?"

"No."

One word, that's all he gives her, his eyes hard.

"Creed—"

"I'm pissed, okay?" he growls. "Let me be angry if I want to. I have a right to that."

She flinches and it finally stirs the anger in me. It's a good plan. Sure, she should have brought it to our attention, but I don't think even she knew what she was doing until she was moving toward the book to sign her name. I don't blame her. Being cruel to her isn't an option.

Billie moves back, intending to give Creed space, but he growls again. "That doesn't mean I don't want you near me," he snarls, his hand snapping out and jerking her back to him. "I just need some time so I don't want to punish you every time you look at me."

The room drops, each of us watching carefully as Billie tilts her head down, not looking at any of our eyes, clearly feeling guilty. "You can punish me if you want to," she

whispers. Her fingers curling around his forearm. “I can take it. Whatever you need to do.”

Creed tenses and glances around the room, taking us all in. “I’m not the only one who wants to punish you for going against the plans, Billie.” He’s staring at her closely, studying her.

“I realize that,” Billie replies softly.

Silence.

Creed glances at each of us, some unspoken thing passing between us. Anticipation has me hardening in my pants, begging for something dirty and brutal. Fuck, I want this. I may not be angry, but I’ve never wanted anything more than to watch her squirm between the four of us.

His eyes narrowing, Creed looks down at Billie and growls, “Get on the bed.”

Billie audibly swallows and turns to follow his direction.

FIFTY-SEVEN



BILLIE

My heart is in my throat. My ears beat with it, demanding to drown out the noise. My mouth has gone dry even while my pussy is wet. Creed's rough command has me desperate to please, wanting to erase the anger from his face. God, do I want him to punish me. Some part of me wants them all to punish me for what I've done. I'll happily lay here and let them do whatever they want to me.

When Creed jerks his t-shirt over his head in the easy way that men do, my eyes drop to his body, to the thick ridges of muscle. The way his muscles are cushioned by a thin layer of fluff makes me want him even more. The smattering of hair and the tattoos that speak of a rural life has me rubbing my thighs together. Creed is indeed a specimen of a man, both a teddy bear and a dangerous animal all wrapped up in one.

My eyes trail over to Jiro where he starts to slowly unbutton his dress shirt, his eyes dark with desire. Though there's no anger coming from him like the others, there's still intention there. After all, he'd warned me not to do it and I'd done it anyway.

Achilles is filled with righteous anger, his anxiety at being so closed up this week and this new fury making him a tiny sun prepared to explode. He's one second away from strangling me, from taking it one step too far and stealing my air completely. He's barely restrained as he jerks his clothing off, his fingers less efficient because of their shaking.

And Row, my Hound, who despite his anger, walked up there and tried to sponsor, and when that didn't work, he immediately signed up to join me. He hadn't wanted to be on that island the first time, but he'd willingly signed up again.

For me.

Each of my men make up a different part of me, demand something from me that I happily give as long as they give

themselves just as much to me. We're a single unit now, a family that works together, exists together.

And I've just thrown a wrench into that stability.

Debbie would be so distraught if she knew.

Creed is the first one to be totally naked while I lay on the bed, watching them all, taking them in. I'm still wearing my dress, realize it, but I can't take it off on my own. Someone needs to loosen the corset back. Somehow, I have a feeling it won't survive this. That thought makes me a little sad because it's a beautiful dress but if we survive this, there will be a million more, to wear, to destroy.

"You made a decision tonight without including us in that choice," Creed says, his voice like crunched up gravel. The anger there makes my fingers clench in the sheets, desperate for someone to touch me. "Because of that, you won't be included in any decision we make with your body right now."

Though he says the words, a silent agreement goes between us. We have standing consent here, and I know if I legitimately ask them to stop, they will, but that's not necessary. I deserve their punishment, yearn for it. I won't be stopping this.

"Understand?" he asks, his hand reaching down to stroke his hard length between his legs. My mouth is no longer dry. Suddenly, it's watering.

Nodding, my fingers clenched in the sheets, I rasp, "I understand."

"Good girl," he purrs before coming up to me. With large fingers, he runs his fingers along my feet where they poke from beneath my dress, caressing far more lovingly than I expect. Achilles appears on the other side, his cock just out of reach.

Row reaches down and takes my crown carefully from my head. "Wouldn't want anyone getting stabbed," he reasons. "At least by the crown."

I'm the only one fully dressed and I want to protest, but I lay here just like I'm supposed to, watching them.

Jiro comes forward and starts pushing my dress up, revealing my calves, my knees, my thighs, hiking it up until the fabric pools around my waist. I'm not wearing any underwear, so he bares me to their gazes as he spreads my thighs apart. I expect him to lean down. Instead, it's Creed who crawls forward, his large shoulders shoving my thighs wider.

"Can I touch?" I ask, my voice breathy.

"Only if someone says you can," Creed grunts. And then he shoves his face brutally into my pussy.

My back bows from the bed, but Achilles shoves it down again, forcing me to hold still despite my need to squirm as Creed eats me like this is his last meal. His tongue swirls around my clit, just a little too rough, his beard scraping against my skin. I cry out, trying to close my legs but his shoulders keep them open. When his fingers prob at my entrance and feel my wetness, his growl against my pussy nearly makes me come.

My core tenses, my body rocketing toward release, my breaths nothing but panting, wanton need. My eyes slam shut, I spiral closer, almost there...

And then Creed stops, and it falls back down, disappearing.

I jerk my head up with a growl. "What the fuck?"

He rests his chin on my pelvic bone, watching me with a savage smile. "You come when we say you come. Until then, no orgasms for you."

My eyes widen. "What?"

"Punishment, rabbit," Achilles growls. "This is punishment."

My face twists. "You're all a bunch of assholes."

"Yes," Achilles grunts, leaning down to bite at my breast. "And I'm going to claim that asshole here shortly."

I freeze, staring up at him, but his eyes only spark with that fury.

Row moves onto the bed then, his cock in his hands as he moves toward my face. “Open wide, goddess,” he commands. I do so without hesitation, opening for him to slip inside and immediately start pumping himself inside me. Someone grabs my hand and wraps it around their cock, forcing me to stroke. With my face turned away, I don’t know who it is.

And then I feel someone probing at my entrance. I move to look, about to twist my head, but someone grabs a fistful of hair and keeps me focused on Row, on his cock in my mouth that he starts to pump deeper, faster. He’s not nearly as brutal as Achilles would be, but he’s definitely still being forceful, his soft groans of pleasure going straight to my core.

The cock that shoves inside me is large and I assume it’s Creed. When he comes over me and I can see him from the corner of my eyes, his face is twisted with anger.

“This pussy belongs to us,” he growls, as he slams inside hard enough that our pelvises slap together. I cry out around Row’s cock, letting him go deeper, making me gag on it a little. Someone starts sucking at my nipples, tugging on them painfully, caressing me. “And you’re going to scream that when we’re done with you.”

His powerful thrusts shake me as he starts to pump inside me, as he winds me tighter again. I get closer, closer, closer, and then he pulls out before I can tighten further, making me mew in protest. Motherfuckers.

Row jerks out of my mouth and I’m turned toward Achilles who immediately slams his cock down my throat, making me gag enough that spit dribbles from the corner of my lips. Just like before, he fucks my throat, punishing me as I come down from the figurative cliff I’d been about to leap off of. When the almost orgasm fades completely, someone else takes over my pussy, stroking inside, fucking me with brutal power.

They take turns like that, winding me up and then edging me so tightly that I can’t do anything but cry out around their cocks when they feed them to me. Creed takes over for Achilles and I taste myself there as he straddles my face and

fucks my throat as hard as he did my pussy. His hands trace over my body, gripping my breasts brutally, pinching my nipples, reaching down to flick my clit while Jiro fucks me.

My fingers dig into the sheets. It's all I can do to hold on.

The next time they move, I get three seconds to take deep breaths before I'm lifted and turned. Jiro sits against the headboard and my head is shoved down on his cock. I happily take him deep, suddenly desperate for someone to come even if it isn't me. Someone else slides beneath my thighs and starts swirling their tongue around my clit, stroking it. I think that's the end of it until I feel someone straddle him and spear inside of me. The thought of them over each other back there makes my core clench and the orgasm rises swiftly. It gets close, and I suddenly think they haven't noticed, that I'm going to get to finish.

Everyone stops moving.

I jerk off of Jiro's cock and snarl. "Alright, you've made your point!"

"Have we?" Creed asks from behind me, and I suddenly realize it's him fucking me. Which means either Achilles or Row are beneath me. "Have we made our point yet?"

"Yes," I growl. "I know why you're angry, but for the love of fuck, let me come!"

"Are you sure that's what you want?" he asks and there's a warning there that gives me pause.

"I ... yes," I rasp, my fingers digging into the sheets in anticipation. "Please."

When I glance over my shoulder it's to find Creed smiling. "You heard her. Let's give her what she asks for."

My hair is grabbed roughly, and my face is turned to the side for Achilles to shove his cock down my throat. Jiro is stroking my neck, feeling it constrict with Achilles' movements, purring words in his native language that I don't understand but that go straight to my pussy regardless. Creed immediately powers inside me again, Row obviously the one

between my legs. I wonder if they're touching down there, how close Row's face is to Creed's cock.

It doesn't matter. The moment they start brutally fucking me is the moment I stop paying attention to anything else.

Achilles jerks out of my mouth, and I'm shoved back down on Jiro's cock. They both take turns, switching me from cock to cock while the other two stroke me higher. The orgasm comes both swift and brutal. Because of all the edging, it hits me so hard I see spots. But they don't stop as my pussy constricts. They continue, forcing me higher, riding me through it.

I suddenly realize what the warning was for.

Before, my punishment was not being able to come. Now, my punishment is going to be to come so much, it won't ever stop.

Someone presses a finger to my asshole, pressing gently inside, working me so I know they're preparing me for what's to come. I think I'll be prepared. I realize quickly I'm not.

Everyone trades and I'm suddenly being shoved down on Creed's cock while Achilles starts to fuck me so hard, I'm crying out around the cock in my mouth.

"That's a good girl," Creed purrs. "Take all of our cocks. You look so pretty stuffed so full. I bet you'll look even prettier leaking from all these holes."

My core clenches again.

"Let's try something a little more fun," Achilles growls, his fingers brutal on my hips as he fucks me, his cock hitting a spot inside me that both hurts and feels perfect. "How many cocks have you had at once back here, rabbit?"

I could lie and say I've had lots of threesomes, but where would the fun be in that.

"One and a dildo," I reply honestly when Creed lets me up for air.

He hums. "Let's see how many you can take."

I'm moving, being lifted. I'm glad I don't have to stand on my own because my legs are shaking. They're so weak. Creed lays down on the bed and Achilles drops me on his waist to straddle him.

"Put his cock in you," Achilles demands, and I do as he says, reaching between us to position him before sinking down. I grind against him, leaning back to change the angle, but Achilles roughly shoves me down onto his chest. "Jiro." I glance over my shoulder when Jiro moves forward, watching as he strokes a hand over my ass and meets my eyes.

"Relax," Jiro tells me, before he starts pushing into my pussy with Creed.

Oh. Oh! I relax as much as possible as I'm stretched around their two cocks, as Jiro works himself inside me, his cock rubbing against Creed's. I can feel them stretching me, can feel that they're touching, and I orgasm just from the stretching, from the thought, shaking on Creed's chest as he strokes a reassuring hand up and down my back.

"Row, you'll get her face," Achilles instructs. His hand comes down on my ass, smacking it. "I'm getting this piece."

I tense despite the feeling of Creed and Jiro inside me, holding still while I adjust. "I can't—"

"You will," Achilles growls, cutting me off. "You're going to take us all, rabbit, and you're going to scream around our cocks as we fill you completely."

He steps up on the bed and straddles my back before moving down, getting close to Jiro. He shoves me down hard on Creed's chest, forcing the angle he needs for his cock to press against my ass. He barely presses at first, just pushing his head against it.

"Relax," Creed coos, running his hands along my back. "That's a good fucking girl. You're taking us so good."

Achilles presses in harder and there's a bite of pain. Everyone else holds still, giving me the time to adjust.

"So tight," Achilles growls, popping past with a grunt. "Fuck, yeah, you're so tight."

He pushes in deeper, and I mew in both pain and pleasure at how full I feel, at how stuffed I am. My nails dig into Creed's chest, and he grunts at the pain, his fingers coming up to circle my throat.

And then they start moving.

My eyes roll back in my head at the feeling of them stroking inside me, at the feeling of Jiro and Creed stroking me and against each other, at Achilles who immediately starts pounding my ass. My soft cries immediately turn to pleasure filled screams, my eyes closed, but there's still one more cock to take. Row turns my head to the side and presses against my lips, tracing his precum along them before pressing inside, stroking my throat at the same speed as those stoking between my legs.

I come so hard, I feel my come start to drip down my thighs, but none of them slow despite my shaking, despite my screams around Row's cock.

"That's my girl," Creed groans. "You're taking your punishment so well."

Achilles growls. "It's not good enough." And then he starts fucking me hard in the ass. My screams grow shriller in my throat, vibrating around Row's cock. Jiro, as if in agreement, also speeds up, until they're all fucking me brutally.

"When you get on that island and the Grand Master fucks you, he's going to see our marks on your body," Creed growls. "He's going to know that you belonged to us first."

"Yes," I hiss when Row pulls out to give me air.

"I bet he's going to make you cream on his cock, make you scream out for all to hear, and when you do, you're going to think of us."

"I'm going to kill him," I pant just before Row presses back in.

"We'll see," Creed breathes in my ear. "We'll see."

I come again, and again, and again, my body shaking so badly I can't even hold it up any longer on my elbow. I

collapse against Creed's chest, each of them still fucking me. Row goes first, his cock stroking against my tongue before he pushes in deep and freezes, his cock jumping in my mouth. His warmth coats my mouth and my throat, spilling out of the corners when I can't swallow fast enough.

"Oh, fuck, yeah," Creed groans, his head slamming back against the bed as his cock starts to jump, pulling me along with him as Row's come drips down my chin and onto his chest.

Jiro slams hard inside me and does the same. I can feel their finish mixing with my own, filling me, making a mess of the sheets. But Achilles keeps going, his groans growing more frantic as the others pump me full. He slams inside me hard enough that I scream, my body convulsing in one long orgasm that makes me see stars. Spots dance before my eyes as Achilles fills me last, as he claims me where he said he would. When his cock stops jumping, he pulls out and they all slowly do the same, carefully arranging me on the bed until I'm cradled between them.

"We would march into hell after you," Creed murmurs in my hair before I pass out completely. "Next time, just make sure we know when we're marching."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, sleep already trying to claim me.

"Apology accepted," Achilles answers, his hand stroking down my back. "Get some rest, rabbit. You're going to need it."

I slide into a sleep so deep, I don't even dream, my body so well sated, I hardly know if I'll ever be able to walk again.

FIFTY-EIGHT



CREED

I watch her sleep, watch the way her back rises and falls as she breathes. She's wrapped in the sheets now, her body cleaned up as best as we could before she'd rolled over and cuddled the pillow. She's beautiful like this. She'd been gloriously beautiful with our come smeared across her skin, dripping from her.

Fuck, I'm so in love with her, it fucking hurts.

"She's in over her head," Jiro murmurs, watching her the same as I am. Despite his words, you would never know he was concerned, though I don't think he thinks Billie is weak. It's more of her getting lost in her quest for vengeance while ignoring what's coming. No matter what Billie says, there's something there with the Grand Master. Shit will go down and either she'll pull that trigger herself while in denial or she won't be able to. Either way, it's her decision and we'll be there to comfort and support her.

"No shit," Achilles growls, shaking his head. "But even if she thinks she can kill him, you were right. We have an advantage. He won't kill her."

"You're so sure?" Row asks, staring at him. "I've never known a Grand Master to play a game so long before he grew tired of it."

"I don't think it's a game anymore," I say, staring down at Billie. "Not with the way he looks at her."

"Oh, he won't kill her," Achilles continues. "Just like you say. It's the way he watches her. He wants her bad, enough to kill. And he's going to do everything he can to have her. No matter if it means letting her get in some good hits or not."

"Which means he won't hurt us," I point out. "The moment he hurts one of us, she'll go savage and won't hesitate to kill him."

“We still need to operate under the assumption that he could kill her,” Jiro counters. “He’s the head of the most powerful society in the world.”

“How are we supposed to compete with that?” Row asks, running a hand through his hair in agitation. “We’re going to need some help.”

Jiro smiles and I raise my brow. “I might have a solution for that. I can make a call. Put some people at the ready. It might mean we have a way off the island if things go south.”

I’m reminded of the kind of person Jiro is. Just because he loves Billie and is part of our family doesn’t mean he’s all good. He belongs to another crime ring, one where he can pull strings that we might just need.

“Fuck, can we protect her this time?” Achilles asks, grimacing. “I mean, it’s a lot.”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t need us to protect her,” I argue, my eyes trailing back down to her sleeping form, her body spent. “She needs us to fight beside her. That’s all she’s ever needed.”

Our rabbit. Our fighter. Our heart.

FIFTY-NINE



BILLIE

On the third day from now, the Prey will be collected and dropped on Prey Island, given weapons, and told to fight for their lives and for money. That fucking countdown in my head starts again, haunting me, demanding I focus on it. I'm both anxious from fear and from anticipation.

The first day, there's this intricate sidestep around the idea of what's coming. Most Hounds don't know if their name was written down or not and it hangs over their head like a guillotine. Only the Grand Master knows, his eyes following me around the room as I try to play the part, as the still blank prey TVs mock me with what's to come. Suspicion flies around the crowd, making most of them side eye their rivals, desperate to know if the hatred goes deep enough to kill. There's this worry that flits across all their faces and no matter how nice or rude you were, everyone is an option. You don't become rich without making enemies.

The games start that day, people goading and teasing, many of them getting drunk and staying drunk to avoid facing the truth. Small fights break out and split up. A few couples have sex right out in the open, so drunk and afraid they don't care who sees. The TVs starts showing videos of the Hounds and initiates who will be hunting. My name pops up at the top of the list, but I'm not listed under my name.

I'm listed under Freya.

Of course.

I scowl at the screen and turn toward the Grand Master when I see it. He's watching me, amused, as I consider going right up there and killing him before we ever make it to the island. Everything is a taunt, a game, and it pisses me off.

My men stay close to me in case any of the glares turn into real animosity. It's when I'm sitting at a table with Row that the gift appears on a tray carried by a waiter.

“What’s this?” I ask, staring at the bright red box with a bow on it.

“A gift from the Grand Master,” the waiter supplies helpfully before disappearing.

I glare down at the fancy box before looking at Row. “Think it’s something I need to worry about?”

He shakes his head. “Just open it carefully in case it’s a bomb or something. I doubt it is, but you never know.”

I gently pull the bow and lift the lid, peeking inside first before frowning and flicking the lid off completely. Nestled inside on silk is a watch. It’s broken, the hands no longer moving, and the glass is cracked. Tiny splatters of blood speckle it and I stare at it in confusion.

“There’s a note,” Jiro comments, leaning over my shoulder to look inside.

I pick it up and read the writing there.

Little goddess,

Enjoy this gift as a token of my pleasure with our games. This watch belonged to Jeffrey Loyd, and he was wearing it when you killed him. I’ve taken the liberty of removing a few links so that it may fit your wrist. Until we meet in fire and blood, my little goddess.

GM

I blink in surprise and pass it to the others to read while I stare at the watch. Looking up, I search the room until I find him, until our eyes meet and latch on.

“The stalker gives gifts,” Achilles muses. “This will either end in blood or with fucking. I can’t tell which.”

I scowl up at him. “I’m not interested.”

He leans in. “The wetness between your thighs right now says differently.”

“I’m not wet,” I argue.

Jiro raises his brow. “Have we not had a discussion about lying, little rabbit, or should I bend you over this table and check like I threatened before?”

My scowl deepens. “Whose side are you four on?”

I can’t believe they’re encouraging me so much to seduce him, to let him in. I mean, my mind is a typhoon right now, undecided if I will or won’t, but still.

“Yours,” Creed says. “Always yours, no matter what.”

And the intention is clear. No matter who else joins, no matter what I decide, it’s up to me.

Sighing, I take the watch out of the box and study it. It’s a thoughtful gift even if it’s a gruesome one. Some sick twisted part of me purrs at the thought of it, at the full circle of wearing the watch of the man who started it all. Looking up at the Grand Master, I watch his face as I slide it onto my wrist and buckle it.

The pleased smirk makes me rub my legs together beneath the table and my ire at liking him even a little bit pisses me off.

Fuck this island.



Day two and the tension is even higher on Predator Point. Some of the Hounds have learned they’ve been selected, and I witness the first fight while strolling into the ballroom for breakfast beside Creed. We’d stopped with the pretenses that I’m only sleeping with Row. No one believed it anyway.

Strolling up to the table, I’m about to take a seat when Creed jerks me backward and out of the way just in time for two men to go tumbling across it, each of them throwing fists that hardly do much damage. Clearly, they’re not the fighting kind, but it doesn’t stop either of them from trying. I watch with a raised brow as they tumble and scream, as one accuses

the other of being jealous. When they stand up and circle each other, I watch while sipping the orange juice Row hands me.

“You fucking coward! You’ve always been jealous of my good fortune!”

“Good fortune! I don’t call getting a million-dollar loan from your daddy good fortune!”

“I worked hard for it!”

“And when I kill you,” the antagonist says. “I’m going to fuck that pretty little wife of yours since she’ll be in the market for a new sugar daddy.”

The wife in question’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t look displeased with the offer.

“You fucking bastard!” And they launch at each other again.

Besides the fighting, other Hounds are drinking so heavily that when it’s time to drop them on the island, they’ll be so lost in their mind they’ll just lay down and die. They have no will to fight, no desire to try. What a waste.

At some point in the evening, someone ends up trying to attack me even. I’m minding my own business at the slot machine when some douche bag comes up and tries to stab me. He’s too slow, obviously useless with the thing, and I’m out of the way fast enough for Jiro to disable the man. Each time someone comes after me, the Grand Master watches in amusement from afar, no longer coming up to me to tease. Is this part of the game or is he letting me stew in my hatred?

The chaos I intended is here and while it’s exactly the chaos I describe, I can’t help but smile.

Perhaps, the rich will end up eating themselves in the end.



On the third day, I’m just as tense as everyone else.

It's evening and the clock is ticking down. I don't know exactly what time the prey will be taken, but I know it's about to happen. It doesn't surprise me when people start appearing an hour later while we mingle, and start grabbing Hounds.

Some of them fight tooth and nail, trying to stop themselves from heading to Prey Island. Some of them are so drunk they stumble along after them. And still, some of them go willingly.

Like the Grand Master.

As someone steps toward him and gestures respectfully, he meets my eyes and smiles before blowing me a kiss, a tease and a promise. It's the last time I'll see him until I'm hunting him and something about it makes my stomach twist. Something about it doesn't settle right. He doesn't seem concerned at all.

When they come for Jiro, I grab him by his lapels and drag him in for a kiss.

"If you die before I get there, I'm going to be so pissed," I warn him as the men start to pull at him to go.

He grins. "I won't die, little rabbit. I'll see you soon."

And then he's gone, leaving those who will hunt and the spectators in the ballroom to wonder what to do. There's no longer any Grand Master to rule over the room. There's no longer any idea of what's to come.

I stare at the door where Jiro and the Grand Master disappear through and frown.

I thought it would feel different to see the wraith dragged away. I thought I would feel successful.

Instead, why do I just feel resigned?

SIXTY



The TVs come alive almost immediately. We have a night before we head to the island where I get exactly no sleep with the anxiety churning in my stomach, but the TVs flashing with scenes are an immediate draw. Apparently, they did indeed put all the prey in cages, even the Hounds and the Grand Master. I stand with plenty of others watching as they're dropped off in the evening sun, the cages sliding off the plane just like I remember and then the mad scramble as they're explained the rules and welcomes. It's interesting to hear someone else make the announcements now that I know who the Grand Master is. He can't announce because he's there, immediately running for weapons and disappearing into the trees. Jiro does the same, moving before the announcement is made, grabbing what he can and getting away from the landing strip before money is even mentioned. The chaos that erupts when some of the prey Hounds start shooting before that makes me cringe.

The rules are simple on Prey Island. There are no rules.

And then I realize there are three people on that island to have an interest in.

Gasping, I point at the TV screen that shows Crystal snarling at a man, snatching a bag full of weapons from him, and taking off into the trees.

“One of those bastards picked Crystal!” I snarl, jerking toward the TV.

Creed wraps me in his arms. “She looks like she’s got herself covered, Billie, but we’re going to get her off. We’ll try and find her the moment we get a chance to.”

“Those bastards,” I snarl, itching to hurt someone. When I find out who put my girl there, they’re going to fucking rot.

While Jiro and Crystal are already fighting for their lives, we have time for breakfast and for preparing with supplies. I have a hard time eating, but I force myself to knowing that food will be more difficult to come by once we’re on the island. I stuff as many snacks and things that’ll keep in the tactical backpack as I can before we head to the room where they give us weapons and whatever else we may want.

Row gets more than me because he’s already a Hound. He gets a tracker and a satellite phone, a map and more tech. I only get the option of weapons and gear, no tech, no map. Lucky for me, I’ll be sticking with Row. Also lucky for me is I already know the island. I’ve already walked on its soil and spilled blood there.

Reality sets in as I start picking out weapons. This time, I get the option of clothing and tactical gear that fits me. Which means I get cargo pants that fit, boots that fit, and a belt where I can put my weapons. I fill it up with knives and bullets, taking as many as I can carry. I take a rifle and a handgun, a handful of small throwing knives I’ll mostly use for regular stabbing, and a larger hunting knife that could take down a boar. I grab MREs, rope, a machete, a first aid kit, and even a small toiletry bag. This time, I’m going to be as prepared as possible.

Row likewise grabs as much as he can, knowing we’re also going to be carrying at least one extra item for both Creed and Achilles. We’ll have to get more weapons once on the island because no one is supposed to know they’re coming.

The plan is for them to stow away on the boat taking us to Prey Island. They’ll hide below until we disembark and then they’ll come with us. It’ll be perfect. Hopefully.

I check the cameras obsessively, making sure Jiro and Crystal are still alive. Sometimes, my eyes take in the Grand

Master, but he's not on camera as much. Either he's really good at avoiding them or the cameras are purposely not showing him. I don't care which. They'll get a good picture of him when I kill him.

When I realize just how many prey there are, just how many women have been chosen, I grow angry. Crystal isn't the only one on that island picked because she's a woman. That's the reason I take so many weapons. Many of the Hounds I'll be riding with on the boat will deserve their death just for choosing a woman to hunt. Those are the ones who leer at me, letting me know I inspired their decision, and it stokes the fire in me.

They're all going down.

But my blood really runs cold when I see Crystal up there fighting men twice her size, fighting to keep hold of food and weapons. She's holding her own for now, her eyes fierce. I realize pretty quickly she searches for the other women, trying to figure out where they are. Her screens are filled with her violently shouting like a banshee and stabbing motherfuckers before running off into the trees. At least she's in normal clothing. Better than the stripper heels I'd been dropped in.

"I hope she slaughters all of them," I tell Row, a snarl on my face.

"Seems like she just might," he says, watching the screens with me. "We're going to get her out of there," he nods, his own anger at the betrayal of her choosing visceral. Those we bring on Predator Point are supposed to be off limits, the waiters and the girls, but apparently, some rules are okay to be broken.

"I'm going to slaughter any motherfucker who touches her, and god help those who hurt her." But at least my friend is strong. Hell, she does insane workouts, so I know her endurance is up there, and apparently, she's not half bad at killing either. I guess when she said she lives for danger, she meant it.

We won't get dropped onto the island until twelve hours later, so we spend that time preparing, discussing the plan, and

watching the live feeds. The time goes by far faster than I assume, but our plan is solid. The goal is to walk on Prey Island, meet up with Jiro, kill the Grand Master, let their chaos sweep across it while we escape and rescue as many innocent people as we can, including Crystal. That's the best we've got. Leave the Hound Society in chaos as we save lives.

When we're all clustering together, preparing to board the ship, I try not to act suspicious as Row and I board the large boat together. We'll be dropped off on the opposite side of the island from the airstrip. The idea is that most prey won't know where we drop off and they won't have had adequate time to safely get there, meaning we'll get off safely. But we're also going to be split into two groups, one closer to the south and one closer to the north. We're planning on getting off at the northern drop point and making our way to the old research facility where we'll meet up with Jiro. Creed and Achilles are nowhere to be found as Row and I shuffle forward silently, our eyes on our surroundings. Any of these Hounds could decide to try and stab us on the boat before we ever set foot on the island. With the Grand Master not here, more and more people have gotten braver. I've seen at least two Hounds get stabbed for no reason. Neither of them were even going to Prey Island.

Once we're all boarded, I try not to look around for Creed and Achilles, knowing they'll get aboard no matter what. And then the ship is moving, heading toward the island just as the sun starts to crest the horizon. The boat we ride is a fancy catamaran that probably cost a couple million. The southern drop point is first and half those riding with us get off. Their screams as they attack each other follow us up the beach until we reach our drop point.

They start getting off, but I stare at the familiar trees, dread filling me. Whether this was a good idea or not, it doesn't matter now. I take Row's hand and let him help me off the boat, my feet hitting the sand just as true chaos breaks out around us.

The nightmare comes alive around me.

SIXTY-ONE



The catamaran doesn't even have time to pull away before all hell breaks loose. Some of the Hounds are still trying to get off the boat when the bullets start flying. We have barely any time to duck into the trees to avoid getting shot so quickly as we wait for Creed and Achilles to slip out. The moment they do, tumbling from the boat before I can quickly back away from the island, we're fighting our way through the idiots, firing at the Hounds that immediately go after us. We didn't even do anything to these fuckers, but here they are, mad that we were getting attention and making waves on their island.

Like children throwing dangerous tantrums.

Because of their bullshit, we end up getting pushed in the wrong direction. We need to go north along the edge so that we can reach the old research facility and find Jiro. That's our first task, but the motherfuckers don't give up easily. The gunfight turns into a crazy sprint through the trees, Hounds running this way and that, some of them going down, at least half of them terrible fucking shots. Shit, I watch as one of them falls immediately and sprains an ankle. He cries out in pain and just kind of ... stays there, rolling around on the ground. I assume he won't last long out here.

Once we get away from the worst of the gunfire, as a group, we start heading back in the direction of the research facility we'd found before. It takes us hours of trekking through the trees, sweat beading on our skin and soaking through our clothing before we close in on it. The longer we're

here, the more I shake with anxiety, my hands trembling. I try to push it down, swallow the feeling, but the more I push it away, the stronger it gets, until I have to stop walking with spots in my eyes, my heart kicking hard at my ribcage.

I double over, my gun tucked against my chest as I try to get my bearings, as I try to push the panic down.

“Hey, hey, deep breaths,” Creed urges, letting Row and Achilles keep an eye out. “You’re doing great.”

“I hate this fucking island,” I say through my teeth, my rapid breathing making me a little lightheaded. The spots appear and disappear, telling me I need to get my breathing under control before I pass out.

“We all do,” Creed says. “You gotta breathe through it or you’re gonna have a full blown panic attack.”

I take a deep breath, then two, then three, before I start the counting in my head that my therapist had taught me. I count the things that are real around me, marking them. The trees are real, the moisture on them because of the humidity. My men around me are real, their hands offering comfort as they keep us protected. The sun is real as it beats down on us like the sun god is tired of our shit. I’m real. I’m also really pissed off.

It works and my breathing starts to slow, my heart rate working its way down. The spots disappear and I feel almost normal again. Ignoring the trauma isn’t the way to go or it becomes a weakness. I understand that, but fuck is it hard to peel back your layers to see your darkness, look deep, and tell yourself it’s okay to be not okay. It’s the hardest shit I’ve ever had to do.

I straighten with a grimace when I feel like myself again. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Creed murmurs. “You know, the first time I came back home from deployment, I nearly punched an old lady for opening a can of cat food?” He shakes his head. “The snap and sound of it reminded me of ... well, some shit from war, and I just flipped, whirled around, and was two

seconds from punching her right in her wrinkled face. It happens. PTSD is a bitch.”

I raise my brows and scrape my hair back from my face. “Did she realize?”

“I don’t know. She just patted me on the shoulder and told me to set the can down for the cats. Apparently, her hips weren’t so great.”

His story brings a smile to my face only because I’m pretty sure the woman knew. It’s hard to miss someone like Creed bearing down on you. “I’m glad you didn’t punch her. That would have been rough.”

“That makes two of us.” He shrugs. “But my point is that you don’t have to apologize. It’s a thing. We deal with it. This place sucks so let’s do what we came to do and get off it as quick as possible.”

And so we continue on our way, cutting through the trees until the concrete testing facility appears in front of us. I breathe a sigh of relief. We’re a little later than we planned to be, the stupid Hounds making us run late, but at least we made it before sundown. There’s still plenty of hours left in the day to recoup and figure out the next best move. I open my mouth to yell for Jiro, a split second away from shouting for him, when movement in my peripherals steal my voice. I snap my lips shut and watch as more bad luck comes our way.

The Hounds appear from the bushes, making too much noise to be good at anything stealth, but they’d been able to be quiet enough waiting that it didn’t matter until we were upon them. These ones are less prepared, dressed in mostly formal attire that has suffered here in the jungle. The clothing is ripped and dirty, their faces ragged and drawn. Which means they’re the prey taken from Predator Point, and they’re probably pissed.

“Well, look what we have here,” one of them says, his eyes on me. “Just who we were waiting for.”

Of course they were. Of fucking course. I’m getting real tired of these rich assholes’ fascination with me.

None of us put down our weapons, knowing this will likely turn into a full-blown gun fight if we're not careful. None of these Hounds have trackers in them or else they would have showed up on Row's tracker. Which means they likely didn't put trackers in anyone who was a Hound. Not following the rules completely then. I suspect the Grand Master doesn't have one either, but all Row can see on his machine is the cluster dots. It isn't a super fancy one. It's not like there are names with them. Helpful and yet not.

"It looks like you have some beef with me," I say, watching the goon leader carefully. "I hate to tell you, but I'm a vegetarian."

I'm not, but it sounds good, and I've always had a penchant for opening my mouth and saying some shit at the worst of times.

"I've got some beef for you," another one goads. "I can shove it right now your—"

"Enough," the leader says, glancing at the other one with a scowl. "I assume you're looking for your friend?"

I tense, glancing around just in case I missed something. When I don't see anything out of the ordinary, I narrow my eyes. "Where's Jiro?"

"Oh, we took care of that one," one of the other goons announces, a proud smile on his face. "I saw him go down after I fired."

Another Hound pats him on the back. "Good job, Mike."

Their words hit me, but I don't feel anger. No, how could I when I can see the shape moving behind them, recognize it even? There's no need to be angry with these Hounds when half of them don't even know how to kill someone properly.

I smile at their exchange and they all shift uncomfortably. "No," I say, tilting my head. "You did a terrible job, Mike."

When Jiro appears and scatters them, it's like a symphony of gunshots and screams. He takes out a good few of them before they take off into the trees, realizing they're probably at a disadvantage if we all attack. It gives us time to regroup for a

minute and we all rush inside the research facility before locking the door behind us. They'll have the same amount of time to come at us again, but hell, we need this. It's better to get our wits about us than just dance around in the forest willy nilly.

"You made it," I grin, pulling Jiro into a tight hug, breathing a sigh of relief that he's alive.

"Were you worried?" he asks, kissing me on the head. His clothing is dirty and torn but he's injury free. A blessing in this hellhole.

"Of course I was," I say, shaking my head. "Not that you would die, but that we wouldn't be able to find you."

Inside the familiar testing facility, I realize we never really explored all of it. Mostly because we only needed the two front rooms and we'd found information that was important at the time that had distracted us. Now, it's apparent that the Prey Hounds who were waiting for us decided to tear through it. Doors stand ajar, papers are scattered everywhere across the floor, but the door open to the right is what draws my eyes.

"What's in there?" I ask, looking over in that direction. We'd never gone in that room. It might have been locked. My memory of our time here is interspaced with panic and desperation, and some of those memories have holes. Trauma responses. My therapist said the holes are our brains way of blocking things out and saving ourselves more trauma.

Jiro shrugs. "I haven't been inside yet. The Hounds came in here first before going outside and waiting. They tried to shoot me, and a good set of acting skills made them think they actually got me." He shakes his head. "They are all a bunch of idiots."

But that door draws me to it, begging me to look, and I find myself walking forward, my brows furrowed in confusion. In my memories, I don't even remember this door. We must not have looked in it if I can't even remember it existing. So then why did the Hounds think it so important to go inside? I don't step inside the room, instead sweeping my hand up the wall beside the door until I feel a light switch. I

flip it on, still amazed that there's electricity here. Who's paying the bill these days? But that thought disappears the moment I get a look inside the room. I stare at a large metal table in the middle of the room with wide eyes. My heart slows. Fuck, everything slows as I get a good look.

"You guys," I rasp, horrified.

Jiro, hearing the horror in my voice, comes over first. He leans around me, careful not to step past me in case something is booby trapped, and his face immediately shuts down when he sees what I do. It's Creed who looks, jerks me and Jiro back, and immediately pulls the door shut behind us, blocking the thing from view.

"Is that what I think it is?" I ask, staring at the now closed door and the radiative symbol painted on it. The paint is peeling and faded, but the warning is clear. It's as fucking clear as ice.

"It is," Creed grimaces. "Fuck. Just what we don't need."

"What the fuck is it?" Row asks, peering through the small window, his eyes searching.

Achilles comes over and pushes him aside, looking through the window, too, before cursing under his breath.

"It's a nuclear bomb, that's what it is," Achilles grunts, shaking his head. "A small one, but that was typical for the timeframe that this place was built.

"Small as in it can't hurt us?" I ask hopefully.

"Small as in it'll take out the islands here in this cluster, but probably won't destroy anything further than a mile away. The fall out will go a couple of miles further." He looks through the door, shaking his head. "Luckily for us, it can't really be detonated without the stuff mixing inside it. See, the detonator is missing, but the radiation around it will still be bad. Lucky for us, it's not bigger. No one goes inside the room again. The door stays closed."

"Agreed," Creed grumbles.

But Jiro is silent, his eyes on the bomb sitting on the table. “The Hounds knew it was here,” he murmurs, staring at it.

“You think they were trying to detonate it?” Row asks, his eyes darting around the room.

Jiro shakes his head. “I don’t think so. Maybe sell it, but they’re idiots. I wouldn’t want to mess with it. Moving a nuclear bomb is a delicate matter. And clearly, they did not think about the radiation.” But then his face lights up with whatever idea strikes him. “Row, give me your satellite phone.”

Row hands it over immediately and Jiro starts punching in numbers. When someone answers on the other side, he speaks in his native language so none of us know what he’s saying. I don’t know who he calls and when he hangs up, he stays silent. I’m tempted to ask, but if he knew what was coming with his call, he’d tell us. He has his own tools in his arsenal. I look at the bomb one last time and shake my head.

“We need to turn off the light and close the door back again. We don’t need anyone coming in and wiggling that thing around. I know you said it can’t go off without the ingredients mixing and that it’s missing the detonator, but I don’t want to take any chances.”

So we do just that. Creed opens the door briefly to flip the light switch again and then we close the door tight. We hide the sight of the door as best as we can with a shelf in front of it, in case others come looking in here and stumble upon it. I don’t know how we missed it before, how we never wandered so deep and found it, but now that I know it’s there, a lost bomb, it makes me uneasy. Did the Hound Society even know it was sitting there before these other Hounds found it? Or was it a happy accident?

An hour later, I’m rolling my shoulders as we prepare to leave. We have to assume the Prey Hounds are probably waiting for us and the moment I open the door, it becomes apparent that they are when they start firing, their bullets glancing off the concrete and trees. Some of them are really

fucking bad shots. How had any of them survived the island the first time to become a Hound?

Clearly though, they've regrouped and decided that we're going to die here. Unlucky for them, we have no plans of dying at all.

I tell myself it's because I don't want them anywhere near the literal atomic bomb inside the building that I take off running despite the rain of bullets. All it would take is one stray bullet for shit to go to hell for everyone. The real problem comes when the others take off running in the opposite direction from me, thinking I'm with them. I don't realize it until we've been effectively cut off from each other by the Hounds. I hear them call for me, screaming my name, but I can't stop now.

Not when I have a literal cluster of Hounds behind me.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I growl. It seems I'm always running, but I'm not the scared woman from last time. I'm resourceful, determined, and I'm armed. I've been trained by all my men with their ways, but it won't do me any good if I'm outnumbered six to one. Still, none of their training prepares me for the decently large cliff that appears in front of me, the stream running over it. A waterfall, larger than the one we'd found last time, the cliff at least twenty feet high. It's not nearly large enough to be some dramatic number, but it's an obstacle in my way. It'll take me too long to scale the rocks down the side to reach the bottom. They'll pick me off before I can get halfway down. So I really only have one option. I peer over, take in the deeper section of water in front of the waterfall, and pray to whatever entity is listening that there are no large rocks hidden just below the surface.

"I got her!" one of them yells behind me.

I put my fate in the hands of that unnamed deity that I hardly believe in, and jump.

I immediately know I didn't jump out far enough, but I was worried that the river would shallow further out from the pooling water. My shoulder scrapes against a rock on the way down, bruising me and leaving behind a nasty mark, but when

I crash into the water below, I'm mostly unharmed. No rocks break my fall as I glance off the bottom and I'd celebrate that if not for the bullets suddenly pinging through the water. The pool isn't super deep, but I stay under, kicking for the rock wall in front of me. I only come up for air once I've dipped beneath the crashing water and am pressed tightly against the rocks. There's a decent sized crevice that can fit a couple of people and I hardly spare a glance as I press myself inside, calming my rapidly beating heart. This little hidey hole is bigger than I expect, an overhang providing shelter, and I press inside it tighter when I hear them shouting over the crashing of the water. I sit there, covering my breaths with my hand for five minutes despite thinking it'll be impossible for them to hear it, until I hear nothing but the crashing water in front of me. I can't hear them anymore, but I still see shadows dancing back and forth over the water as they search for me. Eventually, I know they disappear, off to search for me down river, because I stop seeing their shadows. I huff, squeezing the water from my hair and trying to shake off as much water as possible. My ribs smart a little and my shoulder where I'd rammed it against the rocks, but I'm fine, and now I need to find my guys. Being separated is bad but luckily, we have a contingency plan for that.

I'm just about to ease out of the waterfall to go find them, ready to check for enemies, when the feminine voice speaks up from behind me.

“Are you going to kill me?”

SIXTY-TWO



I stumble against the slippery rocks when the voice echoes, scrapping my shoulder blade against the stone when I turn and face a woman huddled deeply into the overhang. She's curled up tightly in a ball, her hair stringy and dirty, her clothes torn. She's found a hiding space and tucked in tight, keeping herself small. How long has she been here?

"No," I reply, holding my hands up to show her I'm not holding a weapon pointed at her. That thought alone makes me realize I've lost my rifle sometime during the run. Probably in the river. Dammit. That was a really good rifle. I'll have to dismantle my handgun and clean all the water out to make sure it's okay. At least it's not saltwater. "I won't hurt you," I say. I move closer, intending to check her over, but she flinches and curls in tighter. I stop. "I'm Billie. What's your name?"

She sniffs loud enough that I can hear it over the waterfall behind me. Cradled in this nook like we are, we're still able to hear. It's not exactly a cave, but it's close enough to one that we both fit without me having noticed her in the beginning. I can't stand up to my full height, but we can both crouch.

"Candy," she finally chokes out. Her fingers clench in her jeans and I suddenly realize her nails are cracked and bleeding. Like she'd tried to claw her way out of the cages...

"What do you do for a living, Candy?" I ask, leaning around to peer out the side of the waterfall and make sure there's no one out there. When I see no one, I focus back on her. We can't stay here.

She sniffs again and this time, large tears drip down her cheeks. “I cut hair.”

I growl at the unfairness of it, at how they would bring someone with no self-defense experience at all here and hunt her. Granted, they didn’t know I had any, but still. It was different when it was just unlucky me. This girl is one of many. I’d counted six on the screens before we’d left Predator Point. They’d probably taken this girl after work or something. She barely looks like she’s in her twenties. Fucking assholes.

At my growl, Candy flinches and I hold up my hands to placate her. “I’m sorry,” I rasp. “It just... pisses me off that someone like you ended up here. But it’s going to be okay. I’m going to try and get you off this island. But you’re going to have to come with me. Think you can do that?”

She immediately starts shaking her head. “We can’t leave. They’ll find us.”

“Candy, Candy, look at me,” I say gently as she continues to shake her head. “If you stay here, you’ll die, either of starvation or because one of those pricks will eventually find you. Our best bet is to meet up with my... team and get you out of here.”

“Why would you help me?” she croaks, staring at me with wide innocent eyes. Fuck, she can’t be older than twenty-three. I’d be shocked if she was any older.

“Because six months ago, I was here in your same position, and I survived.” I offer my hand out to her. “You’re going to survive this, too.”

She stares at my hand for a few seconds before she reaches out with shaking fingers and takes it, her hand small compared to even mine. She’s barely an adult, for fuck’s sake. This isn’t right. I’m going to strangle the motherfucker who brought her here.

I’m soaking wet after my plunge, but she’s dry which tells me she’s been here for a while. We both have to get wet again as I lead her from our protected nook, and we’re both dripping as I pull my handgun and hold it at the ready, searching for

any threats. When I don't find any, I drop my gun to my side and relax a little. It's been long enough now that the Hounds should be long gone.

"Do you have any self-defense training, Candy?" I ask, looking up through the trees to try and figure out the direction I need to go. If we were to get separated, the goal is to head toward the east tower, sending up the bird call Jiro taught me so we can find each other, but it's hard to triangulate our position without a compass. The idea is to meet somewhere in the middle of heading in that direction, the bird call letting us find each other. That's the idea. But fuck, Row had the compass. That would have come in handy now. Double fuck!

"You mean like kick boxing?" Candy asks, her voice thick with fear. She looks around us with wide eyes, crouched down just the barest amount. She's clearly not made for this.

"Sure, kick boxing is something."

She shakes her head. "I only did one class. Brittany, the instructor, was a bitch and I never went back."

I grimace. "Have you ever used a gun?"

"No, I don't believe in them."

I stop and face her. "I hate to say it, Candy, but you're going to have to believe in them now. This isn't New York."

"I'm from Pennsylvania." Her response is a little haughty and I glance at her.

"Whatever," I grunt. "These people aren't fucking nice. And you're a woman here. They won't just shoot you. They'll do much worse. So it's time to start believing in guns and realize you're going to have to fight."

Her lashes are sticking together. The makeup she'd been wearing is smeared down her face, and at my words, more tears cut through them, running new trails down her cheeks.

"I'm going to die here, aren't I?"

I curse under my breath at my harshness, realizing I probably could have said that a little easier. "I'm going to get

you off this island, Candy, but I need you to work with me. Think you can do that?"

"I'm not a violent person," she sniffs.

"You're going to have to be to survive. It's called Prey Island for a reason, but it's your choice whether to be prey or predator."

She nods and wipes her face. "Okay. Okay, I can do this. I am a bad bitch."

"That's right, you are," I encourage. "Keep telling yourself that, and here." I hand her one of the knives at my hip. "You don't know how to use a gun and I don't wanna get shot in the ass, so here's this. Don't stab yourself. It's sharp. Just stay close to me."

Which should have been the end of it. I'd really like to have my rifle back but it's clearly lost to the island right now, so I keep my handgun at the ready and Candy behind me. She practically breathes down my neck and though I told her to stay close, I didn't exactly mean for her to stand on top of me. I fight the urge to tell her to back off, knowing she's scared shitless, and work on my patience.

We're moving in a direction I hope is east when I hear it. Talking. Two voices. I hold up my hand to tell Candy to stay silent, just like everyone knows, right? I assume she'll stop and be quiet, that she's heard the voices, too.

"What's that mean?" she asks, touching my hand. Her voice is anything but quiet.

The voices in front of us stop.

I hiss through my teeth and shove Candy to the ground at the same time as I step out and pull the attention to me. Two men, neither of whom I recognize, are standing off in the distance. They look like they might be just regular prey.

"We mean you no harm," I try, thinking they might listen.

One of them snorts. "Yeah, right. Fuck you and this island."

Well, I can't blame them, but when he pulls a gun and points it at me, I have no other choice. I fire, Creed's shooting practice coming in handy. Both of them go down before they can fire any of theirs and I stare at their bodies as they drop. Candy screams and cries at my feet the moment the gun fires, covering her ears. When neither of the men move again, I scowl and slide the handgun away.

"Next time I hold up a hand like that, it means stop and be quiet," I spit. "You could have gotten us killed."

"I didn't know," she cries, curled in on herself. "I didn't know. I didn't know."

I sigh and stare down at her sadly. "We better get over there and take their weapons before the gunshots bring any others this way. Come on."

But Candy doesn't move so I leave her there for a second to go and search their bodies. When one of them has a rifle, I practically cry in relief. It's not as nice as the one I'd had but it'll do. They both also have a handgun each and a few knives that I swipe. Then I move over to Candy again.

"Get up please," I tell her. "We have to go."

She drags herself to her feet, tears still running down her face. "That was so violent," she sniffs, and then she sees the bodies on the ground behind me, her face scrunches up, sobs starting to wrack her body.

"Hey," I say but she's not looking at me. "Hey!" I jerk her face to mine, knowing that there's only so much grace I can give her here. She's going to have to fight. "Look, you're in a shitty situation right now. I won't sugarcoat it. But you need to sharpen your claws and bare your teeth if you're going to make it, Candy. *Do you want them to win?*"

"No," she rasps.

"Then act like it," I spit. "Don't be a rabbit. Be the wolf."

But the girl is no wolf. Even I can see that. It was cruel to bring her here and it's a wonder she's made it this long.

"You're so mean," she sniffs, wiping her face.

Her words offend me. Most of my friends would say I'm the nicest person you'll ever meet but out here, that's not possible. I can't be that nice person I am back at home. Survival comes first, and right now, Candy is putting us both in danger by refusing to fight.

My lips tighten in frustration. "Come on. We need to move. I need to find the others."

Because I'm not fucking equipped for this. Jesus Christ, I can't protect someone who doesn't even want to protect themselves. This isn't the time to be a turtle.

I lead Candy in the direction I hope is East and follow that path. I have no way of knowing which direction we're really going when we're in the middle of the island. I don't have much faith in my climbing skills to get to the top of a tree. I'm regretting not having practicing rock climbing with Achilles.

"Can you climb a tree?" I ask, glancing at Candy.

She holds up her arms. "Do these spaghetti noodles look like they can pull my weight up a tree?"

"No," I sigh. "No, they don't."

It's going well enough. We don't run into anyone else for an hour and I start to get a little more comfortable with Candy tromping along behind me, but I don't stop scanning the trees for danger. Unfortunately for me, I don't have the same skills as Jiro and Creed do. Hell, I don't even have what Achilles has. Even Row is better at a lot of this shit than me. They'd only had a few months to teach me what they could and there will never be enough time to teach me everything for something like this. I'm not fucking Rambo.

That's how they sneak up on us, waiting behind trees like fucking phantoms.

Because I'm not better. So it's my fault.

The first man steps out of the brush in front of me, and I have my rifle pointing at him immediately, prepared to take him down. I can drop one fast but it's the others that worry me. Slowly, seven other men step from behind trees and circle us,

their eyes eager and full of things no man should ever imagine doing to a woman.

A woman's biggest predator, though, is a man. That's true for anywhere in the world, this island and back at home.

Candy gasps in fear at the sight of them, a soft sob leaving her mouth as she presses against my back, nearly throwing me off balance.

"We've been looking for you, Freya," the first man says. Each of them is wearing expensive gear which means these are the true Hounds, the ones hunting as predators just like me. I recognize a few of their faces even if I never had any interactions with them.

"How sweet of you to look for me," I goad, my rifle trained right on his chest. Always aim for the biggest target. Creed taught me that. I'm not a good enough shot to get him in the head every time. "You found me. Now, off you go."

He laughs and shakes his head. "I don't think we met on the Point. I'm Gustavo Vos. I'm a buddy of Row's."

I laugh. "Funny, he's never mentioned you."

His eyes crinkle. "We're more like frenemies. You see, our father's companies are rivals. They have been since the beginning."

"How very Romeo and Juliet of you. You sad you didn't get to suck his cock?" I probably shouldn't be so mouthy with eight guns pointed on me, but I can't help it. If I'm going to die, I'm going to go down entirely as myself. And I would never miss an opportunity for a smart retort.

His smile falls. "I didn't expect to find you without your herd of protectors, but here you are." His eyes trail to Candy where she huddles behind me. "And you brought us a gift."

Candy presses tighter against me.

"Fuck off," I growl, my finger on the trigger. "Before I blow your head to pieces."

He smiles but then his eyes focus on Candy behind me. I tense when he starts to talk. "We're not going to hurt you,

sweetheart. You can come with us, and we'll get you off the island."

"Stop it," I growl, pressing back against Candy. "She's not going to believe you."

"Eight of us protecting you is far better than a single woman, don't you think, sweetheart?"

I feel Candy tense and it makes me tense harder in answer. No. No, no, no. "They're lying, Candy. Don't listen to them. I can get you home."

Candy peers over my shoulder and looks at the man speaking despite my words. "You would protect me? All of you?"

"Of course, sweetheart," Gustavo purrs. "We're not a bunch of savages. Do I look like an enemy?"

"Candy, they're the ones that bring people like you here. You can't trust them."

"But she's a Hound, too," Gustavo points out. "Didn't she tell you? She's one of us. Kind of silly to claim we're monsters when she stands here in the same position."

I bare my teeth at him. "I'm a monster because I have to be, because you people made me one. You're a monster because you enjoy it."

He shrugs. "Semantics are no use on Prey Island, Freya." He offers his hand to Candy. "Come with us, Candy. We'll protect you."

And then Candy is moving out from behind me. I snap out my hand and grab her too slight wrist, holding on tightly. "Candy, no. They'll kill you eventually after they'd fucking brutalized you. Don't go with them. Please." Desperation has her face blurring, anxiety eating away at me as I watch her trying to make the wrong decision. I'm trying to keep her alive. I'm trying ... I'm trying ...

She looks back at me with hollow eyes. "You lied about what you are."

“I didn’t. I only ever said I would protect you and that I’ve survived it before,” I growl.

“As a Hound?” she asks.

“No,” I hiss. “As prey. As the only woman dropped on an island full of men. Six months ago. Don’t do this, Candy,” I beg. “I’m trying to help you. Please, come with me.”

She glances at the men again. “Eight protectors seems better than one.”

“That’s a girl,” Gustavo purrs. “You’re very smart. Has anyone told you that, Candy?”

Candy jerks her hand out of my hold, and I let her. I can’t stop her if she insists when I’m surrounded like this and my chest tightens in anger, both at Candy for not listening to me and at the Hounds for this bullshit. I hate this. She shouldn’t be here and now I’m watching her walk into danger despite my warnings. I can’t do a damn thing for her if she refuses to let me help.

“You promise you’ll take me home?” Candy asks, staring at Gustavo with hope in her eyes. I can’t look at her, don’t want to and be reminded of my failure, but I force myself to watch. It’s because of me, because of the last hunt, that she’s even here. I started this chain reaction.

“Oh, of course, sweetheart. Just come with us and we’ll take mighty good care of you,” he purrs.

Either she’s really that stupid that she doesn’t hear it, or her hope is blinding her. Candy steps forward and takes Gustavo’s hand, her dainty fingers dwarfed by his large ones.

Gustavo immediately jerks her under his arm and holds her close, tucking her tight like she belongs to him. She shrivels under the hold, her eyes widening in fear. Apparently, the realization of her mistake is hitting her now that it’s too late. I can’t help her if she doesn’t fight. I can’t help her when she’s fucked me to stand her against them alone.

“If you hurt her...” I warn, knowing it won’t matter. I’ve done what I could, but I can’t force someone to listen to me,

no matter how much I want to. She'll never walk back over to me willingly.

“Don't you worry, Freya,” Gustavo says, and his hand brushes against Candy's breast. She makes a soft sound of protest that barely echoes around us. “Anything we do, she'll like it.”

White hot anger fills me, but my rifle doesn't shake as I keep it trained on him.

“As for the real treat,” he says, leveling his own gun on me “I'm going to kill a goddess.”

I have a matter of split seconds to move, to try and dodge the bullet he's about to shoot at me. I hope he's one of the Hounds who haven't fired a weapon in years. I hope he's slow because I'm not. But just as I'm tensing to move, to fight, to take on eight assholes at once, gunshots come from a different direction.

We all duck at the same time as Candy screams.

SIXTY-THREE



It seems like I jump from one chaotic nightmare to the other. It's fucking terrible. Maybe Achilles was right, and this was a stupid fucking idea. Either way, I have no time for anything except to dive to the ground and army crawl out of the spraying bullets from the unknown enemy and the eight idiots firing into the distance trying to find the source. I keep low in the hopes I don't get hit, careful not to raise my head and look around. I have no idea who is firing at them, don't know whether they're good enough shots to not hit me or if they're interested in killing everyone, so I can only assume they're my enemies, too.

When I make it behind a tree wide enough to cover me, I pop up and press against the bark, tucked in tight. The gunshots stop a few seconds later, but I wait thirty seconds more to make sure nothing else comes. Then I peek out from behind the tree once, fast, just in case they're waiting for me. When no other shots ring out, I peer out again, longer, looking over the scene.

No one is standing. The bodies of the Hounds each lie on the ground, some of them still twitching, but most of them unmoving. There's no one else here and no one fires at me as I study the scene and what's left of the assholes who'd threatened me.

And then I see her.

Candy is there, too, jerking, gasping for breath.

Still alive.

“Fuck!” I growl, rushing over and kneeling down beside her. I look around me frantically as I move, hoping whoever fired on us thought the job done before running off. I get a good look at the wound on her, at the blood oozing from a hole in her stomach and pooling on the ground beneath her. She’s going to bleed out. Blood dribbles from the corner of her lips and her bright blue eyes meet mine as she gasps for air, her hand reaching for me.

“Billie—” she gasps, her fingers digging at my knee, too weak to hold on.

“Just hang on, Candy,” I say, my throat getting tight. “You’ve got this. I’m going to get you off this fucking island and get you help. Remember, you’re a bad bitch. Just repeat to yourself, just like before.”

I press my hand against the wound, putting pressure on it in the hopes that it’ll staunch the blood flow. She doesn’t even flinch when I do so. Her blood wells around my fingers and I know I’m not helping, know there’s nothing I can do. This is a fatal blow. Still, I try. I can’t fail her so many times, one after the other. I’d said I was going to help the women here, not get them killed. Yet here she lies, bleeding out before me.

Her gasps are getting further between, dragging out. Her fingers grow weak and fall from my knee as she’s no longer able to hold it up. There’s too much blood and I know it’s bad. I know it’s hopeless. But I have to help. I have to do something. Fuck, it’s like watching myself die, like watching what could have happened last time happen now. I’d tried to save her. I’d tried to get her off this island. She can’t die now!

This could have been my last time. I might have been shot instead of her. This girl’s only fault was being in the wrong place at the wrong time and not having a mean bone in her body. It’s not her fault she’s not a fighter. It’s not her fault she’s not a wolf.

I tear up when she slumps, when her eyes go unfocused and glaze over. “No, don’t you dare! You’re stronger than this, Candy! You’re a bad bitch! You said so yourself!” I choke out

on a growl. Leaning over her, my own tears spilling over my lashes, I shake her a little. “You can’t die here! Wake up!”

But her chest doesn’t rise again. She doesn’t take in another breath. I’m shaking, tears running down my face, as I stare down at her lifeless body. She’s still warm but soon, she’ll be cold and frozen, left here on this island, a missing person back in Pennsylvania that no one ever finds. I’d failed her. In the end, I’d failed her completely.

I hang my head as I pull my hands away from her, knowing there’s nothing else I can do. Her blood coats my fingers, staining them, and her blood is the stain I know I’ll never scrub off. It’s one thing to kill Predators. It’s another to have innocent blood on your hands. Sniffing, I kneel there, staring at her, and I know her image is going to stay locked in my nightmares. I’ll see this moment over and over again, watch her die so many times that I’ll never be able to forget it.

I’m so distraught, it takes me a few seconds to register the sound to my right.

The bushes shake, and once I realize there’s a sound, I’m on my feet with my gun trained on the new man there before he can take another step. I’m tense even as tears trail down my cheeks, my chest tight with anger and sadness. I can’t see his face behind his mask, just like always, but I can see his eyes.

Pale green.

Now is my chance. I can shoot the Grand Master and be done with it, but I hesitate when he slides his gun away, when he doesn’t defend himself. As if I’m not a threat, or he doesn’t care what I do to him. No one else comes out with him though I check around me just in case this is an ambush. Despite the trauma of losing Candy, my rifle is steady on his chest. Was he the one who fired on the others?

“She got caught in their crossfire,” he says, glancing down at Candy. “I didn’t shoot her.”

Which only confirms what I’d suspected, that he’d killed all the Hounds around me. His own people. Why?

I know Candy didn't have any survival instinct. I should have grabbed her when the shooting started, made her duck her head. There hadn't been any time for much at all, so I'm not sure I could have ever made it in time, but I should have at least thought about it. My gun stays trained on the Grand Master and I don't say anything, my thoughts running wild.

"She couldn't have survived that wound on the island," he offers, as if that'll make me feel better. "You wouldn't have saved her regardless if she'd been shot now or not. It takes a certain type of person to survive this place."

"She shouldn't have been here to begin with," I snarl, angry for the loss of such an innocent life.

"I don't disagree," he says with a shrug. "But rules are rules, and you started an unfortunate trend, little goddess. Men, especially men like the Hounds, love to take innocence, whether by killing or by fucking. Unfortunately, that violent streak is ingrained in those types. Given enough money and power, they no longer see boundaries."

"And yet you preside over them like a King," I spit. "How magnanimous of you."

He tilts his head at me, those eyes looking through me. "I have never pretended to be anything else than I am," he replies, and it's like my words I'd said to Creed back at the club are parroted back to me. I'd said those same words, had defended myself with them, and I can't tell if he chose them deliberately or if we're somehow a little more similar than I thought.

"No, you haven't," I nod, staring at him. "What's to stop me from shooting you right now and being done with it all?"

His lips curl up in amusement. "Nothing."

"Even now you don't remove your mask?" I ask. Still, my hands don't shake.

"It's forbidden," he answers.

"By whom?"

This time, he doesn't answer, keeping his secrets, watching me closely. He takes a step toward me, and I tense.

"Stop," I command, my finger on the trigger.

"Shoot me, little goddess," he purrs. "That's why you brought me here, isn't it? Shoot me."

"If you don't stop, I will," I growl, narrowing my eyes.

He takes another step. "You surprised me, playing the game better than I expected, and it only makes me want you more," he says and he continues forward, until his chest presses against the muzzle of my rifle. "Come on, little goddess. Make me bleed."

I bare my teeth at him. "You deserve to die."

"Yes," he nods. "I do."

That makes me pause, my eyes searching his. There's no lie there, an admission of the monster he is. For some reason, that's what makes me relax. He knows what he is, what he deserves, what he's done. He'd been fully prepared for me to shoot him and wouldn't have complained. Whether he dies here or not, it doesn't matter. But he should be more valuable alive.

"Do you have a compass?" I ask, watching him.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls one out. "Of course."

"Do you know which asshole is the reason Candy was here?"

He points over to where Gustavo lies dead on the ground. "He's already rotting."

I lower the rifle and snatch the compass he holds out. "Good. Then you're coming with me."

SIXTY-FOUR



The hair on my arms stands permanently on end as the Grand Master walks beside me. I'd started by making him walk in front of me so I could use him as a shield, but I'd gotten distracted by his literal perfect ass, so now he walks beside me. Apparently, even in this situation, my priorities are off. For fuck's sake.

"So why exactly did you save me back there?" I ask while I glance down at the compass to make sure we're still going in the right direction. I'd been off a bit before, so I have to get back on track. Every so often, I whistle the bird call and listen for a response. When nothing comes, we continue.

"I can't fuck you if you're dead," he answers, but then he pauses. "Well, I can, but that would be far less pleasurable for me."

My face twists. "Jesus Christ."

"If you think such things don't happen on this island then you're more innocent than I thought, little goddess."

I stop and turn, staring at him. I hadn't thought of that possibility. I haven't stuck around any bodies to know, but that admission has me glancing back the way we came. "I should go back and bury Candy."

But before I can turn completely around, the Grand Master grabs my forearm and holds me there. "Risking your life to bury a stranger is hardly the thing to do on this island."

I jerk away from his hold with a scowl. "I didn't ask your permission."

“I didn’t give you a choice,” he spits back, leaning into me so that we’re both chest to chest, squaring off against each other.

The sudden desperate need to see his face fills me and I’m moving lightning quick before I know what I’m doing. Still, that doesn’t seem to be fast enough. His hand snaps up and grabs my wrist before I can even touch the mask, and it pisses me off more.

“Fucking bastard,” I growl, moving to kick him with my leg, trying to knock him off his feet. He’s prepared for it, dancing out of the way all while still holding my wrist. I swing and swing again, both trying to get my hand free and trying to land a good blow, but frustration fills me as he stays just out of reach, avoiding my fists and my legs. “I fucking hate you!”

I go to kick his knee out, to knock him to the ground, but he twists, and we both go down, him falling on top of me. The air rushes out of my lungs as he pins my wrists above my head before I can act, his body pressing mine into the ground. This is the exact position Jiro taught me never to be in and yet here I am, trapped. I try to bump him off with my hips but when that seems to only make his smile wider, I stop. I’m panting with my effort, but he only grins above me.

“You piece of shit!” I snarl and try to free myself harder, jerking at my wrists. His hold doesn’t loosen, his fingers tight enough to bruise.

“It’s forbidden,” he reminds me. “I cannot remove the mask.”

“We’re on the island. There are no rules,” I fire back, glaring at him.

He hesitates. “In this there is.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” I purr, going for sweet instead of anger.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “It won’t be.” He looks up into the trees and I can see the cameras there, watching, recording every interaction.

“Get off me,” I growl, trying to knee him, but he’s positioned just right, keeping me pinned perfectly.

He leans down, pressing himself tightly against me until I can feel his hardness between us. His breath fans over my neck when I turn my head to the side to try and avoid him.

“Don’t you like me pressed against you like this, pinning you to the ground, while you pretend not to be hungry for my cock?” His voice is like honey, dripping onto my skin the same way I’m dripping between my thighs the moment he turns on the charm.

Yes, but I don’t say that out loud. I’d be a fool to. So I clamp my lips shut and glare at him instead.

“Stubborn, little goddess,” he purrs, but he releases me and gets up, offering his hand down to me. “You’ll come around.”

I leap to my feet without his help and stare at him, at the way he casually brushes himself off, the mask still firmly in place. “I don’t get it,” I say, watching him. “You’ve had every chance to force yourself on me...”

“One who forces the fire in any direction gets burned,” he replies as he starts to roll up the sleeves of his dress shirt, revealing tanned forearms that I can’t help but study. No tattoos. None that I can see.

“Whatever,” I growl. “I’m still going to kill you after all this.”

He smiles at me, his eyes bright with mischief. “I’m looking forward to it,” he purrs.

And somehow, I think he means it.

The bastard.

SIXTY-FIVE



We've been silent for the better part of an hour now. So far, no one has answered my whistle and I'm starting to grow worried. That's what I blame for my inability to see the trap, but in my defense, it's very fucking well hidden. I'm just taking a step, my foot hovering over the leaves before me, when the Grand Master snaps out his arm and jerks me back. His grip is so hard, it hurts and I'm turning toward him, ready for a fight.

"Hey! What the fuck—"

The log comes swinging through the trees, making a hell of a noise as it slams into the tree in front of us, revealing the spikes there. As it ricochets back, the leaves on the ground before us fall out, revealing the spikes below in a decent sized pit. More spikes protrude from the tree the swinging log had hit, a backup in case the pit didn't work. I clamp my lips shut, staring at the trap in surprise, before looking up at the Grand Master beside me. His grip loosens.

"Fucking booby traps?" I growl. "That's new." And shit, none of the guys had trained me for that. I just assumed shit like this was only in the movies.

"Someone wrote down a master trapper for what they'd like to hunt. We need to be more careful if the trapper has been on this part of the island," he replies, looking around in the trees. "It takes some skill to hide such traps so well."

"You apparently saw it," I point out.

"Yes, well, I've dealt with traps before."

I open my mouth to ask, but he's busy checking the trees, making sure there's a safe way to go around. Apparently, there could be more traps connected to this one. I'll ask him later about how he knows about traps.

"Who on earth thought it would be fun to hunt someone who can trap anything?" I grumble, staring down at the death pit. Those spikes are sharpened mighty well. I was one second away from being a corn dog.

"Frank Julliard, that's who," the Grand Master replies, his tone saying he agrees with me. "He's already dead in case you were wondering. I found him a while back stuck in a trap much worse than this one. He was stabbed from below and from the sides, skewered like a kebob."

"That doesn't surprise me." Shaking my head, I follow the Grand Master around the trap, careful not to slip inside. "So, what's your story?" I ask, giving into curiosity. I'd said I would ask later but damn if I don't want to know more about this man who is so determined to win me over. He's got layers and yet he refuses to let me peel them back. It would be fair if I knew at least a little when he knows so much about me.

"I have no story," I replies, offering a hand to help me around.

I take it without a second thought. "You were someone once."

His eyes flash when he says, "That's been wiped away from the world's memory. So it no longer matters."

"You don't ever wish you could have it all back?"

Hesitating, he glances at me before focusing back in front of us, looking for more traps. "I do. I have. But it no longer matters. That life was forfeit the moment I accepted the position of Grand Master."

Raising my brow, I watch him closely. "Who offered it to you?" When he goes silent, I scowl. "Secrets. Of course, what do I expect from a secret society?"

"Secret, except for a small club in Colorado mocking us," he says with a grin. "That was quite clever of you."

“Yeah, well, you all fucking suck,” I grumble.

His laughter washes over me, sending goosebumps along my arms at the intimacy of it. “Again, I don’t disagree.”

A noise cracks behind me and I spin, my gun out before I can see the threat, and when the coconut crab steps out and pauses upon seeing me with my gun trained on it, I frown. “The fuck?”

“Coconut crabs,” the Grand Master says as a few more appear and pause. They seem shy, a few of them tucking back behind the plants. “You encountered them briefly last time, but I suggest you keep a better watch for them now.”

“I know. Creed got pinched on the ass by one last time.” I tuck my gun away.

“No,” the Grand Master counters. “Not because they pinch.” He points to the group of crabs. “They’re following us in case we die, in case we become an easy meal or show them to one. They’re scavengers, and they’re better cleaners of this island than the crews we bring in.”

My blood chills. “You’re saying they eat people?”

Nodding, he raises his brow. “Dead or alive. As long as you can’t move, they’ll eat you. Haven’t you ever heard of Amelia Earhart? The theory is that they ate her when her plane went down.”

Suddenly, the slow zombie-like movements they use as they watch us makes it all the scarier. They don’t attack us, especially since they’re all scavengers, but I don’t want to find out what it’s like to be eaten while I’m still alive. If I move too slow or we sleep or fuck, if I break a leg, the threat is very real.

“Well, that’s not intimidating,” I grunt, staring at them. “Let’s keep moving before they decide to make a meal out of us.”

The Grand Master laughs. “You face down Hounds with ease, shoot them without thought. You’ve fought your way off this island, swam through shark-infested waters, and you’re afraid of the crabs?”

“Have you fucking seen them?” I growl, gesturing to them. The crabs flinch but don’t run. “They’re horror movie worthy and you just told me if I break my leg and can’t run, they’re going to fucking eat me!”

He shrugs. “Nature is a bitch. It kills just as many people here as the Hounds do.”

“Whatever,” I grunt, checking the compass. “Let’s go before they get closer.” I whistle again and wait.

A whistle answers back a few seconds later and I freeze. This time, I whistle a different pattern, one that demands an answering one that isn’t the same. When it comes, I sag in relief.

“Thank you, baby Jesus,” I growl and whistle again, pushing forward. The Grand Master follows along beside me, keeping pace, his hands loose at his sides. He doesn’t seem to have any concern at all, not even at the crabs keeping a brisk pace behind us.

I burst through the trees and grin when I see Achilles first and then the others behind him. “It’s about time,” I say. “You won’t believe the shit that’s happened.”

But their eyes are on the Grand Master as he stands casually beside me. Four guns immediately train on him, their brows furrowed. They’re all on guard, watching him, waiting to see if he’s going to be a threat or not.

“Kill him, huh?” Achilles asks, grinning.

“Shut up,” I grumble, pushing him forward. “He might have saved my life a few times. I hesitated. Doesn’t mean I’m not still going to do it once his use runs out.”

Creed raises his brows and tucks his gun away. The others do the same. “Bonding with him more certainly won’t make it easier.”

Crossing my arms, I roll my eyes. “Whatever. Maybe we can come up with a new plan, like figuring out how to save the other women who got dropped here.” I hesitate. “If they’re still alive.”

“There’s a cluster of dots on the West side of the island I assume might be them but there’s only five of them now. I thought there was six,” Row nods, checking his tracker. “A lot of the dots have gone dark.”

I’m reminded again of Candy, and I frown, glancing away. “Yeah, there were six. At least one of them is dead.”

Silence falls but no one asks, sensing I’m not ready to talk about it. The rustling behind me makes me turn, but it’s only the damn coconut crabs again. The fucking spider looking things are starting to really skeeve me out. I don’t remember them following us last time.

Then again, last time, we ate them.

“We find the girls and any other prey we can convince we aren’t a danger to, we steal a boat or something, and we get back to Predator Point.”

Row shakes his head. “As if it wasn’t difficult to cross the water the last time. The patrol boats are usually small.” He glances in the direction we can hear the ocean waves from. We must be close to the beach. “I’m not going back in there by the way. Not after last time. No swimming.”

I don’t blame him. Many of my nightmares are of the time we’d spent in the water, the sharks swimming around us, the darkness and then the light.

“We have him now,” I say, pointing to the Grand Master.

The asshole laughs and shrugs his shoulder. “She’s not wrong. I’m a great tool.”

“You’re a tool alright,” Achilles grumbles.

Row is looking at his tracker, studying it, and I notice his frown before the others.

“What is it?” I ask, watching him.

He glances up and then back down. “That cluster of dots on the other side of the island, there’s definitely five of them, but they’re not moving any more. They look like they’re at the airstrip, just... staying there. It could be other prey, but usually they don’t band together, not the men. If it’s the women,

they're not moving at all though." He meets my eyes. "That doesn't seem right."

I glance at the Grand Master who only shrugs nonchalantly. "What better way to use them than to keep them all together?"

My stomach sours. "I hate this island," I growl, shoving past him when the crabs start getting braver.

"Oh, but it loves you," the Grand Master purrs back. "That's why it remembers you. It's in your bones, just as you're in its memory. You were born again on this land, little goddess."

Those words send a chill through me. He speaks of the island as if it's a living entity, swallowing innocent lives, feeding off of their blood. But it's just an island.

It's just an island.

It's just an island.

Right?

SIXTY-SIX



The more I think about it, despite my anger at this whole island and the Hound Society and everything it stands for, as much as it pains me, the Grand Master is probably a better tool alive than dead. And it really pisses me off to come to that conclusion because I'd really thought killing him would make me feel better. I could use him to get the innocent people off this island, the patrol boats more likely to stop for him than us despite their stupid rules. It's a good solid plan, that he'll have to flag them down and commandeer us a boat at some point, and I'm starting to think it's one that'll work.

Even if every single prey we run into that isn't also a Hound never seems to believe us.

Some of them are afraid and I guess I can't blame them when we're mostly dressed like the enemy, all except for Jiro and the Grand Master. Even Creed and Achilles are wearing fancier gear thanks to Row. A lot of them see us and try to kill us, their eyes on the money pot that hasn't even crossed my mind since we came here. Honestly, I didn't even want the money after the first time I survived. I realize that for some people, it would be impossible to pass up a chunk of money so large. That kind of money changes lives, changes all the bad into good. Times are hard nowadays, so I understand, but it still makes me sad when we can't convince them to come with us. I even try offering money to one of them on a whim and it only frightened the poor guy more. He'd ran away screaming something in another language.

There's so many that don't even speak English. They look at us with fear and don't understand anything we say. Still, I try. Every. Single. Time. Just in case.

The group of dots is still in the same place on the tracker, close to the airstrip, and the more we watch it, the more I'm certain it's the other women. What reason would anyone else have to stay there, practically in the wide open? They have to be being kept as prisoners. The thought of what they're enduring the longer it takes us to get there makes my stomach roil. We can't go any faster than we are, not without exhausting ourselves, and so it's going to take us two and a half days to get all the way to the other side of the island. Two and a half days of torture and abuse for them. I'm going to kill every single asshole that is there harming those women. I hope Crystal is giving them a run for her money. I once saw her stab a dude in the club for trying to stick his finger down her thong. The police were called. It was ruled self-defense when I pushed for that. It was a whole thing. Still, that story is what gives me hope that she's there fucking them up. I silently send my words of encouragement into the air for her.

"I doubt the Prey Hounds are so well organized with less resources," Row murmurs as he studies the tracker. "Which means it's likely the Predator ones holding them if they are. I can't track them, though."

"That wouldn't be surprising to find them behind it," I sigh. "I'm going to slaughter the whole lot of them."

The Grand Master hums. "I do love when you sound all bloodthirsty."

I shoot him a glare, but he only smiles in return. Asshole.

We're traveling this time along the inside of the moon-shaped island, just inside the tree line so we're not easy to pick off by either enemies or patrol boats. That's where we decide to camp the first night when the sun disappears, and we can no longer see as easily. Travelling in the dark is deadly when there's a master trapper on the island. And according to the Grand Master, he's definitely still alive.

As I look through my backpack that Creed had been carrying, I'm relieved to find the sleeping bags we'd packed. Oh man, this is like luxury after how we spent the last time on the island. We each have one, having brought another for Jiro. All but the Grand Master. He notices the lack of another, but doesn't say anything. Instead, he settles onto a dryer spot on the ground, close to me, and relaxes as if he's on a feather top bed. He wouldn't have a right to be mad anyway. He's supposed to be the enemy.

"It's almost peaceful, isn't it?" he asks, staring up through the trees to the few stars he can see.

The leaves cut off a lot of the view, but with the sounds of the nighttime critters and the sight of the stars, I can see how there's this illusion of peace. The stars are one of the things I thought I might miss of this island.

In the distance, someone screams, and the Grand Master grimaces. "Well, somewhat peaceful."

"I don't know how you can even think it's peaceful with the amount of death that stains this island," I grumble, settling onto my sleeping bag. "This place should be the most haunted island in the world."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asks, looking over at me in a way that makes my breath hitch.

"I don't not believe," I shrug, glancing away. "Hopefully, if they're real, they haunt your ass rather than mine."

We fall silent for a few minutes. The stirring of bushes has me pulling my gun, but I relax when it's only Jiro returning with a few crabs to cook over the fire. I'd forgotten that he'd gone to grab them, so riled up by the Grand Master and his penetrating eyes that I'm on edge.

"You know," I comment, glancing over at the Grand Master again. "Someone as evil as you shouldn't have such pretty eyes."

He grins at the half-assed compliment. "If you think I have pretty eyes now, just wait until I'm looking up at you while I'm down on my knees with my hands behind my back."

Creed hums where he stokes the fire. “She does love when we’re on our knees.”

I scoff and glare at him. “We’re not discussing this right now.”

“It’s hard to miss the marks on your neck,” the Grand Master purrs. “A sign, no doubt just for me. I like it. I want to add my own.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Achilles growls suddenly, sitting up and scowling at us. “Just kiss the bastard already or I will. This tension is killing me. I’m about to fucking burst!”

I laugh at the expression on his face, at his hardness in his lap. “Then go ahead,” I tease, calling his bluff as I gesture to the Grand Master. “If it bothers you so much.”

But Achilles apparently doesn’t care. He gets up on his knees and moves closer to the Grand Master, confidence in his posture. The Grand Master, to his credit, doesn’t move. In fact, he leans in as Achilles grabs him by the back of the neck and literally plants his lips on his, their tongues tangling. I blink in surprise as I watch them, as they kiss far deeper than I expected. Heat fills me a split second later and I’m clamping my thighs shut. Fuck. I didn’t expect to be turned on by the sight. I didn’t expect Achilles to rise to the bait.

They break apart and Achilles shifts back to look into my eyes. “I’m comfortable in my sexuality, rabbit. Are you?”

He crawls over the ground to me and kisses me next, feeding me the taste of the Grand Master and making me gasp into his mouth. It only gives him access to deepen the kiss, to wind me up so tight, I’m panting when he pulls back. “Now him,” he commands as he gives me room. “Fair is fair.”

I glance over at the others, nerves skittering along my skin. “But—”

“Not a single one of us is bothered by it,” Creed says. “At this point, he’s practically muscling his way into our family, the bastard. Go ahead and kiss him.”

Jiro and Row nod, knowing this was bound to happen at some point.

Row grins and starts to chant. “Kiss him, kiss him, kiss him.”

The Grand Master flashes me a crooked grin. “I think they want you to kiss me, little goddess.”

Scowling and bending to a pressure I kind of like, I growl, “fine,” and lean over to him.

I intend to just give him a little kiss, a peck on the lips that will satisfy the others and not make me too nervous, but the moment I lean in and our lips touch, before I can pull away, the Grand Master snaps out his hand and wraps it around the back of my neck, holding me still. He forces me to kiss him longer, turning it more sensual when I fight for a second and then settle into the kiss, into the softness of his lips. It’s a consuming kiss, one that feels like it steals my soul through my mouth. As he kisses me, I find myself leaning in deeper, my tongue tangling with his as his fingers clench at my nape. My hands press against his chest, a soft moan slipping out that he swallows and claims for himself. I get so lost in the kiss that when he pulls away, I blink open in surprise, staring into his eyes behind his mask. My heart is beating a million miles a minute, thumping so hard in my chest, it’s as if it demands to get out of its cage. My eyes are wide as I stare at him. Fuck, it shouldn’t feel like that with him. It shouldn’t feel the same as it does with Creed, Row, Achilles, and Jiro. He’s supposed to be the enemy.

“Christ, even I want to fuck him after that,” Creed jokes.

And the tension around us breaks. Something settles between us as we all share a good chuckle and I return back to my sleeping bag. It’s not exactly trust but something else, a bond built in the middle of survival and fire.

I glance over at the Grand Master where he’s touching his lips as he stares between the fire and me, as if he’s remembering my taste, branding it into his memory.

The promise in his eyes as ours meet says there’s more to come.

And I’m not sure if I’ll ever be prepared for it.

SIXTY-SEVEN



If those dots are the women, they haven't moved. It's like the Hounds have them trapped there somehow and they can't run away. I have no doubt that Crystal could escape if she wanted to—there's so much of her history I don't even know—but she would never leave the other women there, so I'm betting that's why she stays if that's the case. She knows I'll be coming for her.

The coconut crabs continue to follow us. They kept trying to come into the camp last night so someone not only had to look out for enemies, but also for the hungry crabs. It was a constant struggle to swat the fuckers away.

We have a whole day of trekking through the jungle, moving at as fast of a pace as we can manage while also still checking for traps. We run into a whole handful of them, some more sophisticated than others, but luckily, we have Achilles, Creed, and the Grand Master who seem adept at spotting them. I understand why Creed and Achilles know, but the Grand Master is still a mystery.

At least this time, the clothes I wear actually fit me. There was nothing worse than surviving the island with boots too big. I'd had blisters there for weeks, my feet so sore, I'd had to soak them in Epsom salt for a while. Eventually they'd healed and this time, the boots don't rub the same. That or my feet are tough enough to handle it this time. I don't know. I'm also happy to have our supplies, plenty of protein bars in the backpacks so I'm not always starving. Creed keeps insisting on carrying mine which annoys me, but he makes me feel

better by handing me more guns to carry, so I feel like I'm still pulling my weight. It also means they're quickly accessed if danger appears.

We run into a few more prey who take off running the moment we appear as well as some Hounds who scream and take off before we can tell which side they're supposed to be on. Apparently, they hadn't wanted to come to this island, or they were initiates, and they're a bunch of chicken shits. I don't know which they are. We don't get time to ask them before they disappear.

It isn't until we step through the trees and encounter a group of bodies that I grimace.

"The smell," I grunt, covering my nose with my arm.

There's not just one body. There's a whole group of them, prey. They're laid in a pattern and at first, I think it's a game until I realize they'd all sat in a circle...

... and held a gun to the bottom of their chin.

The pattern is because they'd been in the circle when they'd done it.

"Looks like they considered suicide the better option," Achilles comments, and despite his penchant for being an asshole, he seems genuinely sad about that fact. They'd chosen to go out on their own terms rather than face their death at the hands of someone else. They'd banded together and gone.

The cruelty this island breeds is horrible.

Coconut crabs are scattered throughout the bodies, picking at them. Judging by the pieces missing, these people had done it as soon as they were dropped on the island, but it must have been after the Predators were dropped. I would have noticed something like this on the TVs. The fact that Hounds on Predator Point are watching this on screens and drinking and laughing about it makes me sick.

"Your people deserve everything coming to them," I say, glancing at the Grand Master.

He glances over at me, his eyes tracing my face. “All monsters deserve to be treated as such,” he says. “It’s up to someone strong enough to take them down.”

Us. We’re going to do that. No matter what the Grand Master says. I’ve come to realize he’s really nothing but a symbol, a title that controls the Society but not really. Someone else controls him and I don’t know who. We’ll have to search into that later.

We start walking again, giving the coconut crabs a wide berth. Row stares nervously at them. “I’ve never liked those things.”

Jiro pats him on the back. “Just remember you ate them last night. You’re at the top of the food chain.” He hesitates. “Unless you break a leg. Don’t do that.”

Row dances quickly passed them and we keep moving.

We’re parting the trees, moving at a pace that should be good, when I hear the sound of something flying through the air. I don’t know what instinct I have that has me moving, but I duck a split second after I hear it and flinch when a literal fucking arrow embeds in Achilles’ shoulder. He grunts in pain and jerks back against a tree, his eyes going down to the arrow now sticking from his skin.

“What the actual fuck?” he growls, reaching up to touch it and flinching when it causes pain before quickly taking cover. “There’s a fucking archer?”

Creed, Jiro, and Row all take up positions behind other trees, their weapons drawn.

“Get down,” the Grand Master orders, making sure I’m covered behind a tree. “I’ll take care of it.”

The Grand Master steps from behind the tree and *moves*.

“Holy shit, do you see that?” I ask, leaning out to watch as arrow after arrow tries to hit him and misses. He darts at a speed he shouldn’t be able to move. I’ve only ever seen Jiro move that fast and that was from years of training. What sort of training does the Grand Master have?

We all watch as he sprints through the trees and then scales one as if he's a fucking animal. He just climbs right up it like he has claws. There's a small scream that cuts off and then a loud thump as a body falls from the tree and another when the Grand Master drops out after.

I'm staring at him in surprise as he walks back up like nothing happened, a new fancy bow and quiver of arrows in his hands.

"There's a reason he was chosen as the Grand Master," Row whispers. "I don't know what they are, but I suspect I has something to do with how easily he took out that archer."

The Grand Master grins as he stops in front of us and holds out the bow and quiver to Row. "I suspect you're better trained at these than I am."

Row reaches out on instinct to take them. "What do I look like? Robin Hood?"

The Grand Master raises his brows and glances over at all of us, what he would consider the poor, before looking back at Row with an expression that says exactly what he's thinking.

"Yeah, well..." Row grumbles before slinging the quiver on his back. "I'm not that good."

"Then stab people with the arrows. They're weapons." The Grand Master looks over at Achilles and the arrow sticking out of his shoulder. "You can pull that out. It stopped at the bone so you're being saved a world of pain. It'll hurt like a bitch, and you need to wrap it, but you'll be fine for a day or two before infection sets in."

Achilles grits his teeth before he reaches up and yanks the arrow out, air rushing through his teeth at the pain. He tosses it to the ground and scowls when Creed steps close and starts wrapping it, prepared with some bandages from the first aid kit.

"Can you move your arm?" Creed asks.

Achilles does and he cringes. "A little bit, but I certainly don't have free range of motion like before."

Creed nods. “At least it was your left arm, yeah? You can still punch motherfuckers with your other one.”

He gets it all patched up and nods to us that we can go. “All good.”

“We won’t be here long enough for the infection to set in,” I say, nodding. “It’s gonna be fine.”

I think that if I say the words out loud, it’ll be like some sort of self-fulfilling prophesy, that it has to happen since I said it. One can only hope.

By the end of the day, we come upon the cave Jiro, Creed, and I had stayed in with a sigh. We’re covered in sweat and a little grimy, but luckily there’s a small stream nearby that we’re able to clean up in before settling in for the night. In here, we can have a small fire without as much worry of being seen, which means we can leave it going for longer. We always have to kill it after we cook outside.

“Watch the crabs,” I grunt when one of them tries to sneak in. “Sneaky bastards.”

“It’s like being stalked by the slowest zombies,” Row comments. “Like no matter how far or fast you go, they’re always right behind you.”

“An apt description,” the Grand Master nods.

“We need two lookouts tonight,” Jiro says, stoking the fire.

“I can start,” Row offers as he sighs. “Might as well stay up a bit longer since the crabs have me on edge.”

Achilles sighs. “Since I won’t be able to easily participate in the festivities likely to take place in here, I might as well join you.”

I glare at him. “What festivities you think are happening?”

Achilles wiggles his brows at me. “Don’t pretend we can’t all feel the tension hanging between y’all. Jiro and Creed won’t ever leave you alone with him, so I suspect something awfully deprived will happen in here shortly.”

I sniff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But my eyes trail over to where the Grand Master is watching me, his eyes bright as they reflect the fire.

“Sure,” Achilles says, standing. “Whatever you want to believe, rabbit.” But he still comes over and presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Behave.”

“That’s unlikely,” I grumble.

“I know,” he teases and then follows Row to the front of the cave, out of sight of us.

We all fall into silence except for the crackling of the fire. No one moves, each of us trying to distract from the quickly rising tension in the cave. Fuck. I feel like I’m under a microscope and though the others all swear it’s okay, there’s a little bit of fear there, too. Fear that they won’t like it. Fear that they’ll leave me.

“Little rabbit,” Jiro murmurs and I glance up at him, his eyes dark despite the fire flickering. “Let the worry go. You won’t get rid of us so easily.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?” I rasp as I wring my fingers together.

He smiles gently. “It’s written across your face. We all knew this was going to happen. Only you were too stubborn to see the connection.” He shrugs. “Besides, you were right. He will be a great tool.”

The Grand Master grins where he’s sitting on the other side of the fire. “You’re welcome to utilize me in any way you wish.” He leans closer to the fire, and it highlights his face like he’s a devil. “Whether you’d like me to devour you until your legs shake and you flood my tongue with your release, or you’d like me to fuck you until you beg me to stop.” He shrugs. “I’m not particular.”

The laugh comes out when I don’t expect it to and I’m shaking my head in answer. “You lay it on real thick sometimes, you know that?”

He shrugs. “I have something else thick for you.”

I grin. “It’s no wonder you and Achilles get along. You’re both assholes.”

The worry disappears and I’m suddenly just sitting in this cave, around a fire, with three very sexy men, all of which want me. And we’re about to march into another gun fight. Hell, we don’t know what will happen. I could still end up killing the Grand Master before this is all done.

But I have to admit it to myself. I want him. I want him just as much as I want Creed, Jiro, Achilles, and Row. I want him to be around, to be a part of all this, despite who and what he is.

Perhaps that’s some dangerous part of me playing with death, like a child playing with a cobra, but it doesn’t change the facts. It just took me a while to understand it.

It isn’t just about sex. There’s a connection here that goes deeper than power. That same connection hit me when I first meet each of my men. We’d accepted it. They’ve accepted this. So then why did it take me so long to do the same?

“Go on,” Jiro whispers, leaning over to run his hands along my thigh. “Dominate him and make him beg for what he wants.” He presses a kiss against my neck, making me shiver. “Ruin him.”

The Grand Master straightens in anticipation, his eyes fierce. “What will you have me do, little goddess?”

This is a pivotal moment. Whatever I decide now will change things, hopefully for the better, but you never know. There’s no instruction manual for life, and if there was, I’d like to see the fucker who wrote it and demand why this island exists in the first place. So, I watch him carefully for a moment, taking in this heavy weight, and then I let it.

My decision is made.

I grin at the Grand Master and stand, my chin tilted up.

“On your knees, wraith.”

SIXTY-EIGHT



The Grand Master doesn't move for all of two seconds, as if my words shock him. But once it clicks, he's immediately moving away from the fire and kneeling in the dirt, the knees of his slacks getting ruined. He doesn't protest, doesn't complain. He kneels just as I ask him to.

I move over to him, stroke a hand along his shoulder, caress him. He tilts his head for me to have better access, letting me circle his throat, letting me touch at my leisure. "Good boy," I purr, and he tenses, his muscles bunching beneath my fingers. When I move in front of him again, he's hard in his pants, his length begging for attention.

Creed hovers on the other side of the fire, his eyes alight with his arousal. This is the sort of thing he loves, watching me play, watching me consume someone else.

"Would you like to watch or participate?" I ask him, coming over to stroke my hand over him.

He tips his head back, his hands settling on my waist as I stand in front of him. "I think I'm going to watch, stroke myself as you fuck them, and then when I'm close, I'll bring it to you so you can swallow every last drop." I lean down and kiss him deeply, his tongue tangling with mine and driving my need higher.

"Deal," I pant when I pull back.

I don't have to ask Jiro what he wants. He's already stripping his shirt off, revealing the tattoos he sports hidden away beneath it. My pussy clenches.

He grabs me and walks me backward, beside where the Grand Master kneels, and then he presses down gently on my shoulders, so I kneel before him happily, right beside the Grand Master. I'm still in charge, but I know exactly where this is going. The moment I'm on my knees, Jiro unbuttons his pants and frees his cock, letting it hover in the air before me. I waste no time sucking him into my mouth, needy for the taste of him. His hands go to my hair, and he gently fucks me there, not hard like Achilles, but just enough to stroke himself. I know if we continue like this for long, he might come, and I don't want it to end so fast.

I reach to my side and take the Grand Master's hand as I suck Jiro, forcing him to cup my breast and squeeze. His breath stutters as he leans closer, as he starts to press kisses against my shoulder as he kneads my breasts. I pop from Jiro's cock and turn to him, offering him my lips. He doesn't hesitate, his lips moving over mine forcibly, desperately, a deep kiss that makes my toes curl.

"Strip," I command him, even as Jiro pulls me back to my feet and starts pulling my clothing off. He turns me so that I'm facing the Grand Master, pushes me slightly forward so my back is bent, and positions himself at my core. He waits until the Grand Master is completely undressed save for his mask before he spears inside me. I gasp as I grab at the Grand Master, as I drag him in and press his face against my chest. He immediately starts sucking and kissing at the skin he can reach, biting gently before dropping to his knees so that he's face to face with the sight of Jiro fucking my pussy. He leans in and flicks my clit with his tongue, drawing a soft cry from my lips. My eyes dance over to where Creed sits, his cock out just like he promised, his hand stroking up and down as he watches us with half-lidded eyes.

"Up," Jiro says, and somehow the Grand Master seems to know he's talking to him. He stands quickly and Jiro jerks out of me before pressing my hips forward toward him. "Fuck her."

The Grand Master hesitates, staring at me in adoration that's a little twisted, a little sick, before he grabs me and jerks

me against him.

“I’ve dreamed of the day I get to fuck you,” he rasps. “I’ve wanted to be so deep inside you and paint you with my come that I become a part of you.”

“You going to talk about it or fuck me?” I grunt, desperate to be filled.

His hand latches around my neck and squeezes even as my back presses against Jiro’s chest. Jiro’s hand comes up and circles my neck too, tucked over his hand, a warning and a promise. The grand Master leans over me, his eyes bright, as he bares his teeth.

“Burn me with your fire, little goddess.”

He sinks his teeth into my collarbone, making me cry out in pain just before he spears me with his cock. It turns into a cry of pleasure as he stretches me. He’s longer than I expected and when he pulls out and slams back in, there’s plenty of length to stroke inside me. Jiro trails his other hand along my ribs, cupping my breasts, stroking me as the Grand Master starts to relentlessly fuck me, a desperation in his movements that makes me frantic. He reaches down and lifts one of my legs, letting him slide deeper.

“You don’t come unless I say you can,” I growl at him, latching on his neck the same as he has on me. I squeeze just a little. The Grand Master’s pace stutters and he moans as my fingers clutch at his neck. I reach up with my other hand as he lifts my other leg up for a better angle, supporting me. I’m overcome with pleasure but still, I touch the edge of his mask, tempted. I could remove it right now, could see his face. He doesn’t stop me, so focused on marking me, on consuming me whole.

“Yes, little goddess,” he purrs in agreement, happy to let me dominate him despite his title and power. “Make me yours. Let me belong to you. Rip out my throat if you must.”

I tilt my head to the side and Jiro kisses me as I touch the edge of the thick mask, dancing on the edge of that temptation. The Grand Master continues to fuck me, as they both drive me

wild with their mouths. Jiro's cock dances against my back side, begging for attention, and when he gently presses it against my ass, I relax, letting him do as he wishes while supported between them.

"Yes," I hiss, tilting a little. "Take me. Fill me up."

"With pleasure, little rabbit," Jiro purrs in my ear.

He works himself inside my ass, stroking in small amounts, while the Grand Master fucks me hard from the front. I come as he stretches me, my eyes rolling back as I shake, but they both hold me up, keeping me from collapsing.

"You're so beautiful like this," the Grand Master growls. "A deity that deserves to be worshiped. The next time, you'll be covered in the blood of your enemies, dripping with it, and we'll add our come, adding to your victory, pleasure you like the goddess you are. I'll lick you clean."

"Yes," I pant, the violent imagery his words create making my pussy clench around him. Jiro groans in my ear as he settles deeper inside after giving me time to relax before he starts to stroke in long hard thrusts. I'm sandwiched between them, fucked from both sides, each of them biting and running their teeth and tongues along my neck and shoulders.

"Fuck," Creed rasps from the other side, his eyes open just barely as he strokes himself faster to match our rhythm. "You look so perfect fucked like that," he growls. "So fucking perfect."

I'm crying out with release after release, giving myself over to them, bringing the Grand Master into our circle, marking the occasion with my pleasure.

"I knew you had room in your heart for me," the Grand Master snarls. "I told you that you would love me. Just as much as I love you. As much as I want you." He reaches between us and feels where he's pumping inside me, presses his fingers there and strokes. "Fuck yes. My filthy, erotic little goddess."

I can feel myself tightening, another orgasm coming, larger than all the others. "Come," I command. "Now. Both of you."

Jiro picks up speed and starts to fuck me just as fast as the Grand Master, both of them sliding in and out, stroking me until I'm practically sprinting toward release. I'm crying out, ecstasy starting with a small shake and then spreading, my toes curling. The Grand Master slams his lips against mine just as I shatter, swallowing my scream as he pumps inside me and then bottoms out, holding there as his warmth coats my insides. He moans against my lips, the sounds echoing around us and heightening my own pleasure. To hear him so open, so desperate for me, makes some predator inside me purr in pleasure. Jiro tumbles over right after, his soft groans in my ear adding to it as they both still, breathing hard against my skin.

Jiro pulls out first, leaving me on the Grand Master, desperate for breath. The Grand Master leaves himself inside me and carries me over to Creed where he's groaning, his own toes curling as the corded muscles on his neck stand out. He kneels down and, still nestled inside me, turns my head toward Creed's cock. I open my mouth immediately, sucking him in, even as the Grand Master still rocks against me. Creed groans and comes, filling my mouth, caressing my jaw as I swallow.

"Good girl," he pants, jerking in my mouth. "Such a good girl."

I release him when he's finished and look up at the Grand Master. "Is this what you wanted?" I ask, my voice husky. "Is that what you've been searching for?"

"Yes," he growls, jerking me close and holding me. "For all my existence." He buries his face in my chest, holding me, and I glance at Creed and Jiro surprised, as the Grand Master says, "I belong to you, little goddess. You can do with me what you please. Kill me or keep me." And then softer, almost too difficult to hear, he adds, "I love you with all the twisted parts of me."

I'm caught off guard, not sure how to respond, so I just wrap my arms around him and hold him back. Creed wraps his arms around me from behind, and then Jiro. And then Achilles and Row appear to do the same, until we're all hugging.

And something falls into place. Like a piece we'd been missing.

And holy shit. This is not what I expected.

This is not what I expected at all.

SIXTY-NINE



I wake up sometime in the bright beginnings of the morning to take over the watch shift. I have the last shift and when the Grand Master sits up to take over with me, two parts of me war with each other. One says we shouldn't trust him and another says we should. Though we've had sex and there's some sort of bond here, things are still complicated and I don't know how this will all work. Surely, I can't remain in a relationship with someone who rules over the secret society I'm trying to take down. I doubt my influence will go very far, especially knowing there's someone or something over the Grand Master. When Jiro settles onto the sleeping bag and watches me, I hesitate.

"Should we trust him?" I whisper as the Grand Master moves to the front of the cave.

"He will not harm you," Jiro comments, his eyes already closing for a few more hours of sleep. He falls asleep before my eyes and I frown. If Jiro trusts him, then there's no reason for me not to. He's a much better judge of character than I am.

So that's how I find myself sitting in front of the cave with the Grand Master, both of us staring into the last remaining hours of darkness before we have to actually fight. The stars still scatter the sky despite it now being more of a darker blue than black, painting a scene that's almost beautiful. We're only an hour's walk from the airstrip and the moment the sun rises, we'll be preparing for that, but for right now, all is still.

The Grand Master still hasn't removed his mask and it's strange to think that I care for someone so strongly when I've

never seen his face. Somehow, in all these games, I've fallen for the bastard and that really pisses me off, but the need to see his face is strong. How can I love someone without knowing what they look like? It just doesn't make sense. But getting him to remove it...

"If you glare at me any harder, you might make me spontaneously combust," the Grand Master comments with a smile.

I blink, not having realized I was looking at him at all. Turning away, I focus on the trees. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I understand your conflict, little goddess." He tilts his head back against the stone. "I've already had the same conflict in my own mind many times over."

"So then why are you here?" I ask. "Why risk whatever it is you risk by being here?"

He laughs and looks down at his hands, hands that have touched me, hands that have killed. "Even before you touched me, before you knew me, I belonged to you, little goddess. All you had to do was look at me."

Scoffing, I shake my head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Doesn't it?" He reaches between us and picks up my hand, runs his rough fingerprints along mine, stroking my skin. "We both have blood flowing through our veins, a network of tendons that stretches through our bodies. We carry bones and meat and are the same, and yet not. But you and I, our histories of hunting and being the beast, our stories of being the prey, makes us perfectly complement each other."

"You speak in riddles," I grunt. "Why not just say what you mean?"

His lips quirk up as he turns to look at me, those eyes catching mine and holding. "There are teeth marks on everything I've loved, little goddess. But you, you bite back. Despite your misfortune, despite being dropped on an island that could have killed you, you took that trauma and wrapped it around your shoulders like a shawl. You love fiercely, protect those you care about with your life, and me? I still

don't know how to love you without swallowing you whole. But loving you, first from a distance and then up close, it's an experience, erotic and religious. One of us wants to eat, and one of us will be swallowed up in little pieces. The interesting part is we might never know which is which."

I'm listening to his words, to this poetry he spews, and it's fucking endearing. God, I've never heard such pretty lines before. "Before you were this person, before you wore the mask, were you a poet?"

A soft chuckle. "No, little goddess. I am only a man in love. All beasts become poets when they give their heart to someone who can stomach it." He glances over his shoulder, toward the opening of the cave. "Just ask your men."

"You speak of me so highly," I whisper, my fingers twitching in his as he continues to run his thumb along the back of my hand.

"You were made in violence and bloodshed, little goddess. You've been through so much and yet you've still turned out to be this fucking masterpiece of a human being. This experience didn't break you. It built you, made you ruthless, beautiful. All I've ever wanted is to be warmed by your fire." He smiles. "Even if I get burned in the process."

I can't help but smile back at him, and at his words, I shift a little closer so we're shoulder to shoulder, touching. "You know," I say, glancing at him. "If we don't die, this is going to be one hell of a story."

His eyes flash. "All the greatest loves end in violence. Perhaps, ours may outlive this island." He leans closer. "In the meantime, I plan to surrender to the hurricane of loving you, little goddess, while I still can."

Perhaps, in this life, we exist to bleed in some way. Bleed love, bleed life, bleed death. But in some way, we also exist to burn. We dance with the devil, dance a little too close to the fire, and we can either be warmed by it, or burned by it.

Here, with the Grand Master looking at me as if I'm something holy and magnificent, with Creed, Achilles, Jiro,

and Row all feeling the same, I realize I was never meant to survive alone in that fire. I've always been meant to dance in it.

With them.

It's another knife. I can feel it. It's a different knife than what I expected, but a knife still. I can either trust the knife or use my own, but in this moment, I don't care.

Some things are worth spilling blood for.

I lean over and our lips meet in a kiss far too gentle for the both of us, but we linger there, in that gentleness, in the hopes that the love between us is equally as gentle.

How silly.

To capture a predator, you can't remain the prey. You become their equal in every way. My violence will meet his violence. Bloodshed is inevitable.

But for now, here in front of this cave and a larger fight to come, I relax into his claws.

The disaster of burning will come later.



When the sun crests the sky high enough to cut through the trees, we pack up our things and head out on the three hour long trek that will bring us to the airstrip. It's mostly spent in silence, a companionable comfort between us now that feels both natural and not. I revel in that feeling, in this complete change in outlook. I didn't know this was what we needed, that he would fit into our family like a puzzle piece we'd been missing and hadn't known, but now that he's here, it feels right.

I'm still a little unnerved by that.

We're about ten minutes out from the airstrip when we first start hearing their sounds, those of the Predator Hounds partying it up. We sneak the last little way in, growing closer, moving at a much slower pace so we're not discovered.

I glance at Jiro. “You already took out your tracker, right?” I whisper, making sure my voice barely carries.

He nods and I’m relieved to know he’d already thought of that. These Hounds will definitely have trackers. A few of them are initiates, but most of them appear to be the assholes that drank and partied on Predator Point, the ones who signed up for fun. They just moved the party here apparently.

There’s about a dozen of them from what I can see as I peer through the trees, watching them. They sit around with their guns on their laps, laughing and being boisterous as if we’re not on an island covered in death. I search the group, looking for the women or whoever the cluster of dots are, but I only find them when I broaden my gaze and start looking further away.

“There they are,” I whisper, watching the women where they sit huddled together, tied up. I’m grateful we’d been correct in our hunch, and they were easier to find. I can see Crystal there among them, her hair wild, her eyes fierce and narrowed. Her ropes aren’t done as tightly as the other so maybe she’s already managed to get them untied and is working on the others. Still, they don’t have any hope of running away from twelve goons with guns. “I only see four though.”

The fifth appears a second later when a Hound comes dragging her out from behind a wall of crates. She’s crying, her makeup smeared all over her face, and a savagery fills my blood that I can barely contain. He tosses her toward the other women and starts tying her up.

“I’m going to use your intestines to strangle you,” Crystal spits at him, immediately shifting closer to the girl who sobs.

The Hound, an idiot with a death wish, laughs as if it’s a game. “I’d like to see you try, whore.”

Crystal only grins and it clearly unnerves him because he stumbles away back to the others. “That one is batshit crazy. You sure we want to keep her around?” he tells the others.

“Who? Crystal? Hell yeah we do. Didn’t you get a taste of her on Predator Point? She’s fucking fantastic at fucking. Magical pussy, that one,” another answers. “If you’re not man enough for her, just say so.”

“Which one of you knows legit bird calls besides the one you taught me?” I whisper, glancing over my shoulder. “Creed?” He nods. “Crystal is an avid bird watcher—”

“She’s a what?” Row asks, confused.

“Yeah, I know. She’s a walking oxymoron. Regardless, she’ll recognize most birds. I need you to make a bird call that sounds like something not found on these islands, something she’ll know isn’t from here,” I tell Creed.

“Got it,” he whispers back and then sucks in a breath. A high-pitched sound comes from his throat and echoes around us, but it doesn’t stand out from the rest of the nature sounds. That’s the goal.

I watch through the trees as Creed makes it again and Crystal’s head snaps up, her eyes roving over the tree line, searching. When she focuses on where I am, I gesture in the hopes she can see. She stops, focuses, and her smile turns saccharine.

Creed makes the sound one more time and she nods.

“She’s aware,” I whisper. “She’ll get them ready.”

The Grand Master shifts. “Perhaps, in this, I can be of use?” He offers me his hand. “Would you like to put your acting skills to use, little goddess?”

“Oh no,” Creed growls. “You’re not walking her into that nest of assholes.”

“I agree,” Row says, nodding. “There’s at least thirteen of them. This isn’t Predator Point. They could turn on you and then she’ll be in the line of fire.”

Achilles is watching us, his eyes dancing between me and the Grand master. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“What?” Creed spits quietly.

“No, he’s right,” Jiro adds. “Walking Billie in there will make it appear like he’s bringing a gift. They won’t shoot him right away. They all know she’s the one who wrote his name down.” Jiro looks at the Grand Master. “But they will shoot you the first opportunity they get. This will need to be a distraction and not something long term.”

The Grand Master nods. “We’ll walk in, I’ll boast and offer to tie up Billie with the other women. I’ll pretend to tighten it and walk back to the others. The moment I’m there, you’ll come out and Billie will get the women into the trees.”

“It’s a solid plan,” Row says, grimacing. “I don’t like it.”

“If Billie gets hurt, I’m gonna gut you,” Creed hisses at the Grand Master.

The Grand Master just nods. “I would let you.”

This time, when he offers me his hand, I take it and stand up. I hand my rifle to Creed knowing I can’t walk in with that on my back. The handgun, I tuck into my cargo pocket rather than the holster for it.

Jiro wraps rope around my wrists to make it look like they’re tied together and then I’m being tugged through the trees, behind the Grand Master as if I’m his prisoner.

“You’ve started the party without me?” the Grand Master asks loudly as he strolls forward, dragging me. I stumble to make it look good, my face twisted into a mask of hatred.

The Hounds immediately lift their guns, but when they find the Grand Master towing me along, the one who seems in charge tells the others to lower their weapons.

“Grand Master,” he says. “We weren’t aware you were keen to join us.”

“I’ve been chasing after this one, determined to capture her.” He gestures to me where I stumble after him. “A game of cat and mouse if you will. This cat finally caught his mouse.”

I glare at the men, at the way they size me up, and they laugh.

“She’s a feisty one,” the others laugh. “Have you used her yet? I bet she bites.”

“Indeed,” the Grand Master nods. “I have a nasty bite mark on my arm to prove it. It adds to the allure though.” He glances at the other women. “What say you I tie her up with your other conquests and we can discuss how the game is going?”

“Yeah!” One of the men shouts, but just as the Grand Master is turning to take me to the women, the lead Hound stands.

“Hang on.” The Grand Master freezes and looks at him quizzically as he strolls forward. He stops just in front of me and grins. “I think, before you tie her up, I’d like to fuck a goddess.”

Fuck. That’s not part of the plan.

The Grand Master glances at me and seems to make a decision. “Sure. You want to take her somewhere—”

Apparently, he had full faith in me gutting this man.

“No, no, no,” the Hounds says, shaking his head. “Right here. Just in case my boys wanna join in.” He grins and reaches forward, grabbing my tit through my clothing. The Grand Master tenses just the barest amount, enough that I notice but not enough that they would. “Think she’ll scream for me?” His hand moves lower, along my stomach, prepared to reach through my pants.

Oh, hell no. This isn’t going to happen. I jerk my hands apart and go for my knife, ready to stab this motherfucker right in the gut, but just as I raise my blade...

... the guy gets a blade to his eye socket.

I stare in shock at the gruesome picture as the guy kind of hovers there for a second, as if his brain hasn’t quite caught up with the knife embedded in it.

“No one touches my goddess,” the Grand Master snarls and then twists the large hunting knife in his skull before yanking it out. The Hound collapses at our feet.

Why the fuck is murder so fucking sexy? Holy shit.

“Go!” The Grand Master orders, pushing me toward the women the moment the others realize shit just went south.

I don't ask questions. I immediately sprint for them just as bullets start flying through the air, my men coming from the tree line and firing at the remaining Hounds. I glance over my shoulder once to see them making a dent in the assholes, before I slide to a stop in front of Crystal. Some of them are screaming at the sound of the bullets, but Crystal is already tugging their ropes loose, her eyes fierce.

“The calvary is here, ladies, just like I said they'd come! Time to pull up your thongs, perk your tits, and get out of dodge,” Crystal tells them. Miraculously, every single one of the women nods, stops screaming, and follows her direction. I'm herding them through the tree line a few seconds later only to find Crystal not with us. I whirl, searching for her, and find her rushing into a literal rain of bullets.

“Crystal!” I growl. “Now isn't the time!”

“It's always time for revenge,” she snarls back just before she fucking tackles the douche bag she'd threatened earlier like a fucking linebacker. The man flies off his feet with a scream and before he even hits the ground, she's already stabbing a blade she stole from his belt into his stomach and wrenching it up. I watch in horror as she slams her hand into the gaping hole, literally drags out his fucking intestines out despite his screams and frantic clawing, and wraps them around his neck.

Creed stops what he's doing to stare at her with same expression of horror I wear. “What the actual fuck?”

“He deserves this, okay?” Crystal snarls. “Focus on your own deaths.”

The girls are crowded against me, three of them hiding their eyes from Crystal's gruesome display, but one of them watches with rapt attention. The one who'd been dragged out by him. She watches, her eyes wide, before the tiniest of smiles tugs at her lips.

The words burst from her lips like water busting a dam. “Strangle that bastard, Crystal! Rip his cock off!”

Crystal is happy to oblige, stabbing her knife into his groin over and over again while she strangles him. When the man stops struggling, his sounds dying off, Crystal stands and wipes her bloodied hands on his shirt. It doesn't remove the stains, her arms up to her elbows coated in blood, but she doesn't seem to care. At the exact same time, the shooting stops and my men all stand around assessing the damage.

“Phew!” Crystal says. “Job well done, guys. Y'all killed it! Well, we killed them. You know what I mean.”

I step out of the trees, my eyes wide. “Crystal, what did you say you did before dancing?”

“Oh, I didn't,” she replies brightly before kicking the dead body. A man with his fucking intestines wrapped around his throat and his dick shredded to pieces. “Anyways, what's the plan now, boss lady?”

I blink and remind myself never to get on Crystal's bad side.

“We should try and flag down a patrol boat—” Row starts saying, but before he can finish, his satellite phone starts ringing. He frowns and tugs it from his belt. I watch as he puts it up to his ear. “Hello?” A pause. “It's for you,” he says, handing it to Jiro.

Jiro takes the phone and doesn't say anything, just listens. He curses and tosses it back to Row before gathering up supplies. “We have to go. Now.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, gesturing for the other women to come with me.

“The research facility. We must reach it before three a.m.,” he replies, shouldering his backpack.

“That's a long ass walk to worry about booby traps and shit,” Creed grunts. “It would normally take twice as long as that timeline to reach it.”

Jiro nods. “I suggest we move as quickly as possible.”

“Why is that?” I ask, sensing the panic in his shoulders. He’s not showing it in his expression, but I can feel it in my soul. It’s become easier to read him now. “What’s happening at three a.m.?”

He meets my eyes and I know what he’s about to say isn’t good. Whoever called him had given him a tip, but it’s a tip we’re going to have to follow.

With a deep breath, he says the words that fills the rest of us with the same panic.

“There won’t be an island left after that,” he rasps, his eyes hard. “Now, move.”

SEVENTY



I t's a race against the clock. We only have fifteen hours to make it to the top most part of the island, back to the testing facility. It doesn't seem like it would be that difficult considering the island isn't super large, but we still have to worry about booby traps, other Hounds, and prey who don't know the true danger. Jiro put a countdown on his phone that he watches closely as we practically jog through the forest. The women stumble between us, many of them unable to run as fast as the rest of us want to go. They're scared, but they keep up. A few of them are strong-willed enough that they usher the other ones. I don't think Crystal even breaks a sweat as she jogs and makes sure the others all keep up.

"Was the call your people?" I ask Jiro as we move, trying to even out my breathing.

He nods. "There was no guarantee the *Yakuza* would interfere, but they've put a plan into place."

"And what exactly is that plan?" Creed grunts, wiping sweat from his brow. "Jesus, this is like basic all over again."

"They've placed bombs around the testing facility, specifically in the rooms inside."

I nearly fall when I miss a step at his words. Only Achilles' arm on my elbow keeps me upright. "They're going to blow up *the nuke*?"

"Holy shit," Row grunts. "We should probably pick up the pace."

The Grand Master doesn't say anything as he runs, his eyes flicking between our conversation and me. I suppose he probably already knows about the nuke and if there are bombs being placed around it, that's going to be bad.

"That means we have to be far away," Achilles growls. "Your people are going to get us off and away?"

"There will be a boat waiting for us," Jiro affirms. "As long as we get there before three a.m. and not a second too late."

"Motherfucker," Creed grunts. "Come on, everyone. Move."

We come across bodies and traps, nearly getting taken out by a few of them, but as we run, we come across some prey, too. Each time, I yell at them, "get off the island! It's going to blow!" They either shoot at us anyways or hide. We won't be able to save them all if they won't listen. Slowing down to convince them means our death so I can't do much more than warn them. They'll have to do with that what they will.

Eight hours in, we come across another large trap. Creed nearly loses his head to the contraption, ducking just in the nick of time. I scream when it barely misses him reaching out only to relax when he stands back up with a look of fury on his face.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Creed growls. "I'm sick of these motherfucking traps! We're not even here to fuck with him."

"Then why are you all carrying guns?"

We all have our weapons trained on the man who appears a second later, his hands free of any of his own. He raises them in the air, watching us, and god, does he look like a mountain man. Scruffy beard and hair, plaid shirt, heavy hiking boots. He looks like he was meant to set traps.

"You the one leaving all the gifts for us?" I ask, watching him carefully.

"Not for you, per se. I've watched you lot kill plenty of the bad guys, so I realize these aren't for you." He tilts his head. "What I'm curious about now is why you're running so fast?"

I lower my gun and the rest do the same. “The island is going to blow. If you want to live, I suggest you come with us.”

“Blow? As in blow up?” His brows shoot up. “How you managing that?”

“There’s a nuke on the island,” is all I offer, and he blinks.

“Well, shit. Goddamn. What are we waiting for then? Lead the way!”

And that’s how we convince at least one other prey to join us. He talks up a storm as we run, and he surprisingly helps the women along when they stumble. When one starts crying and saying she can’t run anymore, the man puts her on his back despite his slight frame and runs with her. He acts like it’s easy. Clearly, I’d underestimated him because of his appearance.

The sun goes down and we still keep running, forcing our way through the thick foliage that isn’t meant to be run through. It takes pure will to keep pushing despite the exhaustion nipping at our heels.

At midnight, we don’t slow, moving as quickly as possible, Row leading the way with a compass and a flashlight. We don’t run into too many more prey after midnight, so I start shouting into the dark just in case someone can hear.

“Follow us to get off the island. The island is going to blow.”

I repeat myself every few minutes until my voice begins to crack and grow rough, and then Creed takes over, shouting for those close enough to hear. When a few people out of the darkness join us at the back of the group, we tense, but keep running. They don’t attack. They’re just other prey trying to escape.

The last hour is a mad scramble. We’re so close I can hear the ocean waves in the distance. But it isn’t until the last fifteen minutes that we burst through the trees and I breathe a sigh of relief. Now all we have to do is go over the dune and the boat should be right there.

“We made it,” I pant, shoving my hair back from my sweaty face. “Thank fuck.”

“I wouldn’t be thanking anyone just yet,” a voice says, before bright lights come alive and we’re staring at a large group of Hounds. This time, it’s a mixture of prey and predator, choosing to band together rather than fight. We’ve made a lot of enemies. “This is our territory now and you’re trespassing.”

I growl in frustration. “We don’t have time for this, you fuckers.”

Jiro glances at his phone. “Fourteen minutes.”

Which means we have to act fast.

“Get down,” I tell the women, shoving those closest to me down as we fire at the large group. I stalk forward, firing with my handgun. One Hound pops up on my right and I turn, pull the trigger.

CLICK.

“Fuck!” I throw the gun at him, knocking him upside the head and pull my hunting knife, shoving it into his heart and yanking it out. I turn...

... and come face to face to a Hound with his rifle trained right on me.

Time slows. Everything grinds to a standstill in my mind as the Hound grins and fires. I watch the bright flash from the muzzle in the dark, once, twice, three times, the rifle spitting them fast. I stare at the bullets heading right for me and know this is it. I’m not fast enough to dodge these. Fuck, this is my end. There’s nowhere to go.

But at least the others will be safe. At least I gave them all a fighting chance.

Just as I’m resigned to my fate, as the bullets come speeding toward me, my view of them is blocked. It all happens so fast, at a speed I can’t possibly fathom, and yet for me, it moves in slow motion. Perfect so that I can remember each and every millisecond.

I watch in horror as the Grand Master throws himself in front of me, as the bullets hit him once, twice, three time, jerking his body with each impact. One of the bullets goes through completely and grazes my thigh, leaving behind a nasty, burning wound that nearly makes my knee buckle. Instead, the Grand Master slams back into me and we both go down. Someone screams. Others start shouting, and then I hear the asshole who'd shot us shout and choke off.

“Billie! Billie! Are you hit?” I can hear Row shouting. It's echoed by Creed, Jiro, and Achilles, fear in their throats.

A choked sob escapes my throat as I drag myself out from under the Grand Master throw myself above him, looking him over.

All three bullets meant for me hit him, striking at the most vital places.

“No!” I growl, tears spilling over my lashes when I see the blooming flowers across his front. One in his lower chest. One in his stomach. One in his upper thigh. “No! Don't you do this to me!”

He's awake, his pale green eyes focused on mine. “Billie?”

“I'm here,” I croak. “Come on. Get up. We have to get on the boat.”

Hi lips curl up just a little as he glances down at his wounds, his body already almost too weak for such movement. “You and I both know this is the end of the line for me, little goddess.” He coughs and a trickle of blood appears at the corner of his lips.

“No! Get up, you fucking bastard!” I snarl, trying to hoist him up, but he's too heavy. He grunts in pain, and I stop, desperate to save him but not wanting to cause him more pain. “Creed! Creed, I need you!”

There's still shooting around us, but I'm trying to put pressure on the two worst wounds, trying to keep as much in his body as possible. His hand reaches up and caresses my face as I drop tears on him, as I sob. “We can get you help!” I cry, trying to find a way to lift him. “A hospital,” but the

words, I know, are useless. The nearest hospital is too far away for wounds like these. There's no way to get him there without him bleeding out first. "Get up!"

His laugh is weak. "There's no help for me, little goddess. You go. Save yourself. Save the others. Do what you came here to accomplish."

As he speaks, his voice weakens, his hand starting to fall from my face, so I hold it against my cheek, his blood smearing on my skin.

"Bullshit," I spit through my sobs. "Stand your ass up. You can't die now, not after everything!" But my words don't hold much venom with the sobs cutting them up.

"You know the rules of the island, Billie," he rasps, more blood trickling from the corner of his lips. "I'll never make it to a hospital. I don't have that kind of time." His eyes soften. "Besides, remember, I deserve to die."

"I changed my mind," I croak. "Get the fuck up. You can survive this. Creed!"

Creed appears and his face twists when he sees the shape the Grand Master is in. "Billie—"

"No!" I hiss. "We can carry him to the boat. Help me!"

"Five minutes," Jiro says as he appears beside Creed. He scans the Grand Master, assessing the wounds, and he goes preternaturally still. "Billie—"

"Get the fuck up!" I start screaming roughly at the Grand Master. "You can't die like this! You can't save me and then die because of it!"

His fingers against my face twitch and his eyes shine. "My only regret is that we didn't get more time, little goddess," he rasps. "But all the greatest love stories end in violence." His voice is so weak. So goddamn weak.

"Four minutes," Creed growls, reaching for me.

I'm sobbing, desperate for him to live, but I know what this is, and the others are waiting. If I don't get on that boat,

they won't either. I can't let them die, too, not when they're depending on me.

I reach up and touch the edge of his mask, push at it. When he doesn't stop me, I shove it off completely, revealing his face to my eyes. He's as handsome as I expected, his pale green eyes bright in a chiseled face. His eyes meet mine as I burn him into my memory.

"Not like this," I rasp, choking on my sobs.

He pulls me down for a brutal kiss that makes him grunt in pain. I can taste him and the metallic flavor of blood before he pushes me back.

"Three minutes!" Jiro snarls.

"Go, little goddess," he tells me. "This was always my fate. Be free of me. Be free of this place. Be free of these people."

I cry harder as Jiro grabs me and starts to drag me away. "I love you," I choke. "You fucking asshole, I love you!"

"And I will carry that love with me for the rest of my existence," he croaks, but his words start to choke off. "I love... you, too."

"Two minutes!" Achilles shouts as he comes to help drag me.

I can't look away as I'm dragged up the dune by Row, Jiro, Creed, and Achilles, each ushering me to move. My last image of the Grand Master is of him slumped on the sand, blood pooling around him. Just before we go up and over, he blows me a kiss, his last one.

I don't notice much as I'm being dragged toward a large boat. The other people with us have already been hoisted on. As we step into the water, it lights up with bright blue phosphorescence, something in the water making it glow as we disturb it. I can't even focus on the beauty of it as Achilles scales the boat and reaches down for me, dragging me up as the others follow. The moment the last person's feet are off the sand and being pulled up, we're speeding away from the island as fast as the boat will go. It's a little crowded, but the triple

engines on the back of the boat are large enough to cut through the ocean waves at a pace that makes me hold on for dear life for fear of flying off it. The entire time, I keep my eyes on the island, on the way I can see boats moving around it in a panic until I can't, until I can only see the shape of the island itself, a dark mass sitting in silence. We don't slow until the island is a blip in the distance, until I can only make out the tiniest image of it. I can't make out any details, only that there's something there.

A man appears from inside the boat and claps Jiro on the back in familiarity. He says something in his language before switching to English. "We got the list of people given to us off of Predator Point over an hour ago. They are safe."

"My dad?" Row asks, his eyes conflicted. I know he wants his dad to make it off, but he doesn't look hopeful. He's a Hound, but still his father. In the end, he'd helped us with our plan.

Jiro nods. "As well as all the workers still there, including the rest of the working girls?"

"Yes," his friend adds. "Only Hounds were left, those complacent. Some of them left the moment the hunt began and there are many who are no longer on the islands. It seems there were a great many yachts missing once we arrived." He glances down at his watch and sighs. "Five seconds," he says before gesturing to the blip of an island in the distance. "Watch."

I focus on it, fresh tears rolling down my face as the numbers count down.

Five. I choke out a sob.

Four. I grab onto Jiro beside me and hold on. Creed, Achilles, and Row press against me.

Three. I wipe my face and force myself to see, to witness.

Two. I stop breathing.

One. Silence.

The explosion looks just like in the movies, just like the documentaries we watched. The explosion lights up orange and red, a mushroom cloud rising above it and spreading. I don't hear any sound for a few seconds and then it reaches us, a great boom that's followed by a wave that rocks the boat.

No one will be able to survive on Prey Island, not in the direct blast zone. The part of the island not affected by the blast will be impossible to survive on. Predator point will fall into the contamination zone just like the rest of Prey Island, the radiation eating up everything after the blast shreds the windows. It'll all be gone, unusable, wiped from the Hound Society's pocketbooks.

Prey Island, wiped away.

Predator Point, given back to the radiation.

As if nothing ever happened.

The island that destroyed me and then remade me is gone.

The image of the man who'd sacrificed himself for me burns into my mind.

Only then do I look down and realize...

...I'm still holding his mask in my hand.



I'm a little numb and so thoroughly exhausted by the time the car pulls into the driveway, I can barely keep my body up. The gate with the large M opens as we pull in, allowing us passage up the gravel drive. I stare out the windshield as the horses come running to the end of the fence, throwing their heads back in the wind and whinnying so loudly, I can hear it in the car. Rolling down the windows, I listen to their welcome song, to their excitement as we return after...

How long has it even been?

I've lost count of the weeks, of the days.

The sound of their happiness eases something just a little in me but I suspect this heaviness will last for a long time, if not forever. Beside me, Achilles and Row offer me comfort. Row and Jiro take the front seats, each of them obsessively checking over me as if I could fall apart at any moment. I won't.

I'm forged from stronger stuff than that.

Besides, I've already fallen apart so many times since then that I'm spent, a little bit hollow where that puzzle piece had fit in before being violently ripped away. His mask is in my bag, a reminder of him that I don't know if I'll ever look at again without pain.

As we draw closer to the house, the woman I'm eager to see comes running down the porch and to the drive, her eyes bright with tears. She doesn't know what to expect, or who all will step from the car, but as soon as Creed throws the SUV in park and gets out, she's rushing over to throw her arms around her son. And then each of the men in turn.

I'm the last out of the car, my body sore from healing. The bullet graze on my thigh was deeper than I'd thought and Achilles still has a wound in his shoulder. Apparently, Creed suffered his own graze along his hip. Jiro and Row are untouched. We'd all been tended to in the Marshall Islands to avoid infection.

The moment I'm out of the SUV, Debbie wraps her arms around me and I break down at the comfort she offers. She pats my head, hugs me tightly, in an embrace I didn't know I needed from her as I sob. I guess I have a little more breaking left in me after all.

"Oh, darlin'," she whispers. "It's okay. It's all going to be okay." She leans back and searches my face, her own tears trailing down her cheeks. "Did you make them pay?" When I nod and snuffle, she tugs me in again. "That's my girl."

The sound of the horses in the background settles me, and despite the tragedy we'd just come from, it feels nice to be home.

Home.

God, it feels so nice to be home.

SEVENTY-ONE



Five Months Later

The small café in Creed's town is new and business is booming. The cashier I once warned against taking money from the Hound Society, now runs it with the money I'd given her. It's a humble place with a few tables set up outside that are meant to be brought in during the winter. The coffee is great, far better than I expect, and it gives me great pleasure in knowing I had a hand in her achieving her dreams.

I sit at one of the outside tables, glancing up at Jiro where he waits for his tea, before focusing back on the paper in front of me. Row is in there, discussing business with the owner, thinking about investment opportunities.

The headline on the newspaper reads, "Extensive cleanup still underway for Marshall Islands." The news had broken almost immediately. There isn't a nuclear explosion without every major government coming to check it out. They'd quickly ruled it an unstable nuke that had been lost and forgotten, that the elements had somehow been right for it to explode randomly. There'd been no mention of the Hound Society, no mention of the expensive facility on Predator Point or the trashed yachts half sinking there. There'd been no mention of the bodies.

The conspiracy theorists are all over the internet, talking about it, claiming things like the government is testing it and doesn't want to own up to it or that something bigger was happening. None of them even come close to the truth.

Hell, there are obituaries all over the internet, for CEOs and heirs, for rich assholes who did nothing more than exploit people. There's a massive shift in the powers of the world, companies scrambling for replacements. They blame some sort of mythical disease, scaring the population, but the consensus between them became bad champagne apparently during a party that took them out. An easy cover story that as preposterous as it sounds, the public is happy to believe. But the news only talks about the rich ones. They never talk about the ones who were kidnapped. Just other missing persons who are never found. Dozens more cold cases.

We're sitting here only because I'm supposed to be meeting with a realtor about possible land opportunities an hour away in one of the major cities in Tennessee. He's looking for the perfect place to put a new club, another Prey Island. I'll need something closer if I'm going to live in Tennessee full time. The club in Denver has already been given over to Holly. It was her wedding present, given to her just after I'd stood beside her and held her flowers while she married the man of her dreams. I'd cried. She'd cried. It had been a whole thing.

I'm putting roots down around me slowly. All of my men have done the same. Row and Jiro have had to leave a few times before returning, handling their business. Jiro was my biggest concern, but because of his part in crippling the Hound Society, the *Yakuza* has decided to allow him free reign, to do what he pleases.

His debt has been repaid.

"Bullshit," I grunt with a shake of my head and start folding the newspaper back up. What a load of crap. I'm just setting it down when the chair in front of me scrapes out and someone sits down. I expect it to be the realtor and so I straighten with a smile...

...And freeze.

Pale green eyes.

I gasp and stand, my chair falling backward with the force. "How—"

“Good evening, little goddess,” he says, still casually sitting in the café chair. “I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced. I saw you sitting here and just had to come over.” He offers his hand to me, and I stare at it. “You are?” he asks, his eyes crinkling.

With a shaking hand, I reach toward him, touch my fingers barely to his before he latches on, tugging me closer to lean over the table. He’s real. Solid.

“Billie,” I rasp, shock still having its hold on me. My heart is beating a million miles a minute as I meet his eyes. “You?”

He smiles, and it brightens his entire face, a face I can see, a face that’s burned into my memory. “You can call me... Wraith.”

And then he’s tugging me into a tight hug, embracing me right here on the street in front of a tiny café. Jiro and Row come pushing out the door, matching expressions of shock on their faces as they stare at the man holding me.

A Wraith.

My wraith.

“How?” I ask, wrapping my arms around him just as tightly. “How are you here? You died!”

He releases me and leans back but he doesn’t let go of my hand. “A powerful man never reveals his secrets, little goddess.” He boops me on the nose. “Or should I call you a wolf?”

“I don’t care,” I say, staring at him with wide eyes, happy but so incredibly confused. I glance at Row and Jiro, confused. “Are you still the Grand Master?”

He shakes his head. “That position was forfeit the moment my mask was removed. As far as anyone is concerned, the Grand Master died on that island.”

“And yet you still let me remove your mask.”

His eyes crinkle. “A dying man realizes his priorities rather fast.” He presses a kiss against my forehead. “Our

fairytale may end in blood and gore one day, little goddess, but I refused to let that be our end.”

I stare at him, at the way he’s smiling. “The boats came and got you, didn’t they?”

His smile softens. “The medical team made it in time to save me, though it was very close. We were speeding away when the blast nearly sank us, but we made it. They saved me at the risk to their own lives. A final parting gift from the Hound Society, I suspect.”

And then I’m being tugged away from the café, Jiro letting me know he’s messaging the realtor to meet at a later time. There are things that need to be discussed before that.

Phantoms to reacquaint with.

The newspaper remains on the table, left behind for anyone else to pick up. It doesn’t matter. None of it does.

All that matters are the new obstacles that will come our way now, of things we may face in the future.

Invictus maneo.

I remain unvanquished.

We remain unvanquished.

We’ve all been to hell and back for each other, and I think we’d all be willing to take another trip if we had to, but for now, we have time for each other, time to heal and learn, to become the family that we created in the bloodshed and tragedy of Prey Island. But god, I look at them and I know. Hell isn’t the end. It isn’t hellfire and brimstone. It isn’t even sin and desperation, or the end of days.

Hell is just another place I guess I’ll go as many times as needed...

...to keep them all warm and loved and mine...

EPILOGUE



One Year Later

You'd think a marriage ceremony between six people would be a shitshow, and honestly, the planning of it was a nightmare. While we can't legally all marry each other, we can hold a ceremony that means a lot to us, and so we bring everything together and manage to have a private little ceremony on the ranch, surrounded by our closest friends and family and the horses.

Larry walks me down the aisle, doing his best to sneak bites out of my bouquet.

I hadn't known how something like this would work, but it starts with each of my men saying their vows before it'll be my turn. Dressed in black rather than white, I walk down the aisle to them, gesture for Larry to head off into the pasture, only to watch him nibble on some more of the decorations. We all laugh and let him do his thing. Flowers are temporary after all, and we'd made sure none of them would be toxic for horses.

Debbie stands next to Holly and Mark, all them smiling brightly at me. Crystal is here, too, dressed to kill in a form fitting dress that highlights her body. The only problem is, I don't look at Crystal as a quirky dancer anymore. The image I have of her is her gutting a man and strangling him with his own intestines. It's kind of hard to forget something like that.

Row's father is here, his signature glass of brandy in his hand. He seems genuinely pleased with everything despite this

disruption of tradition, and he'd personally shook my hand when he'd arrived at the ranch to thank me for his son still being alive. Row's nanny, Linda, he'd spoken about is here, too, her crinkled eyes bright as I walk down the aisle.

We'd invited Achilles' parents, too, but the invitation had been ignored. Just as well. If I met them, I might have killed them for harming a little boy so thoroughly he can't stand closed in places.

Fred, the trapper we'd met on Prey Island, officiates the wedding. In a weird twist, he's become a very close friend and he's apparently ordained in... something. He's from Tennessee himself so it was a no brainer to invite him along for the ride.

Row comes forward to take my hand and I stare into his bourbon-colored eyes. "Billie," he breathes. "You are already my wife in many ways, but here, in this moment, it will mean something more. I vow to be your confidant when you tire of the others' games. I vow to hide you away in a pillow fort when you're overwhelmed. In the end, I could never have imagined I'd find someone like you, soft enough to be a rabbit and fierce enough to be a wolf. I only hope you continue to love me as much as I love you despite the trouble my father will cause." I laugh and glance at Senior where he's raising his glass in salute. "My vow is that you will never be alone in this world, and you will never be unloved."

He presses a kiss to my lips and backs away, allowing Jiro to take my hand in turn.

"I once told you when you tried to hold my hand that they're too stained to touch you. You took my hand anyways and made sure I knew it wasn't a stain that you cared to avoid. Our relationship will be much like that, built on who we are and what we were made to be. I vow to hold you close, to love you, despite the blood on my hands, despite the blood on yours." He presses a kiss to my knuckles and then to my lips before backing away.

Achilles swaggers up, a grin on his face despite the fact he's wearing a suit and no shoes. "Billie," he says, and the tone he uses makes everyone laugh. "Billie, Billie, Billie. We

all know you were in love with me from the moment you saw me.”

“No,” I laugh. “Not in the slightest.”

“And that you dreamed of the day I would return those affections.”

“Where are you going with this?” I ask, my eyes crinkling.

He smiles that lopsided smile that makes everything inside of me twist. “What you didn’t know, is that from the first moment I saw you in that jungle, determined to live, strength in your shoulders, I knew you were the one for me.” My heart stops. “I never told you that I wanted to kiss you the first time you fired an insult right back at me. Or that I would follow you to hell and back. I mean, we did that, a few times now.” Winking at me, he tugs me in close. “I vow to keep loving you, to find my way home when I have to breathe the open air. Because, Billie, you are not my cage, you are my sky and all that hangs in it.”

His kiss is far sweeter than I’m used to from him, and I lean into it, letting his words wash over me. Words that mean so much more than they seem.

Creed clears his throat and Achilles steps back with a grin, passing my hand to him.

“Well, here we are,” Creed says. “I imagined a wedding with you since the beginning. Perhaps not one so unconventional, but really, this is perfect. I’m not so great with my words as the others are, so I figure I’ll just tell the truth. Billie, I vow to always love you, no matter what atrocities you commit, no matter how badly you burn dinner.”

“It was one time,” I say, grinning. “And it was your fault I was distracted.”

“Excuses,” he teases. “I vow to take you horseback riding at least once a week or else Larry will have my head.” As if in answer, the horse snorts from the pasture and we all laugh. “I vow to hold you when your nightmares come knocking and love you through them until you recognize you’re safe. I promise to be a part of this home, to be a part of our family,

and to never stop fighting for us.” He presses a kiss to my lips. “I love you, Billie.” A whinny. “And Larry loves you, too.”

My eyes are welling up now at their vows, at the sweet words I hadn’t expected. When Wraith walks up, my hands are shaking as he takes them.

“Little goddess, there is never a moment in which I do not adore you,” he begins, his eyes alight with fire. “I demanded to be in your fire, and though you fought it, we eventually made it here. I dreamed you. I wished for your existence, and in the end, I nearly died to be with you. That’s gotta count for something, right?”

I grin and squeeze his hand. “It does.”

His smile curls his lips. “You are a great and terrible thing to love, a free spirit that burns with the fire of a thousand suns, that demands loyalty and safety, and I want you to know that even with a knife to my throat, I would still love you. Even if you decide I’m not worth your time, I will still love you. Even with my heart in your hands and my blood on your fingers, I will still love you.”

“A bit gory, that one,” Holly murmurs behind me.

“You get used to it,” Debbie laughs. “I think it’s romantic.”

“I am nothing in my soul if not obsessive,” Wraith continues. “And you, little goddess, will be my forever obsession. I love you with everything I have, and I will love you when I am nothing, and when the world ends and all is lost, I will still love you then.”

His kiss is just as sweet, just as touching, and when he steps back and I gesture for them to all come forward, I make sure I’m touching each of them in some way.

“I’ve survived Prey Island. Twice, and still, you assholes are able to make me cry,” I choke, wiping at my face as they laugh. “Okay, okay. Here is my vow to each of you.” I take a deep breath. “I vow to be your safety and your freedom, your savagery and your strength, whenever you may need it. I vow to fight for each of you, to love each of you, until long after our existence is gone. I vow that I will never take your love for

granted, that I will cherish it until my last breath, and when we become ghosts, if I'm the first one, I'll haunt each of you with the vehemence you expect." More laughter. "You found me in the midst of battle, of survival, and we became a family." I glance at Wraith. "Some at different times, but a family nonetheless. So let us look toward the future together, as one family, one unit, forever and always. I love you all."

We're holding on tight, determined to feel the love around us.

"By the powers invested in me," Fred says. "I now pronounce you, uh, husbands and wife. Yeah, that sounds right. Gentleman, kiss your bride so we can dig into that awesome looking bar-b-que over there. I'm starvin'."

Laughing, I throw my head back and relish this feeling. This is it. This is the moment I've waited for my entire life. Somehow, I had to go to a horrible island in the middle of nowhere to find it, but I did it. I made it.

I thought I knew how to play this ridiculous game.

As it turns out, it was never a game. It wasn't meant to be.

It was just destiny.

That bitch...

...that, beautiful, conniving, bitch...

"Let's go eat some bar-b-que!" I shout, smiling so wide, my cheeks hurt.

What often feels like the end is only the beginning though.

This is our beginning. This is our everything. Where the past looks into the future. Where we are in love, and whole, and perfect.

And we are...

We are...

We are...

ABOUT KENDRA MORENO



Kendra Moreno is secretly a spy but when she's not dealing in secrets and espionage, you can find her writing her latest adventure. She lives in Texas where the summer days will make you melt, and southern charm comes free with every meal. She's a recovering Road Rager (kind of) and slowly overcoming her Star Wars addiction (nope!), and she definitely didn't pass on her addiction to her son (she did). She has one hellhound named Mayhem who got tired of guarding the Gates of Hell and now guards her home against monsters. She's a geek, a mother, a scuba diver, a tyrannosaurus rex, and a wordsmith who sometimes switches out her pen for a sword.

If you see Kendra on the streets, don't worry: you can distract her with talks about Kylo Ren or Loki.

#LokiLives #BringBackBenSolo

To find out more about Kendra, you can check her out on her [website](#) or join her [Facebook group, Kendra's World of Wonder](#).

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