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CRYSTAL ASH



# HARMLESS

VENGEFUL GODS MC BOOK 2

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## CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains mentions of:

- suicidal thoughts
- sexual assault against men and women (not graphic or on the page)
- Gun violence and gunshot wounds
- misogynistic and abusive thoughts toward women

## RECAP OF FAITHLESS (VENGEFUL GODS MC BOOK 1)

### **SPOILERS FOR BOOK 1 AHEAD.**

### **MAKE SURE TO READ FAITHLESS BEFORE STARTING THIS BOOK.**

**A**urora “Rori” Wilder, the eldest daughter of Mariposa Wilder and the Steel Demons MC, is 23 years old and secretly in love with her twin brother’s best friend, Torrance “Torr” Knight. While out celebrating her future sister-in-law’s birthday, Rori hears a disembodied voice and sees a white dove that appears to be following her. This spooks her enough to believe she is suffering from hallucinations, and she consults her mother, a doctor, for help.

Mari and her husbands reveal to her that the bird is a god (in this case, a goddess called Astarte), and what she’s saying is true—Rori has been chosen to carry out a mission, just as her parents were guided by gods in a war before she was born.

Rori tells all of this to Torr, who says he is coming with her because he is secretly in love with her as well. As a longtime friend of the family, Mari and her men are pleased that he’s going and their daughter won’t be alone.

Rori and Torr set off on their motorcycles together. They meet Gwen, a publicist working for an elite family in Blakeworth, who tells them they’re going undercover to an exclusive hidden resort that only the ultra-rich know about and patronize. Because of her connections in Blakeworth, Gwen is able to get them in, along with providing clothes and heavy makeup to make them look the part. Gwen is being guided by

Lupa, a wolf goddess who talks to her, just as Astarte does to Rori.

Upon arriving at the Mystic Canyon resort, Rori and Torr, acting as a married couple, immediately find out that the biggest attractions are gladiator fights. Attractive gladiators are also used to provide sexual services, which Rori sees as an opportunity to find out more. She schedules time with a fighter called the Butcher, which pisses off Torr and prompts a period of arguing and silent treatment between the two of them.

The Butcher, whose real name is Santos, actually hits it off with Rori, and they don't have sex during their sessions together. They spend most of their time talking, and Rori meets Tezcatlipoca (Tezca), his companion god in the form of a black jaguar.

Meanwhile, Torr sees a bunch of resort guards beating up a new gladiator, and Torr jumps in to defend him. Torr reveals that he and Rori aren't actually guests but have come to investigate the resort. He says they want to shut down the resort, and the gladiator (known as the Hunter) says he'll try to rally the other fighters.

Torr knows he's on borrowed time since he beat up a bunch of resort staff, so he goes to find Rori, who still isn't keen on talking to him. She does eventually hear him out but has one more appointment with Santos, which she insists on going to in order to warn him that she'll be leaving. This pisses Torr off again.

Rori finds Santos badly beaten and tends to his injuries. They also have their first sexual encounter, in which she goes down on him. With limited time left, Santos reveals he's likely going to be thrown in an isolation cell. Rori reveals that she and Torr are leaving the resort but swears she'll come back for him. Right before they're separated, Santos reveals he was punished because he refused to have sex with someone else.

Rori returns to Torr, where they have a final blow-out of a fight in which their true feelings are finally aired out. Torr has a fear of abandonment, and after having watched him sleep around, Rori never believed he would want anything serious



with her. After all is revealed, they have a passionate night together.

They wake up early the next morning, hoping to sneak out of the resort to gather reinforcements and return later to release the gladiators. They are greeted at the door by Nella, the guest services manager, with an armed guard detail. Nella tells them they're being escorted out of the resort due to Torr's assault on several staff. Rori and Torr agree to leave.

Just as they make it to the elevator, Torr is yanked away, cuffed, and knocked out as they drag him toward the colosseum. When he comes to, he's in a pitch black cell with none other than the Butcher.

Meanwhile, Rori is forced up the elevator and released at gunpoint with threats against her family. She has no choice but to walk away through the desert. She argues with Astarte and heads east. Eventually, she makes it to the old Interstate 80 and calls her cousins to pick her up.

In the epilogue, Hudson, an old friend of Santos and Devin's, has just been raped by a woman and is full of angry, violent thoughts toward women as a whole. He then hears the voice of Tezcatlipoca telling him to hold on and not give up.

HERE IS WHERE HARMLESS BEGINS...

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DEVIN



I flipped one knife in my left hand, catching the handle on every second turn in the air. With my right hand, I moved a smaller blade across my knuckles like my old man had taught me to do with a quarter when I was a kid.

The wooden target, with its faded circles of paint and hundred of tiny nicks on the surface, sat fifty yards away from me, but I wasn't looking at it. I wasn't looking at anything in particular, but I sure as hell was listening.

All of the gladiators noticed Santos' absence. The Butcher was famous in and out of the pit, not that he'd ever wanted the fame. Everyone also noticed that Tezcatlipoca, his jaguar, seemed to hover around me like a shadowy four-legged bodyguard.

I didn't particularly know or care what conclusions the others drew from this, not even if it made me a target. Even if I didn't have a two hundred and fifty pound black jaguar prowling around me protectively like I was his cub, I was the Ghost. No one could touch me.

On top of that, I was annoyed. On edge. If I let one thing get under my skin, I was liable to let one of my knives fly until—oopsie—it landed in someone's eye socket.

Everyone sparring in the pit was talking, except for the one person I wanted to hear from. Aside from my missing roommate, that was none other than the very jaguar currently sitting on his haunches, panting in the sun as he stared out across the sands.

“You know where Santos is. You’re just not telling me.” I caught the knife I’d been flipping and let it fly. The blade hit the wooden target with a thunk just to the left of center-mass. Not bad for throwing with my non-dominant hand, but had I been cool and not so twitchy, it would have hit dead-center. My emotions were getting to me, and that made me sloppy.

I never let anything get to me. My survival depended on my aim, and if my aim was fucked, I was just another corpse in the pit. For four years, the carnage of this place had always passed through me, never sticking with me. Guys disappeared all the time, whether their last act was fucking a guest or bleeding out on the sands.

But never Santos.

We were each others’ anchors here, a friendship made through being forced to endure the unthinkable. First, in that hellhole before the gladiator pit, and then afterward.

It had been three days since he went for a personal appointment with that woman and never came back. Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen her or her supposed husband either.

“Not a peep, huh?” I muttered out of the side of my mouth, the question aimed at the jaguar who was, in fact, not a jaguar.

Tezcatlipoca was some kind of deity, divine consciousness, what-have-you, that was currently occupying the body of a jaguar. He had a connection with Santos, but I had also heard the jaguar speak directly into my mind. What I’d heard sounded like riddled nonsense, but I would have taken anything, even a clue in pig-Latin, to know where Santos was.

Or if he was even alive.

But after three days and counting, Tezca didn’t seem interested in revealing any of that to me.

“Not that it’s important or anything,” I said, approaching the target to retrieve my knife. “But I care about Santos. I’m pretty sure you do too. So, anything you can offer would be great.”

The jaguar moved to the shade next to the row of targets and plopped his belly down in the sand with grunt.

“You’re making it awfully tempting to stab you.”

Tezca rolled over, twisting his spine as he brought his paws up and his belly to the sky.

“Really? You think *now* you deserve belly rubs? Or are you just taunting me?”

He stretched his neck out, offering his chin up for scratches.

“Only if this is an even exchange, cat. I give you scratches, you tell me where the Butcher is. That’s the deal.”

I got nothing. No words, in any case. The closest thing to a response I got was a feeling of frustration, separate from my own. The sensation stroked along my brain, similar to when I heard the jaguar god speak to me. Tezca was annoyed with me, like we were playing charades and the answer was completely obvious to him, but I kept making the wrong guesses.

“I dunno, Tez.” I turned around, stalking several paces away to set myself up for target practice again. “I don’t get it.”

“You’re not the only one.”

I whipped around, knives ready, letting my instincts and keen hearing guide me to my new target—the source of the voice that had somehow managed to sneak this close to me.

The Hunter lifted his chin to give space to my blade that found itself nuzzled snugly against his skin. A red bead of blood welled at my knife’s edge, growing round and dark before it ran a crimson trail down his throat.

“What don’t you get?” I asked him. “That you missed a spot shaving down here?”

“Take it easy.” He held his palms open and out to the sides, while his swallow made his throat bob and press my blade in deeper against his skin.

“You must not know what happens to people who try to sneak up on me,” I mused.

“I didn’t try. I did.” A cocky smile spread across his lips, despite the fact that his life was literally hanging on the edge

of my knife. One wrong move and he'd have another smile right under his jaw. "Guess I'm not that bad of a hunter after all, huh? I caught me a ghost."

"Might need your eyes checked, Hunter. It seems I'm not the one who's caught."

I kept the pressure against his neck rock steady, and the kid finally seemed to get the picture that I wasn't a nice guy and therefore not letting him go.

"Look, I just wanted to talk." He held in his breath, trying not to press against the blade any more than necessary and add to the blood running down his neck.

"I'm not much of a talker." In my spare hand, I brought up my second knife and let it dance across my knuckles again. "I let my knives do the talking."

"I wanted to ask you about the Butcher."

"Why would I know anything?"

Santos and I were careful to not appear outwardly friendly to the other gladiators. Any whiff of friendship would be used against us. We'd seen it dozens of times with the fighters who became close as brothers, or lovers. They had always been set up to fight against each other, one forced to kill the other.

Our mutual survival depended on acting indifferent toward each other. We'd been brought here together and luckily ended up as roommates simply because it was logistically easiest for our overlords. Only in those private moments in our room, lying awake in our beds at night, did we allow ourselves tiny shreds of vulnerability with each other.

It never got sexual, because Santos didn't swing that way and I wasn't going to push that boundary, especially not when he'd been exploited enough by the guests. Sometimes it was a vent session, a mutual exchange of I-can't-fucking-take-it-any-longers. Other times, one of us had to drag the other out of unfathomably dark mindsets. The kind where Santos teased the edge of his machete along his wrists or I stared at my knives a little too long, knowing how easy one stab through the neck would be.

In an environment that was truly every man for himself, we were extremely lucky to have each other. And we made every effort possible to protect this rare friendship we had from outside threats.

Apparently, the fucking Hunter saw right through all that.

“I know you two are tight. You make a good show of not acting like it, but I could see it. Plus, his jaguar’s protecting you.”

I didn’t allow my face to flicker. “Even if that were true, what’s to stop me from slitting you open right now?”

“My value has shot up since I killed the Animal. I’m set to take the Butcher’s place in the next fight.”

“Your head must be all kinds of fucked if you think I care how much money is riding on you.” It was true that I’d get in trouble for killing a valuable gladiator outside of a scheduled fight. Maybe take some beatings, get thrown in the isolation dungeon, yawn. Like I wasn’t already numb to all the punishments of this place.

“And I want to help!”

The Hunter’s last statement was made on a desperate rasp. I didn’t realize I’d pressed my knife in a fraction deeper until I saw he was on his toes, trembling as he fought to keep the kiss of sharpness away.

I pulled my blade back by a hair’s width, using my peripheral vision to make sure no pitmasters would interrupt us. “Help with what?”

“Revolt. Escape. Getting free and telling these assholes where to shove it.”

Only then did I fully pull my knife away, partially out of shock, but mostly out of pity for the delusional bastard. This kid didn’t need me to kill him. If he was being serious, he’d do that all on his own.

The Hunter doubled over, taking his first deep breaths in probably a full minute while he pressed a hand to his throat to stem the bleeding.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Actually, no, don’t tell me.” I held a palm out to him as I turned to face my targets again. “I don’t want to be part of this stupid idea or know why you’d want to get the Butcher involved.”

“I think he’s already involved,” the Hunter wheezed. “Something’s going to happen, or is happening already. We need to be ready.”

“You’re a new gladiator, so I’ll make it clear for you.” I started flipping a knife again, warming up my wrist. “There is no *we* in this place. The moment you start teaming up with people, making friends, they’ll be sure to ruin that by throwing you all in the pit until only one of you survives. That was why you and your three buddies got sent out to fight together. You want to watch another friend you’ve murdered die in your arms?”

There was silence behind me for a while, enough for me to sink three knives into the bullseyes of three separate targets.

“No,” came the quiet answer behind me. “I don’t want to murder anyone. I want out of here.”

“Then *you* will be murdered. Those are your only choices.” I spared a glance at him over my shoulder and actually felt a drop of sympathy for the guy. He was just in shock. Santos and I called it BGS— Baby Gladiator Syndrome. Sometimes the new fighters were in denial, unable to accept their new reality at first. They were desperate for a way out that wasn’t as a corpse.

“No, it’s not anymore.” The Hunter came around to stand in front of me, blocking me from retrieving my knives from the targets. The bleeding on his neck had barely slowed and it continued in a rivulet down his neck and chest. “Listen, I talked to a guy, a guest. Well, he was posing undercover as a guest, but he was here to gather information.” The Hunter leaned in close to me. “He and the woman he came with. They’re getting this place shut down and all of us out.”

I closed my eyes so he wouldn’t see me rolling them, willing myself to have patience with this child of a man. “I’m sorry, but he was lying to you.”

The Hunter jerked back as if I'd struck him. "What makes you say that?"

"Because everyone lies. You think I haven't heard it before? Every once in a while, a guest gets a savior complex and wants to feel good about themselves. So they pony up the cash to bring a hot young thing home." I poked him in the chest as I said that. Yeah, the Hunter was hot, but naivety was such a turn-off for me. "If they happen to choose you, congratulations. You're now enslaved in a fancy house instead of a gladiator pit. And eventually, the novelty will wear off, and they'll get bored of you. Next thing you know, you're starving to death in a dungeon because they don't care to feed you."

He paled but blew out a determined huff. Damn, this kid was stubborn.

"That's not what this is. They're from Four Corners, not this upper class crowd."

I frowned. All I'd ever heard of Four Corners was that it was a pipe dream. A mythical, promised land where everyone had rights. Not dripping in riches, but no slavery either. A place where you could live a normal life, have a normal job, and generally go do whatever you wanted. After what my life had been for the last six years, anything resembling *normal* sounded like a fantasy.

And from what I knew about the guests that came through here, they were allergic to anything simple and normal. Everything had to be extravagant, from their possessions to the stories they told other people. It was that old expression of keeping up with the Joneses, but on steroids. There was nothing in these people's worlds that wasn't a one-up contest.

So, if someone had been wanting to take the Hunter home as a pet, they wouldn't dream of claiming to be from somewhere as mundane as Four Corners.

"Which guest was it?" I found myself asking.

"Uh, dark hair. Good-looking fucker and, like, naturally so. You know how a lot of them look plastic and fake? He didn't



look like that. And I saw him with a woman, also naturally really pretty. She was tall for a girl, short blonde hair. You remember Marilyn Monroe from way back when? Hair and face kinda like that.”

“Fuck.” I tipped my head back to the sky, even though I knew in my gut who they would be.

“What, ‘fuck’?”

“That woman. The Butcher had seen her for...personal appointments.”

“Oh, so they hooked up? Lucky dude. That guy, Torrance, he said she wasn’t actually his wife.”

“He’s not *lucky* to be rented out like a blow-up doll,” I hissed, even though I had an inkling that wasn’t entirely the case with this particular woman.

I remembered when Santos first pointed them out to me, coming down the elevator into the canyon when they first arrived. He kept insisting there was something odd about the couple, although I wrote it off at the time. Tezca had told us to prepare for something, and he seemed convinced it was them.

Santos had been all googly-eyed about that woman, to the point where I’d bet my knives he’d sleep with her for free. He’d been twitchy, nervous, before he left to see her for the first time, and grinning like a cat that ate the canary when he got back. I didn’t ask for details, and he didn’t give them, but it was a hell of a change from the somber, hollow-eyed look he’d have coming back from other sessions.

He’d gone to see her at least two more times, all eager and excited like a kid going on dates. And now he had fucking disappeared.

“I don’t care what this guy claimed.” I shoved past the Hunter, walking up to pull my knives out of the targets with rough yanks on the handles. “The Butcher went to see that woman, and now he’s vanished. I don’t trust her or that guy she came with.”

*You can trust the Light and the Guard.*

The words hit me gently, like someone running their hand over my head, but it was so unexpected that I tripped over air, stumbling over my feet as I whipped around, blades out. When my gaze landed on Tezca, the black jaguar lounging calmly in the shade, that was when my pulse kicked into overdrive.

*The Hunter can be trusted as well, Tezca added. But do not trust the false messenger.*

“The what?” I whispered in disbelief. “Who is that?”

“Hey, Ghost? You alright?”

My head jerked to the side, realizing only then that the Hunter had been speaking to me the entire time I’d been listening to Tezca. “What’d you say?”

“That couple has disappeared too. I’ve been asking around, and no one’s seen them. There was some commotion a couple days ago and someone said they saw those two getting kicked out.”

I refocused on the jaguar, who blinked slowly at me with those sharp, lantern-yellow eyes. *I’m supposed to trust him? And them?* The questions were both wondering thoughts as well as seeking confirmation from the deity within the animal.

The answer I received was not in words but as a feeling so strong, it was almost a physical sensation on my skin. A pair of hands on my shoulders, urging me forward. An overwhelming sense of affirmation that I was on the right path.

I turned to The Hunter, clarity honing my instincts. “We need to talk to the gladiators.”

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RORI



I hobbled out of the bedroom, my feet still tender and aching from my day-long trek through the desert. I went to rub an itch on my nose and winced. My sunburn was peeling, which made my skin itchy as hell, but the new layer underneath felt tenderized and near painful to touch.

My two cousins, LJ and Carter, oh-so-helpfully watched me wobble from their guest bedroom to the kitchen table like a newborn gazelle.

“How do you feel?” The question came from Carter, the older of the two brothers.

“‘Bout as good as I look. Did you leave me any coffee?”

“I’ll get it.” LJ jumped up from the table, rounding the kitchen counter to grab a mug.

He was always a sweetheart, the sunshine to his brother’s brooding dark cloud. I didn’t know what Carter’s deal was. Maybe my aunt Noelle and uncle Lark were stricter with him, since he was the first-born and all. They all seemed happy when our families got together, though.

LJ placed a mug of coffee and two slices of slightly-burnt buttered toast in front of me, and I beamed up at him. “Thanks, LJ. Did you know that you’re my favorite cousin?”

“Aww, you’re mine too, Ror.”

Carter just rolled his eyes as his little brother plopped back down in his seat. “So what the fuck’s going on?”

The single bite of toast I'd taken turned to sawdust in my throat, and I swallowed it down with lukewarm coffee. "I'm gonna need your guys' help. Probably the Valkyrie Network's help too."

"I gathered that. But I need to know what exactly I'm helping you with."

I swallowed again, steeling myself as I recalled everything that had unraveled so quickly in the last few weeks. My eyes lifted to the window at the sound of fluttering wings. It couldn't have been very loud, but I was attuned to that infernal bird and couldn't do shit about it. Sure enough, Astarte, the goddess inhabiting a white dove, peered at me from the windowsill.

"Torr and I came upon something terrible that's being kept secret. We went undercover and it's..."

"Where *is* Torr?" Carter pinned me with a hard stare. "Why were you alone when we picked you up?"

"He got..." I tried to force another breath through my closing throat, "...captured."

LJ reached out, putting his hand on my arm. "Captured where? By who?"

I went for the glass of water on the table, gulping it down with the realization that I was probably still dehydrated. My cousins waited patiently as I took my fill and recomposed myself. Torr needed me to have my shit together. So did Santos. I would never be able to get them out if I was a blubbering mess, so I zipped it all up and breathed until I was calm enough to speak.

"There's a resort hidden in a canyon in the desert. The super-rich pay a lot of money to go there, I'm talking Blakeworth elite types."

"Rich people doing shady shit, what a surprise," Carter drawled.

"What are they doing there?" LJ piped up.

I took another calming breath, making sure not to close my eyes, or else I would see nothing but the carnage of the gladiator pit, the abuse that had been done to Santos, and Torr being dragged away from me.

“They enslave people,” I choked out. “Mostly men to fight as gladiators. The, uh, attractive men are also pimped out to the female guests as sex slaves. There are female staff there too who could use help.” I rubbed my forehead, as if I could wipe away my maid Paige’s look of terror when she first talked to me, all because *she* believed she talked too much. “Basically, these ultra-wealthy folks get to do whatever they want to those beneath them.”

“Fuck,” LJ breathed, eyes sliding toward his brother.

Carter only cracked his knuckles. “So we’re fucking up some rich assholes’ playground and getting Torr out? I’m in. What do we need?”

A smile pulled at my lips for the first time since my cousins had picked me up. No, longer than that, probably. The last time I smiled was probably when Torr and I were naked in that suite.

But I loved that Carter was a man of action, always ready to go. He and LJ were the right people to call for this job. Carter wasn’t even 30 years old, and yet he was one of the most accomplished riders of the Valkyrie Network, an organization that smuggled people out of oppressive territories, like Blakeworth, and brought them to safe havens like Sevier and Four Corners.

I shook my head as I smiled, waving my hand in a *no* gesture at him. “Not just Torr. Everyone.”

Carter lifted one dark eyebrow. “And how many people is *everyone*?”

I did the quick math in my head. “All the gladiators, plus service staff, might be about...thirty?”

“Thirty people!” LJ exclaimed.

“I don’t actually know how many gladiators there are. They... you know, lose so many and then bring in more.”

“Where do they get more?” LJ asked, peering at me with all the curiosity of a child.

“Prisons, it seems. When they’re not kidnapping men off the streets.”

“A better question is, even if we *can* rescue thirty fucking people, where are we going to put them?” Ever the logistical one, Carter cocked his head as he continued staring at me. “The most we’ve ever moved at one time with the Valkyrie Network is ten people.”

“I was hoping we could use the safe houses,” I admitted. “If they’re not currently occupied.”

Carter scrubbed his face and blew out a long breath. “One of them might be free. But it still only has four rooms to sleep in. Even if we pack ‘em in, we can fit maybe ten or twelve people in there before shit gets too crowded.”

“I’ll figure something out,” I insisted. “I’ll call Aunt Kyrie. She might be able to house people somewhere too.”

“She’s definitely gonna be pissed about something like this happening so close to Sevier,” LJ mused.

My aunt Kyrie, a former governor of Sevier, was the one who started up the Valkyrie Network. Her three husbands, my uncles who formed the Sons of Odin MC, were in charge of finding riders daring and brave enough to sneak into war-torn territories, many of which ran like dictatorships and even forbade their citizens from leaving said territories. Hence the need for bikers who were proficient with weapons and could ride fast. Although there had been a few close calls, no riders or refugees had ever lost their lives since the Network’s inception.

Each of my dads had volunteered to ride for the network a number of times, rotating so three of them always stayed home with my mom and us. My mom hated the danger but knew how important the work was. On her days off, she and some colleagues would give free checkups to new refugees in Four Corners. In one form or another, everyone did their part to help out.

A few years ago, all four of my fathers decided they were finished riding for the Network and passed the torch to the younger generations like Carter. Daren, LJ, and I would be eligible to volunteer when we turned twenty-five, and Torr had just become eligible this year.

Now that my uncles were older as well, they had recently hung up their cuts and promoted their most trusted Sons of Odin members to run the Network. Rumor had it that Carter was rising up the ranks and would likely receive a President patch within the next ten years.

Multiple branches of my family, from my blood relatives to my biker family, had all dedicated their lives to rebuilding our post-Collapse world. My aunt Kyrie had dedicated most of her life and her political career toward helping others, so she definitely wouldn't sit on her ass and do nothing about fucking Mystic Canyon Resort.

“So what can you guys help me with?” I looked back and forth between my two cousins. “I need riders, firepower, vehicles to transport people. We're going to need food and water too. Probably clothing.”

“Firepower for sure.” LJ nodded enthusiastically. “Vehicles too. Uncle Jandro actually just fixed up and donated some vans to us—”

“Hold your damn horses.” Carter cut him off with a slapping palm to the shoulder, then looked at me. “I'll have to check our inventory, see what the Network's plans are for the next few weeks. We have resources already allocated for certain missions, and you're kinda asking for stuff with zero notice or intel, Ror.”

“I know, and I'm sorry. I'm not trying to take away from other people in need.” My fingers curled on the table, nails biting into my palms. “This just feels so urgent because Torr is there. And...”

“And someone else?” Carter's eyes narrowed with the question. For being so damn stony, he sure could decipher my emotions.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But I swear it’s not just guys I have a thing for—”

“So you *do* have a thing for Torr!” LJ sat back in his seat like a great realization had floored him. “I knew it. For, like, ten years, I’ve known it.”

“Seriously, though, that place is awful,” I said, ignoring my younger cousin. “Some of those gladiators might actually be violent psychos, but I don’t think most of them are. They’re normal people who got taken advantage of, and they need help.”

“That’s most of what we deal with in the Network,” Carter said. “We’re used to it. And we try to prioritize our efforts to the most dire situations. So trust me, I’ve seen some awful shit.”

“Well, this is pretty fucking dire. People are literally being killed for entertainment.” I stood from the table. “Alright, see what kind of weapons and cars you can set aside for me. I’m gonna call Aunt Kyrie and see what she can do.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” It almost sounded mocking, but I knew LJ was too sweet to be anything but sincere. He stood as well, gave me a quick hug, and headed for the basement, where their armory was most likely kept.

“Anything else you need?” Now Carter’s tone, on the other hand, dripped with sarcasm.

I wheeled around to face him. “Just don’t be a dick, alright? I know I’m interrupting the Valkyrie Network’s very carefully crafted schedule and you’re going to have to shuffle some inventory around, which I *do* appreciate, it’s just...” I waved my hands around helplessly. “People are dying in there, daily. And with every passing second, I’m worried Torr could be next.”

Carter’s face softened just a fraction, his expression showing an echo of sympathy. “I get it, Rori. I felt the same way when I first joined the Network. There’s a sense of desperation, that you have to move as quickly as possible to save as many lives as possible.”



“Yes, exactly,” I breathed.

“Here’s some advice I hope you take to heart.” He crossed his arms, resembling a stern, younger version of his dad, my uncle Larkan. “Drop that mindset. Let go of it, right now.”

I returned his stare and the arm-crossed position, not ready to back down. “Excuse me?”

“If you go in rushed and half-cocked, you’ll be sloppy. And when shit goes sideways, you won’t know what to do, and you’ll panic. You’ll make mistakes that will probably cost people their lives. A successful mission counts on being prepared, having backup plans for your backup plans. And that takes time to get that all lined up.” Carter rapped his knuckles on the table and stood, continuing to look me square in the eye. “Go ahead and call Kyrie, see what kind of supplies you can get. But I also want you to write down a description of this place. Draw a diagram if you can, and do not skimp on a single detail. We need to know what we’re getting into.”

“And what if Torr doesn’t have that kind of time?” I demanded. *Or Santos, or Paige, or, fuck, anyone.* “What if planning everything down to the letter is what costs people their lives?”

Carter gave me a sorrowful look over his shoulder as he headed for the same door his brother went through. “No matter what you do, you can’t save everyone.”

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SANTOS



Adjusting to life in complete darkness wasn't the hard part, especially when there was someone to talk to. The shitty part was when one of the ceiling panels opened, and light flooded our dark little dungeon home. Torrance and I were too busy shielding our blinded, pain-filled eyes and retreating to the shadowy corners of the cell like cockroaches.

The pitmasters opened the ceiling quickly enough to drop food or water, blind the shit out of us with the spotlight they always used, then close things back up again while our optical nerves dealt with the whiplash.

Every day, Torr and I tried to be ready. But they never opened up at regular intervals. We could faintly hear the hustle and bustle of the colosseum outside of our prison, so even though we didn't have any light to go by, we could make educated guesses on what time of day it was.

It had been quiet during this last drop, and Torrance and I had been catching some sleep, so we could only surmise that it was the middle of the night. The spotlight had jolted both of us out of a dead sleep, on top of killing our eyes. It was disorienting as fuck, to the point where I didn't know where I was for maybe thirty seconds.

That was good ol' psychological torture for you.

"Hey, you good?" I heard Torr's voice from somewhere across the room when everything had darkened again.

"Relatively speaking," I groaned, rubbing my eyes in an effort to get the flashing storm clouds out of my vision.

“We got a brick painted to look like bread again.” I heard a *tap-tap-tap*, like he was pounding the rock-hard loaf against the ground. “And like two inches of water that smells like fucking backwash.”

“My favorite,” I deadpanned.

I heard the shuffle of footsteps coming closer and waved my hand out in front of me until my fingers brushed against Torr’s pant leg. He clasped my hand and stuck a handful of hard bread into it. “Bon appetit.”

“Thanks.”

We ate without conversation, our chewing the only sounds as we choked down the stale bread with nasty water.

It wasn’t long before Torr got up and started walking the perimeter of our pitch-black cell, his hand running along the brick wall keeping us in. When his feet nudged my hip, I scooted forward from where I leaned against the wall, and he kept walking.

Another day of pacing in the hamster wheel. What else could we do?

“How long do you think it’s been?” he asked on his second lap around.

“Going off the sounds of activity outside? Three days, give or take a day.”

“How can you even keep track? Can’t see shit to make markings on the wall or anything.”

“Well, counting to three is pretty easy for most people. The longer we stay here, though, the funkier time’s gonna get.”

“That’s what I’m saying. There’s no sense of time in here. No context, no stimuli. I can’t even tell how big this room is. Feels like I’m losing sense of up and down too.”

I noted the hint of panic in his voice and had to remember he wasn’t like me. Even if he wasn’t as rich and privileged as the actual guests who came through here, he’d probably never been imprisoned. Never been thrown into an isolation room

like this one. Never been sleep deprived or starved as a punishment.

Psychological torture was a bitch though, often even worse than physical. And we were in Mystic Canyon's favorite torture chamber.

"You need to calm down," I told him. "You're falling for what this room is made to do—screw you up mentally. They know it fucks with your senses, that's the whole point. Remember that, and keep your wits about you."

"Fuck, man. Every time I want to take a deep breath to chill out, it feels like there's a weight on my chest."

"Yeah, it's humid as fuck in here," I said. "Just do your best."

Torr's steps continued to shuffle along the perimeter, so to avoid getting kicked by him again, I scooted forward to sit closer to the center of the room.

"You been in here before?" he asked after a while.

"Not this one specifically or for this long."

A memory surfaced of before I came to Mystic Canyon, when Devin and Hudson were forcefully dragged away and I was left alone to imagine what kind of horrors were being inflicted on them. They came back about twelve hours later, hollow-eyed and tight-lipped, their wrists, ankles, and necks covered in raw, angry red marks.

"You gladiators," I could imagine Torr shaking his head in disbelief as he spoke, "must have nerves and balls of steel from this shit. I thought I could handle a dark room, but I'm wilting over here, and you sound rock steady. Like a Buddhist monk or something."

I let out a soft laugh. "We're all forged by our environments. I'm sure it would be the reverse in a different situation."

Torrance was quiet for a moment, then I heard a scraping noise, like he was sliding his back down the wall to take a seat

on the ground. “You know what? You’re a nice guy for a gladiator.”

“You met many gladiators?” I snorted.

“Fine, I take it back.”

We both scoffed at that.

“I can see why Rori likes you, is what I’m trying to say,” he added.

I stiffened. Aside from acknowledging that we had both been with Rori in the beginning, we had avoided talking about her. She told me a little about the whole sharing thing with her one mom and four dads. The idea would take some getting used to, but I wasn’t opposed to it.

Having that kind of thing work seemed to hinge on the people involved most of all. How well everyone got along, if personalities meshed, and if things were all balanced. And I just didn’t know Torr well enough to say if I was willing to share Rori with him.

But it was ultimately up to her, I suppose. She and him already had a history. I was the outsider trying to find a way in.

“When did you and Rori meet?” I asked.

“When we were kids. I was twelve and she was ten.”

Oh, damn. That was a *long* history with them. The possibility of seeing myself alongside them wilted like a plant starved for water.

“My birth parents just kinda fucked off and left me to die,” he said casually. “So I lived with her family for a few weeks until a suitable foster home was found. But they became my family. Her twin brother’s my best friend, so I was over there hanging out with them all the time.”

My head lifted. “So you saw how her family was like, huh?”

“Oh, you mean her four dads? Yeah, it was weird at first, but you got used to it. And they ended up being like dads to

me too. Good thing, ‘cause they’re great role models, you know? Those guys love the hell out of their woman and make it known, never complain about her in private or sneak around on her like my foster dad does. Nah, Rori’s dads also taught us all kinds of cool shit like how to ride motorcycles and shoot guns. Great family. Good people.”

“That sounds nice,” I said remotely. It must have sucked to get abandoned, but it seemed like the guy ended up alright. Well, up until the point that he landed in a dungeon with me.

There was a rustling sound like Torr was shifting his weight. “What about you? You got family somewhere missing you?”

I shrugged even though he couldn’t see. “I’m sure I got blood relatives all over the place, but no one who would claim or miss me. The closest thing to family I’ve got is Dev—”

My mouth shut abruptly with the realization that I almost just gave his real name. Shit, even if I hadn’t, I shouldn’t be revealing my friendship with another gladiator.

“Who?” Torr pressed.

“Nothing. I don’t have any family.”

“Dude.” He sighed. “I’m in this dark, dank hole with you, trying not to lose my shit. I’m not gonna rat you out to the resort people. Rori’s coming back, and we’re gonna get out. We need to trust each other, at least with basic information.”

I sighed and scooted back toward the wall, letting my head rest on the solid brick. I wished I had my machetes on me, not to use them, but to sharpen them or work out my wrists—do something with my hands.

Even if Torr was lying, which I didn’t think he was, or if Rori didn’t come back for whatever reason, it wasn’t likely the resort staff would use any information against me. There was nothing more they could do to me. This cell was the last one punished gladiators sat in before they got sent out to be disposed of in a fight.

I was either getting out or I would be dead soon. There were no other options.

“There’s a gladiator called the Ghost,” I said. “His real name is Devin. We were imprisoned together before coming here, then got shipped to Mystic Canyon together. We’ve gotten to be pretty good friends, so he’s the only one I would call family.”

“That must be huge, having someone at your back in a place like this. I imagine most people gotta deal on their own.”

I smirked in the darkness. “Imagine if you didn’t have me to talk to in this cell.”

“Shit, my mind would be gone already.”

If I had to be honest, Torr being here was helping me to stay sane too. Talking to another person was grounding. I could guesstimate the distance between us with how his voice traveled and the sounds he made when he walked around. And instead of letting my thoughts roll around endlessly in my head, I could express them and get feedback that wasn’t just an echo.

“There was another guy with Devin and me,” I said, suddenly in a talkative mood. “His name was Hudson, and if we do get out—”

“We will,” Torr interjected.

“Devin and I are going to want to find him,” I said. “Once we’re in the clear, that’s going to be objective number one for us.”

“Rori will make it happen, I’m sure. Do you know where he’s at? Another gladiator pit?”

“No. I don’t know what or where it was exactly. It was just...hell. Imagine a prison in hell, that’s what it was.”

“It’s not like that description makes my imagination go wild or anything. Did they dangle you naked over bonfires or something?”

The mental image made me laugh despite how vastly uncomfortable I felt talking about that place. I could see why Rori liked Torr too. He had a goofy side that made you feel more at ease despite uneasy situations.

“No, but...you know how I was brought out of the pit to, uh, service guests?”

“Yeah.”

“There was some of that there too, only it was a lot more forceful. Like, we’d be tied down and shit.”

“Jesus Christ.” Torr’s words were muffled like he was rubbing his face. “What a fucking nightmare.”

“That wasn’t even all of it. We weren’t forced to fight, but some guys left and never came back. We’d hear screaming, and sometimes there was blood dripping through the cracks in the ceiling. We’d walk past a guy in a cell who’d be covered in bleeding cuts all the time.”

“What...*the fuck?*” Torr’s tone was bewildered. “Are you fucking with me, Santos?”

“I’m not.”

“That sounds like straight-up horror movie shit.”

“All three of us said the same thing. We kept hoping to wake up and find out that none of it was real.”

“How the fuck did you end up there?”

It had been a while since I’d told that story. “I was grabbed while I was just out walking after a job. I’d actually fucked up the job, because the client wanted his cheating wife killed, and I didn’t take out women. That was just my personal boundary.”

“What were you, a hitman?”

“Kind of, yeah. More of a mercenary. Anyway, I broke into the house like I was supposed to, had my machete against her throat and told her what the deal was. Then I told her she needed to get the hell out of Dodge and that I’d take care of the rest. I was going to fake a bloody murder scene, tell the client I’d dumped the body, and it was all done.”

It was interesting recalling that memory right then. I examined each event of the night, walked through every step I took, wondering which one, if any, would have altered the course of my destiny.



“Did it work?” Torr pressed.

“Beautifully,” I said. “She made her escape, I painted the scene and got out, then I was on my way to meet the client and collect my pay. He was a rich Blakeworth fuck, so he was waiting in my part of the city, the underbelly, all dirtied up under a disguise.” Torr snorted, and I rolled my eyes. “Right? So I was gonna meet him in a bar. I was on the same street and could see the door up ahead.” I went quiet, knowing this next part was where I’d fucked up.

“I take it you didn’t make it.” An astute observation from Torr.

“No,” I whispered. “A little girl ran up to me out of nowhere. She was wailing, sobbing, in so much distress. She was dirty and barefoot, such a sad little thing. This kid grabbed my hand, trying to pull me somewhere. I pulled back and just tried to get her to calm down. I couldn’t understand what she was saying, she was hysterical. So I crouched down to her eye level.” I closed my eyes. “That was when they got me.”

“Jesus, how?” Torr asked. “I’ve seen you out there. You’re a beast.”

“Chloroform, my man.” I chuckled mirthlessly. “They waited until I was distracted and close to the ground, put the shit over my nose and mouth, and then a bag over that so I couldn’t escape the fumes. Next thing I remember, I woke up sitting in a cell across from Devin.”

“Fuck, that’s some shit.”

“Yeah.” I rubbed the back of my neck. *Then, six years later, I got a talking jaguar and I’m falling for a girl who has another man.* Not that I got any bad vibes from Torr, but I didn’t need to reveal my whole hand just yet. He probably already knew I had it bad for Rori anyway.

Torr cleared his throat. “Got a personal question, if you don’t mind.”

“Shoot.”

“After all that, do you still feel the same way about killing women? Is it still a boundary for you?”

A laugh burst out of me from seemingly nowhere, echoing off the brick walls. But I knew where that sound came from—the deep part of my soul that had gone as black and empty as a bottomless pit.

“Absolutely the fuck not.”

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RORI



I dropped onto the couch, dying to get off my still-aching feet. “I can’t thank you enough, Aunt Kyrie. This is more than I could have asked for.”

I knew the woman had resources, but she’d really come through for me. She had two safe houses reserved for us, plus a warehouse full of blankets, clothes, toiletries, basic first aid supplies, and non-perishable food. She was also arranging for fresh water and food and a doctor to come check on our soon-to-be escapees for more serious medical issues.

“It’s my pleasure, sweetheart. Nobody deserves what those people are going through.” I heard a distant tapping on the phone, like my aunt was drumming her fingers on her desk. “Something about this resort sounds...I don’t know, familiar, but that’s not quite the right word.”

I sat up. “You’ve seen something like this before?”

“No, but the exploitation of men, specifically at the hands of women, reminds me of something one of your uncles went through as a child.”

I gripped the phone harder, pausing before asking, “Uncle Grudge?”

“Yes,” she confirmed softly.

Her husband, Grudge, my dad Shadow’s half-brother, had been rendered mute as a result of his tongue being removed. He could make some sounds with his throat and lips but primarily communicated in sign language. It was because of

both him and my brother's girlfriend Lily that our whole family took on learning how to sign.

With Shadow's scarred appearance and Grudge's mutilation, it was clear that they had both been through horrific ordeals when they were younger. I hadn't yet made a connection between them and the gladiators, but what if there was one?

"Has he told you what happened?" I asked Kyrie.

"Yes, but," she said, pausing. "It's not my story to tell, Rori. I can ask him—"

"No, it's okay." I stopped her. "I don't want to dredge up bad memories for him. Besides, it was so long ago, way before I was born, right? It probably isn't related. No one at this place had their tongues removed that I saw."

"Even so, I'm going to tell him what you told me," she said. "If he thinks there's a connection, he'll say so. And you know all three of them will want to help."

"What happened to enjoying retirement?" I laughed.

"I found T-Bone and Dyno hitting each other with golf clubs the other day. I don't know *how* they still have so much energy and testosterone, but they need some kind of outlet."

"My dads will probably be the same. They'll have to go on old-man rides together and leave you and my mom in peace."

Kyrie laughed, and I heard the smile in her voice. "We could use a girls' day. Val and I miss the hell out of Mari and you kids."

"I miss you and Val too and even those old farts."

"Oh, you'll be seeing Val soon." Kyrie's voice brightened, and I knew her smile was growing wider. "She'll be running those supplies over to you."

"Really?" I straightened again, but this time out of excitement at seeing her daughter, another one of my cousins. "That'll be badass. It's been too long."

“She’s just like you, can’t keep her off a motorcycle. I swear you two should have been sisters.”

“Yeah.” I sighed through an uncomfortable pang in my chest.

I loved my little sister Lucia to the ends of the earth and missed her like crazy. We had an easy sibling friendship, bonding over books, gossip, and boys, but we otherwise didn’t have much in common. She didn’t get my love of riding and hated that motorcycles were so loud and always kicking up dust.

Aside from my parents, only Daren loved riding like I did. And Torr, but he and I had dropped all pretense of acting like siblings, hadn’t we?

Aunt Kyrie’s voice cut in before my mind could drift to those last moments with Torr. “Well, I’ll let you go, sweetheart. I’ve got to dispatch all these supplies and get these safe houses cleaned up for you.”

“Thank you so much, again,” I said. “You’re the best, Aunt Kyrie.”

“Absolutely. It feels great to be doing *real* work again, instead of going to charity functions where only a fraction goes to those who really need it.” She finished off that thought with a grumble before her voice became chipper again. “It was great to hear from you, dear. Let’s do that girls’ day once all these people are rescued and those responsible are tossed in a grave.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. The woman had come from a well-off family, the daughter of a governor. She was well-educated, a natural player in the political arena, and on the surface, prim and proper. Kyrie could blend seamlessly into the Blakeworth elite crowd and no one would bat an eye.

But she married three bikers, and at her core, was a biker bitch through and through. My aunt looked as pretty and fragile as a glass shoe, but if need be, she wouldn’t hesitate to smash the heel off and fight dirty with the jagged edge.

“Can’t wait. I love you, Aunt Kyrie. Give your three old men my love.”

“Love you too, kiddo. And I will.”

We ended the call, and I pulled the phone away from my ear to look through my recent calls. Kyrie and I had talked for nearly an hour, but she wasn’t my first call of the day. My call to Gwen had gone straight to voicemail, which worried me.

She was the one who’d arranged for Torr and I to get into Mystic Canyon, from faking our application paperwork to dressing us up. As a publicist for one of the Blakeworth elite families, she’d been able to carefully siphon money, clothes, and even cars from her employers.

Since capturing Torr and tossing me out, the resort staff must have dug deeper to discover our ruse. And I had a sneaking suspicion that any repercussions wouldn’t fall on the wealthy family who’d supposedly vouched for us, but on Gwen.

I tapped her number again and brought the phone to my ear. “Fuck,” I muttered, ending the call a second later when her voicemail greeting instantly connected. If anything happened to Gwen, it would be our fault. My fault.

I stared at my phone screen for a long while, willing it to light up with a call from her. When nothing happened, I sighed and scrolled down to my mom’s number, tapped it, and brought the phone to my ear.

It rang several times before going to voicemail, which wasn’t unusual. She was probably working.

“Hey, mom, it’s me,” I said after the recording beep. After that, my mind went blank for a moment. What should I tell her? Leaving my mom a message was such an autopilot process for me that my brain actually stuttered to a halt when it came to revealing actual details on what had happened.

“Um, I’m okay. Safe. I’m with LJ and Carter right now. I just wanted to let you know so that you wouldn’t worry. I’m going to be out here for a little while longer, but I’m hoping I

can make it back home soon. I miss you. I'll call again when I can. Love you, bye."

I ended the call quickly, my throat burning. If I stayed on any longer, I'd spill everything about Torr and the resort, then she'd send my dads out to retrieve me like a lost little lamb. But this was my fight, and I had to see it through, no matter how badly I wanted to rush back home to where I knew I'd be safe at all times.

The reason I actually called her was because I knew she wasn't likely to answer. If it had been one of my dads, they'd pick up and immediately grill me for details, and I'd cave. Chances were high they'd see me calling and immediately head for the nearest parked motorcycles.

It was sweet, and I was lucky to have a family unit that was so caring and protective. But my mom had a different perspective than them, a more nuanced one, perhaps. My fathers' instincts were to run out and save me at a single hint of trouble. My mother knew I had to spend this time in the trenches, figuring out how to fend for myself. She'd get my message and let everyone know I was okay.

God, I missed them though. I'd never been away from my family this long. And it had only been, what, a week? A week and half?

I missed all the male voices talking over each other, the smell of coffee and fresh eggs in the morning, the shit-talking and roughhousing out of love. I missed the parties we threw at every excuse—birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, celebrations. Sometimes our house got so busy and rowdy with friends and family that I'd head out for a ride just to have some alone time, some peace.

But all that noise *was* peace. It was warmth and love and life being lived.

I was so caught up in missing my family and home that I jumped when my phone vibrated in my lap with a call. Looking at the screen, I frowned. Unknown number. Definitely not my mother calling me back.

I let it ring for another few seconds, steeling myself for whatever was on the other line before I answered. “Hello?”

“Rori? It’s Gwen.”

“Oh, thank fuck!” I sagged into the couch, relief shooting through my sore limbs. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“Yeah, I ditched my old phone. Rumors started flying around my employers’ circles that something happened at the resort. So I took some vacation time and decided to make myself scarce for a few weeks.”

“So you’re okay, then? You’re safe?”

“Oh yeah, I’m good. Lupa and I are staying with family. Nobody from Blakeworth knows where I am.”

“Good. That’s good.” I raked a hand back through my hair. “Shit, I was worried.”

“I told you one of my dads is a hacker, right? I know how to make myself untraceable.”

I smiled even though she couldn’t see me. “I’m glad.”

“So, I take it you and Torr are not at the resort anymore?”

I swallowed, my throat going dry again. “I’m not. Torr still is and...he’s in trouble. I’m working on a plan to get him out.”

“Oh no! The place was that bad, huh? Or worse?”

“Worse,” I sighed, and gave her a brief run-down of events from when we first touched ground in that canyon to being separated and me forced out at gunpoint.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. “I don’t even want to think about how many missing people have gone through that place.”

“Yeah, getting kidnapped just to be thrown in a colosseum to die? It’s sickening.”

“What can I do to help?” Gwen asked, or rather, demanded.

“Nothing.” I practically barked into the phone. “They’re probably already looking into you since you dropped us off.”



So you stay hidden and safe until this blows over.”

“Rori, I can’t just sit on my hands while you’re—”

“Thank you, Gwen, but you’ve done enough. You got us in, and now we know someone’s dirty little secret. We just have to find out who’s it is.” *And blow it the fuck up.*

“I’m already involved. I might as well help,” she insisted.

“Gwen, please.” I rubbed my forehead. “I fucked up, and Torr’s still in there because of me. If something happens to you, I don’t want that on my conscience. I won’t be able to handle it. Please.”

Silence stretched out over the phone. “You’re serious,” she said finally.

“Yeah.” I rubbed my forehead. “We kinda fucked the whole thing up. Bad. And other people got caught in the crossfire.” *Like Santos and Paige. I know Santos is strong, but God, I hope Paige is alright.*

Some crackling and shuffling came over the speaker like something was fuzzy with our connection.

“Gwen? You still there?” I glanced at my phone screen to check my reception bars. All good on my end.

“Yeah, sorry!” she said after a few seconds. “Lupa just told me something, and it startled me, so I dropped the phone.”

My pulse started to pick up for no apparent reason. Lupa was like Astarte and Tezcatlipoca, a deity in an animal vessel. In Lupa’s case, a wolf.

“What did she say?” I almost dreaded the answer.

“She said to tell you that all is unfolding as it’s meant to. Trust yourself and try not to worry. You are on the right path, Rori.”

I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up the patience to keep this frustration away. “Tell her thank you for me.”

I heard a bark and soft howl in the distance, to which Gwen and I both laughed softly. “We’re thinking of you and

Torr,” Gwen added. “If there’s anything we can do, please let me know.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Trust in Astarte too, Rori.” Gwen’s voice was firm, like she knew my faith in the winged goddess was shaky at best. “She’s there to guide you.”

“I’ll try,” I answered with a sigh. “I know you probably can’t give me your number so call back in a few days, alright? I’ll update you.”

“Will do. Be safe, Rori.”

“You too, Gwen.”

I ended the call and glanced at the window behind the couch just in time to see the white dove perch on a tree branch. It was hard not to glare at the animal, and not only because her feathers were so damn bright. Supposedly, Astarte was here to guide me, but she’d remained silent the vast majority of the time.

The few times she did deign to speak with me, it was some vague, riddled mumbo-jumbo, like I was supposed to figure it all out like a puzzle.

I didn’t have time to solve puzzles. Not when Torr, Santos, Paige, and everyone else in that hellhole needed me.

“Would be nice if I could get a little more *specific* guidance on what the fuck I’m supposed to be doing,” I muttered more to myself than anyone, but of course, that was when Bird Almighty chose to respond.

*You’re still not understanding, Aurora, came the goddess’ voice raking over my brain like a chastising mother. I cannot interfere with your free will. I cannot change the course of actions already taken.*

“Then why are you even here?” I wanted to throw my phone at the window. “What good is your so-called guidance?”

*When you are conflicted, I can show you a path. When darkness is all you see, I can be a beacon to show you the way*

*out. But you must choose to take those actions, which will lead to events, which leads to more actions to be taken.*

“But you are hoping for a certain outcome, right? You’re trying to prevent something bad from happening. That’s your ultimate goal, and I’m your tool to do so. So why not just tell me the best way to make that happen? Why sacrifice Torr and Santos for this?”

*For you, the journey is just as important as the outcome, Aurora. Every decision you make lays the foundation of the woman you will become. I am here for when you are truly lost, but for the most part, you know the answers. The dove shook out her feathers, resembling a puffy ball before smoothing them all down again. And I never said your men will be sacrificed, but they are important keys of your journey.*

“Will this plan work?” I pleaded quietly. “Will we really be able to pull this rescue off? So many lives are riding on my decisions, and I *need* to know. It’s killing me.”

*You’ll know soon enough, Aurora Wilder.*

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DEVIN



The Saint was a fairly new gladiator who had quickly made a name for himself. He earned his fighting name in a twist of irony, from the upside-down crosses tattooed next to his eyes.

Other fighters began rallying around the Saint after the Animal had been killed, kissing his ass in an effort to make him their new cult leader. It was interesting to watch from the sidelines. Some people were completely aimless without anyone to follow. And others turned out to be natural-born leaders.

The Saint wasn't a loud, brash guy like the Animal had been. Like Santos and I, he had mostly kept to himself, and at first seemed like an unusual choice for the other fighters to rally around. He'd been tested, of course. Not everyone liked or respected him, so a pecking order had to be established. I'd heard of three fighters, all on separate occasions, sneaking into the Saint's room at night to kill him in his sleep. He'd slaughtered every single one and brought trophies as proof to the breakfast table the next morning.

Just like that, he'd not only proven he wasn't one to fuck with, but that he could also bring a group of bloodthirsty men to heel. Which was exactly what we needed if we were going through with this whole organized escape plan.

I volunteered to speak with him during training hours, to which the Hunter seemed relieved.

The Saint was sharpening a spear as I approached him head-on. Coming up from behind would likely end in death, or at least a bloody neck, as the Hunter had figured out when he approached me. It was an important lesson to be learned in the gladiator pit—if you’re not a threat, it’s smarter to let the other party see you coming.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” I was ten feet away and the Saint didn’t even lift his head when he asked the question.

I scanned the colosseum. We were near the center of the fighting pit in plain view, but no one was close enough to eavesdrop.

“How would you like to get the fuck out of here?”

He paused in his sharpening, the tattoos at the corners of his eyes compressing slightly as he squinted up at me. “That can mean any manner of things. Are you propositioning me? I’m flattered, Ghost, but men aren’t my delicacy of choice.”

I didn’t know what threw me first, his overly-formal speech or that he immediately thought I was offering to fuck.

“That’s...not what I was asking,” I said, lowering my voice and walking closer. “I mean out of *here*. Escape.”

He smiled as if amused, then lowered his head, returning his attention to his spear. “Just when I’ve been chosen as the shot-caller? Interesting approach to knock me off my throne, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m not after your position, I don’t want it.” My eyes continued scanning the arena, and I pulled out a couple knives to mess with in order to look less suspicious. “We’ve got a real shot at fucking this place over. But we need to organize. You’re the one with the most influence over the fighters.”

“Yes, I am,” he said matter-of-factly. “What are you proposing? An uprising?”

“Help is coming from the outside.” I flipped a knife in the air, caught it, and held it up, pretending to examine the blade. “We need the fighters aware and ready, and most importantly, to keep their mouths shut until it’s time.”

“When is this outside help coming?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, so who are our kind rescuers?”

Tezca’s words returned to me. *You can trust the light and the guard. But do not trust the false messenger.* All fucking riddles. Some names would have been great, but all I knew was that the guy’s name was Torrance. Who knew if that was even a real name?

“I’m not sure. But they posed undercover as guests here,” I answered.

The Saint snorted. “So you don’t know who’s coming or when. What do you expect me to tell the fighters?”

“You’re their leader.” I shrugged. “You speak well. Be persuasive.”

“And why should I put any amount of trust into what you say?” He peered up at me again, those tattoos making his glare look sinister. “The pitmasters put you up to this, didn’t they? Are they trying to see if I’ll actually go through with an uprising so they’ll have a reason to shoot us all down?”

“Why would they kill us en masse? They need us.”

“Only temporarily, until they find more bodies,” he pointed out.

“Listen.” I sighed heavily, caught my knife, and brought it to my side. “The Butcher is missing.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“He’s my friend, okay? We’ve had each other’s backs for years, and I know his real name.”

“Which is?”

I hesitated. The Saint could take Santos’ given name and run directly to the pitmasters. Or worse, Nella. Both of which would immediately throw me into a fight I wouldn’t be allowed to win. He knew the risks of asking for and receiving such information. But he needed something if he was going to help us, and I had nothing else to give him.

“I won’t tell you his,” I said. “But my name is Devin. Devin Ito.”

The Saint straightened, his face going slack with surprise. “You’re either incredibly foolish or you believe in this cause that strongly.”

“I do,” I said. “I’m done here. I’m finding my friend and getting the fuck out or getting killed trying.”

The other man narrowed his eyes again. “Is anyone else in this with you? Or are you coming to me on your own?”

“The Hunter is with me,” I said. “He’s the one who actually spoke to the undercover guest.”

The Saint crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ll need his name as well. That is my price.”

“I don’t know it.”

“Then get him over here.”

I looked around, then whistled and motioned when I spotted the Hunter trying to look busy while swinging a sword around. He jogged over, and I gave him the rundown of what we had just discussed..

“You told him your *name*?” The young fighter stared at me in disbelief.

“Talk louder, please,” I hissed at him.

“Are you fucking nuts?” he whispered aggressively.

“Maybe, but we don’t have any other collateral to give him. I’m Devin, by the way. You might as well know too.”

“Fuck.” He grabbed at his hair and turned around, looking at all the gladiators in the distance.

“I’m waiting,” the Saint mused, testing the sharp edge of his spearhead.

The Hunter turned back to face him. “We need your name too. It’s only fair.”

“You’re getting my fighters to organize and prepare for an uprising with no other details, and that is it.” The Saint

glowered at the Hunter. “No other extras. Your given name, Hunter. Or you get nothing from me.”

The Hunter’s eyes shifted to me, and I gave a slight nod. I hated to put him in this position, but we had literally nothing else to give.

“It’s Levi,” he said quietly. “My name is Levi Cooke.”

\* \* \*

I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED it when, hours later after a quick shower and returning to my room, Nella requested me in her office. Tezca did not seem interested in coming along, and promptly jumped onto the bunk bed the moment I vacated it. At least the pitmaster escorting me went pale as a sheet the moment he saw the big cat. Tezca enjoyed taking bites and swipes of those who fucked with Santos and me.

My mood soured the instant I stepped into the guest services manager’s office. It was a luxurious room, with Nella’s long, polished wood desk at the far end and a bank of windows overlooking the canyon behind her. There were bookshelves and a sitting area with two chairs to the left, a loveseat with a coffee table to the right. The floor was covered in a plush, patterned rug, and the ceiling vaulted high above my head, making the room feel like a cathedral. A perfect place for my sins to be judged.

“Thank you for coming, Ghost,” Nella said with her fake pleasantness. Like I had the choice not to come. “Please have a seat.”

She gestured toward one of the chairs in front of her desk, and I obediently walked forward while the pitmaster stayed by the door. I dropped unceremoniously into the chair and waited.

There were papers on her desk. My file, perhaps. Although why anyone bothered to keep paperwork on the gladiators was beyond me. We came in and got out all in the same ways.

“How are you, Ghost?” she asked, flipping through the papers like she was my accountant or something, catching up



with me before getting down to business.

If I hadn't been patted down and stripped of my weapons, I'd have driven my blade through her neck already.

"Why am I here?" I responded instead.

She actually had the balls to look offended that I didn't want to waste time bullshitting with her. "We've noticed you spending more time socializing with one of the newest fighters lately, the Hunter. Is there anything you'd like to tell me about that?"

I shrugged with a shake of my head. "He needs guidance and fighting tips. When I kill him in the pit, I don't want it to be too easy."

"So you're training him?"

"Just passing the time, but sure, I guess."

"Would you say you've gotten attached to him in any way?"

"No." Any other answer or deflection would have looked suspicious.

"We also noticed you talking to the Saint earlier today. Anything you'd like to share about that conversation?"

"He's the new shot-caller, so I was just paying my respects."

"Really? You never did that with the Animal."

"I didn't respect the Animal. I do respect the Saint." At least that was the truth. And from this line of questioning, it didn't seem that Nella knew the Hunter and I had shared our real names, which was a relief. She wouldn't have bothered with all the fake pleasantries if that were the case. She was just being a nosy bitch.

"Are you feeling more social now that your roommate is gone?" Nella sent an evil smile my way.

In an instant, I could have jumped from the chair, leaned across the desk, squeezed the air from her throat, and demanded to know where Santos was. But if he was still alive,

her knowing of our friendship could not only put me in danger but him as well.

So I shrugged again. “It’s whatever. At least I’ve got his jaguar to keep me company.”

Nella frowned, and I mentally snickered. *Yeah, and don’t you forget it, bitch.*

She and the pitmasters hated having the jaguar around, but there wasn’t much they could do about it. Any attempt to capture or shoot Tezca was met by the aggressor being mauled, if not killed, by said jaguar. Everyone was safest when they left the big cat alone, much to Nella’s dismay. A force with teeth and claws—not to mention unnatural speed and strength—protecting gladiators meant her grip of control on us was slipping.

“I’m going to ask you something, and if you value your life, I strongly suggest you answer me honestly.” She paused for dramatic effect, and I resisted the urge to fill the silence with a long fart noise. This woman thought she was so powerful, so intimidating. But it would only take a crack to the foundation to collapse her fortress. The only problem was, her fortress was heavily guarded.

“Are you and the other fighters planning something?”

“No.” Again, short and to the point. To lie effectively, I had to give her nothing to work with. Most people were bad liars because they subconsciously felt guilty for lying, were afraid of the consequences if found out, or a mixture of both. Good thing both guilt and fear had been beaten out of me years ago.

“Are you lying to me, Ghost?”

“No, I’m not.” My hands and feet remained still, my gaze rock steady while her eyes bounced all over me in search of tells.

Nella’s brow pinched. A small, frustrated huff left her nostrils at her inability to find a chink in my armor. So she switched tactics, her face relaxing.

“I’m glad to hear it. Just a reminder, you would be rewarded well for coming forward with any information if the fighters *are* planning something. You could have a suite of rooms to yourself, not just a dorm. Running water that’s heated. Meals brought to you. All kinds of comforts that would be very well deserved.”

Right. And then I would be promptly killed by the Saint and his crew the moment I stepped foot among the fighters. What a great deal that was.

As if reading my mind, Nella added, “You would be guarded for your own protection, of course. I know the other fighters wouldn’t react well to you receiving special treatment.”

Shadowed by pitmasters at every turn, even better.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, feigning a tiny bit of interest in her offer, only because it would have looked suspicious if I didn’t act like I wanted cushier accommodations. “But for the time being, I have nothing to tell you. May I go now?”

Nella pursed her lips. Actually fucking pouted. “You’re so eager to leave? I was looking forward to catching up with you, Devin.”

I didn’t expect her to use my real name, and damn it, it got to me. My fist tightened on the end of the armrest, teeth clenching in my jaw. Keeping my expression as calm as I could, I said, “Yes, I am eager to leave. I loathe every minute in your company.”

“Devin.” My name came out as a grating whine on her lips. “That really hurts my feelings. I thought we had so much fun together.”

She was seriously pouting across the desk, sticking out her bottom lip and using her arms to push her cleavage together. Fuck, I hated this game. I hated how she used us, not just for sex and fighting, but her stupid little roleplaying fantasies too.

Using my name and pretending like we were star-crossed lovers or some shit? She used our humanity like we were toys

to play with. She did the same thing with Santos, even trying to pit us against each other like jealous guys in a love triangle.

“Do I have your permission to leave?” I asked through gritted teeth. I refused to play, but I couldn’t actually go anywhere unless she let me.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she whined. “I want you to stay and show how much you’ve missed me. Work has kept me *so* busy, you know.”

“The day I’ll never see you again will be the best fucking day of my life,” I answered. “Second only to the last day I see you, which will hopefully be when I finally kill you.”

Nella jerked back, her face shocked. Maybe some part of her actually believed the delusion that we were in some kind of relationship, but I wasn’t about to start feeling sympathy for her now.

“Just so we’re abundantly clear,” I said, leaning forward. “I will celebrate your death. And I will never, ever miss you.”

“Get out, Ghost,” she hissed, getting back to business. “One more word and I’ll have you beaten for threatening a superior.”

*Ha. I win this round, bitch,* I thought with a smile, although I’d never give her the satisfaction of saying it out loud.

I left the chair and had just made it to the guards posted at the doors when she called out, “Oh, I almost forgot,” in an all-too pleasant tone. “You’re fighting the Butcher the day after tomorrow.”

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RORI



“This is it?” I frowned as I scanned over the list of names and supplies, trying to visualize everything in my head.

“Uh, yeah. You’re welcome.” Carter huffed like he was insulted. “That’s who and what we have to spare.”

After spending the last two days telling my cousins everything I knew about Mystic Canyon, the list didn’t feel like enough. Not for a surprise attack on a heavily guarded canyon resort. Although, without my cousins’ connections and resourcefulness, I wouldn’t have anything at all. I was grateful but nervous. We might be able to pull it off, but it wouldn’t be easy.

“You don’t look happy,” LJ mused from his spot sitting on the kitchen counter.

Sighing, I put the list down and rubbed my eyes. “Thank you, guys. This is actually great, and I appreciate you both getting this together. I just worry about actually executing it.”

“If the diagram you gave me is accurate, it should be doable. Given we stick to the plan,” Carter said. “Everyone’s been briefed, and they’re ready to go on your order.”

I scanned the names of the riders again, a few of whom I recognized as family friends and acquaintances, but many I didn’t. These were Carter’s people from the Valkyrie Network who were currently off rotation, some of whom were members of Sons of Odin MC.

If Carter vouched for them, then they were solid. Good riders, quick thinkers, and trustworthy. But it still bothered me that I personally didn't know most of the people I'd be riding and fighting besides.

And even more concerning, eighteen total people, including me and my cousins, didn't seem like enough to take down the whole resort.

Who knew if the gladiators would even see us as help? Santos said he'd do what he could, but could he realistically do anything after being dragged away by those guards? Maybe Tezca was communicating intel to him. Or, for all I knew, the big cat was as useful as my damn bird.

"So what do you think?" Carter pressed. "Are we a go?"

"Hang on." I stood, leaving the list behind as I headed for the small balcony off the dining room. "I need to think for a minute."

Ignoring Carter's grumbling, I went outside to the crisp, dry air. For once, the trees were empty as I scanned them.

"Figures," I muttered. "When I go looking for you, you're nowhere to be seen. When I don't want you around, you're hovering over me."

Only silence answered me and the distant cawing of a crow or raven. My uncle T-Bone had a raven named Munin who could mimic voices and allowed me to pet him. He was a much cooler bird than this fucking dove.

"You're here to guide me, so where the fuck are you?" I muttered.

*You know, Aurora, a little respect goes a long way. The familiar, disembodied voice raked over my brain. Please and thank you cost nothing.*

"Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual," I grumbled. "Straightforward answers would be most appreciated."

*Just like your father, Asarte mused. You mask feelings of fear and inadequacy with stone walls and sharp barbs. True strength is being open and vulnerable, Aurora.*

“This is not about me. I’m trying to ask you about this attack we’re planning.” I lowered my voice, knowing my cousins could overhear if I got too riled up. “Is this a suicide mission? Am I going to cost seventeen other people their lives if we do this? And that’s not even counting the people in the canyon.”

*The outcome of your attack will depend on the decisions you will make in critical moments.*

I nearly slammed my forehead down on the balcony railing. “Just once. One fucking time. A yes or no answer would be amazing.”

A force came out of nowhere, like an invisible vice pressing in on me on all sides. I felt excruciating pressure on my head, chest, arms, and legs. I could barely take a breath, and every attempt to move felt like trying to lift a car with my pinkie.

*I am not your personal fortune teller, Aurora Wilder. I am not a toy you can pull off a shelf and demand answers from. You are a human woman who has known twenty-three years of life. In the millenia of humanity I’ve seen, do you realize how utterly insignificant you are?*

“Please,” I gasped, finding it harder to draw breath with each passing second.

*I am not in your service. Do you understand? If you don’t want humanity to fall, you will listen to me. Because I have seen your kind rise and fall.*

“Okay!” I wheezed, desperately clutching my throat. “I’m sorry. I’m listening.”

The pressure immediately lifted, and I slumped against the railing, taking in lungfuls of beautiful, precious oxygen.

*As I’ve said, Astarte’s voice took on an eerie calm, I cannot influence outcomes of events or your decisions. I am telling you to trust yourself, your own inner compass, Aurora.*

“But I—”

*Stop. Stop running your mouth and letting your brain chatter take up all the room in your head. I'm telling you to cut through all of that and listen to the deepest, most instinctual part of yourself, Aurora. Listen to the part of you that has always been connected to me.*

“What the fuck?” I groaned, still gasping for breath.

Astarte went silent and I knew she was gone, or at least not hovering over me anymore. As I caught my breath and found my legs underneath me again, it became clear that it wasn't just the goddess that went silent but all of my surroundings.

LJ and Carter lived in a small apartment complex, mostly consisting of fellow bikers and Valkyrie network cohorts. Usually, I could hear a neighbor or two talking, laughing, barbecuing, the roars of bikes and cars coming or going, but now there was nothing.

It was too damn quiet, and my own breaths and heartbeat thundered in my ears. My instinct was to fill the silence, work out this rescue plan aloud to myself or head back inside to chat with my cousins. Noise and chatter was comforting, familiar. This abject quietness left me feeling vulnerable and exposed.

I suppose that was the point.

Placing my hands on the balcony railing, I took a long, shaky breath. The kind you took before jumping off a cliff. And then I closed my eyes.

And I listened.



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TORRANCE



“**Y**ou better quit that.” Santos’ voice came from my left, about ten feet away was my best guess.

“Why?” I didn’t lose momentum, didn’t lose a breath in my push-up routine. Without weights to throw around and test myself, bodyweight workouts were my only option, aside from crawling up the wall from going stir-crazy.

“You’re going to exhaust yourself. We’re not eating or staying hydrated enough to sustain working out like that.”

“Relax, I’m not going that hard.” I paused at the top of my push-up, walked my hands and feet back to the wall, then took my feet up the wall to go again, this time from a modified handstand position. “I’ll be bored out of my skull if I don’t move around.”

“So move, but don’t exert yourself.”

“What are you, my mother?”

“I’m just trying to keep us both from getting killed.”

“I know my limits. Just trying to burn off some energy, alright?”

“Alright.” His voice carried a don’t-say-I-didn’t-warn-you tone.

I rolled my eyes, not that he could see, and kept going. “How do you stay sharp, Butcher?” I brought a fist to the small of my back to keep lowering and lifting myself one-handed.

“Mobility,” he said. “Keeping my joints flexible. And spatial awareness. Devin taught me a lot about how to move and react.”

“Yeah? What’s his story?”

“If we ever get out of here, maybe he can tell you.”

Only then did I stop, my pulse slightly elevated and only a bit of shallowness to my breaths. I brought my feet down to the ground, coming to sit with my back against the wall. “We will get out, Santos. Rori won’t leave us behind.”

There was silence for a while, then a sigh and some shuffling as Santos rearranged his sitting position. “I hope you’re right. I really do.”

“She will. I have zero fucking doubt.”

“That’s great, Torr.”

I wished he could see my face. Not just because the pitch-black darkness routine was getting old but so he didn’t miss the glare I was shooting him. “What the hell, man? I thought you believed in her too. What happened?”

Santos’ laugh was dry and absent of any humor. “I’ve been enslaved for most of my adult life. Every shred of hope I ever had turned out to be for nothing. That’s what happened. So, sorry for being skeptical of anything turning out differently this time.”

I crawled forward until I found him, my hand coming down on the shin of one leg stretched out in front of him. “You thought the psychological effects of this place were getting to me? Well, I think they’re getting to you now, buddy.”

He snorted. “Probably, who knows.”

I squeezed the leg my hand rested on. “No way, man. You’re not giving into apathy now. You’re fighting this.”

“If you don’t stop touching me, I’m gonna be fighting you.”

“Sorry.” I lifted my hand away. “Do me a favor though, Santos.”

“What?”

“Think of Rori. Think of the last time you saw her. Picture her face. Imagine *her* touching you. Remember what she told you. Remember how you felt back then.”

Santos had gone unnaturally still, and I knew his mind was back there, with her. I used the silence to examine how I felt while telling this other man to fantasize about his last moments with the woman *I* loved.

After a few long seconds of sitting with that, I realized I was...fine.

I was fine when Rori herself told me she wanted to explore things with him after all this was over. They were still practically strangers, but their connection was clear and undeniable. I didn't feel threatened by or jealous of this guy. Shit, I was starting to like him too.

I'd always known Rori would find multiple men to be with. And I was secure in knowing my connection with her was something irreplaceable, something neither of us had with anyone else. We had a bond that ran deeper than two partners. She was my home, my safe place. The only woman I'd allowed myself to fall in love with, even if I was too chickenshit to voice it.

Santos and I *had* to get out of here just so I could man up and tell her all that shit.

“You there, man?” I asked him after probably a full minute of silence. “You with her?”

“Yeah.” Still, he sounded hesitant. “This isn't weird to you?”

“What, telling you to think about my woman to get you in the right headspace to survive? Nah.”

He laughed dryly, with a bit more humor this time. “You're right, though. It's working. I'm remembering how...serious she was about coming back. How painful it was to be separated from her.”

“You can believe her when she says she’ll do something. I’ve known her for thirteen years, and she’s never half-assed anything or gone back on a promise.”

“I want to believe you, Torr. I do. It’s just hard to go against the last six years of life experience.” He made a soft sound, and while I barely remembered what he looked like, I could picture him smiling. “Rori...she feels like a fantasy. Like she’s not even real. The last time I saw her feels like it could have been a dream.”

“She is real, my man. And this nightmare you’ve lived is about to end.”

“I would love for you to be right.” He sighed. “I really would.”

More silence stretched between us for a while until I cleared my throat. “Uh, is it cool if I pat your shoulder?”

Santos laughed. A real laugh this time that echoed off the walls of our dungeon. “Sure. Just don’t feel up my leg again.”

“Deal.”

I felt around blindly until I found his forearm, to which I followed up to a broad, round shoulder. As I slapped my palm there twice, I nearly got the wind knocked out of me from Santos smacking me right in the center of my chest.

“You’re alright, Torr,” he said, still chuckling. “You’re not bad.”

\* \* \*

EVERYTHING CHANGED ROUGHLY A DAY LATER.

Light flooded our dungeon with no warning, sending Santos and I ducking and covering our faces to protect our sensitive eyesight. What had been white noise in the background became a deafening roar. I realized it was a chorus of voices, hundreds of them.

An audience.

“What the fuck is happening?” I groaned, squeezing my eyelids shut against the painful light.

“It’s the side wall opening up,” Santos answered. “Right to the sand pit. Looks like we’re fighting.”

Peeking over my arm only brought more searing pain to my eye sockets. “We’re...*what?*”

“Come on, dude. Like you didn’t know this would happen.”

“How am I supposed to fight when I can’t fucking see?”

“I dunno, figure it out quick. The seats are packed.”

It was another full minute before I could even squint. I saw an arena with a sand-covered ground alright. And hundreds of people in the colosseum seats, shouting and waving.

A fight was already going on, from what the dark blurs zipping all over the pit told me. My eyes were having a bitch of a time tracking motion, let alone giving me details about what was right in front of me.

I turned back to the darkness, my senses too overwhelmed by everything going on outside, and that was how I got my first close-up look at Santos. I’d only seen him from a distance before, one of many figures out on the sands. Now seeing him up-close as a fellow man was something else.

His hair and beard were growing out, as I was certain mine had as well. He was a broadly built dude, which made it even more impressive that he could move so quickly. Intense, dark eyes met mine. That was the most familiar thing about him, the weight of his stare. I remembered the look in those eyes as he stared down his opponents in the fight I watched.

“Hey, sexy,” I greeted.

That clenched jaw relaxed into a smile for a moment. “Back at you.”

A cheer rising up made us both turn around. My eyes were slowly adjusting, and I could make out a figure lying still in the center of the arena while another raised his arms in victory. Blood darkened the sand around the victor’s feet in big

splotches. A pool of it surrounded the body on the ground, slowly growing in size.

The lone man standing spun to face the crowd in all directions, turning his body slowly until he faced us. When our eyes met, his face broke into a smile and he pointed his arm, which I now saw was holding a sword, straight at us.

“Son of a bitch,” Santo hissed. “He’s got my machetes. That fucking thief.”

“Who is that?” I squinted, now seeing more clearly that the fighter’s blade was shorter than a sword’s and curved up at the end. Only one was in his hand, the other sticking out of the chest of the man on the ground.

“The Bulldozer.”

“Well, even bigger problem.” The Bulldozer gestured at us with his free hand, a mocking-friendly motion to come out and play. “He’s armed and we’re not.”

“There’s a rack of weapons we can grab. A lot of crappy, rusted-out shit, but better than nothing. It’s to the right of us, but we have to make a mad dash.”

“Do we stand a chance against this guy?” I watched the Bulldozer wave Santos’ weapon around, grab his crotch, and stick his tongue out. True to his name, the guy was huge. And he knew fighting well enough to survive this long and stab a guy in the chest.

“If the two of us are armed?” Santos tilted his head from side to side like he was weighing the options. “Maybe.”

“Okay, get weapons. Good plan. Anything else I should know?”

“Yeah.” He leveled that dark stare at me. “Rori better be on her way right fucking now. Because they won’t stop the fights until one or both of us is dead.”

Shit, how could I forget that part? One man standing was the only rule in the gladiator ring.

“So we gotta stall for time,” I said. “Potentially a *lot* of time.”

“We can’t let the audience get bored. As long as we’re entertaining, they’ll keep it going.”

“Well, shit. How do we do that while not dying?”

“Improvise. Switch up your weapons. Get naked and run laps around the pit, I dunno.”

“Fuck.” I scrubbed my face because my eyes were still fucking killing me.

“One more thing.” Santos took a long pause. “If you can make a kill, don’t hesitate. Just do it. Make it quick and painless, if that’s your thing. But if you hesitate, the other fighter *will* kill you first. Understand?”

“Yeah, I got it.” I clenched my hands to hide the shaking in my fingers. Fighting and shooting were well-honed skills of mine, but I never imagined I’d be in a position to take someone else’s life. Logically, I knew now was not the time to puss out. It was survive or die, as simple and brutal as that. But I’d never been in a position where I’d had to finish the job before, nor had I asked myself if it was something I was capable of.

Guess I was about to find out.

Not that I was about to bring that up to Santos. He had enough on his plate and didn’t need to be shouldered with giving me a pep talk on top of everything.

For a moment though, I envied him. He seemed like a nice dude, and he obviously cared about Rori. But as his gaze focused on the arena, jaw clenched and brows down in concentration, I saw the cold, detached killer that this place had made out of him.

It wasn’t that I envied what he’d been through, just that he could turn off all emotion and do what he needed to survive. He wouldn’t hesitate. The fact that he was still here was living proof that he never had.

Me, on the other hand? I didn’t know if I could turn off the human part of myself and become a killing machine.

No pressure or anything.

There was a metallic clanking sound behind us and I whipped around. Santos, smartly, didn't turn his back to the fighter on the sands but cocked his head in the direction of the new noise.

Another wall panel of our cell slid away, revealing a room on the other side. Or, rather, it was more of a corridor, because the space was packed with armed guards as far back as I could see. There had to be at least a dozen of them coming through the new opening, filing in and crowding our once-dark and closed off cell.

“Into the pit, prisoners,” ordered the leader, a sadistic smile pulling at his face as he slapped a baton into his opposite palm. “Your sentence is death.”

Santos and I moved to the far edge of the cell, where the first wall had opened up. His toes hovered over the shadow casting a line in the sand, darkness on our side, light on the other.

“Count of three, we run for weapons,” he muttered. “One, two—”

“Get moving!” Something flashed in the corner of my vision—an arm swinging back, ready to bring a baton down on my head.

“Three!”

We took off, bursting into painful sunlight and burning sand. I didn't expect the ground to be hot, while also soft and shifting beneath my feet. Santos' blurry form was several paces ahead of me as I struggled to find my footing.

*You better fucking get here, Rori,* was my last thought before falling flat on my face and looking up to see a dark shadow looming over me.



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SANTOS



Torrance was no longer at my side when I made it to the weapons rack. When I looked back to find him? “Aw, fuck.”

I’d forgotten that he wasn’t used to the sandy ground because this surface was like second nature to me. He’d fallen, and the Bulldozer was right on his ass. I grabbed the first weapon within reach, not even taking note of what it was, and hurried back. A sinking feeling in my stomach told me he was already a goner though. The bastard couldn’t even see yet.

The Bulldozer swung his—my—machete down, catching only a bit of Torr’s shirt as he rolled out of the way. Torr then kicked the inside of the fighter’s knee, making him scream and stumble, but the Bulldozer did not go down.

And I knew the big bastard wouldn’t go down easily. He’d been here as long as me and Devin.

Torr went for an easy kick next—the gladiator’s nads, but the Bulldozer was ready. He grabbed Torr’s foot just as I sprang into action again. He started to twist just as I took a running jump and broke my weapon against his face.

What I’d ended up grabbing was a wooden stick, little more than a broom handle. I cracked my weapon so hard against the Bulldozer’s nose bridge that it splintered apart. His nose erupted in a fountain of blood, and he released Torr’s leg to grab at his face.

“Get a weapon!” I yelled at him, facing off at the Bulldozer with my now-splintered and broken stick. The

bleeding gladiator had also dropped my machete, and I eyed the curving blade on the sand near his feet.

I couldn't grab it yet though. The enraged gladiator seemed to forget about the blood pouring from his face as he stared me down. "Butcher." He smiled cruelly, revealing jagged, blood-stained teeth. "You're alive after all." Without breaking eye contact, he lowered to pick up the machete. "Killing you myself will be so much sweeter now that I can do it with your own weapons."

"How'd you even find those?" I didn't really care to know. I was just stalling for time, backing away slowly, the splintered end of my stick pointing at the Bulldozer as he advanced on me.

"Went in your room when Nella had some fun with your roomie in her office. That big cat of yours didn't stand a chance."

He said both of those sentences to throw me off my game and get under my skin. And goddamn him, it worked. While I was trying to process Nella taking Devin again, and this big oaf actually laying a hand on Tezca, he moved in for a strike.

On instinct, I brought up my weapon to block, forgetting that it was made of wood. My mistake became clear when my own machete sliced through it cleanly, nicking me in the shoulder before I dodged the rest of it with a hiss of pain.

I went behind the Bulldozer and he spun, coming for me again, forgetting all about Torr who ran up behind him with a mace of some kind. Rori's man swung the weapon like a baseball bat, landing a hard blow on the Bulldozer's kidney.

"Took you long enough to find something," I muttered, holding my bleeding shoulder while the Bulldozer swayed unsteadily.

He swung at Torr, who successfully blocked the machete blow and kicked the gladiator in the stomach. Unfortunately for him, the Bulldozer barely budged.

While those two danced, the Bulldozer swinging my blade as Torr dodged and whacked him where he could, I went to

look for another weapon. There was a short sword on the rack, not quite what I was used to, but it would work well enough. I grabbed it and grimaced at the weight. There was no way I could hold this thing with my bum shoulder. It felt like the muscles had torn, so I was already down to using one arm.

*Not that I don't have faith in you, but any minute now would be great, Rori.*

I switched the weapon to my other arm and ran over to help Torr. The Bulldozer was giving chase now, running after my buddy and swinging wildly while Torr did his damndest to keep out of range of that blade. Every move missed him by inches, and he was bound to get sliced if they kept at it.

What the Bulldozer had in brute strength, he lacked in speed. I came up behind him and brought the sword down across his back, hoping to slice between his vertebrae. If I had my own damn weapons, I'd know exactly where to aim. The fighter's thin shirt sliced apart, revealing some kind of vest underneath.

"Goddamn it!" I ground my teeth against frustration and the pain in my arm. No gladiators had access to stab-proof vests. Sometimes we managed crude armor out of metal plating, but that thing could have only come directly from the pitmasters. Torr and I had sat in darkness with barely any food or water for days, and they still rigged this fight against us.

The Bulldozer only laughed when I realized what he was wearing. "What's wrong, Butcher? Don't want your pretty little weapon back?" He waved my machete in front of my face, mocking me.

"Take it off," I hissed at him. "Take that fucking vest off and fight like a real man."

"No thanks, but I'll remember your honorable words when I'm carving your insides out." He was holding the machete all wrong, waving it around with no finesse or respect for the weapon. "I think I'll keep your blades too. They're very sharp."

“They’ll let you die too, you know,” I said. “Their gifts don’t mean anything. *You* don’t mean anything. You think working with them will get you a leg up so you’ll live longer, and maybe you will, in the short term.” Torr was creeping silently up behind the Bulldozer, so I went on talking to keep him distracted. “But they’re still using you, just like they use all of us. You’re not a favorite. You won’t be saved.”

“You sound jealous, Butcher. Want one of these for yourself?” The Bulldozer pounded a fist on his vest. “Fucking the guests and being the crowd favorite not good enough for you?”

Torr took that moment to jump, his arm around the huge gladiator’s neck and legs braced on either like he was taking a piggyback ride. He’d lost the mace at some point and held the Bulldozer’s neck in a choke hold, his wrapped arm clasping his opposite bicep to cut off the fighter’s oxygen.

Almost immediately, the Bulldozer’s face turned a bright red, his eyes widening in panic from the lack of air as he fought to get Torr off his back.

“Now, get him!” Torr yelled, clinging to the massive fighter with his full body. The Bulldozer couldn’t break the hold on his throat, so he was trying to elbow Torr in the gut.

I darted forward, aiming the sword low at the fighter’s legs. He wore leather greaves to protect his ankles and shins, so I drove the sword through his thigh. Only a grunt escaped his mouth, and I couldn’t tell if that was due to his pain tolerance or Torr’s hold. I stabbed through his other thigh, dark red blood now pouring onto the sand as if from a fountain.

My jabs were quick, and I darted back to stay out of the gladiator’s reach. “Torr, let go! He’s going down!” I hollered.

The Bulldozer began leaning backwards, like a tree falling. His face was slack, as if he was unconscious already, and quickly losing color. And Torr still did not release his choke hold.

“Torr, let go!”

He finally did, but it wasn't fast enough. The Bulldozer fell backward with a crash, pinning Torr beneath him.

A moment passed where everything felt still. Even the people in the audience, whom I was barely aware of, seemed to be holding their breath. Then it hit me.

Oh fucking hell, neither of them were moving.

"Torr!" I dropped the sword, ran to the Bulldozer's hefty side and started pushing, trying to roll his dead weight off the other man. "Fuck, you better be just knocked out under there..."

I had only been shoving for a few seconds when a meaty fist snapped up, fingers clasp around my throat in a surprisingly painful hold. In an instant, my breath was gone. Stars and dark spots danced in my vision, but through them, I could see the Bulldozer's eyes. Open and alert.

And the grimace of effort on his face as he squeezed harder was equally clear. "We all die, Butcher," the gladiator wheezed through his broken nose and choked throat. "I'm just glad you'll die before me."

I clawed at his hand with the last of my flagging strength, desperate to break the hold over my airway, but there was no use. Fuck, why did I drop the sword?

My vision became mostly black, and my lungs burned. It was wholly unfair, but everything about a gladiator's life was. I was sloppy, weak, and uncoordinated from being imprisoned. Even with two of us against one, Torr and I never stood a chance.

This was an end I expected for myself. I just hoped Rori wouldn't be affected by my death too badly. She and Torr loved each other, but her and me? Maybe it was a good thing we never really got a chance to begin. She'd have enough to deal with, mourning the guy she'd known since childhood.

Devin would learn to move on. Nothing could mentally break that guy. Maybe he and Rori could save Hudson.

*So many maybes...* was my last thought before I gave in and stopped fighting to breathe.

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DEVIN



“Let me out,” I demanded the pitmaster. “It’s supposed to be my fight against the Butcher. He’s taking *my* kill.”

“Step back.” The uniformed guard sneered as he slapped his electric prod against my chest, finger hovering over the trigger. “We had a last minute change in the fight. You’ll go out when it’s your damn time.”

I paced back forth behind the gate, for once eager to run out into the sands instead of dreading it. I was forced to watch the Bulldozer collapse on top of the guy the Hunter had called Torrance and then choke Santos until my friend fell limply to the sand. The Bulldozer was now rolling slowly to his feet, despite still bleeding severely from his legs and nose.

That was the thing about this particular fighter. He was slow, and not very well coordinated, but fighting him was like a scrawny child going up against an armored tank. He had yet to lose a fight due to sheer endurance alone. He would not live past this day, but he still wanted to die on his feet.

I could have respected that if he hadn’t just killed my friend.

And for Santos, I needed to be the one who ended the Bulldozer’s life. It was the least I could do to avenge him.

“Let me out,” I repeated to the pitmaster. “I’m up next. What are you waiting for?”

The asshole pulled the trigger on his prod, releasing a crackle of electricity. Before he could stick me with the

business end, Tezca got between us and let out a low warning growl. The pitmaster hesitated, because the last guy who tried to electrocute the jaguar lost his hand.

That was when the gate decided to rise, granting me entry into the arena.

I didn't spare the pitmaster a second glance as I ducked underneath and sprinted out onto the sand. Tezca was right at my side and then ran ahead of me straight to Santos' side.

The Bulldozer was on his feet but unsteady and leaking blood like a faucet. My throwing knives were between my fingers the moment he faced me head on, and two were embedded in his eye sockets before he took his next ragged breath.

He didn't seem to know what happened, turning his head left and right as if wondering why he suddenly couldn't see. The realization hit him a moment later when shaking, bloodsoaked hands reached for his own face.

I sent a third knife into his thick neck, since his chest was protected by a convenient stab-proof vest.

The Bulldozer was dead before he hit the ground, which worked well enough for me. I was never one for prolonging anyone's death, no matter how vile they were.

We never knew who, what, or when they would send our next opponents out, so I retrieved my knives first before heading over to check on Santos. "Tezca," I hissed, eyes darting to all the gates and doorways that would bring new bodies into the pit. "Tell me something good, please."

The jaguar had his paws on Santos' motionless chest and was sniffing the man's nose and mouth.

"Is he alive?" I demanded.

*Not quite.*

I fucking hated how calm that voice sounded. "So he's... dead?"

*Also not quite.*

“Fuck.” I looked up and around at the gathered crowd, feeling powerless. Nearly every seat was filled, with the audience yelling and gesturing, but I couldn’t make out what they said. Nor did I care. None of this shit should have been happening out here, like we were animals in a zoo. If Santos was dead, I wanted to mourn him privately.

But that was a luxury none of us had.

I went over to the other guy, Torrance, just to give myself something to do. Putting my ear to his nose and mouth, I did hear breathing. So he must have just gotten knocked out when the Bulldozer flattened him.

He and Santos both looked unkempt, like they hadn’t bathed in a week, and pale. Santos looked thinner than I remembered. Had the two of them been holed up together?

The fluttering of wings and a cooing sound brought my attention up to one of the gates. A white dove had settled on top of the archway and peered over at us, as if curious about the unconscious man.

In the next moment, several things happened at once.

The gate just beneath the dove started to open. And I heard a long, rasping, desperate breath of air behind me.

“Fuck,” Santos wheezed and coughed. “Ghost?”

“Hey, dude.” I didn’t take my eyes from the silhouettes of fighters approaching. “Glad you’re back, but it’s not over yet.”

Santos coughed again. “Protect him. I’m getting my machetes.”

I didn’t know if he was talking to me or Tezca, but I straightened as the Saint approached me calmly in the pit, a pair of short swords made with long cross guards to look like crucifixes in his hands.

The fighter clicked his tongue once, smiling almost pleasantly. “Where’s our daring rescue party, Ghost?”

Shit. This was all bad if no one came within the next two minutes.



“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“That’s unfortunate,” he mused. “Because if no one is coming to our rescue, there is only one way this ends.”

More fighters entered the pit from where he came, fanning out to the sides in an orderly formation. They looked like organized units now, but I knew if a signal didn’t come from the Saint, all bets were off and everything would descend into chaos.

I spotted the Hunter, Levi, in one line of fighters, his eyes locked on us. *Wait*, he mouthed insistently at me.

“We have to stall for time,” I said to the Saint.

“How much time?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know if the woman would come within minutes, today, or even next week. “Just as long as possible.”

“You know that won’t work,” the Saint warned. “They’ll come in and start killing us themselves if we don’t do our jobs.”

The crowd started chanting, *Fight! Fight! Fight!* right then, as if on cue. Pitmasters started closing in, their electric prods crackling. Time was not a luxury we had, and we had nothing to bargain with to gain more.

“What do you say, Ghost?” the Saint pressed. “Business as usual?”

No, no. Not with all of us out here at the same time. I couldn’t bring myself to make an attempt on Santos’ life, or even the Hunter’s.

A metallic hum and series of clanking sounds caught my attention, but it was just the banks of floodlights lighting up the arena. The sky had darkened and now we, the men caught between a hard place and death, were spotlighted for the world to see.

The Saint sighed as if he were only mildly disappointed, then rotated his wrists, making those blades flash. “Well, it was a convincing attempt. I’ll give you that.”

“Wait,” I hissed. “Just...spar with me. But don’t let anyone make any kills.”

“It’s too late for that.” He almost sounded apologetic. “Everyone’s got their own life to save now.”

“Wait...wait...” Torrance was rolling over now, coming painstakingly to his knees and then standing all the way up. “Rori’s coming. She wouldn’t leave us.”

“When?” I demanded. “Because we are out of time.”

“I don’t know, I...” He rubbed the side of his head, wincing like he had a concussion. “You just gotta trust her.”

The Saint made that wistful little sigh again, looked over his shoulder, then made a slicing motion across his throat to the other gladiators. Like a flipped switch, they turned on each other with every weapon they had—slicing, punching, stabbing, and bludgeoning the nearest man to death. The Hunter was backed into a corner, fighting for his life.

“No, wait!” I stepped up to the Saint, only to feel the edge of his sword on my throat.

“No hard feelings, Ghost,” he said. “It’s just survival.”

He pulled back to swing, and I went for my knives, leaning into my instincts—my distribution of weight on the sandy ground and the finely tuned muscle memory of my arms—when the floodlights shut off.

I let a knife loose just as the entire colosseum plunged into darkness. It wasn’t just the floodlights that were off, the entire canyon had lost power, from the looks of it.

The sounds of fighting ceased as everyone froze in shock. This was unprecedented. In my entire four years in this place, the resort had never fully lost power.

One small, dim light switched on near the top of the colosseum, and everyone turned to look at the source like moths to a flame. A figure stood in the announcer’s box, which was rarely used. The figure leaned down, revealing herself to be a woman with short, blonde hair wearing a leather jacket .

“All spectators are to leave now if you don’t want to get hurt,” she said into the microphone, her voice reverberating across the arena. “The gladiator fights are over. Mystic Canyon Resort is fucking closed.”



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## RORI



**T**here was no reaction to my announcement at first, only stunned silence. The spectators sitting closest to the announcer box looked at each other with confused expressions. I made a quick hand signal to LJ, who was hidden behind a pillar a few rows down from me. He returned the signal, stepped out of his hiding place, and fired a few rounds of his automatic rifle in the air.

That got people moving. And screaming. But it was the moving part that was important.

While the resort staff dealt with the chaos of a few hundred panicked, stampeding people, now we had to deal with the gladiators.

To keep any curious spectators from looking too closely at us, LJ lobbed a smoke grenade into the stadium seats. Riders from the Valkyrie Network guarded the sections of lower seats to prevent anyone from running out into the sandpit, which was where I needed to go next.

I left the small office and jogged down the stairs in LJ's section, patting his armored back as I passed him. "Good job, keep it up."

"Thanks, boss." He fired a couple more shots in the air to spook an especially slow group of people. "Let's move it, people! The resort is permanently closed for business. No, you may not ask questions, just move your asses."

Hopping over the final barrier, I was out in the fighting pit. And shit, Santos hadn't called it the sands for no reason. The

ground was shifty, almost fluid beneath my feet. Every step felt like I was sinking in a little.

A group of men stood across the pit, watching me run toward them. There had to be at least a dozen fighters out there. With all the spectators that had been in the crowd, this looked like it was going to be a massive, battle-royale type of fight.

It seemed we arrived just in time.

I tried to scan faces in the darkness, looking for the two faces that had haunted my every waking moment since I was forced away from this place. One man started toward me, running at full speed, but with all the chaotic noise and lack of light, I couldn't make out his features clearly.

"Stop! I have a gun!" I shouted, drawing my weapon from my holster.

The figure didn't slow until he crashed into me, wrapping me in a hug that felt just as good and familiar as my motorcycle seat.

"Fuck, I'm so glad to see you." Torr's voice was muffled, his face pressed into my neck.

"Torr! Oh my God, are you okay?" I nearly buckled under the weight of him but held on just as tightly as he held me, my hands running up to his face and neck.

"You don't want to kiss me, creep," he warned. "I smell and probably taste like a sweaty asshole."

My laughter was cut short by the feeling of wetness on my hand. I pulled my fingers away from his hair to see dark, sticky blood coating my skin. "Shit, are you hurt? Did you hit your head?"

He pulled away and felt the back of his head with a grimace. "Had a little tussle, but I'll be okay."

"Torr, a head injury is serious."

"Damn, it's so good to argue with you again." He gave me that sexy, lopsided smile, but it was far too early to enjoy our reunion yet.

“Are *you* the one rescuing us?” The question came from a tall, leanly muscled fighter with crosses tattooed next to his eyes. He carried a pair of short swords at his sides, turning to me like he was ready to use them.

“Yes,” I answered. “Surprised?”

“You could say that.”

“My name’s Aurora Wilder.” I lifted my chin, projecting my voice so everyone in the fighting ring could hear me. “And I’m here with some capable fighters of my own. We’re here to shut down the resort for good, but we need your help.” I scanned the faces watching me, my heart leaping when I saw Santos among them. “Help us fight back against the people who have used you, enslaved you, and took away your humanity.”

“What do you want from us?” someone called out.

“Nothing!” I spread my arms out. “You are free to go your own ways afterward, or come with us as long as you don’t harm my people.”

“Yeah, fuck this place!” yelled another guy.

I raised my hand before the hooting and hollering became too loud. “While we’re here, I’m requesting you bring me four people alive.” I tucked in my thumb to make the number 4. “Bring me Nella and the three guards whose preferred weapons are the spiked brass knuckles.”

“I’m gonna kill Nella!”

“I’m asking that you don’t.”

Bright light filled the arena just as I said that, the floodlights humming as they re-powered. We figured there would be a backup generator somewhere. The darkness was just so I could have enough time to talk to the fighters.

Shouts and movement echoed all around the near-empty colosseum. The armed guards were getting into position at the exits, and I could only hope the gladiators would pick our side and hadn’t succumbed to any kind of Stockholm Syndrome in this place.

“Need a gun, Torr?” I pulled my spare from the holster at the small of my back.

“Oh fuck yes, please. Loaded?”

“Yup.”

I fired a shot at one of the nearest guards, catching him square in the chest. His hand came away bloody as he collapsed. “They don’t have vests!” I called out. They must have never expected revolting gladiators to have guns.

Chaos erupted then, fighters running in all directions as they beat their chests and shouted war cries. I headed for a certain fighter wielding a pair of machetes, sidestepping and looking in all directions to make sure I wasn’t a target.

“You really came back.” Santos’ warmth shone clearly through his features, despite looking thin and more than a little haunted with dark shadows under his eyes.

“Told you I would.” I slid one arm around his back, only to get crushed into a full-body embrace against his chest. For a moment, the canyon, the battle, the whole outside world didn’t exist beyond me and him. “You okay?” My gaze scanned over him, immediately zeroing on the dark, wet stain running from his shoulder to his elbow. “That arm doesn’t look good.”

“I got nicked, but it’s not serious.” Santos lifted and swung both machetes, and I noticed his injured arm didn’t raise as high. “At least I got my babies back.”

Like I was just gonna let that stand. I grabbed his good arm and tore off a chunk of his sleeve. With no words, only his amused smile, I wrapped the strip of fabric around the wound at his shoulder and tied it off.

“We have medics with us,” I told him. “We’ll get that taken care of properly as soon as we’re out of here.”

“Look at you, always taking care of me,” he murmured.

I went to touch his face before remembering my fingers were now slick with his blood. “Somebody has to.” As much as I wanted to sink into the warmth and intimacy of this moment, the sight of his injury kept me grounded in reality.



Peaceful, tender moments had to wait. “You and Torr both look like you’ve been through it.”

“We were. They kept us in the same cell.” Santos flipped his blade in his hand to caress my cheek with his knuckle. “You could say we’re best buds now.”

I laughed. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, your man’s alright.”

A four-legged shadow encircled us, Tezca’s golden eyes gleaming as he stalked low to the ground, ready to hunt.

“Well hello, handsome.” I stroked a hand down the jaguar’s velvety back, and Tezca headbutted my hand in reply. “Was he with you?” I asked Santos.

“No. I think he was keeping watch over the Ghost.” Santos nodded ahead to where the tall Asian man fought against the canyon’s guards alongside the Hunter and the man with tattoos near his eyes. “Suppose we should help out.” Santos rolled out his wrists, circling his twin blades in figure-eight patterns.

“The sooner we do, the sooner we can get everyone out of here.”

Santos embraced me again, brushing a quick kiss on my forehead as he released me. “I owe you my life, paloma.”

He was jogging away, Tezca loping at his side, before I recovered from my mental swooning.

*Behind you. Northwest side of the arena.*

I turned without hesitating at the sound of Astarte’s voice, spotting one of the armed guards with his arm around a woman, holding her in front of him with his electric prod at her temple. The moment I recognized her terrified expression and that long, red braided hair, I sprinted up to that section of seats.

“Let her go!” I demanded, leveling my weapon at the guard’s head.

Paige’s eyes went even wider as she saw me. “Ma’am? Rori?”

“Stop the uprising or she gets 10,000 volts,” the guard hissed, his finger shaking over the trigger of his weapon. “These have been engineered to kill, and I won’t hesitate to use it on her.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I remember you.”

“You will! I’ll kill this maid if you don’t stop everything right now.”

“No, you were the one who pointed a gun at me and forced me away from the canyon.”

“Yeah, and I told you not to come back. Now people are going to die, and everyone you love will be enslaved.”

I laughed, the sound wild and maniacal. “You said you let me go because I was a woman. What did you think was gonna happen?”

My first shot was fast and low, an aim from my hip. The electric prod clattered to the ground as he screamed. The guard clutched his maimed hand, blood pouring from the wound in the back of his palm.

“You like that? Neat little trick my dad taught me.” I held out my free arm. “Come here, Paige. I got you.”

The poor girl thankfully had enough sense to listen, hurrying to my side and allowing my arm to fall around her shoulders protectively. Holding her trembling form close to me, I took proper aim with my shooting arm, lining up my wrist, elbow, and shoulder.

Now it was the guard staring at me in fear, his mangled hand held tightly against his chest.

“You shouldn’t have let me go,” I told him. “Your biggest mistake was believing me to be harmless.” I fired, and he fell dead in a crumpled heap.

Immediately, I turned to Paige, wrapping her up in both arms. “Are you okay? Did any of them hurt you?”

“W-what’s going on?” She shook like a leaf, practically vibrating in my embrace. “I’m scared, I don’t know what’s happening.”

“We’re closing down the resort and freeing everyone.” I pulled away, taking her face in my hands. “You’re getting out, and then we can get you in touch with your family. You’ll be able to go anywhere you want, but you have to listen, okay?”

Paige nodded shakily, and I tried not to take it personally that she probably had some amount of fear of me as well.

“Stay hidden and out of harm’s way until this is over. We’ve got to fight our way out, but none of my people will hurt you, okay?” I wasn’t so sure about the gladiators, but I knew at least my cousins and the Valkyrie Network riders wouldn’t harm a hair on her head.

“Ah, ma’am? Aurora?”

“Yes?” I turned to face the fighter who had walked up behind me and stepped between him and Paige.

It was the Hunter, panting slightly, his bare torso slicked with sweat and blood. He held a hatchet in one hand and a short sword in the other.

“We’ve found the pitmasters with the brass knuckles. They’re bringing them to the center of the pit now.”

“Excellent, thank you.” I immediately decided that I liked this guy. He seemed noble and honest, not to mention a stellar fighter.

*He is trustworthy.* A featherlight breeze over my skin and Astarte’s words confirmed it.

“Hunter? Would you please watch over her?” I stepped aside to reveal Paige, who seemed calmer since he arrived. “Paige is my friend and was almost taken hostage. I need to make sure nothing happens to her.”

The young gladiator straightened, his chest puffing out slightly. “I will guard her with my life.”

“Again, thank you.” I turned to Paige, giving her shoulder a little squeeze. “Stick with him, okay? You’ll be safe.”

Even though I had nothing to worry about, I stepped in close to whisper in the Hunter’s ear, holding my weapon loosely at my side. “I will know if you hurt her or touch her in

any way that she doesn't want. And I won't be merciful on you."

His jaw tightened. "I would never."

"Good." I gave his shoulder a little pat as I slid past him, heading back to the fighting pit.

Shouting and gunfire, with the occasional explosion of a smoke bomb, came from all around me as I walked. Someone had released the rest of the gladiators who hadn't been in the pit, and those were the ones the uniforms seemed to be going after at the moment.

LJ, Carter, and their riders were mostly guarding the exits—allowing guests to escape but not staff. A few others were combing through all rooms and offices of the resort, flushing people out of hiding places or hidden passageways. We knew there had to be procedures in place in case of a breach and figured there would be some amount of escapees.

That was fine with me. I wanted word to reach whoever was at the top of this operation. I wanted to remind them that they weren't all powerful, and they wouldn't get away with enslaving people for much longer.

I wanted them to know I would soon come knocking.

With head bent low and hands tied behind their backs, the three guards sat in a circle on the sandy ground. Two gladiators stood over them, one of them being the man with cross tattoos next to his eyes.

"A gift for you, Aurora," said the tattooed man with a smile, gesturing to the three guards.

"Thank you." I spent a quick moment taking him in. "What are you called?"

"As a gladiator, I was called the Saint." His smile stretched wider. "Now that I'm no longer enslaved, it would honor me to present you with my given name, Solomon."

My gut remained silent about this guy. I couldn't get a read on him, nor did I receive an endorsement of trustworthiness from Astarte. I would have to keep my guard up.

“It’s good to meet you, Solomon.” I held my hand out. “Welcome back to humanity.”

He clasped my palm in a fast, respectful shake. “I’ll leave you to it. Or do you wish for us to stay?”

“I’m good, thanks. Think I’ve got these dicks handled.”

He motioned to the other fighter, and together, the two men jogged across the sand pit to join the fray elsewhere.

I turned my attention to the three men tied up on the ground and gave them my best psychotic bitch smile. “Hey, fellas. Remember me?” One of them flinched as I reached down and took the brass knuckles off his belt. That fearful reaction just pissed me off even more.

“So, these are your weapons of choice?” I slid the brass knuckles onto my fingers, testing the weight as I curled my hand into a fist. The finger holes were too big for me, but with a clenched fist, I could still hold the weapon in place. “You like to use them on gladiators who can’t fight back, right?”

“Please...”

“It must be *so scary* for you, being surrounded by all these men who kill each other every single day.” I tilted my hand from side-to-side as if I were admiring some diamonds on my knuckles. “I bet it feels good to tie them up and get some hits on them. Show ‘em who’s boss.”

“Listen, we just do our jobs! If we don’t do as we’re told \_\_\_”

“Hang on, let me try this.” I curled my fist tighter, pulling my arm back until the spiked knuckles were next to my face. “I gotta see what all the hype is about.”

The man in front of me shut his eyes and turned his head away from me. The other two also found something very interesting to look at away from me.

I waited, my anger calm and cold like a steel blade. I was patient enough to wait all day if it meant serving up this asshole a taste of his own punishment.

A whole minute passed before he was curious enough to take a peek, bringing his head forward just a few inches.

The sound of my fist connecting with his jaw was the most satisfying, sickening noise that ever hit my ears. There was a definite *pop* as I disconnected his lower jaw from his skull. The spikes gave me claws that rivaled a jaguar's, piercing his skin and dragging through the flesh to cut his mouth wide open. And the weight of those knuckles gave my punch the power and follow-through of a man twice my size.

"Damn, you were right." I returned to admiring the brass knuckles like they were a flashy engagement ring. "These are *so* much fun. I think I'll keep them."

The man's screams and protests got lost in the fountain of blood gurgling from his face. I might have cut a bit of his tongue too. Good thing I had my mother's stomach for gore and wasn't squeamish in the slightest.

"Rori!"

I turned to see Carter running toward me, his boots kicking up sand and his assault rifle barely swaying as he held it in front of him.

"What's up, cuz?" I held up the knuckles, about to ask if he wanted a hit on these assholes, but his expression made me reconsider. "Something wrong?"

"Uh, yeah." He stopped in front of me, barely panting. "I started to think this was too easy. But they've got backup coming."

"How many?"

"A shit ton. Coming in from the north. They're less than a mile away. We gotta evac now."

"Has anyone found Nella?" I demanded. "She's the one who runs this place, and I need her."

"No word yet. But you can bet your ass we'll all be trapped in this canyon if we don't leave *now*."

"Fuck..."

If Nella got away, nothing would be fixed in the long run. She and whoever her superiors were would just build another resort—with even better security measures—and enslave more people.

But saving a few lives was still better than letting everyone perish here.

“Alright, fine. Call it.”

Carter gave a quick nod and put his fingers to his lips, letting out two loud, shrill whistles. I pocketed my new brass knuckles and followed him, not giving another glance or thought to the men tied up in the center. They were just grunts, hired muscle. Nella was the head of this operation, so it was her brain I needed to pick.

“Head for the elevators!” I yelled to fighters and service staff as we ran through the underbelly of the colosseum. “It’s time to go!”

One of the maids darted out from a side room, her arms full of liquor bottles. A gladiator came out from behind her, took some of the loot to lighten her load, and they ran out toward the canyon floor together, holding hands.

“You seen Torr?” I asked Carter, looking around.

“He was searching for that bitch in charge last I saw.”

A flash of red hair in my peripheral vision had me spinning on the balls of my feet. “Paige! We’ve got to go!”

“Coming!” She ran toward us, hefting a drawstring laundry bag over her shoulder. The Hunter was glued to her side, and as he checked their surroundings, he took her bag to carry it in his free hand.

*They’d make a cute couple,* I thought just as a sense of warning filled my body. All my muscles locked up, like I was being physically held back from going any further.

*Take cover.*

Astarte’s instruction barely finished processing when I grabbed the back of Carter’s shirt, dragging him off to the side until we were pressed against one of the curving canyon walls.

“Stay covered!” I hollered at the top of my lungs to no one in particular. “Don’t go out into the canyon! Paige, get back here!”

Bullets fired down from above us, and Paige and the Hunter went down.





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## TORRANCE



The rain of ammunition came from nowhere.

All had been fairly quiet for a while. Santos and I had been tearing up the offices, looking for any documents about the resort or anybody important that was hiding.

“Oh shit! She just punched the fuck out of that dude with his own brass knuckles.” The fighter stared out a window with a scenic view of the colosseum and the east-facing canyon walls. He let out a wistful sigh. “Damn, that’s hot.”

“I know, man, but we gotta focus.” I felt around the heavy wooden desk, tapping my knuckles in search of hidden compartments. “You sure this is Nella’s office?”

“Yeah, I mean this is where she brought me and Devin all the time.” He didn’t give me the specifics of why, and I didn’t ask him. I figured it wasn’t a monthly review on his accomplishments as a gladiator.

Just as my fingers ran over a tiny deviation in the smooth, polished wood, I heard a rapid series of pops.

“Shit!” Santos and I both dove below the window ledge for cover.

“Is that you guys?” He took a careful peek through the window. “Dressed all in black, shooting down over the canyon ledge?”

I shook my head. “Doesn’t sound like the Valkyrie Network.”

“Oh fuck, they’re shooting down at escapees! Everyone’s scattering.”

My heart stopped in my chest. No one likely expected the resort to have backup. “You see Rori?”

“No.”

“Shit.”

“There’s a fucking lot of them Torr, they’re lining up all along the ridge.”

I went to look myself and cursed again. Those who weren’t shooting at people went up to Carter’s truck and began looting what looked like food, blankets, and medical supplies. One of them promptly shot all four of the vehicle’s tires.

That was especially bad for Santos, who needed his shoulder treated as soon as possible.

“Fuck.” I checked the magazine of the gun Rori had loaned me. Four rounds left. I had used most of my ammo on the pitmasters who’d been guarding this office.

Santos tightened his grip on his machetes. “What should we do?”

“Find Rori,” I decided. “If only one person makes it out of here, it has to be her.”

The fighter gave a solemn nod, and we headed for the door together, only to be met by Tezca, his jaguar, on the other side.

*Follow.*

If the disembodied voice running over my brain wasn’t enough, my feet trailed after the big cat like they were puppeteered by him.

“Here, you go.” I pushed Santos in front of me so I could guard his back. From what he’d told me of the jaguar’s kill streak, I figured the teeth and claws provided adequate cover in the front.

Tezca let us through all kinds of doorways and corridors, some of which were as pitch black as the cell Santos and I had been in together.

“Did you know all this was here?” I asked him as we made our way through a particularly twisty tunnel.

“None. I was only allowed in the pit, my sleeping room, and the chow hall.” He paused. “And the sex room, I guess.”

The tunnel stopped short, and the black jaguar sat on his haunches in front of a door. On the other side, we could hear shouts and commotion. And...was that Rori’s voice?

“Let me open it.” I slid past Santos and felt for a knob. When the door pushed open, it reminded me of when they’d shine bright lights into the prison cell to blind us. Spotlights were now positioned at the top of the canyon, shining down on the open area below.

“Torr?”

I looked to my left to see Rori, Carter, and a cluster of gladiators and service staff pressed against the wall.

“Oh, thank fuck.”

“Oh, thank fuck.”

We didn’t laugh about speaking in unison, just wrapped each other in a tight embrace. “Santos and Tezca are here too.”

“Have you seen Devin? The Ghost?” Santos scanned the faces of those pressed against the wall, shielded from the guns looming above. His jaw clenched tight when he didn’t see his friend.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t.” Rori looked at him with a mix of determination and sympathy. “We’ll find him, though.”

“Maybe in an afterlife,” Carter muttered. A barrage of shots came down from below, kicking up dirt and gravel while everyone pressed against the wall tried to make themselves flatter. “Because I don’t see how we’re getting out of here like this.”

“They have to come down here at some point,” Rori said.

“Do they?” Carter challenged. “And even if they do, can we wait them out? Because they can run for supplies whenever they want.”

Santos pointed across the canyon. “Hey, is that—”

“Don’t expose your arm!” Rori slapped his hand down against his thigh. “I did the same thing and almost lost my hand. Those assholes are actually decent shots.”

The guy jerked his chin instead. “Is that the Hunter?”

“Yeah, and Paige.” Rori’s mouth tightened. “We had them go ahead of us just before the gunfire started coming down. They’re trapped out there.”

The couple were huddled together under a picnic table in a clearing smack in the middle of the canyon. Craters littered the table’s surface, hundreds of small indents made from gunfire. For once, I was thankful to the resort for having top-of-line, cream-of-the-crop quality everything. Who knew a damn picnic table would be bulletproof?

“She keeps trying to run out there.” Carter shot Rori an annoyed look.

“I can’t just leave them!” she cried.

“He’s right,” I said. “We can’t have you filled with bullet holes either.”

“Fuck.” Santos rubbed his mouth, his eyes narrowed on that table. “It’s only a matter of time before a round makes it through.”

“Ugh, don’t say that!” Rori’s hands dove into her hair. “We can’t just sit here!”

“Unfortunately, that’s the only thing we can do,” Carter said.

We weren’t the only ones taking cover against the canyon walls. People were lined up single file, avoiding the areas most exposed to those preying on us from above. Not everyone was lucky, though. Several bodies laid out in the clearing, unmoving as their blood pooled around them.

Our shooters weren’t just sitting and waiting up there either. They walked the rim of the canyon, trying to catch people at different angles. The spotlight kept moving around, sometimes exposing people’s feet as targets.

It was abundantly clear, though, that the shooters were in no hurry. They would wait us out if they had to. We were sitting fucking ducks.

“Should’ve planned for this,” Carter grumbled with a shake of his head.

“Excuse me? No.” Rori folded her arms and glared at her cousin. “If we’d been any later, these guys would have fought to the death. Can’t believe I had to drag your ass out as late as we did.”

“Well, maybe if we’d planned to mitigate being trapped in the canyon, we wouldn’t be trapped in a fucking canyon right now.”

“Fuck you, Carter. Now is not the time to pick a fight with me.”

I cleared my throat, “Hey guys, maybe we should focu—”

A spray of bullets rained down, piercing the dirt just inches away from our feet. From out in the clearing, a scream rang out.

“Paige!” Rori cried. She leaned away from the wall as if she were about to run out, but Carter pulled her back.

I could barely see the woman under the table. She was curled up on the ground with the gladiator on his hands and knees over her, shielding her with his body. When he touched her hands or arms as if to reassure her, his hand came away bloodied, and he looked up at us with a grim expression.

“Is she hit?” Rori called out to him.

“Just a graze, I think,” the Hunter answered. “But she’s bleeding a lot.”

“Fuck.” Rori’s hands went to her hair again. “We have to do something.”

“I’m all ears, president,” Carter snorted.

“Shut the fuck up! You can talk shit later, but my friend is hurt!”

“She’ll survive a graze.”

“Not if we’re out here for hours and it gets infected! She’s not a fighter, Carter. She can’t just tough it out.”

The woman under the table was sobbing loudly now while the gladiator tried to soothe her, his large hand applying pressure to her wound.

“I’ll get her.”

I didn’t realize the words had left my mouth until everyone stared at me like I’d grown a few extra eyeballs.

“The fuck you will, Torr,” Rori said.

*Follow.*

Everyone looked down this time at the jaguar who returned our gazes with bright golden eyes. That single word had led Santos and I straight to Rori moments ago. Was I really willing to follow the command a second time?

*Follow and trust, Torrance. And stay low.*

The big cat left the cover of the curving, canyon wall, and I did as he instructed. Despite the background noise of the others yelling at me, I followed.

Sure, it wasn’t lost on me that I was walking into open gunfire and therefore scared enough to shit my pants, but there was something else besides that all-consuming fear. A strange sense of calm, like I just knew that everything would be alright.

The ping of bullets all around me was a poignant reminder not to tempt fate too much, so I kept alongside Tezca, low to the point where I was practically crawling. Don’t get me wrong, the jaguar was bigger than most cats, but he wasn’t exactly lion or tiger-sized. The broad side of his body barely covered me, but he trotted along calmly, as if we were just going for a stroll in the park.

We reached the picnic table and I dove underneath, blocking the view of the Hunter and Paige from one side. I figured Tezca would go around to block the other end while I assessed the damage.

“Where’d she get hit?” The big gladiator was curled so tightly around the woman, I could barely see her.

“Her leg. Outside of her thigh. Shhh...” He petted her hair and soothed her with the arm that kept her protectively to his chest. His other hand was already stained dark red from putting pressure on her wound.

I took my shirt off, hating to use such a filthy thing, but slowing her bleeding was the number one priority. We’d have to worry about infection later.

“Let me tie this around her injury. You’re gonna lift your hand when I say, just enough to put this over the wound, then you’re gonna apply pressure again. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

The barrage of gunfire continued all around us as we worked, the smell of gunpowder burning my nose. With an errant glance over the Hunter’s shoulder, I realized Tezca wasn’t blocking the other side. Where the hell was that jaguar?

Once Paige’s tourniquet was secure, I ventured a peek around the canyon and was struck dumb by what I saw.

Tezcatlipoca was running laps through the canyon, drawing gunfire *away* from us. The cat wasn’t so much a blur as it was a shadow, at times appearing flat and two-dimensional. But then I’d blink and he looked normal again, just fast as hell. It looked like the shots were hitting, but the jaguar never lost a step as he zig-zagged around the open, exposed floor.

“Damn, the Butcher has that cat well-trained,” the Hunter remarked.

“Yeah.” I fought to keep my head in the game, shaking off the jaguar’s complete disregard for the laws of physics. “Listen, can you carry her and run? We’ll be better covered at the wall.”

“Yeah, of course.” The gladiator tenderly shifted his arms around Paige. “I’m gonna put your legs over my arm, okay, hun? Tell me if it hurts.”



Paige only made a few soft whimpering noises as the Hunter maneuvered her. Shock and adrenaline had probably set in now. Once they were ready, I turned my focus to the situation outside of our little picnic table bubble.

“Wait for my signal.”

Tezca completed another loop around our end of the canyon, the jaguar practically levitating as he moved through space. Like a hornet colony swarming an attacker, all the guns on the rim swung to follow the shadow on four legs. For the moment, at least, we were forgotten.

“Now, let’s go!” I scrambled out from under the table, staying nearby to guard the other two coming out.

Driven by some instinct or compulsion, I didn’t know which, I pulled out Rori’s borrowed gun from my waistband and pointed it at one of the distracted attackers on the ledge. My finger curled around the trigger and a shot rang out an instant later, the man crumpling to the ground.

“What the fuck?” I whispered.

It wasn’t my shot that hit him.

“Torr, get *the fuck* over here!” Rori’s hoarse screaming finally got through to me, and I sprung into action, heading for the canyon wall. The Hunter and Paige were already there, protected by a little alcove.

“You are going to give me a fucking heart attack—”

“There’s someone else up there.” I cut off Rori tearing into me and rendered her speechless. “One of them got shot, and it wasn’t from me.”

“Was it someone down here returning fire?”

“I don’t think so. It looked like they got hit from behind.”

“Carter?” Rori turned to her cousin. “Are any of your people still up here?”

“No. The ones posted at the elevator jumped down here to start hurrying people up. We’re all down here.”

Santos voiced the conclusion that all of our brains were struggling to comprehend. “Someone else is up there? Helping us?”

“We don’t know that,” Carter muttered. “It could have been an accidental friendly fire. Or worse, a competitor.”

“Oh my God, look!” Rori pointed, forgetting all about her own rule of keeping arms out of sight.

More of our attackers were being taken out with extremely precise shots, to the point where their comrades were looking around as if confused. Most were even turning their attention away from us down in the canyon.

“I don’t know who’s giving it to us, but this is our chance.” Rori popped a fresh magazine into her gun and yelled at the top of her lungs. “If you have a weapon, return fire now!”

She didn’t have to tell anyone twice. Riders, gladiators, service workers, anyone who’d gotten their hands on guns, emerged from their cover just to gain enough clearance for shooting.

Now we weren’t the ones who were trapped.

Those who weren’t getting shot were falling to their deaths into the canyon. We were barely even hitting them and they dropped like flies.

Somewhere between an instant and an eternity later, the canyon fell silent.

Not a single living soul remained in sight on the rim. Everything was still, even Tezca, who had taken to calmly lying down on top of the bullet hole-ridden picnic table.

“Is it over?” Paige whispered.

“Highly doubt that.” Rori checked her ammo, then motioned to me, Carter, and Santos. “Hunter, you stay with her. You three with me.”

Santos and I fell into position on either side of her and later, I would recall how natural and seamless the formation had been.

We stayed just on the edge of cover, heading toward the main elevator that carried us in on our first trip here. I guess for me, it still was my first trip, and hopefully my last one.

The elevator cage was at the top, the inside of the glass walls now covered with some kind of stiff, gray sheet. I assumed it was some kind of bulletproof shield for getting people out safely.

The four of us kept moving toward the panel with the button that would bring the elevator down. Carter, in front, kept sweeping his gun back and forth in front of him, and I did the same on Rori's left. On her right, Santos' remained hypervigilant with his machetes at the ready.

Once about ten feet away from the panel, we heard a metallic clanking and an electric hum.

"It's moving!" Rori hissed. "Someone's coming down!"

Without another word, the four of us pressed into a dipping curve in the canyon wall, covering ourselves but within full view of the elevator door. The three of us with guns pointed at the slowly descending elevator and waited.

"That shield sure is a cock tease," Carter muttered.

"So this is what guys feel like when they're about to see some titty," Rori mused.

No one else commented as the elevator made its descent. When it gently touched down on the floor pad, we collectively sucked in a breath and tightened our hold on our weapons.

The door slid open and...a *dog* came loping out?

No, wait. That was a wolf. And one I'd seen before.

"Lupa?"

The wolf ran straight toward us, tongue lolling out and lips pulled back in a canine smile.

Rori stepped in front of Carter and shoved his gun muzzle down. "Put your weapons down, they're allies."

"How the, what—"

Her cousin was still sputtering his disbelief when Gwen stepped out of the elevator, her smile a bit more reserved. “Hey, Rori. Torr. You guys really should get better at accepting help when it’s offered.”



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## RORI



“I’m so, so grateful you didn’t listen to me on the phone,” I said, pulling Gwen into a hug for at least the third time.

“I just knew the resort had more tricks up their sleeve that they’d never reveal to guests.” She returned my squeeze, then pulled back with a cheeky grin. “Plus, I had to return your bikes.”

“Oh, Gwen...” My motorcycle was my baby, my most prized possession in the world. And it was crazy to think that I hadn’t given her a thought while I was hellbent on rescuing Santos and Torr. But now, thinking of reuniting with my treasured steed, controlling and riding her in the way I only knew how, brought tears to my eyes.

“My dads’ riders’ brought them out of storage and rode them over,” Gwen said with a reassuring look. “I promise your bikes were well taken care of.”

“Oh, I trust you. I’m sure they were.” I sniffed and blinked away my emotion quickly. “So, this is your parents’ club?” I looked around at the impressive fleet of bikers who’d come to our rescue, who were now helping people up the elevators out of the canyon, searching more of the resort, treating injuries, or just shooting the shit with Carter’s men.

“Yeah, Chasing Death MC.”

I cocked my head, letting that name bounce around my brain like a pinball. “I think my uncles know them. Sons of Odin MC.”

Gwen's eyes widened, and then she bobbed her head up and down in a nod. "Oh, yup. I've heard some stories about the Sons of Odin."

"Don't corrupt my innocent ears." I jokingly slapped my palms to my head. "But seriously, Gwen, I can't thank you enough. We owe you big time."

She shook her head, her artfully crafted eyebrows furrowing. "Just find the people responsible for this. And end them for good."

"That's the plan. Speaking of." I hopped out of Carter's truck bed, where we'd been sitting together. "Nella still hasn't been found. I need to at least see a body before I'm satisfied."

"I'll leave you to it. I'll see if these guys need any help." Gwen headed off to where a group of Chasing Death medics were packing up supplies.

The worst of the injuries had been treated, including Santos' shoulder and Paige's graze. We'd be ready to head to the safe houses in a couple of hours. I couldn't believe all that had happened occurred over several hours. It felt like I had blinked and now dawn was teasing the eastern edge of the horizon.

A handful of gladiators and service staff had died when caught in the crossfire, including two maids. Paige didn't have much of a reaction when I told her, though she may have still been in shock. With a blank expression, she only said she didn't know them. I wondered if she had been discouraged from forming friendships with other maids, just like the fighters were.

Well, she wouldn't have to worry about that anymore.

Torr and some of the others were burying those who had died trying to escape the resort. As for the ones who attacked us? The vultures and other desert animals would take care of them just fine.

I went down the elevator into the canyon to find a disgruntled Santos waiting for me. He was shirtless with a fresh bandage taped over his shoulder, wearing a clean pair of

canvas pants and black leather boots. My heart did a little flutter as the elevator door opened. Who knew if he'd ever take it up, but he'd look so damn hot straddling a motorcycle.

“Don't you look happy to see me,” I teased, approaching him.

His frown lifted into a smile that took my breath away. “Always, paloma.”

The need to kiss him rode me hard, and I was never one to ignore my urges. So I did, rising up on my tiptoes and bringing a hand to his nape, while our lips connected so effortlessly.

He and Torr had been given clean clothes, cleansing wipes, and toothbrushes from the toiletry supply. Just enough to remove the grime of their captivity before getting into a real shower.

As a result, Santos actually tasted and smelled decently. His lips were just as soft and pillowy as I remembered, his tongue slick against mine now that he'd chugged some water and was decently hydrated.

The bossy persona I'd taken on to see this mission through—the reason why Carter had sarcastically called me president—melted away as Santos didn't let me break the kiss, his good arm coming around my back to keep me pressed to his chest.

“Fuck, I'm so glad you're okay,” I whispered when he finally let me breathe. “The whole time I was away from you, I was terrified I'd be too late.”

“But you weren't.” His fingers came to my chin, holding my face while he let his forehead rest on mine. “I believed you'd make every effort to get back here, but holy shit, I had no idea you'd be such a badass.”

“What, me?” I laughed bitterly. “People died. I got us trapped in here.”

“Everyone knew death would be a risk. The vast majority of us are alive, and thanks to you, free.”

I sighed and leaned against his supportive weight, suddenly feeling much more tired. “There's still so much left



to do.”

“You have more support now. Word of this will spread.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” I leaned away, reluctantly stepping out of his embrace. “On that note, this entire canyon needs to be combed from top to bottom for Nella. She needs to be found or else we have to assume she escaped.”

Santos’ face hardened. “There’s still no sign of the Ghost—I mean, Devin—either. I’ll bet you anything he’s hunting for her.”

“Why, something personal there?”

He blew out a long breath. “You could say that.”

That sounded like an off-limits conversation to me, so I grabbed his hand and laced my fingers through his. “Want to search for them together?”

There was that smile again. I swore just touching him, talking to him, validating him in any way, made him happy.

And that made me happy.

“It’s a date.” Santos brought our connected hands up and kissed the back of my palm.

“Hunting for an enemy together, so romantic.” I grinned at him. “Let’s check with the others and see what areas have already been cleared.”

Some of the Chasing Death guys had found hidden corridors to a maze of underground garages. Santos asked one of them if they’d seen Devin, and the man pointed down a corridor they hadn’t cleared yet.

We headed in that direction, our path illuminated by security lights in the ceiling and along the walls in a vast tunnel reinforced by concrete pillars.

“Did you know any of this was here?” I asked Santos.

“Not a clue,” he said.

“They really cut deep into the rock here.” I turned to glance behind me. “This whole place must have taken at least

a decade to build. It's amazing no one found out."

"If they did, they were probably paid off," Santos muttered. "Or captured or killed. Any of those seem likely— whoa."

We stopped at the same time. The tunnel had opened up into a flat expanse of steel and concrete. A parking garage.

"Holy shit." Santos walked up to one of the few cars that remained, a sleek red sports car that looked as though it could barely fit two people. "I used to watch street races of these things. Never thought I'd see a real one up close ever again."

"The guests must have panicked and piled into the bigger vehicles when we showed up," I mused. There were only a handful of other cars in the garage, all compact and flashy. The air had a slight burned-rubber smell, and dark tire tracks criss crossed all over the concrete floor. A bunch of guests definitely left in a hurry. Good fucking riddance.

Santos cupped his hands around his mouth. "Devin! You in here?" His voice echoed off the ceiling and floors in the mostly-empty garage.

Something prickled along my senses on the left side, like fingers skimming lightly down my arm. I looked in that direction, seeing only a bright blue car before swinging my gaze in the opposite direction.

The prickling only intensified, and then I heard Astarte's voice. *Look closer.*

A flash of movement caught my eye and drew my attention back. All at once, my instincts roared.

"There!" I sprinted toward the blue car just as Nella took off, running away from it.

She ran hard but not fast. It seemed she'd been running and evading someone for a while because she was clearly gassed, breathing hard in her effort to get away. I pumped my arms and legs, gaining on her quickly. She had a head start, but I'd be caught up to her in seconds.

I was so focused on catching her that I'd forgotten about Santos' friend, Devin.

"Devin, don't!" I heard Santos yell.

Something bright silver flashed in my vision, and then with a cry, Nella went tumbling down. I had so much momentum that I nearly tripped over her, but I was able to jump over her crumpled form instead. When I turned back to her, Nella was clutching her leg where the handle of a knife stuck out of her calf muscle.

Devin emerged from a dark side corridor, as silent and deadly as his gladiator name, the Ghost. His face was stony, determined, with a knife in each hand at his sides.

"Devin." I stepped in front of Nella, blocking his path to her. "Listen to me, I can't let you kill her."

"Move." His voice carried a dark edge of calm. "I have every right to kill her."

"I need her alive for information." I extended a hand in an attempt to calm him. "If she dies, so do the secrets of Mystic Canyon. They'll be able to start up again, somewhere else. We need to shut the whole operation down for good, and we can't do that unless she talks."

Despite her stab wound and the fact that she must have been in extreme pain, Nella let out an indignant snort. Without taking my eyes from Devin, I said, "Santos, secure her, will you?"

"You got it." I heard his footsteps, a scuffle, and then a screech of pain and the sound of him dragging Nella across the floor. Hopefully it was by her injured leg.

"Look, I don't dislike you," Devin said, which seemed to be a high compliment coming from him. "But you don't know everything she's done to us, to me and him especially." He nodded at Santos. "And I'm really fucking sick of taking orders from women. So, no offense, but she's not leaving this garage alive."

"I get it, Devin. I really do." I brought both hands up now, palms out toward him. "She's hurt you, and you want revenge."

I completely understand, and I'm willing to let you have it." My heart kicked a furious beat in my chest while I tried to focus on Devin's face instead of his knives. I knew exactly how deadly he was with those. "But I'm asking you to look at the big picture here. If she dies, more women just like her will continue to mistreat innocent men, just like you two. It won't stop with her, Devin. Do you understand?"

He didn't answer, but there was a tiny flicker in his expression. I would have missed it if I blinked. Devin wasn't a dumb guy, he wouldn't have survived being a gladiator this long if he was. He had to see my reasoning, and I could only hope that some thread of rational thinking was breaking through all the hurt and aggression clouding his judgment.

Finally, his dark eyes lifted to meet those of the man standing behind me. "You in favor of this?" he asked Santos.

"I trust Rori." Well, if that didn't make me swell with satisfaction. "I agree that Nella needs to be questioned. But once Rori has the information she needs...maybe we can work out a deal."

Devin's gaze returned to me, snide and resentful. "So I'll have your permission to kill her after you're done? Should I be grateful for this?"

"You can feel however you want," I told him. "But yes, I'm in charge, so you'll need my permission. And I'm willing to make a promise to you now, with conditions."

"Of course," Devin scoffed.

"If you give me your word that you'll give her a swift death—no torture or rape—I'll hand her over to you after I'm done with her."

"Torture or rape?" Devin's lip curled like those words were the most distasteful he'd ever heard. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

"I have no idea. All I know is you're a gladiator. But I'm willing to make a bargain with you, Devin. So there's my offer." I folded my arms, relaxing now that I'd gotten him to

think a little more rationally. “You can have your kill, a clean kill, if you can wait for me to question her. What do you say?”

There was a long silence, during which Devin’s eyes went Santos again. After an eternity, he said, “Fine. I agree.”

I sagged with relief and felt Santos do the same behind me. “Thank you. Now how would you like to leave this place?”

Devin holstered his knives into his belt. “What was your name again?”

“Aurora. But I go by Rori.”

“Like the aurora borealis,” Santos chimed in, hoisting Nella up by her arms so she could walk—or rather, limp—out of the cavern with us.

“The what-now?” Devin fell in behind Santos and Nella while I led the way out.

“You know, the northern lights. They light up the sky way up north where it’s fucking cold all the time.”

Devin made a scoffing sound. Then he muttered something that sounded like, “The light and the guard.”

“What was that?” I glanced over my shoulder as we came up to the tunnel’s exit.

“Nothing,” Devin called back. “Just something I heard once.”



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## SANTOS

**A**fter getting her stab wound treated, Nella was hogtied and thrown in the bed of a pickup truck, which was damn satisfying to see. She wouldn't be tortured or abused, but nobody gave a shit about making her ride comfortable.

Once the canyon was ransacked and everyone's injuries patched up, we loaded up and headed for the safe houses. And for the first time in my life, I rode a motorcycle.

Well, hung on the back of one, rather. I got paired up with Torr while Devin rode with Rori's cousin, Carter. Rori led the pack, her ride occupied only by her. When everyone figured out where they were sitting or riding, Rori raised her arm straight in the air, whistled so loudly that it echoed across the landscape, stomped her foot down against the side of her bike, then tore off with a roar.

Everyone followed in a steady procession. Torr's bike jolted forward, prompting me to tighten my hold around his waist. He gave me a little pat on my hand and I laughed, flipping him off.

Once I got used to the speed at which we were moving, felt the wind racing across my skin, it hit me like a brick wall.

We were out. Fucking out. We were free.

The thought was just as overwhelming as it was liberating. I hadn't seen the outside world in years. Hadn't just...done whatever the hell I wanted in years. I felt like a child

surrounded by toys, not knowing which one to pick. The fact that I was completely free now left me paralyzed.

I didn't even know *what* I could do anymore. How much had the world changed since I'd been captured? I'd been a criminal before. It was all I knew. One thing was certain—there was always a living to be made as a mercenary. But I wasn't sure if I wanted to do that anymore, not that it'd been much of a want in the first place but a necessity. I needed to survive, and my first job fell into my lap at 19. Turned out, I was good at it. So I kept doing it.

Round and round my thoughts went, focusing on nothing in particular. At some point, Torr hit the brakes and we slowed, my chest leaning lightly into his back. Up ahead, Rori was sitting on her idling bike, talking to a man in a small shack next to the road. He looked to be in his early forties, had a black leather vest on, and carried an automatic rifle almost as long as my arm span.

They talked for a few minutes and then Rori burst out laughing. She and the man embraced like they were family, and then he settled back into his gatehouse. Rori signaled for us to continue forward, and on we went.

“Who was that?” I asked Torr as we pulled forward.

“Family friend,” he answered. “Well, biker family, not blood. Slick rode with Rori's fathers back in the day, so he's basically another uncle to her.”

Slick was not the only guard we passed, he was merely the first. Our whole caravan went through three more checkpoints, all manned by armed, black-vested bikers. All of whom seemed to know Rori like she was their sister or daughter.

Our elevation changed constantly too. It was a never ending up and down, the gears on the motorcycles putting in the work to make us climb and descend. We didn't go through any more canyons, thank God, but stunning mountain passes and valleys that became greener the longer we rode. The air became cooler too, a sign that we were leaving the blistering heat of the desert for somewhere more temperate.



When Rori stopped her bike for the fifth time, it wasn't at another checkpoint but a cleared plot of land set with a few buildings and tons of open space. There were two houses facing opposite each other on a gravel road cul-de-sac. Between them was a detached garage, which didn't seem entirely necessary because each house had its own garage door.

Nonetheless, a black pickup truck was parked in front of the detached garage. A dark-haired woman sat on the edge of the truck bed pulling bungee cords free and folding back a tarp over the bed's contents. She looked up and grinned as everyone pulled into the cul-de-sac.

"Bitch! Took you long enough!" The dark-haired woman cackled as she jumped gracefully to the ground, arms wide open to the sides as she approached Rori.

I tensed, only because I could clearly see the two guns in their holsters under the woman's leather jacket.

"Fuck you, bitch!" Rori laughed in return as she hopped off her bike, spreading her arms in the same gesture.

I only relaxed when the two women embraced hard, nearly knocking each other to the ground. Rori was a few inches taller, so she would have won that fight, but the other woman had a similar air of not-to-be-fucked with.

"Everyone!" Rori turned to face us all, her arm around the other woman's shoulders. "This is my cousin, Valorie. She brought the lion's share of supplies for you all, and we're going to divvy it up fairly. Everyone will get the very basics that they need, but if there's anything else like meds, phones, what-have-you." She wrapped her arm playfully around Valorie's throat, holding her in a headlock. "Take it up with this bitch."

Valorie laughed, wrestling out of Rori's hold. "We've got a mobile clinic with a nurse and a doctor arriving soon too. So anyone with more serious injuries will be tended to."

"If you're not injured, start lining up with Val for supplies," Rori said. "There are clean beds and showers inside

both houses and food in the pantries. But please, do not take more than you need. There is enough for everyone.” Her expression went serious, eyes sharpening as they scanned over the roughly two-dozen faces that needed refuge. “If I find anyone stealing or hoarding anything, that is where my generosity will end. Medics?” She lifted a hand, motioning for those riders to come forward as she walked to the driveway of one of the houses. “Let’s assess the injured here to hold over until the mobile clinic arrives.”

“Goddamn it.” Torr sounded angry as he kicked the bike into motion again, driving forward slowly to get out of the way of traffic. He headed for the edge of the driveway where Rori and the medics were setting up.

“Something wrong?” I asked when he parked and shut the bike off.

“She’s treating the injured when she’s fucking exhausted. Look at her, I bet she’s been awake well over twenty-four hours.”

Now that I could see her up close, Rori did look burnt out. There were large, dark circles under her eyes, and she moved slower than she had at the resort. Her smile as she snapped on a pair of sterile gloves had no light behind it.

“You go talk her into getting some rest. I’m gonna claim a bed and some food for her.” In the work of a moment, Torr was off the bike and heading into the house through the garage, which was now open.

Rori and the medics used folding tables to set out a random mix of medical supplies, which looked like a bunch of first aid kits that had been combined into one pot. I took a seat on the folding chair next to Rori and got straight to business.

“You need to rest,” I told her.

As if I hadn’t said anything, she made a little spinning motion with a gloved finger. “Turn and sit the other way so I can check out your shoulder.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

She said, “Yes. I’m just choosing not to listen.”

“When did you last sleep?”

“I don’t remember. Doesn’t matter, I’ve been running on caffeine. Turn the other way, Santos.”

“Paloma, you’re exhausted. What if you accidentally stick a toothbrush in my shoulder?”

The laugh that erupted from her began as an adorable snort, then she slapped a hand over her mouth and laughed louder. She was too tired to hold back any of it and started wiping tears from her eyes. “Oh God, my mom would kill me.”

“Why’s that?” I wanted her distracted. Maybe if she wasn’t so *go-go-go* all the time, she would realize how exhausted she really was.

“Because she’s a doctor.” If anything, that seemed to make Rori more focused on treating me. “If you’re not gonna turn around, I’m just gonna check your shoulder out this way.” She clicked on a pen light and stuck it behind her ear before proceeding to unwind the bandage at my shoulder.

“She the reason you’re a medic?”

“I’m not, really,” she said. “I know first aid and CPR, plus she taught me how to treat injuries in the field. None of my training is formal, except technically, I’m a phlebotomist. I’m certified to draw blood and stuff, but that’s about it.”

“How’d you get into that?” I watched her face intently as she spoke, taking note of her fight to keep her eyelids open.

She shrugged, inspecting my shoulder wound with the pen light. “Just something I did while trying to figure out what to do with my life.”

“And did you? Figure that out.”

“Nah. Kind of got interrupted by a talking bird telling me to come on this grand adventure.”

I smiled at her. How could I not? She was checking out my wound while trying not to nod off where she stood.

“Well, I gotta say, you’re pretty good at the whole ‘riding to peoples’ rescue’ thing.”

Rori snorted. “Yeah, ‘til I totally forgot to watch our asses and we got trapped for a hot minute.”

“Hey, it was your first time. And you still gave all these people their lives back.”

“Mmhm.” She rubbed her eyes against her upper arm and blinked several times. If her hands weren’t busy, I was certain she’d slap herself to stay awake. “Your shoulder looks good. Doesn’t look infected, and it’s healing up super fast, looks like.”

“Thanks, doc.”

She huffed at that and started wrapping a fresh bandage around the wound. “Make sure you have a real medic look at it in a couple of days. Speak up if you get a fever or it starts hurting more.”

“And *you* make sure to get some rest. Your man will have my ass if you don’t, and he was just starting to like me.” I angled my head, looking up at her. “Don’t make me look bad, paloma.”

Rori started to laugh just as Torr returned to the garage. “You.” He pointed menacingly at her. “Come here.”

“Torr, seriously. I’m okagh—hng!”

While her mouth was open, he jabbed a slice of buttered and jellied toast between her lips. He had folded it in half to ensure the toppings didn’t go everywhere in the ensuing fight. “Chew,” he ordered. “Then swallow. Don’t worry, I’ve got water too.”

Rori rolled her eyes but obeyed, devouring the toast quickly in several bites. She even licked a drop of jelly off of Torr’s thumb.

“Good girl,” he purred. “Here.”

She accepted the bottle of water, acting like it was the last thing she needed, but she barely took a breath as she gulped the whole thing down.

“Was it necessary to be so dramatic?” she asked dryly when finished.

“With you, yes.” His hands went to her waist, where his fists curled into her leather jacket and pulled her forward. “Now, I’ve claimed a bed for you—”

“No, I don’t want a bed,” she argued. “Give it to someone from the canyon. I’ll crash on the floor or somewhere.” She angled her head toward me. “Let Santos have it.”

“Nah, Torr’s right. You take a bed, you deserve it.” I insisted. “I’ll find Devin, and we’ll figure out a place to crash. Don’t worry about us.”

“Thanks, dude.” Torr beamed in my direction before returning to look at Rori. “See? You’re outvoted, and you’re falling asleep on your feet. Go. Lie. Down.”

“Everyone else is tired too! Why are you two ganging up on me?”

“Because there’s still shit to do later, and you need to be sharp for it.” Torr picked her up by the waist, spun around, and set her back down facing the door leading into the house. “Like questioning that prisoner and figuring out what we’re going to do with everyone in the long run.”

He started to gently push Rori toward the door, but she stopped short. “Wait, Nella! I forgot! Where is—”

“Carter’s got her in the basement,” Torr said. “He’s got a 24-hour guard rotation on her, don’t worry. See what I mean though? You wouldn’t have forgotten about her if you were at peak energy.”

Rori sighed, her body swaying as she finally allowed herself to be pushed by Torr. “Fine, fine. I’ll take a little catnap.”

“Nope, you’re getting eight hours minimum. Hopefully closer to ten.”

“I swear to God, if you don’t stop acting like *another* father to me...” Their voices faded as they went into the house, and I abandoned my chair to go in search of Devin.

I found him in a little copse of trees behind the houses. He was throwing knives into one of the skinniest tree trunks with Tezca hanging out near him. It was interesting, how the jaguar seemed to go wherever he was needed most. Since finding Rori, I didn't feel like I needed as much of his guidance. I had found what I was looking for.

Devin, on the other hand, seemed far from content. He was on-edge, using all of his strength to sink his daggers deep into the tree trunks. If his targets had been men, he'd be decapitating them.

"Hey," I said casually, keeping clear of his throwing zone. "You find a place to sleep?"

"I'm not staying here." To any normal person he would have sounded calm, but I heard the seething anger in his voice.

"Where you going, then?"

"I don't know, but not here." He glanced at me, wiping one of his blades with his sleeve. "I don't trust them."

Tezca yawned then, as if he'd heard this conversation before and was tired of it.

"I trust them," I said. "Torr was in the dungeon with me. Rori kept her word on coming back for us. That doesn't mean anything to you?"

"No." He let fly three blades at once, and they sunk into the wood in a perfect vertical line. "You've always been too quick to trust, Santos. To me, the only thing I'm sure of is that people act in their own best interests. They didn't free us from the canyon out of the goodness of their hearts."

Like Tezca, I wanted to yawn, and not just because I was exhausted. This was the same old argument and the biggest sore spot between Devin and me. Despite proving myself the deadliest fighter in the pit, not to mention fucking whoever I had to to survive, he thought I was too soft-hearted. Like I only trusted Rori just because she was pretty, or good in bed, or whatever. No, I was a realist. I could tell the difference between sincerity and manipulation. Tezca himself had told me Rori was the real deal.

Devin was just so damn prickly and such a cynic that all he saw in anyone were liars and manipulators. He probably wouldn't recognize a sincere act of kindness if it stabbed him with his own knife.

"What about Nella, then?" I asked him. "You're just gonna leave without taking your chance to kill her?"

He had brought his hand behind his head, ready to throw again, but ended up dropping that arm to his side. "That's the main reason why I haven't taken off yet."

"Main reason, huh?"

He turned to face me, a smile pulling at his lips. "Like I'd leave you behind, dick."

"Give them a chance," I said. "I mean, we don't have to fucking fight anymore. Can we just relax and celebrate that?"

Devin scoffed, his smile growing. "I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do tomorrow."

"Anything you want. That's the beauty of it." My hands rested at my hips, hovering over the handles of my machetes. There was no doubt in my mind I'd be keeping them. The world wasn't any kinder just because I was free. I was certain Devin felt a similar attachment to his knives. These weapons had been our only instruments of power, had kept us alive to see us through this escape.

"I think I'm gonna sleep in. Let the sun wake me up." I crossed my arms over my chest. "You know how damn long it's been since I've gotten out of bed whenever the hell I wanted?"

"I don't know if I ever have." Devin dragged a fingertip along the edge of a knife.

"Stay a while then. And try it."

Devin's expression hardened, his dark eyes like obsidian as he looked up at me. "She gets one chance to fuck us over, got it? One. Maybe you'll be able to forgive her or whatever, but that's not me, Santos. I am *done* with women trying to control me."

“I hear you,” I said with an affirming nod. “I think that’s fair.”

“Do you?” he challenged. “Because you look perfectly happy being a third-wheel boy toy.”

I glared at him. He could talk shit about me all he wanted, but I wasn’t about to let him slander Rori. “That’s not what it is.”

“No? I’m not blind, Santos. You hook up with her like three times, get locked up with her man for a few days, and now you think you’re part of a happy throuple? Come on, you’re not *that* naive.”

I started to regret coming out here, shaking my head as I looked at our surroundings. “You know what you sound like, Dev?”

“Like I’m right?”

“Like you’re jealous.”

He barely reacted, but I knew his tells, as subtle as they were. A twitch of his eyebrow. A slight hardening of his mouth. A squeeze of his knife’s handle.

“Whatever.” Devin faced the tree trunk again, preparing for another practice throw.

“Yeah, whatever,” I agreed. “I was gonna suggest we room together, but it doesn’t sound like you’re keen.”

“What, you mean Rori and Torr haven’t made space in their bed for you? Color me shocked.”

I shook my head again, turning back toward the houses. “Get some rest, man. We all need it.”

“Like I can get a wink of sleep in this place,” he muttered before letting his blades fly.





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## RORI



I slept way too long. I knew it immediately from how refreshed I felt when my eyes fluttered open, from how good it felt to stretch and groan.

“Goddamn it, Torr.” I rubbed my eyes and brought my feet to the floor, stretching once more now that I was upright.

I was annoyed that he let me sleep for so long but grateful too, I had to admit. He’d insisted I get the biggest bedroom in the house too, which was a total waste, especially when everyone else had to share rooms. I had been too tired to fight him about it yesterday, but soon I would have the energy.

Through the window, the sun peeked over a distant mountain range. I couldn’t tell if it was rising or about to set. The room felt a little chilly, so I guessed it was early morning.

That meant I slept—damn—around twelve hours? Yep, way too long.

Rummaging through a duffel bag set near the bed, I found a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie that were too big but would be comfy. With one deep inhale of the hoodie, I knew—these were Torr’s clothes.

The smile could not stay off my face as I pulled the clothes on. *Look at my guy, being all thoughtful and shit.*

I heard a soft murmuring of voices as I came down the stairs and found Carter, LJ, Valorie, Paige, and the Hunter all hanging out in the kitchen.

“Mornin’, sunshine!” LJ called as he saw me come down.  
“Want coffee?”

“Oh God, please,” I groaned.

“Nice cowlick, Alfalfa.” Valorie grinned at me over the rim of an ancient, chipped mug that said, *Save the Tatas* next to a faded pink ribbon. “You slept like the dead, by the looks of it.”

I felt the back of my head and, sure enough, my hair was sticking straight up right at the crown. “Wasn’t by choice, but yeah, I guess so.”

“You deserved it,” Paige told me from where she sat next to the Hunter.

“You sound like Santos,” I grumbled but smiled at her as I took a seat between Carter and the Hunter.

“Who?” asked the ex-gladiator, his brows drawn together in confusion.

“Oh, um, the Butcher.” I raked a hand back through my hair, probably making it stick up some more. “I probably should’ve asked him if it was okay to give out his real name.”

“I saw him going around saying hello and introducing himself by name last night,” Carter piped up. “Seems there isn’t a need for gladiator names anymore, right?”

“I dunno, I do kind of like being the Hunter.” The man in question extended a hand to me. “My given name is Levi, by the way.”

I shook the hand he gave. “Great to meet you. And thank you for taking such good care of my girl, Paige, by the way.”

The two of them blushed as they exchanged glances. Yeah, such a cute couple.

“I was honored to do it,” Levi said softly, his eyes rapt on her. “I only regret that she got hurt at all.”

“Stop.” Paige gave him a playful smack on his bicep. “You couldn’t have done anything to stop it.”

“I could have taken that bullet myself.”

“Ugh.” Paige rolled her eyes and looked exasperated but couldn’t hide the blush that deepened. Or the smile twitching at her mouth.

“They were just telling me the story.” Valorie finished off her coffee with a smack of her lips. “Damn, I wish I could have been there and shot some slave-driving assholes.”

Carter snorted. “Your ass would have been shot within the first minute of arriving.”

“Why, ‘cause I’m a girl?”

“No, you’re just fucking loud. They’d hear you a mile away.”

“Aw, fuck off, Carter.”

Their bickering served as amusing white noise as I nursed my coffee. When there was a lull in the shit-talking, I asked, “Are Torr and Santos asleep somewhere?”

“Yeah.” Val nodded. “They helped me dispense supplies and get people settled after you went down.”

“Course they did,” I grumbled through another slurp of coffee. Those two made *me* quit working, then ran around like busy bees themselves. Hypocrites. Sweet, lovable hypocrites.

I turned to Paige after my first cup was drained. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, better!” she beamed. “My leg is still a little sore, but I can walk without much trouble. Would you like me to tidy your room?”

“No! I mean, sorry, I don’t mean to yell, but no, Paige. Focus on recovering.” I smiled at her, absolutely loving the way she kept sneaking glances at the fighter next to her. “You can do whatever you want now, including *not* tidying up after anybody.”

She returned my smile nervously. “That’s the thing. After being, um, in service for so long, I’m not sure what to do. The other maids have said similar things. Maybe it’s silly, but I’m a little anxious, to be honest. I have no idea what’s next, and I have no idea where my moms and sister are.”

“It’s not silly at all,” the Hunter reassured her. “The fighters feel the same way. Many of us don’t know what to do with all this free will.”

“You guys don’t have to worry,” I said. “We have resources that can put you in touch with your families. If you don’t have people, you’re welcome in Sevier, where Valorie’s from.” I nodded across the table to my cousin. “Or Four Corners, where I grew up. Both territories are very friendly to refugees from all kinds of situations. They have streamlined paths for housing, education, career opportunities, the whole thing. You’ll be making your own choices for everything, but there’s a structure to it all, so you won’t be overwhelmed. You guys will be fine, trust me.”

“Oh, that’s such a relief.” Paige released a long sigh, like she was no longer carrying a heavy burden. “A new territory sounds amazing. If my family’s found, I hope they’re already there or will be willing to move.”

“Once we find your people, we can ride out to retrieve them, then escort them back to ensure safe passage,” Valorie piped up. “It’s one of the many services the Valkyrie Network provides.”

“Thank you,” Paige breathed with a hand to her chest. “I can’t believe this nightmare is over.”

“The world is your oyster now.” The Hunter’s eyes brightened as he stared at her. He was so smitten, it was adorable. “If you could do anything in the world and there were no limits, what would that be?”

“Oh, um...” Paige looked down at the table, focusing on folding a napkin. “It’s nothing big, kind of dumb, actually.”

“No activity is dumb if you’re passionate about it.” He nudged her gently. “Come on, what is it?”

“Well, um.” Paige shot a nervous glance at me, and I gave her an encouraging nod. “I really like...doing makeup. I’d love to be a makeup artist.”

“And you are incredible at it,” I said. “I loved every look you did on me back at the canyon.”

Paige took a whole second to beam with pride before staring down at the table again. “Oh, thank you. It just feels silly because it’s not a ‘useful’ skill, you know?”

“Bullshit,” the Hunter said. “I don’t know anything about it, but it’s like art, right? It’s creativity. And the world needs more of that.”

*Yup, they are one-hundred percent getting married,* I thought as their eyes met. And that led to a lightbulb going off in my head.

“Would you ever do wedding makeup?” I asked.

“Oh yes, I love bridal make up! I’ve never done a look on a real bride before, just practiced, but I’d enjoy that very much.”

“My twin brother is getting married in six months. And I’m pretty sure his bride doesn’t have a makeup artist for the wedding yet. Would you be interested?”

Paige’s mouth dropped open with nothing coming out for a long while. “You mean that?”

“Of course I do. I’ll have to check with Lily, but I don’t see her saying no. It’d be one less task for her to do.”

“Oh my God, I would be honored! Please yes, check with her first, and if she’s already found someone, that’s fine. But if not, I would be thrilled to.”

“I’ll give her a call later and let you know.” I squeezed her shoulder as I got up for a second cup of coffee.

Carter was right on my heels, leaning in close to speak quietly. “Thought you should know that Nella has been refusing food and water since we arrived. Anything you want done about it?”

“No.” I refilled my cup and stirred in some sugar. “Let that bitch starve if she wants to.”

“Roger the fuck that,” he answered, amusement lighting up his eyes.

“How’s everyone else?” I turned my back to the table, keeping my voice low. “Is there any friction or is everyone getting along?”

“Getting along pretty good for the most part. Couple little scuffles here and there, but nothing we can’t handle. My people are keeping an eye out, so is Chasing Death.”

“Scuffles between who?”

Carter paused to take a long sip of coffee. “The one who calls himself the Saint seems to think he’s in charge.”

“Keep an eye on him. It’s not that I get *bad* feelings about him, but I don’t get good ones either.”

“You got it, Pres.”

I punched his bicep, not enough to hurt but just enough to threaten spilling his coffee. “Stop calling me that. People will start to believe it.”

“And?”

I gave him an exasperated look. “It’s misleading. I’m not the pres of anything.”

“You could be.” When I went to punch him again, Carter caught my fist in his palm. “I know I give you shit, Ror, but truth be told, you’re handling this whole thing extremely well. You’re a natural leader, and people want to follow you. On top of that, you care. You follow through on your promises and show that you can be trusted. I’ve seen a lot of presidents who have one or the other but rarely both. The last one I saw who had a backbone and a heart like yours was Reaper.”

My throat tightened at the mention of my father’s name, choking off any response I had. God damn, I missed him. All of them.

“My old man would have followed your dad to the deepest pit in hell without even a moment’s hesitation. I guess he did, back in their day. And you know what?” Carter dropped my fist to point his index finger at my chest. “I know for a fact that Torr and Santos would do the same for you, and not just ‘cause you’re their woman.”

I brushed that off with a wave of my hand. “Santos doesn’t know how to ride.”

“So? He can learn, he’s devoted to you, and he’s a deadly fucking fighter. Shit, if that Ghost guy comes with him, you’ll have a better weapons combo than the Steel Demons ever did.”

I opened my mouth to say that was impossible, then quickly shut it. All of my dads had been good fighters, but none had the otherworldly accuracy, speed, and skill as Gunner and Shadow. I heard countless stories of them hitting impossible targets with deadly aim. Thinking about it now, it would be fun to see Santos and Devin compete against those two.

“What about you?” I scoffed, changing the subject. “You’re talking me up like I’m pres material, but would *you* ride into hell with me?”

Carter gave me a crooked smile as he put his coffee down in the sink. “I’ll ride with you at every opportunity, but the Valkyrie Network is where I’ve pledged my loyalty. This fight you have?” He circled his index finger in the air. “I respect it, but it’s not *my* fight.”

“I get it. I was just messing with you.”

“Think about what I’m saying. This is only the beginning for you. You’re going to need to get organized and have a group you can trust.”

I shook my head. “I barely know what I’m doing here, Carter.”

“Well, you’re faking it pretty well. Just think about it.” He coughed and leaned one hip against the counter, then in a louder voice said, “So how long you want to have these folks here gettin’ some R&R?”

“Another couple of days, I think.” I mirrored his pose, also talking louder now that our private conversation was over. “Let people relax for a bit, and let it all sink in. If they want to leave sooner, they can. Of course, anyone who’s injured should stay as long as they need to recover.” I lowered my



voice again. “I’ll talk to Nella tomorrow. Give her another full day to throw tantrums about our hospitality.”

“Sounds good to me. What’re you doing today?”

I polished off my second cup of coffee, placed it in the sink, then headed out of the kitchen in search of a shower.

“Hopefully that question becomes a matter of *who* I’m doing.”



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## RORI



**A**fter a shower and a more substantial breakfast than coffee, I headed over to the second safehouse to check on things there. This was where most of the solo fighters seemed to gather, whereas the female service staff and couples kept to the other house.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped outside was men working out everywhere. It was still early morning, but the cul-de-sac was abuzz with roughly a dozen men doing push-ups, burpees, sparring each other with bare fists or wooden sticks, and squatting full-grown men on their shoulders. The air was thick with sweat and testosterone.

Old habits die hard, I guess. At least they weren't killing each other.

In fact, they were very polite. Almost everyone nodded or waved hello as I walked past.

Further up the road, it looked like LJ, Gwen, and some of the Chasing Death members were giving riding lessons. A handful of fighters were taking turns on loaner bikes, riding down straight stretches of the gravel road before turning and heading back after a few hundred yards. Paige, the Hunter, and Santos were among them, and so my feet carried me that way.

Santos was just finishing his turn, controlling the motorcycle with a confident ease as he came to a smooth stop. His beaming smile at me was like a hit of sunshine directly into my veins.

Leaving the bike running, he lowered the kickstand and got off as Paige and the Hunter went up to ride next.

“Hey.” Santos jogged over to me, that brilliant smile never fading. “Don’t you look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“And you look like a natural on that bike,” I said. “Was that your first time riding?”

“Yeah. I’ve always been into cars, though. It’s not too different when you get the hang of it.”

*Oh, I know someone you’d get along very well with.* I immediately thought of my dad, Jandro. If he ever got a chance to meet Santos, and not be an embarrassing, overprotective dad, I could see the two of them being like peas in a pod.

“How’s your shoulder feeling?” I decided to ask, instead of creeping him out with suggesting meeting my dad.

“So much better.” He rotated his arm in a big circle. “I couldn’t even do this yesterday. It’s still a little sore, but it seems like it’ll feel good as new in a couple days.”

I stared at him. “That is wild. Like, ridiculously fast healing.”

He shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “I’ve always been a pretty fast healer. More so when I met this big guy.”

Tezca bumped his head against Santos’ thigh right then, the jaguar’s crackling purr rumbling in a steady rhythm as he rubbed the full side of his body against Santos’ legs and then mine.

“Hey, handsome.” I ran my hand down Tezca’s back, then up again to scratch his ears. “Have you been taking care of our man? Healing him up, too?”

Tezca let out a chuff and licked my palm with his scratchy tongue.

“I like the sound of that,” Santos murmured.

“What, the noises your cat makes?” I scratched under the jaguar’s chin.

“No.” The warmth of Santos’ breath heated my neck. “Being your man.”

I paused, then turned into him slowly. The heat on my neck had now spread to every part of my body. “You’re sure that’s what you want?”

“If you’ll have me.” Santos’ voice went low, meant only for the two of us. “I have this thing for badass blondes who save my life.”

“And if Torr is mine too?” I met his eyes, keeping my tone serious. “I want you too, Santos, but I need you to understand I’m not built for one partner. I probably never will be.”

“I’m good with it, really. I like Torr a lot, actually.”

That got a grin out of me. “Really? Because I want to throttle him half the time.”

“You love him, though.” Santos said it as a statement, not a question. “And you’ve known each other a long time. You get each other in ways no one else does. It’s obvious you two just work well together.”

“Obvious to everyone but ourselves until recently.” I ran a sheepish hand through my hair. “But none of that bothers you? Please tell me honestly if it does.”

He gave me a look that felt like a warm, loving embrace. “I mean, I’m a little jealous that he already knows you so well and has years of memories with you. But I figure we’ll reach our stride eventually. Make our own memories.”

“Trust me, most of my memories with Torr are stupid.” I snorted. “Lots of playing pranks on my brother and being drunk idiots at parties. In a lot of ways, he and I are starting anew too.”

Santos looked smug then, crossing his arms with his chin lifted. “Then he and I are on more even footing than I thought.”

“It’s not like it’s a competition, but anyway.” I waved my hand toward the house. “You want to go inside?”

“Somewhere more private, you mean?” His grin was slow, sultry. “I thought you’d never ask, paloma.”

We joined hands, leaving Tezca to watch the motorcycle lessons, and headed for the fighters’ house, which I had started calling the frat house in my head. With nearly everyone working out or learning to ride, I figured the house would be mostly empty.

In fact, that was exactly what I was hoping for.

Sure enough, it was blissfully quiet as we went through the front door. We tiptoed through to the kitchen, holding hands like a couple of teenagers sneaking around our parents.

“Did you have breakfast?” I said, noting the dishes piled in the sink.

“Not yet.” He turned and lifted me so swiftly, I didn’t notice I was in the air until he sat me on the counter. His eyes burned as he moved in close, his big body filling the space between my legs. “But I’m about to.”

His kiss came down, deep and thorough. This was nothing like those fast kisses of relief back in the canyon. No, he intended to stay here for a while and devour me in the process.

I returned each hot stroke of his tongue, glide of his lips, every sigh and soft moan and short breath of air. Every touch was re-learning this devastatingly sweet man I was just getting to know.

“What do you like?” I whispered against his jaw, my hands exploring the planes of muscles on his back. “Teach me how to please you, Santos.”

“Mm, you’re pleasing me right now, paloma,” he groaned, hips pressing forward.

“No, tell me what drives you crazy.” I edged my teeth along his earlobe. “Tell me your deepest desire so I can be the one who gives it to you.”

He actually froze, a stiffness entering his body, and I started to worry that I offended him.

“Was that too far? I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be pushy. I just want this,” I squeezed my thighs around his hips, “to be an enjoyable experience for you.” *Especiallly after all that you were forced to do*, was the part that I left unsaid.

Santos shook his head, but the apprehension in his face remained. “You’re not pushy,” he said with a kiss. “And every moment with you is enjoyable, it’s just...” he rubbed his jaw, looking away from me. “If you really want to know what does it for me, it’s not exactly...conventional.”

“My whole life is anything but conventional.” I brought my hands to his nape, running my nails over the buzzed hair on the back of his head. “Try me. I would never judge you.”

Santos pulled in a deep breath, fingers teasing along the shirt at my waist while he hesitated a bit longer.

“So, I haven’t had the chance to fully explore this, but um.” He licked his lips and swallowed. “When it comes to bedroom stuff, I think I lean toward...the submissive end of the spectrum.”

“Really?” The word left my mouth in a long, slow stretch of syllables, accentuated by the smile growing on my face. I had no idea what he’d say or how I’d react, but this sensation filling my chest was nothing short of pure elation.

“When it comes to you, I just...I want to please you and take nothing for myself. I want to do everything you tell me because it’s what *you* want. When I was a gladiator, my only power was killing others.” A long sigh left his chest before he continued.

“I was handed out to the guests for rough sex, but I never got off on that. I’ve never been turned on by inflicting domination and pain, but it was what I *had* to do. And now...” Santos leaned in until his forehead touched mine. “I don’t want power. I don’t want control. I want to put it all in your hands and be everything *you* need me to be.”

I was struck dumb. Speechless. Nearly moved to tears, I realized as my vision got blurry and I had to blink back to clarity.

As the silence stretched on, Santos started pulling away, and I could sense his emotional retreat as well.

“Sorry, that was a hell of an unload. I know it’s a lot, and if you’re not into that—”

My fingers curled into his shirt, holding him in place. “Stop talking and kiss me.”

His hesitation was for only a beat, and then his sensuous mouth was on mine again. The passion from earlier was dialed up to eleven now, a frenzied desire overriding us both.

“I want you to go down on me until I come, and then you’re going to fuck me on this counter.” My voice shook with need, but I hoped I sounded dominant enough for him.

“Fuck yes, paloma,” Santos moaned, his mouth moved toward my neck.

“Wait, I’m not done.” I held his chin, bringing him back to eye-level with me. “You will fuck me good and hard until I come again, but you are not allowed to finish inside me. Understood?”

His throat bobbed with a swallow, eyes dilating as his lips parted. “Yes, paloma.”

“Because...” I grinned. “I’m going to suck you off and take your cum deep down my throat.”

If he really wanted me to be in control, he was going to have to deal with the fact that I too loved to please my partners.

“Goddamn,” he hissed, grip tightening on my waist. “You are my biggest fantasy come true.”

I brought his mouth to mine for another kiss, but someone loudly cleared their throat with the obvious intention of interrupting us.

My eyes opened to find the Ghost—no wait—Devin glaring at me over Santos’ shoulder. Of course it would be him. If it were anyone else, I’d tell them to move along so I could get laid. But Devin and Santos were friends.



I had no issues with the sharp-eyed, sharp-cheekboned fighter, but he did seem to take issue with me. Especially with my ankles locked at the small of Santos' back and Santos' hands nestled snugly in the curves of my waist.

"Oh hey, Dev." Santos turned to address him casually, not at all embarrassed by our compromising position. "You need something?"

"I would love to make some toast, but it seems I'm all out of counter space," the other man deadpanned.

Santos only chuckled and patted my hip. "I guess we could move."

"Sure." I unwound my legs from him and hopped down from the counter. "Did you sleep well, Devin?"

"Would've slept tons better if the enabler of our enslavement wasn't still breathing fifty feet away." He shot me a huge fake smile. "Unless I now have your *permission* to rectify that?" Everything about his tone was mocking and disrespectful, setting me on edge.

The excitement of being on the cusp of having sex with Santos vanished like a puff of smoke.

Santos took a protective step between us, squaring off in his friend's direction. "Dev, come on—"

"No, it's okay." I put a hand on his arm. "He has a right to how he feels."

"So glad I have your permission for that too," Devin drawled, moving around us to reach the toaster on the kitchen counter.

"I'm interrogating her tomorrow," I said as Devin emptied the tray of crumbs from the toaster. "Figure I'd give her another day to sweat and let her mind go in circles a bit."

"Great. Just fantastic." Devin rummaged through a drawer and I tried to hold back my flinch when he held up a serrated bread knife. "Just let me know when your business is all done. Since you're the one in charge and all, plus you've got *so*

much history with Nella. I'm sure you'll have plenty to hash out."

He started cutting slices into a sourdough loaf as Santos bristled next to me. I gave a quick squeeze of his arm and stepped forward, determined not to let him get caught in the middle of whatever issue his friend had with me.

"Hey, Devin, listen. I'm not sure if I did something to offend you. If I did, I'd love for you to tell me so I can acknowledge my mistake and own up to it."

He ignored me and went on slicing, shoulders stiff as he made quick work of the whole loaf.

"Okay, then. Well, if it's not anything specific, I don't see why we can't get along. We want the same thing in the end, we don't have to be enemies—"

"You know what your problem is?" Devin whipped around, loose strands of his long, dark hair following the movement gracefully. He pointed at me and thankfully didn't have the knife in his hand. "You want *everyone* to like you. No, even that's not enough. You need everyone to fall in love with you."

"Man, what?" Santos stepped in front of me again, getting into Devin's personal space. "Where the hell is this coming from?"

"You are the last person who should be saying anything," Devin snapped. "She's got you exactly where she wants you—eating out of her hand. Same with Torr. Same with everyone here who looks at her like the sun shines out of her ass."

"Dev, I don't wanna hurt you, but if you don't shut your fucking mouth—"

"Okay, stop! Come on." I pulled on the back of Santos' shirt, but he stood his ground like an oak tree, so I moved to get in front of him again. Which put me *very* close to Devin.

Funny. I had forgotten how breathtakingly beautiful he was until that moment. The lines and angles of his face were just as sharp as those knives he liked so much. Not even the faint

freckles on his nose or the dark beard on his jaw did anything to soften his face.

On top of that, he was angry. At me. Devin's brows slashed down and his lips had all but disappeared with how tightly they pressed together. But there was more than anger that I sensed in his expression. I saw a whole lot of fear, with a generous helping of pain.

I leaned on Santos until he backed up enough to give Devin and I some breathing room. He was sweet to jump to my defense, and it was pretty hot seeing his switch flip from eager-to-please submissive to ready to throw down on his friend for my honor. But Devin was right about one thing. Santos was not the right person to come between us.

"I don't know where you got that impression," I said to Devin. "But I don't need everyone to love me. Or even like me. As long as we can be respectful of each other, okay? That's all I'm asking for."

"Right," he snorted. "So where's my respect? Why do I have to defer to you before I can get my kill in?"

"We talked about this, Devin," I said gently. "I need information only Nella has. Otherwise the machine keeps going, and there'll be another Mystic Canyon within a decade. Nobody wants that."

"Who the fuck put you in charge, anyway?" His glare was downright murderous. "Why do you decide where we stay? Or when someone gets questioned?"

"Look, someone had to step up, alright?" I could feel my emotions running high, coming close to the surface no matter how much I tried to shove them down. "After Santos got thrown in the isolation cell, and then Torr got captured, I had to do something. I felt responsible, okay?"

"Responsible," Devin sneered. "As if we're all children needing a mother hen to keep us in order."

"You want to go back to being a gladiator?" I snapped, flinging my hand toward the front door. "Go. Follow the road

out of here. Since you're so self-sufficient, I'm sure you can find your way back to the canyon."

"Way to miss my whole fucking point." Devin's temper was unraveling too, his voice raising as he stepped into *my* personal space this time. "If you think I'm going to roll over and say, 'yes ma'am' just because another woman decided she was in charge, you are sadly mistaken. No one controls me anymore!"

"Hey." Torr picked the perfect moment to come down the stairs, eyes zeroing in on me as he hurried over. "What's with all the yelling? I could hear you from the bathroom."

"Nothing," I said quickly. "We're just getting to know each other. Aren't we, Devin?"

The fighter's eyebrows lifted slightly, like he was surprised I wouldn't rat him out to my boy toy. *Yeah, amazing when people don't fit the preconceived notions in your head, right?*

I was determined not to prove Devin right about me. Sure, I could be petty and bossy, but I wasn't some evil seductress looking for a harem of men to enslave. It seemed like he had a hard time believing that, though. And it wasn't like I could blame him. He didn't appear to have a good track record with women.

We didn't have to be friends, or even acquaintances. But if we could get to a level of mutual respect and trust, I'd consider that a win. He hated me because I was a woman who acted like I ran the show, fine. No better way to lead than by example. All I could do was treat Devin with some basic decency and hope to get the same in return one day.

Torr knew right away there was more to what I said, and he walked over with a puffed-up chest that was soon halted by my outstretched palm.

"It's okay, Torr. Really." I forced a smile at him. "Nothing I can't handle." Devin's issue would remain solely with me. There was no reason for my guys to get involved.

"You sure?" His eyes slid over to Santos, who shrugged.

Devin chose then to leave the kitchen, grumbling as he took with him half of the sliced sourdough loaf with nothing on it. I hoped he'd enjoy choking it down by his lonesome.

"What was that all about?" Torr's question cut through the tension in the kitchen as he headed for the remaining bread loaf. Tension that was now dissipating since the source of it had left.

"Nothing." I eyed the width of Torr's back pulling at his white T-shirt, noted the water droplets in his dark hair as if he'd just gotten out of the shower. No doubt he'd gotten up before the crack of dawn and already got a workout in.

"That Devin guy being a problem?"

"No, Torr. I got it handled."

"I can talk to him," Santos offered.

"No." I spun around to face him. "Really, it's fine. If you guys talk to him, it's just going to reinforce his idea that I send men out to do my bidding. Honestly, I'm not some wilted flower. I can handle him."

"If you insist." Santos let out a soft sigh before gliding his fingers over my neck. I leaned into the touch, grinning and eager to continue what we'd started, before I realized he'd stopped and was staring at Torr behind me. "What you making there, cinnamon toast?"

"You know it, man. You want some?"

"Hell yeah, let me get more butter out. Rori?"

"I'm good, actually. I ate." I gave Santos a little swat as he moved past me to the fridge. "Eat your fill, though. Torr is the toast-master."

I went to work tidying the kitchen while the two of them put a dent in the bread, butter, sugar, and cinnamon supply. My aunt Kyrie had people clean the safehouses regularly, but these fighters had the table manners of wild animals. I felt bad leaving the mess out for others to deal with.

Washing dishes was actually a chore I didn't mind. It was almost meditative. My mind went pleasantly blank as I

scrubbed plates and mugs with warm, soapy water. I had spaced out so much in fact, that I didn't notice someone walking up behind me until I felt the weight of their hand.

Torr ran a touch down my back, not stopping until he found my ass and squeezing. I turned in surprise, my senses lighting up with pleasure.

“Looking for something back there?” I asked as he continued to grope and squeeze me.

Torr leaned in close, his nose nudging against my cheek. “Let's go for a ride.”

“Mm-hm.” I turned my head until my nose brushed his. “And then what?”

He spun me around to face him, then palmed my ass with both hands. “And then you're gonna ride me.”



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RORI



With a final, hard squeeze and no other words, Torr released me and headed to where our bikes were parked. I had to just watch him walk away for a moment, those long, powerful legs eating up the distance. His wide shoulders cut through the air with every confident stride, knowing I would follow.

I stopped ogling long enough to find Santos looking at me with a knowing smirk. My mouth opened, the words falling out in a rapid rush. “I’m sorry. Let me go tell him you and I were just about to—”

“No.” He shook his head, cutting his hand through the air. “You two should catch up. Go ride.”

I hesitated, watching him. He didn’t seem jealous or upset but some guys hid it well. “Are you sure?”

Damn it, I felt awful, and this was so hard. Fuck Devin for interrupting our moment. Torr had no idea what we’d been about to do before he came downstairs. If he knew, I was certain he’d find another time to ride.

I figured having to split time with my guys would happen at some point, but not so soon. It made me wish I could take a time-out to call my mother for advice right then.

*Hi mom, it’s Rori. Listen, what am I supposed to do when I’m about to bang one guy, we get interrupted by a rude asshole, and then another guy cuts in and wants to bang?*

Thinking about it that way, the obvious answer was a threesome.



“Yeah, it’s fine, really.” Santos appeared calm as he walked over and looped his arms around my waist in a light hold.

My hands went to his nape, still searching his eyes as I leaned into his chest. “You could join us,” I hedged.

Santos shook his head again, but he was grinning. “Another time.” He leaned down and brushed a soft kiss over my mouth. It was so light that I immediately wanted to deepen it for more. “He was your man first. I understand you need some reconnection time.”

Technically, Torr wasn’t mine first. In terms of being physical, I had Santos first. Then Torr got jealous, and the dams holding back feelings on both our ends had burst. But Torr and I did have a long history, and we were probably both seeking comfort in what was familiar.

“When I get back,” I slid out of Santos’ hold reluctantly, “we’re finishing what we started.”

The heated look he gave me sent my heart racing. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, paloma.” He made a shooing motion. “Go on now. You kids have fun.”

I turned, heading out to where Torr sat on my idling bike. He scooted back, indicating I should drive while we doubled-up.

“No Santos?” he asked, like he’d been expecting the other man to join us.

“No, he said we needed time together.”

Torr nodded sagely as I got into my seat, his hands coming to the tops of my thighs as I sat down. “I like him.”

Relief and love filled up my chest. “Good.” I planted a quick kiss on him over my shoulder. “Me too.”

That didn’t stop my mind from racing as I brought my feet up and drove off the property. I had been worried about the two of them, and honestly still was. More Santos than Torr, because he’d never been around a family like mine. He was taking it all in stride now, but would this really work for him

long-term? Even if I balanced both relationships perfectly and spent an equal amount of time with him as Torr, would it eventually bother him that I loved another guy?

No one I'd ever been with had ever wanted to share me for a long period of time. They either wanted to keep group fun in the bedroom only, or they wanted to date other women as well, which didn't work for me.

I trusted Torr and wanted to trust Santos. But I didn't want to fall head over heels for my sexy gladiator only for the other shoe to drop.

I really needed to ask my mom for advice at some point.

I drove aimlessly, barely keeping track of where I was going. At some point, I got out of my head enough to park on a hill that gently sloped down into a small valley. The valley below was covered in greenery and pops of color—purple, orange, yellow, and pink wildflowers just starting to bloom. In another couple of weeks, this place would be awash with colors and fragrant blooms. Probably all kinds of butterflies and other wildlife too.

Before I could voice any of this to Torr, he reached forward to shut off my bike. The next place his hands went was my waist, then they slid up to my breasts as his mouth dragged along my nape.

“I need you,” he said in a rough whisper, hips already rolling against my ass. “Now. God, I just fucking need you so bad, Rori.”

“I need you, Torr.”

All thought went out the window as I kissed him over my shoulder, arching and pressing back against the thick erection in his jeans. Sensation and the physical need for him was all that was left.

Torr released one breast to slide his palm down. He cupped the juncture between my thighs, which were still straddling the bike. I ground into his hand, the ache for him becoming more urgent with each rub of my clit against his palm. When his

hand pulled away, I wanted to whine in protest, but he was just pulling at my waistband.

“Get these fucking pants off,” he growled, releasing me to pull apart his belt buckle.

“I’m gonna have to get off the bike,” I told him.

“Fuck no, I want you right here.”

It took some creative maneuvering, but I managed to strip from the waist down while remaining on the bike the whole time.

“Next time, just tell me to wear a dress,” I said, draping my pants over the handlebars.

“Hmm.” Torr pumped his cock with slow, lazy strokes. “I didn’t take you for a dress kind of girl.”

“I can be for the right occasion.” I backed up against him, lifting my ass to rub against his heavy length. “Like being an undercover rich girl and getting fucked on a bike.”

“God...” Torr’s head fell back on a moan. “You are just the perfect woman for me. I can’t believe it took so long for us to happen.”

“I love you too, Torr.”

A bashful smile crossed the face of my sexy, dirty-talking man. He hugged around my waist and kissed my nape, sensual and sweet. In the next moment, his hands were running over me again, caressing my hips and waist before they disappeared under my shirt. His kisses grew hungrier, sucking and nibbling along my shoulders and upper back.

Though it would have been nice, I didn’t expect him to say it back. I knew how he felt, knew why it was difficult for him to say those words. I wasn’t upset and would be content to continue telling Torr I loved him. My love for him was selfless, not a tit-for-tat thing. It was here to stay, unlike his birth parents who’d abandoned him and made him feel undeserving of love. And in my words and actions, I would continue to reassure him of that.

But damn, I'd be lying if I said I couldn't wait for that day to come. When he finally felt safe enough to remove that final barrier around his heart and tell me that he loved me.

I closed my eyes, letting go of my thoughts to sink into the sensations of his talented hands and mouth. Reaching behind me, I wrapped a hand around his length and stroked him from base to tip. Torr's soft, shuddering moan turned into a hissed curse as I angled him to my pussy, stroking him against my slick flesh.

"You're getting me all wet," he said tightly. "Are you that soaked for me?"

"Yes," I moaned. My thighs were already shaking from the anticipation of taking him inside me.

Torr didn't waste a moment. He thrust forward while pulling my hips back at the same time. My cry of, "Fuck!" echoed into the valley below as my hands slapped down on the bike's dash.

"Oh yeah, stay stretched out like that." Torr grabbed my hips and started up a rhythm that was already hitting me in places that made me see stars. "Mm, love seeing my girl take my cock on a bike seat."

A motorcycle provided lots of great handholds for leverage as it turned out. My hands gripped the top edge of the dash between the handlebars, feet on the footpegs. Basically, it was the perfect position to absorb Torr's brutal thrusts. All I could do was hold on, and hold on I did.

"Torr," I moaned over the smacks of his hips against my ass with every drive forward. "Let me turn it on."

"Are you kidding? Goddamn, you turn me on so fucking much. I love watching you take my cock."

"I mean the bike!" I laughed. "I have an idea."

He slowed and then paused, smacking a big palm on my ass as he took a series of panting breaths. "Just don't send us rolling down this hill."

I turned the key, bringing the bike to life with a roar that lowered to a gentle rumble. Settling back down, I shot Torr a grin over my shoulder.

“Oh, you dirty girl.” He smacked the other side of my ass, returning my grin. “That feels nice on your clit, does it?”

“You know my bike is my favorite toy.” I pressed my belly and pelvis down into the seat, seeking the most friction possible from the vibrations of the machine. “Don’t you dare fucking stop now, Torr.”

“Trust me, I never want to stop.” His cock drove through me slower but no less intense with deep, long strokes.

The vibrations seemed to turn up my sensitivity everywhere, amplifying every sensation on my skin and also internally. I felt every inch of him glide through me just as much as I felt his hands on my hips, pressing me down into the bike so I could feel that constant rumbling even more.

My head was empty except for how wildly, insanely good this felt. And when Torr’s hand cracked down over my ass, that dialed everything up to a new high.

His hand clamped on my nape, the other digging into my hip, holding me in place as he fucked me with more force, more speed. With my head turned to the side, I watched the hypnotic thrusts of his hips, saw the flex and release of his muscles and my ass bouncing with every impact.

Torr was no submissive, and it was wild to think that I craved his rough hold and punishing thrusts just as much as I wanted Santos’ sweetness and eagerness to please.

“Come for me.” Torr growled out the command. “I can feel you getting there. Let me feel you squeeze my cock.”

“Spank me harder,” I demanded in reply.

Torr’s rough, sexy moan was eclipsed by the crack of his palm on my flesh. Heat bloomed over my skin like a fever, and he brought his palm down again before I could recover.

Again and again, the sharp heat of pain lit up my senses. Combined with the rumbling vibrations on my nipples and clit,

and his cock fucking me at such a brutal, delicious pace, I didn't stand a chance.

The orgasm ripped through me like lightning in a storm, once, twice, and once more. Torr's release followed, kicking inside me and spilling heat that sent more little lightning bursts through me.

The vibrations became too much at that point, and I slapped my palm blindly up in the general direction of the ignition. Torr figured out what I was doing and used his longer reach to turn the bike off for me.

"Thanks," I panted, dropping my cheek back to the seat, then started giggling.

"What?" Torr lowered over my back and brushed a kiss along my nape.

"Nothing. Thanks is just a weird thing to say after sex, isn't it?"

He chuckled and patted my arm like we were no more than acquaintances. "Thanks for the ride, partner."

We burst out laughing together, which quickly turned into moans and body wiggles since he was still inside me and we were both incredibly sensitive.

Torr placed another kiss on my shoulder before he gingerly pulled out of me. I hopped off the bike to get re-dressed and had to lean against the trusty machine on my wobbly, post-orgasm legs.

"I think we both needed that," I said, once zipped and buttoned up again. Nothing like rough sex on a bike to feel refreshed and invigorated.

Torr nodded, his eyes bright and playful. "Aren't you glad I made you rest?"

I rolled my eyes but marched over to him, wrapping my arms around his neck before pressing up on tiptoe to kiss him. "I'm glad you're here with me, period." His arms went around my waist as we kissed a second time. "I love you, Torr," I whispered when our lips parted.

The playfulness left his eyes, showing the vulnerability he hid underneath. His forehead rested on mine, hands tightening on my waist like he never wanted to let me go.

Never *would* let me go.

Again, I had no expectations and felt no rejection at his silence. I stroked his cheek and kissed him with a smile to let him know that I knew, that I understood. That I loved him regardless and would never let him go either.

“I guess we should get back,” he said, voice full of reluctance.

“Yeah,” I agreed with the same tone. “You want to drive?”

His eyes lit up again, that smirk returned. “I did you that good, huh?”

“Shut up.” I went behind him and swatted his ass. “Your ego doesn’t need to get any bigger.”

In truth, there was no else I trusted more to ride in front of me.





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## RORI



I tried not to look too gleeful as I headed down into the safe house's basement the next day. It wouldn't be a good look if I appeared to get pleasure from interrogating someone. But I actually intended to enjoy this. Very much.

Nella had been cuffed around her wrists and ankles. From both points of restraints, a length of chain kept her tethered to a support beam running from the floor to the ceiling. She had been given just enough room to have free range of movement, but no more. She had also been offered a shower and two meals since coming here, both of which she refused.

As far as prison cells went, hers was luxurious. The basement was insulated, and she'd been provided with blankets and sweats for the colder nights. There was even a slim, rectangular window giving her some sunlight and a sense of night and day. Way more than what she gave Santos and Torr in that dark pit.

Nella had more than reasonable accommodations for a prisoner. And I was fully prepared to continue being reasonable, as long as she was.

For some reason, I wasn't holding my breath on that.

I took my sweet ass time coming down the basement stairs, letting each of my steps register on the warped, wooden planks. Behind me came Carter and three veteran riders of the Valkyrie Network. Those three were men that Carter and I both trusted, guys who had ridden with my uncles' and fathers' clubs.

When I hit the concrete basement floor, I didn't acknowledge Nella at first. I nodded to the two men on guard duty—younger ones around LJ's age—and gave them a sweet smile. "Thanks, guys. We'll take it from here."

My posse stepped aside to let them up the stairs, and then it was just us and our prisoner.

"Hi, Nella." I poured every ounce of control into my voice and smile as I grabbed a metal folding chair from the wall, opened it, and took a seat. "How are you doing?"

Her eyes followed me as I moved, the rage pouring off her in waves. No control over her emotions here. "You're wasting your breath," she spat. "I'm not telling you a goddamned thing."

I manipulated my face into a mask of concern. "Hmm, that doesn't sound like you're very happy here. Is it the food? You've refused to eat it, so no, that can't be it. Does the sunlight bother you? Would you prefer a cell in total darkness like the one back at the resort? We'd be happy to arrange it if so. Just say the word."

I crossed my legs and clasped my hands on top of my knee, like a therapist having a heart-to-heart with a patient.

Nella shook her head, chains clanking with the movement as she let out a dry laugh. "You don't get it, child. You're too young to know how things used to be."

"Tell me, then." I gestured a hand imploringly at her.

"The Collapse," she hissed. "Before, during, and after. Do you know how it was for us women? I mean, going back centuries. Do you have any clue what *they* did to us?" Her eyes flicked up to the men standing behind me on the word *they*.

"I have some idea." I picked at my nails, looking bored. "It's still happening, you know. The subjugation of women. Fucking terrible, isn't it?"

"If you know that, then why am I a prisoner and *they* are armed and free?" Nella bared her teeth, pulling on her chains as the veins in her forehead popped. "I don't have just 'some

idea', I *know*. I know firsthand how they like to hurt us. Use us. They think they're entitled to our bodies, our labor. We're not people to them, we're cattle."

"So that's what the resort was all about." I cocked my head. "Getting back at men for what they've done to women for thousands of years."

"Yes!" Nella actually sounded triumphant. "The balance has been tipped too far in their favor. Now we're correcting it. Exerting control over them before they can control us."

"Who is 'we'?"

Nella snorted. "Every woman who can see the truth for what it is."

I'd take that answer for now and circle back to it later. "Is it true you kidnapped innocent men off the street? How do you determine which ones to get your revenge on?"

She snorted again, casting a look of disdain up at Carter and the others. "There's no such thing as an innocent man. They're rotten from the day they're born."

I held back the anger that swept over me, just barely. "Seems you like men enough to fuck them. And to have an armed militia ready when you call. Those backup commandos looked expensive. That resort made you very wealthy, didn't it?"

Nella shrugged. "Men can be useful when they're under control."

"You mean enslaved."

"Again, is it any worse than what they did to us?"

Her fanatical beliefs were just pissing me off and not the information I actually needed. I had to focus. "Who owns the resort?"

"A powerful group of women who will bring us into a new era." Her eyes widened like she'd just gotten an idea. "They could use someone like you. A leader who takes charge. You'd be spending your time among your own gender, people with

creativity and brains. Not these knuckle-draggers who only follow you because they want what's between your legs.”

This wasn't part of the plan, but I shifted in my seat to look up at Carter. “Carter, do you want to fuck me?”

He made a face. “Uh, no? You're my cousin.”

My head swiveled to look in the other direction. “How about you, Dan? You want some of this?”

“Respectfully, hell no.” Dan frowned. “You're my daughter's age.” He was attractive and fit for being in his early forties, but the feeling was mutual. Not my type.

The other guys muttered similar sentiments. I already knew one had a long term boyfriend and the other was newly married with a baby on the way.

“So it seems,” I swiveled in my chair back to face Nella, “that the men in this room would *not* fuck me at the first opportunity. So they must follow me for some other reason.”

The prisoner only shook her head pityingly at me. “Here's a newsflash for you, child. Men lie.”

“I know. Guess what? So do women.” I uncrossed my legs and planted my feet wide, leaning forward with my arms on my knees. “So if you and I are so much better than them, help a girl out and tell me what I need to know. Tell me specifically, who are the owners of the resort?”

“You and I are not the same,” Nella said. “You're blinded by the world *they* created. We are building a new world. Women like you stand in the way of progress. So I won't tell you a thing. You're just going to kill me anyway.”

*Showtime*, I thought, leaning back in my chair.

“You're wrong there, Nella. I'm going to keep you very much alive. Because while I love having a good bitchfest about how useless men are, I draw the line at kidnapping them off the streets.” I leaned forward again, steepling my fingers. “I take issue with forced prostitution. I'm not okay with forcing people to fight to the death for entertainment. The fact

of the matter is, not a single one of those men lifted a finger to assault you.”

“Of course not! I made damn sure never to give them the opportunity,” Nella hissed.

I stared her dead in the face, all pretense of charm and joking gone. “That makes you a murderer, Nella. And a rapist.”

She gave me another dismissive roll of her eyes. Fucking psychopath. Which was what I figured.

“So it seems we’ve come full circle once again,” I said with a wistful little sigh.

Nella narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You exploit and harm innocent men.” I leaned back, holding my hands out to the sides. “These guys get to do the same to you.”

Her eyes widened for a second before she put on her air of superiority again. “You wouldn’t.”

“Who owns the resort?”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s no way to talk to your pimp.” I opened my palms and wiggled my fingers. “What do we got, boys?”

I heard rummaging through pockets and opening wallets as I watched Nella’s face morph from bravado to fear. The guys slapped some currency into my hands, and I only glanced down to count what they had paid.

“Hm, it’s a little light.” I stuffed the territory credits in my jacket pockets and crossed my legs again. “You all can fuck her mouth, but that’s it.”

“Goddamn it,” Carter grumbled as he pulled out another wad of bills and held it out to me.

“Atta boy.” I grinned, accepting the money from him. “You can have her ass too.”

In front of me, Nella had gone completely still. And pale.

“Last time I’m asking,” I warned her. “Who owns the resort?”

She swallowed and glared at me, trying to put on a brave front, but she had started to shake.

“Suit yourself.” I scooted my chair back to give the guys room to surround her.

Dan flexed his fingers, opening and closing his hand into a fist. “Mind if I knock some teeth out? I don’t want my dick to get bitten off.”

“Mm...” I pretended to think about it. “Not preemptively, no. But if she does bite, feel free.”

Nella’s teeth chattered from how hard she shook, while the guys closed in and began undoing their belts and jeans. She looked at me through the gaps between their bodies, eyes round and pleading, while I kept my expression passive like I was about to watch a boring TV show.

Dan’s cock was already stiff and engorged, his fist wrapped around the base. He clasped the back of Nella’s head with his free hand, guiding her mouth to him when she screamed out, “Sisters of Bathory!”

I rocked forward in my chair and the men froze. “Who?”

“Sisters of Bathory...” Nella was sobbing now, curling into herself. “Please don’t hurt me...”

I signaled for the guys to step away, wondering why that name rang a bell in my head. “Where are they located?”

“All over...several locations...”

“Do they have a central base? A headquarters?”

“Yes...a compound in the Basin Territory.”

“You’re going to write down the exact location for me and every single detail you know. How many people in total, including armed guards. Is it another resort?”

“No, it’s just...” Nella sniffed. “It’s where we live. Where we’re safe from...” Her eyes slid over a trembling shoulder to where the guys stood a few feet away.

I snapped my fingers in front of her face. “Focus. And write. Otherwise, I still have their money. And they’ll want what they paid for.”

Her expression crumbled into despair, abject fear, and betrayal.

That last one was a doozy. It fucked with my head the whole time her shaky hands chicken-scratched the information I asked for on a legal pad.

She felt betrayed by me. Like there was some code I wasn’t supposed to break because we were both women.

When she finished, I scanned the paper and felt satisfied with what I’d gotten.

Nella’s head was bent, her defeated gaze on the floor. A few dark spots of wetness had landed on the concrete. Tears.

“Don’t let them touch me,” she cried softly. “I swear that’s everything I know.”

Sympathy threatened to rise up in my throat, but I choked it off. This woman had blood on her hands. She’d used and sold dozens of men, including one I was falling in love with. Everyone had trauma, it didn’t make them a good or bad person. I’d just figured out how to use hers for our gain.

It worked, and the job was done. But I wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

Saying nothing, I got to my feet, taking the legal pad with me. I went up the stairs, the guys following after me, and Nella was left alone.

Once Carter closed the door behind him, I let out a long breath that had constricted my chest like a fist. “Thank you, guys. I’m sorry I asked you to act like that, but...thank you.”

They all nodded and grunted through tight-lipped frowns. I picked these men in particular because I trusted them well enough to know that they’d get no pleasure in acting like they were about to gang-rape a woman. They’d follow through on what I’d asked them to do but would never go a step too far.

It never would have happened, but Nella believed it would. That was the whole point, and yet, it wasn't sitting well with me.

“Anything else you need?” Carter asked.

I shook my head. “No, that's it for today. Thanks again, guys.”

“Can we get our money back?” Dan muttered.

“Oh, right. Here.”

They all grabbed their cash and took off in a hurry, probably in search of somewhere private to rub out those erections caused by the pills I asked them to take.

Alone, I looked down at the information Nella had written, but all the words blurred together in my brain. With a careful pull, I tore the sheet off the legal pad and carefully folded it before putting it in a jacket pocket.

I got what I needed. And I never had to inflict pain on Nella or do any other sick type of torture. I just fucked with her head. Made her believe her worst fear was about to happen and probably triggered some flashbacks.

Hell, that was probably *every* woman's worst fear. Maybe that was why my conscience was all weird about it now.

I wanted to ride. I wanted to drink until I passed out. I wanted to have some very enthusiastic, consensual sex. I wanted to be alone and stare at the ceiling.

What was done was done. But how was I supposed to keep going and be okay with it?

While running on the hamster wheel of my mind, I wandered into the living room where Devin and Santos sat on the couch next to each other.

Their weapons were laid out on the coffee table—Devin's many small throwing knives and Santos' much larger machetes. The guys were clearly in the middle of a sharpening session, with whetstones, oil, and a small pile of cloths near the blades. Both of them paused and looked up at the sight of me.



“Hey,” Santos said gently, wiping his hands on a cloth over his leg. “You okay?”

I found it utterly impossible to answer him in that moment, so I looked at Devin.

“I got what I needed. She’s all yours,” I said before turning and heading up to the bedroom I’d claimed.



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## HUDSON



I woke up to something hard and cold poking me in the chest. Groaning, I went to rub my eyes but found my limbs still tied down.

Oh, right. I'd managed to free one arm and punched the woman who'd gotten on top of me, which earned my restraints being reinforced by chains now. On top of some other really unpleasant shit.

But it was worth it. I felt a surge of joy lighting up my cold, dead nerves every time I saw that bitch's black eye.

The man I used to be wouldn't have been able to fathom striking a woman. He never would have believed he'd be captured and used as a breeding stud either. My reality was incomprehensible now. Maybe I'd died and this was Hell.

It turned out to be a gun barrel poking me in the chest. The long snout of a rifle, so the woman holding it could still keep a fair distance away from me.

"Wake up," she said, nudging me again. "And wash up. You're going out today."

Out? As in, leaving this room I'd been confined to for months, if not years? I didn't dare ask for clarification, but the spark of hope in my chest was a painful thing. Hope did nothing but ensure more misery later on.

My wrists and ankles were unbound while four rifles hovered in the air a few feet away, all pointing at me. I drew my arms and legs in, muscles screaming at the stiffness and cramping.

“Shower,” said the woman, swinging her gun toward the adjoining bathroom. “The water shuts off in ten minutes.”

I moved in that direction, timid and slow, until I was in the bathroom and the door shut behind me. If I could still feel anything, I would have wept. A shower, alone, for ten whole minutes!

Not wanting to waste time, I stripped off my clothes and went under the spray. Oh God, it was *hot* water too.

There were no temperature controls, no shower head, towel rods, or anything that could have been used as a weapon. Someone was controlling the water and temperature from another location, but I didn't care. This was a tiny slice of heaven in the hell I'd found myself in.

One small soap bar rested on a shelf, and I ran it over my skin, taking notice of my body for the first time in months.

I stayed clothed when they used me. They uncovered the only part that mattered and then put it away when they were done, so I hadn't taken a good, long look at myself in a while.

I was thinner, paler, unsurprisingly. The musculature I'd once been proud of was gone now, atrophied from lack of use. My tattoos however, were vibrant and stark. Maybe I'd become so pale and sickly that the ink stood out more because of the contrast. I'd forgotten they were there, and looking at them now on my arms, legs, and chest was like finding a photo album of my life from years ago.

The nostalgic memories came flooding, and with them came a physical ache behind my sternum. I wasn't even a person anymore. I couldn't tell some woman to get the fuck off me, let alone choose to put some ink in my skin.

This body used to be mine, and I'd decorated it and worked it out with pride. I used to walk around with my shirt off so I'd get looks and questions about my tattoos. I used to have sex because I was attracted to someone and wanted to feel good. I used to eat whatever the fuck I wanted and sometimes drank too much. Because I was hungry and I

wanted to party. Whatever I did was because I just fucking *wanted* to.

Now...I no longer belonged to myself.

I was nothing.

I was a means to an end with lungs, a heartbeat, and a wish that they would shoot me with one of those rifles.

All too soon, my shower ended.

I dried off with a folded-up towel that was left on top of the toilet lid. Underneath the towel was a change of clothes. Just a pair of loose pants and matching long-sleeved shirt that reminded me of a prison outfit.

A metallic tapping came from the other side of the door. "One minute to get dressed," called the armed woman who had ordered me around earlier.

This whole going-out, shower-and-fresh-clothes thing was curious, now that I was thinking about it. It almost seemed like I was being prepared for something. Were they finally going to kill me?

As bright as that thought was, it didn't seem likely that I'd be under so many armed guards if that were the case. Why not just shoot me in my bed?

"Are you dressed?" called the woman through the door. It was almost funny. For as much they liked keeping me prisoner for what I had stored in my balls, they sure didn't want to see me naked.

"Yes," I answered, my voice raspy from lack of use.

"You will be shot if you are lying."

Damn, missed opportunity there.

The door opened, and I was escorted out by my armed detail of serious, stone-faced women. The one in charge led the way out the bedroom door and up a short flight of stairs to a hallway that opened up into a kitchen and dining room. So it was the basement of a small house I'd been kept in, essentially a cottage.

I was led out the front door, and I blinked in the harsh sunlight. Holy shit, when was the last time I'd been truly outside? Looking around, I tried not to let my steps falter as I took in my surroundings.

There were rows of small cottages, all lined neatly along this path my escorts were taking me. Some houses were fairly plain, others were painted bright colors or decorated with gardens. As we continued walking, we passed a larger, fenced-in garden on the right side. Some women harvested fruit and vegetables while others appeared to be propagating or tilling soil.

Everyone stopped and looked when we passed.

I caught the eyes of one woman standing in front of her house with a chubby toddler on her hip. The pink bow in the child's hair indicated she was a girl. And that woman had come to use me many, many times.

My next breath got stuck in my chest and I nearly coughed, my eyes unable to tear away from the woman's child, *my* child, unless there was another poor bastard here in the same position as me.

A rifle barrel jabbed me in the back, and I stumbled forward. "Keep walking," came the command from behind me.

I continued my walk with my head down, my stomach churning with nausea. I had known what they were using me for, knew what the results would be. But I had never seen those results with my own eyes before. Never seen eyes that looked exactly like mine staring back at me.

A cold sweat started breaking over my skin as it all started hitting me at once. There had been so many of them. Nearly every single day. For what felt like an eternity. That child looked about a year old, so how many...

I clutched at my near-empty stomach, my steps faltering. Two rifle barrels pressed into my back now, digging under my shoulder blades to keep me upright.

“You are being brought before the Dark Mother,” one of the women hissed at me. “Show some respect.”

The what-now?

I concentrated on moving my feet as we wound through the houses, while more women came to watch from their front doors. Some were heavily pregnant or had young children. Others were alone or had older children, I estimated about ten or twelve years old.

All of the kids were girls.

Some math wasn't adding up. Where were the boys?

An answer came to me that was too horrific to fully comprehend. I shoved it away, dismissing it despite the ample evidence of what had been done to me and all the other men I shared space with in this hellhole.

I was brought before a set of stairs leading up to a platform with a slanted roof, held up by four support beams. Four women stood at the edge of the platform, shoulder-to-shoulder. They were all older, in their fifties or sixties, and dressed far better than everyone else.

My escorts with guns and everyone who'd watched us had been in simple, clearly re-used clothes. Not everything fit right or went together, like they'd just grabbed things from a secondhand store.

These women had on long coats that were tailored and looked brand-new, a clear sign of their elevated status, as if being ten feet higher than everyone wasn't enough. The youngest of the group also liked her jewelry, with a gold medallion hanging from her neck and no less than three rings on each hand.

I was shoved to my knees on the ground at the base of the stairs and kept my gaze on the first concrete step in front of me.

“Look at us, male,” one of them snapped.

I looked up, blinking at a sky that was overcast but still too bright.

The oldest of the women smiled down at me, sinister and pure evil. “You’ve done us a great service. So much so that the Dark Mother requested you herself. She is impressed by you.” The woman brought her hands behind her back. “And we are not easily impressed by *men*.”

She spat out that last word while a tittering laugh rose up from all around. Whatever this was, it seemed that quite the audience had gathered.

“We’ve canceled the blood sacrifice for this full moon to celebrate instead,” said another woman on the stage. “Ten daughters from one source is such a blessing. Praise the Dark Mother!”

My nausea returned while everyone else cheered. Ten...ten fucking kids that I never wanted or consented to. Children I had no rights to. And that was just girls.

While my gut churned like an angry sea, my eyes darted around for something to focus on so I could just fucking breathe. To my right, I saw another woman lifting a baby high in the air as she cheered. Oh God, I was going to be sick...

“The Dark Mother wishes to remind you all,” said the bejeweled woman, “that our work is far from done. In order to turn the tide against the men who have taken everything from us, we need more daughters. More sisters in arms. Thanks to our benevolent goddess, our power grows. But we cannot stop here. Not until,” she looked down and extended a hand in my direction, “every man is on his knees before us.”

More cheering. More bile in my throat.

The two center women on the platform stepped away from each other, and I was forced to my feet. “Come and meet our goddess,” said the older one coolly. “Men don’t usually get the privilege until right before they are sacrificed.”

I resisted going up the steps, but the guns against my back and ass ensured I went up there regardless. Once on the same level as the four elder women, I saw the dark red and brown stains in the gray concrete, all creating pathways toward strategically-placed drains.



Screams filled my head. Memories of waking up to blood dripping on my forehead crashed to the forefront of my mind. Oh God, they did it *here*. Right above where they kept us all prisoner. Every new and full moon, they sacrificed men to their so-called goddess. Spilling as much blood and causing as much pain as possible in retribution for millennia of the subjugation of women.

Only when the guns braced against my back did I realize that I had backed away. I wanted off this platform, off this ride, out of this body that was just a tool for them.

The bejeweled woman extended a palm to me, her smile deceptively warm. “Don’t be afraid, male. You will not be sacrificed this moon cycle or the next. The goddess still has much use for you.”

“Please, I don’t...”

I didn’t even know what I was begging for. They would never stop. Never put me out of my misery. Never let me go.

Was this goddess even real? Or was everyone just brainwashed by these cult leaders?

“Don’t waste this privilege,” the bejeweled woman warned. “The goddess may even let you live long after your service is fulfilled. You could watch your daughters grow up.” Her voice grew low. “As long as you understand your place, *male*.”

Yeah, right. Watch my daughters grow up to hate and hunt down men? I didn’t want to be around for any of that.

A breeze picked up, and the cool air felt like fingers moving along my neck. A comforting touch and a reminder that I wasn’t alone.

*Hold on, my son.* I remembered the voice from days ago, when the wind howled angrily outside my prison. *I have not forsaken you. I am everything their goddess wishes she could be.*

Maybe I was losing it and this sense of calm was just my brain disassociating to protect myself. But I wasn’t ready to die yet.

“I understand,” I said, lowering my gaze humbly. “I am, uh, honored by the privilege.”

The woman looked pleased and turned toward the far side of the stage. “Follow me.”

When I went after her, my armed escorts and the others stayed back. There was a shade tent at the far end of the covered platform, even though it wasn't sunny.

But the shade tent was draped in swaths of cloth. Ribbons made of dozens of different fabrics wrapped around the legs. Sitting at the bases of all four legs were flowers, stuffed animals and children's toys, beads and jewelry, handwritten letters and photographs. The items near the bottoms of the piles were dark brown with remnants of dried blood.

Offerings, I realized, swallowing to tamp down my nausea again.

Once we reached it, the woman stood to the side of the tent just outside the canopy. She gestured for me to go inside. “No one but those of us in the Sisterhood has gazed upon a living, breathing deity.” Awe filled her voice. “You truly have no idea how lucky you are.”

Inside the tent was a wicker bassinet, gently rocking from side to side. A bolt of fear jolted through me. Whatever was in that thing, I did *not* want to see. Only the desire to maintain the illusion kept me inching forward. The woman beamed at me as I walked past her, mistaking my nauseating fear for reverence.

A metallic smell hit me as soon as I ducked under the shade cloth, and I almost turned the fuck around when I realized the entire floor surrounding the bassinet was coated in blood. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I did *not* want to do this.

And with that thought came the helpful reminder that nobody here cared what I wanted.

I approached the bassinet at the pace of a geriatric snail. The closer I got, the more my terror grew, but as I got peeks of the cushion and fabric lining the basket, I became a tiny bit

curious. Was their goddess a baby? Some re-imagination of Jesus Christ to fit their anti-men ideology?

After what felt like years, I reached the bassinet. I stood over it and looked down at what was inside.

I lasted maybe five seconds before turning and throwing up on the floor. There was a flurry of movement and voices, then multiple hands grabbing me, guns poking me to move again, but I couldn't get my feet to cooperate. Couldn't get my eyes to unsee the thing writhing in that bassinet.

It looked like...a hunk of raw meat. Maybe a human liver. But it *moved*. It was alive and sentient, and it *knew* I was there. It knew what purpose I served for its devotees. I felt that it recognized me as easily as seeing someone wave at me in a crowd. I saw what it wanted for the world, and the sheer scale of devastation made me feel as insignificant as an ant.

“The Dark Mother was the size of my pinky finger decades ago.” It was the bejeweled woman speaking, her smile and eyes bright as she walked alongside me. Except I wasn't so much walking as I was being dragged. “After decades of devotion and sacrifices, her power has grown and she has rewarded us. But there is still so much to be done.”

“What...how...” My stomach heaved again, and I coughed up bile and saliva.

“Faith, stupid man. Faith, prayer, and sacrifice.” The woman went up to the door of a cottage and proceeded to unlock and open it. “We need only a few months before she can take a vessel, and then our goddess will walk among us.” She stood to the side, beaming like she'd won the lottery as my escorts dragged me inside. “And that is something you will *not* want to miss.”



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## SANTOS



I watched Rori leave the living room, listened to the bedroom door close, and then looked at Devin. “Shit. What do you think happened down there?”

“Don’t know.” He did a final wipe-down of his knives before sheathing them. “Long as she didn’t take my kill, I don’t care.”

*Liar*, I thought. Maybe he didn’t like Rori as much as I did, but I could tell he was warming up to her. Slowly. Okay, maybe at a glacial pace, but he was coming around to her and maybe even women in general. I actually heard him say good morning to Paige when they walked past each other.

“I said it to both of them. Her *and* the Hunter,” he’d protested when I made fun of him.

Devin was all serious now, his blades tucked away into their various hidden holsters as he stood from the couch.

“You doing it now?” I asked him.

“Why wait?” He breezed over to the basement door, silent and fluid.

“You want to be alone?”

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “I do, actually.” He shot me a glance over his shoulder. “This is for me. Unless you’re also itching for a revenge kill.”

I shook my head. Killing had been nothing more than survival for me. It did nothing for me emotionally. I never got a sense of closure or vindication from taking a life.

“No, I’m good. Take it, man. You deserve it.”

Devin gave a small nod before swinging the door open and heading down the basement stairs. My gaze went up another set of stairs, where Rori had just gone, looking conflicted and gray.

My feet were moving without another thought, taking the steps two at a time until I reached the landing. Only one bedroom door was closed, everyone else was out stretching their legs or learning to ride motorcycles for the day.

I went up to the door and rapped my knuckles softly. “Rori? It’s Santos.”

“Come in,” came the reply.

I opened the door only far enough to stick my head in. She was sitting sideways in an armchair next to the window, the pane opened and her white dove sitting outside on the sill.

“Hey. Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

Rori angled her head in my direction, a smile pulling at her lips. “I’m okay, I think. Just working through some shit in my head. You want to sit with me?”

Did I ever.

I closed the door behind me and crossed the room to her. Rori stood from the armchair, allowing me to sit, then resumed her sideways position with her legs across my lap. Her dove flew away as I circled my arms around her waist, tugging her closer.

“Did I interrupt something?” I asked with a brush of my lips across her forehead.

“No.” She chuckled, scratching lightly along the back of my neck. “It seems you and I are the ones who keep getting interrupted.”

I smiled against her cheek. “Should I barricade the door?”

“No, stay right where you are.” The gentle command created a warming sensation in my chest, and I tightened my

hold on her. “If anyone knocks on that door, I’ll yell at them to fuck off.”

The warmth in my chest grew and spread, reaching my belly and my throat. It felt amazing to know she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

“So what is this shit you’re working through in your head?” I ran one hand up her back, lightly scratching, circling, massaging, as I studied her face.

Rori inhaled deeply and sighed it all out, looking exhausted. “Ethical issues concerning the interrogation of prisoners, I guess.”

“Sounds like a very difficult university class,” I said, just to make her laugh. “What’s bothering you, though?”

She blew out another breath, and I stayed quiet, ready and eager to listen. “My fathers were tortured. You know, back in the day. They didn’t give us details, but they were honest about it happening.” Rori’s eyes went from focusing on me to staring at a blank spot on the wall. “All of them said the worst part about it wasn’t the pain. Not starvation or the solitude. What almost broke them was realizing their worst fears were on the brink of coming true. The idea that everything they fought for would go up in flames. That they’d never see each other or my mother again.” Rori’s focus returned to me again. “I used that with Nella today. I deduced what her worst fear would be and used that fear to break her.”

“Okay,” I said. “And that was?”

“Being raped by a group of men.”

“Ah.” I frowned at her. “Did you—”

“No! It never went that far, and I never would have let it. I just planned it really carefully to make her *believe* it would happen. I chose guys that I trusted and had them pop pills to get hard. Because, you know, they’re not the type that would naturally be turned on by that situation.”

My eyebrows shot up. Damn, that was crafty. “Oh, wow.”

“I had them give me money, told them what they could do to her. It was all an act. They never actually touched her, but fuck, Santos, it got *really* close. And she was terrified. I’ve never seen a woman so scared. Not even when Paige was under that table in the shootout.”

“I see.” My palm smoothed up her back. “And you feel bad about doing that to a fellow woman?”

Rori’s head tilted back with a groan, leaning into my hand cupping the nape of her neck. “Honestly, not really. But I feel bad that I don’t feel bad, you know?”

“Sure, I get it. I’ve had kills that have made me feel no remorse or anything. And that’s a weird feeling in itself.”

Rori’s features relaxed with relief, her head lifting to face me again. “Exactly. You *do* get it. But it’s got me wondering if I’m a sociopath or something.”

“The fact that you’re feeling conflicted and weird about this is proof that you’re not.” I rubbed my fingers into the taut muscles of her neck. “You saw Nella for the person she is—someone who has ordered the death and abuse of dozens of people. You were too smart to fall for her sob story of being trampled on by men her whole life.”

“Yeah, but the thing is, she’s not wrong about that. She and this Sisterhood she’s part of, their way of dealing with that is so unhinged.” Rori shook her head as if clearing the thoughts from her mind. “It doesn’t matter how they justify it. Their fucked up business of gladiator fights and sex slaves needs to end. Nothing justifies treating people like that.”

“Seems you already knew that all along.” I smiled and rubbed her back again. “See? What do you need me for?”

“Oh, stop.” She wrapped both arms around my shoulders and kissed me deeply, a long, passionate press of her lips and tongue that left me breathless. “Thank you for listening,” she whispered, then kissed me again. “And for coming to check on me.”

“Rori...” I was all heat and coiled up need underneath her. “Can we—”



“Finish what we started in the kitchen? Yes, please.” She slid over my lap until she straddled me, grinding down over my zipper. “You remember everything I told you?”

I closed my fist in her hair at the back of her head. Just because I leaned submissive didn't mean I was a passive little bitch. I took control in my own way.

“Eat your pussy until you come screaming my name. Fuck you hard until you come around my cock. Then let your sweet mouth take me until I come down your throat.” I brought my mouth to her ear, rolling my hips up so she could feel how hard she was making me. “Did I get all that right, paloma?”

“Y-yes,” she said on a shuddering breath, pupils blowing wide. “Good boy.”

I surged up from the chair, holding her legs straddled around me, then turned to face the comfortable seat we were just in. Locking our mouths in another kiss, I eased her back down into the chair until my knees hit the floor. Rori's legs hugged around my ribs, holding me exactly where I wanted to be.

She melted into the chair from our kissing and petting, her body languid and fluid, giving me a soft place to land. I was getting used to the idea that Rori was a safe place for me, warm and comforting just as much as she was tough and protective. I only hoped I could provide the same kind of safety for her. It felt like a gift that she opened up to me about what happened in the basement.

“Santos...” She sighed out my name with a frustrated groan, arching her back to press the long length of her body against me.

“I'm getting there, paloma.” I nipped at her neck, kneading her thighs and calves on my journey down her legs.

Her shoes were those cumbersome biker boots with shoelaces a mile long, so I had to pull away to undo them. Turned out, plucking at those laces heightened the anticipation, much like unlacing a fancy corset would be. I'd

rather be here every time, sitting on the floor, undressing the woman who owned me in the only way that mattered.

“I should tie you up with those laces.” Rori laughed as I pulled the last knot free with a flourish and slid the boot off her foot.

“Would you? Please?” I started on her other boot while her bare foot ran up my thigh, her cute little toes dragging over my waistband and zipper. Nothing would make me happier than being tied up for her to use me in any way she liked.

“I’ll think about it,” she purred coyly, running her foot up my stomach to my chest. “They’re certainly long enough.”

“Yeah, really. What’s up with you bikers and your hundred-yard shoelaces?”

A laugh bubbled out of her before she lifted her chin, arching one eyebrow down at me. “I thought you were undressing me, not making cheeky remarks.”

I didn’t bother to suppress the groan rising out of my throat. She was so fucking hot when she was bossy and deserved to know it. “Yes, paloma.” I kissed the ankle of her foot that had been exploring me which was now resting against my shoulder.

The moment her second boot came off, I reached for the waistband of her jeans. Rori lifted her hips and they slid down easily, along with her panties. Her legs came together to remove everything, and I split them wide again as soon as she was naked from the waist down. Stripteases were fun and all, but my woman gave me a specific command, and I was eager to follow through.

I grabbed Rori’s waist and pulled her forward, sliding her down the chair and bringing her knees over my shoulders. As tempting as it was to dive straight down to her core, I wanted to savor her. Ease my way into bliss so that it would taste that much sweeter.

She shivered when I kissed the inside of her thigh, legs coming in closer until I pulled them apart again.

“Sensitive here?” I made sure to run my stubble against her skin as I turned my head to give the same treatment to her other leg.

“You already know I am.” She reached down, scratching her nails deliciously over my buzzed hair. “You’re so good at pleasing. You don’t need me to tell you that.”

“You haven’t given me a test drive yet.” My kisses went lower, and I kept eye contact with her. If I looked down to the spot between her legs, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself.

“Because you’re going slow and making me wait.” Her voice was playfully chiding as she curled her toes against my back.

“You didn’t tell me not to tease you.” An inch lower on each thigh. Her skin was so warm and smooth here, I couldn’t resist flicking my tongue out for a lick.

Rori squirmed in my hold, her hand on the verge of pressing my head down right to where she wanted me. “I’m gonna have to watch what I tell you. I didn’t know you’d be such a brat.”

“On that note, you should probably know I’m not into spanking as a punishment.”

“Mm-kay, noted,” she purred. “What would you prefer?”

“Smother me by sitting on my face.”

I slid my mouth over her pussy before she could answer, and whatever sexy retort she was going to say became a gasp and a throaty moan that filled the room. And the taste that filled my mouth was nothing short of ambrosia.

I licked a long stripe up the seam of her cunt, stopping just short of her clit. She’d get attention there soon enough, but I wanted to feast on her first. I thought kissing her mouth was good, but I never wanted to stop exploring her with my lips and tongue down here. She was sensitive and thrashing, bucking her hips into my face and clamping her thighs to my ears.

My hands came up and I spread her thighs out to the sides, holding her open so I could taste and see more of her. She loved it when I sealed my mouth over her and stroked my tongue through her entrance, then sucked on her lips as I pulled away for a breath.

Rori was panting now, whimpering and begging, her control temporarily gone while she was on the edge of release.

“Can I please make you come now, paloma?” I whispered over her clit, the little pearl begging to be touched.

That snapped her back into bossy mode. Her head jerked up, cheeks flushed and eyes determined with need. “Yes. Be a good boy and make me come *now*, Santos. Do your job and please me.”

“Yes, paloma.” I flattened my tongue over the top of her cunt, pressing down while I stroked two fingers inside her. She was so wet, I couldn’t wait to suck her taste off my fingers.

I spread and curled the digits inside her, giving some friction to her inner walls while my hand rocked in and out. Down below, I was vaguely aware of my hips moving in the same motion. Fuck, I wanted inside her so bad, but this was what she wanted. Her pleasure overrode mine, always.

“I’m so close...right there...don’t stop...oh fuck, Santos!”

Her delirious chanting was music to my ears, the sound I marched to steadily with my tongue and fingers. When the orgasm finally hit her and her body convulsed under my ministrations, I still didn’t stop.

Only when she pushed my head away did I release her clit and withdraw from inside her. Still, I lapped at her sensitive skin, kissed all around her gorgeous cunt that was now swollen and flushed with her pleasure. I was content to stay here, licking and kissing between her legs until she no longer needed me.

After a few minutes of that, Rori leaned forward and shoved roughly at my shoulder. Her feet planted firmly on the floor while I remained kneeling in front of her. A small spark of worry struck my chest. Did I do something wrong?

“Take your clothes off, Santos. Now.” Rori was already whipping off her leather jacket and shirt. “I need to see you and touch you while I fuck you.”



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RORI



Santos hurried to obey me, which sent such a rush through me, it almost resembled an orgasm. He tore his clothes off and flung them to the floor without care. All good with me. I didn't want a slave. I wanted a man who was passionate and wanted to please. From the sight of his cock bobbing stiffly as he stripped off his pants, he was enjoying this just as much as I was.

His fast stripping left him standing, so I decided to fix that quickly. "Kneel."

Santos dropped to his knees in front of me like he was before. Fuck me, was there anything hotter than this huge warrior of a man kneeling at my feet? Right after he ate me like I was the finest meal he'd ever had, no less.

He was beautiful to behold, all scarred, sun-kissed skin and swaths of muscle. A dangerous killer, but no threat to me. Like a wild animal I'd bonded with but could never be truly tamed.

Santos' breaths were relaxed, though his body was taut and alert. His eyes, framed by those incredible dark lashes, followed me as I walked a slow, observant circle around him, though he remained facing forward as I came around to his back.

"Do you like what you see, paloma?" he asked, patient and still while my eyes feasted.

"Very much."

There wasn't as much scarring on the wide expanse of his shoulders and back. If someone managed to attack him from

behind, he likely wouldn't be kneeling so nicely in my bedroom right now. He had a perky, squeezable ass too, perfect for grabbing onto while he thrust into me.

“You can touch me anywhere you want.” His head turned to the side, revealing the slope of his nose, chin, and luscious mouth. “Please touch me, paloma.” His voice took on a pleading tone that was somehow still rich, deep, and masculine. His submission to me did nothing to take away his raw masculinity. If anything, his trusting me enough to relinquish sexual control made him even more of a man to me.

I started a touch in the center of his back, letting my fingertips drag up the length of his spine. Santos' head tilted back towards me with a reverent sigh, like this one touch was all he needed to be satisfied.

“You really want me to use you?” My palm reached the nape of his neck and slid around to his throat, tracing over his Adam's apple and the dip between his collarbones.

“Yes,” he breathed, his throat moving against my fingertips.

“Any limits?”

He hesitated. “No violence on either end. No humiliation or degradation either.”

“Got it.” I leaned down, letting my breasts press to his upper back. My hands slid down over the flat planes of his chest, massaging over the strong drumbeat of his heart. “How about I tie your hands together and ride you? Since you're being so good, I'll let you touch me after I drain your cock of cum. How does that sound?”

Santos closed his eyes on a sharp inhale, dark lashes sweeping over his cheekbones. “I would love that. Please, paloma.”

I kissed his neck before standing, taking my time to nibble and pull at his warm, sensitive skin. “You are so damn sweet. I love you so giving and pliant like this.”

“Oh, you do?” Santos' voice was teasing, breaking character for a split second.



I had picked up one of my boots and begun to pull the laces free when I realized what I'd said.

Oh shit.

I said I loved him.

I didn't mean it like that, but that didn't make the words any less true. I was in the process of falling for him, that was for damn sure. I probably started falling the first time I watched him fight.

And I was loving this sexual dynamic between us too. I'd never been in the role of a truly dominant partner before. With Santos, it just seemed to work. What I had with Torr was more traditional in a sense, and I loved that too. I guess that put me firmly in switch territory. I loved being manhandled and thrown around by Torr just as much as I loved bossing Santos.

It was such a rush, the control Santos handed over to me. But I had to be careful too. The last thing I wanted to do was abuse this control, and make him feel like this wasn't a safe space for him. He trusted me, and I was determined to make sure that trust was well-earned.

So rather than answer Santos' question of if I loved him, I gave him my best stern expression while yanking my shoestring through the eyelets of my boots.

"Put your hands together above your head."

He slapped his wrists together, tongue darting out to lick his lips as he watched me with greedy eyes. I stood in front of him, my breasts at his eye level while I bound up his wrists in the black cord.

His warm breath teased my skin as he stretched forward, testing his limits while I took his hands away.

"May I please give you a kiss while you do that?" he asked, low and husky, his mouth within inches of my nipple.

"No." I tugged at the knots around his wrists, then slid a finger between the bindings. When I was satisfied the tie would hold him without cutting off circulation, I bent down

and took his chin in my hand. “But I appreciate you asking politely.”

I dropped a chaste kiss on his lips, which he answered with a needy, frustrated groan.

“How’s this?” I tugged at his wrist bindings again. “Too tight?”

“No, it’s good.” His eyes roamed over me as I stepped back, teeth sinking into his lower lip. “And you are perfect.”

“Keep talking like that and you’ll get to come in no time.” I stroked his cheek, admiring the new flexion of muscles in his arms and chest with his hands trussed up like that. He rested his hands on top of his head, cheek leaning into my hand as he looked up at me, so adoring and eager.

I dropped my hand and brought it to my hip. “Stand up.”

Santos rose to his feet with feline grace, all masculine muscle and power as he towered over me.

“Lie back on the bed,” I told him.

He walked backward, looking behind him only once so he didn’t trip, and I watched with rapt fascination. Using his elbows and strong legs to shimmy up toward the pillows, he somehow made it look hot and not at all awkward.

“Is this where you’d like me, paloma?” His head and bound hands rested on a pillow, long body overtaking my bed with his feet splayed out, relaxed.

His cock, though, was anything but.

It stood straight up like a column, the thickness and slight upward curve promising an incredible ride. The blunt head of him was glossy with precum, just begging for me to spread it around with my hand. Or my mouth.

Damn, did I really have to wait to taste him? I was in charge, right? Who was to stop me from going down on such a beautiful specimen right now?

*Patience, I reminded myself. Stick to what you told him. Don’t change the rules.*

“*You* are perfect.” I lowered onto the edge of the bed, and Santos beamed at me repeating his words. “Just look at you stretched out on my bed for me. And this gorgeous cock.”

I leaned over and circled my hand around his head. With a firm stroke, I spread the wetness from his tip down and around his shaft. “Is all this for me?” I asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” Santos hissed, hips rolling up to pump through my fist. “All for you. I’ve never gotten so hard for anyone like I do for you.”

Jesus. How could he expect me to be a stern domme when everything he said made me melt?

Keeping my hand on his length, I leaned up to kiss him and fuck...it had only been minutes but it felt like I’d gone without kissing him for years. The tension between us was as taut as a piano wire, every little exchange of power between us pulling it tighter. My pussy pulsed with a needy ache, and I didn’t have to touch myself to know that I was soaked and already on the verge of another orgasm.

Santos clearly felt the same on his end. The passion he poured into kissing me was heightened by his soft moans and the hypnotic rolls of his hips, thrusting his cock through my stroking hand.

Abruptly, his mouth broke away. “You better stop if you want me to last.”

I gripped his jaw with my free hand while my strokes of his cock squeezed tighter and slowed down, but I definitely didn’t stop. “I stop when *I* want to stop. Your job is to keep all that cum inside your balls until I let you shoot down my throat. Understand?”

He groaned so low that it was almost a growl. “Yes, paloma.” The sound was so sexy, so strained from the effort of holding back.

Another bead of precum released from his tip and I spread it down, taking a few slow, measured pumps of him before pausing my grip at his base. Why not give him a little relief? I

didn't want to make this an entirely torturous experience for him.

I waited until the tension of holding back left his face before swinging a leg over to straddle him, holding his cock in the perfect spot to sit on. Santos hissed in a breath as he watched me, the muscles in his arms bunching as he pulled on the wrist ties. Squeezing him with my thighs as I would a motorcycle, I lowered down slowly but didn't let him penetrate me yet.

My hips thrust forward and I rubbed my cunt against the underside of his length, letting him feel my wetness and heat without getting inside. His stiff cock felt incredible on my clit, so I let myself grind and rub on him for me and only me.

Poor Santos went crazy. He had no choice but to accept my treatment and not come, and his breaths came in short, ragged pants. His wrists strained at his bonds, his head throwing back on frustrated moans only to lift again so he could watch me.

“God...fuck...*please*, paloma. You're so...ahh...”

“Good at dominating you?” I offered, running a hand up his taut stomach until I reached a nipple to pinch.

“Mmm, I was gonna say you're so mean, but that works too.”

I laughed, lifting up until his blunt head kissed my core. “Too mean?” I watched him carefully, wiping the humor from my face.

“No,” he insisted, giving me a tight but dreamy smile. “You're perfect.”

“Good.” I positioned him at my entrance and lowered slowly, finally letting him fill me up.

We both moaned as I sank down all the way. I was so slick and beyond ready to receive him. Once fully sheathed, Santos' erection jumped inside me, the stiff length flexing against my inner walls and hitting a deliciously sensitive spot.

“Fuck...” I pitched forward, my hands on his chest as my hips lifted. The drag of him through me was exquisite, a bliss

that bordered on painful. I wanted to savor the sensation but also couldn't get enough, so each slow lift was followed by a quick thrust down to start it all over again.

"I want to touch you so bad," Santos groaned, his eyes following the lifting and lowering of my body.

"You are," I said, giving a playful tweak of his nipple.

"I want to be touching you more," he clarified. "With my mouth and my hands. I want to smack your ass and suck on those cute little nipples."

"Do you want to be untied?" I straightened my arms and took him in a more vigorous rhythm, making my ass bounce on his thighs and my tits bounce in his face.

"Mmm..." His teeth sank into his lip, and it was so cute seeing him trying to form a coherent thought while having his cock thoroughly worked. "Kind of," he decided.

That wasn't a no, and I couldn't find any true discomfort in his expression, so I let my bossy domme side answer. "Too fucking bad."

The ragged moan leaving his mouth was music to my ears. My thighs were starting to ache, so I slowed my ride, leaning down to press flush against him. It would be nice to feel his arms around me, those battle-callused hands gripping my ass, but I loved him at my mercy like this too.

Yeah, I just loved him, period.

Our mouths found each other, the kiss just as passionate and needy as that time we were forcibly separated by the guards back at the canyon. This time, there was no fear of losing each other riding on our backs. This energy with the strength of a monument and fire of a phoenix reborn was purely us. *Our* connection.

The kiss ended with the slowest of separations. My lips skimmed up the bridge of his nose to his forehead as I lifted over him, taking mercy and giving him a taste of what he wanted. What we *both* wanted, more like.

Santos dragged a slow lick over the swell of my breast before his lips closed over my nipple. He gave it the same sensual attention as kissing my mouth, alternating gentle pulls and nips with his teeth. I continued a slow roll of my hips back and forth over his cock, the added friction of our upper bodies together plus his laving on my nipples was bringing on my orgasm faster.

“Santos...” My forehead came down to his, my hip rolls becoming an aggressive, greedy slamming down and lifting in short, shallow thrusts. The pressure building in my clit made my breath tight and every instinct desperate for release.

“Fuck yes, paloma. You ride me so well,” he praised. “Come for me. Let me feel that gorgeous cunt grip my cock for everything it needs.”

Bless this beautiful, submissive man and his dirty mouth. The orgasm washed over me in waves, taking me under in full-body pulses that gently ebbed away. It was delicious, so fucking good. But my own pleasure wasn't even at the forefront of my mind.

I slid free of Santos when the pulses faded and rolled off his body as best as my shaky legs could manage. “Come here. Sit at the edge of the bed.”

He rolled up and swung his feet down to the floor in an instant, bound hands resting atop his head again. I knelt between his legs, coming face-to-face with his heavy, straining cock.

This was where the submissive and dominant sides of me truly overlapped. I loved this, being on my knees before a powerful man to please him with my mouth. I also loved that I was giving my sweet Santos his well-earned release after he'd been such a good boy for me.

My lips slid over his head, tongue pressing along his length as I drew him in. He was coated in my wetness, my own tangy, musky taste filling me with a different kind of pleasure. No other woman would soak his cock ever again.

I formed a seal with my lips as I drew back, eyes lifted to watch the tortured pleasure play out on his face. His mouth was parted on panting breaths, chest rising and falling with exertion.

“Please don’t stop. Please...fuck, I’m so close.”

To reward his sweet begging, I brought a hand up to massage his heavy balls. They were drawn up tight against his body, his cock like iron wrapped in velvety skin.

I got to enjoy only three, four, five more sucks of him before he couldn’t hold back anymore. He swelled and spilled his release down my throat, just as I’d told him to. Again and again, he gave me mouthfuls of hot, salty cum, his orgasm long and drawn-out as I held him on my tongue, my hand continuing to massage his balls until the last of it was wrung out of him.

Santos collapsed back on the bed when finished, the harsh breaths from his chest the only sounds he made. I climbed up next to him, grinning like a cat that swallowed a whole jar of cream as I plucked the knots holding his wrists together.

The moment he was free, his arms came around me, holding me to his chest and cupping my face as he kissed me with such a deep, overwhelming passion that I felt tears prick at my eyes.

“Was that okay?” My hand flew to his wrist, feeling the indent in his skin made by the shoestring. “Does it hurt? I should really learn how to tie sex-safe knots.”

“Okay?” Santos sounded incredulous, pulling away to look at me like I was crazy. “I have never in my life enjoyed sex so much.”

I blinked at him. “Really?”

“Fuck yeah, really.” Hauling me up in his arms, he moved us around until we were lying on the pillows, facing each other on our sides. “Your domme side is just what my sub side has been craving for years.” He kissed me again, warm and tender with his thumb brushing back and forth over my cheekbone. “Thank you for trying this with me. I know it’s not typical

bedroom roles.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead before pulling back to look me in the eyes. “What did you think?”

“I really enjoyed it too,” I whispered. “It’s such a fine balance. I tried to give you what you needed without being cruel. Mostly I’m just floored by your trust. Being your domme is so...humbling. I was nervous about taking it too far, that’s why I asked so many questions. I just want to do right by you, always.”

“You’re a natural.” Santos traced my cheekbone and jaw. “And it’s good to ask questions and be careful, that’s a domme worthy of trust. So many people get off on the power trip. They say they’re dominant as an excuse to be an abusive piece of shit.”

“I never want that.” My hand slid up his chest, resting over his heart.

“I know.” He kissed the bridge of my nose before pulling back again, grinning. “You can push me even further next time.”

“Hmm, I’ll have to think about how.” I drummed my fingers on his skin. “No violence or humiliation, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I like sensory deprivation. Being tied or blindfolded are my favorites. I loved when you made me kneel and every time you barked orders at me. Fuck, that’s so hot.”

I leaned into the crook of his neck, laughing lightly. “I almost took pity on you and untied you early.”

“Nah, being tied up is great. You know why?”

“Hmm?” I placed a kiss on his neck.

Santos’ hands moved over me with slow, intentional movement. Running up the back of my thigh to cup my ass, palming my waist before moving around in front to run up my belly and roll over my breasts. His hand went around my nape and drew me in for another one of those breath-stealing, electrifying kisses. When he eventually broke away, his lips hovered over mine as he answered.



“Because it makes touching you now so much better.”



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## TORRANCE



Rori and Santos came down from the bedroom in the middle of the afternoon, both of them looking blissed out and well-fucked. People's heads turned and conversations stopped as they walked past, hands intertwined, but neither of them looked like they were on a walk of shame. It was more a walk of *fuck yeah suckers, we got laid good*.

I was in the kitchen, shooting the shit with Carter and LJ. Paige and the Hunter were hanging out too, and it was hard to not laugh at Paige's eyes bugging out as Rori untangled herself from Santos and came over to me.

"Hi." Rori's arms went around my neck, her smile hidden but smug as she leaned up for a kiss.

"Hey, creep." I let my hands rest on the small of her back, lowering to give her the kiss she wanted. "Have fun?" I whispered against her lips.

"So. Much. Fun." She punctuated each word with a peck on my lips, her smile turning into a full-on grin against my mouth.

"Well, invite me up next time," I said with a swat to her hip.

"I can't wait." Her nails ran over the back of my head as she kissed me again. "I love you, Torr."

I held her fast to me, trying to force those same stubborn words out of my chest. What came out instead was, "Anything for you."

Rori brushed her knuckles over my cheek, her smile warm and loving and not the least bit resentful. “Right back at you.”

Our tender moment was interrupted by Santos rummaging through the fridge. “Is there any food left?”

“What, like you didn’t get enough to eat?” the Hunter cracked, earning a smack on the arm from Paige.

“Strenuous exercise means calories have to be replenished,” Santos replied smugly, closing the fridge door. “I’m gonna check in the other house.” He came over, kissed Rori on the back of her head, and gave a quick nod to me before leaving.

“Seems like he gets it,” I observed, watching him go out the door.

“He does,” Rori said dreamily. “He really does.”

“You sound head over heels already,” I teased with a pinch to her waist.

She just leaned her head on my shoulder. “Pretty sure I am.”

I kissed her forehead before resting my cheek there, loving the feel of her against me, her arms around my neck, and the dreamy relaxation in her voice and face. Sure, it was another man who made her feel that way, but my woman was here with me now. She was happy, and she loved me. Plus, Santos was a good dude. I trusted him with her, so how could I be anything but pleased at this situation?

“I’m happy for you, creep. You two are good together.”

“Thanks, but so are you and I,” she said into my neck.

“I’m working on it.”

“You being a pain in my ass is just another reason why I love you.”

I kissed her hairline again with a chuckle. As much as I would have preferred hearing her say she loved me over and over, we had other matters to attend to.

“I think it’s time to tell everyone what’s next.” I spoke low, in a voice meant only for her ears. “It’s been a nice three days of R&R, but people are getting restless. Especially the fighters.”

Rori nodded, straightening as she stepped away from me. “I figured today would be the day.”

“Want me to get everyone together?”

“Yes, please. Is out front in fifteen minutes enough time?”

“If you tell everyone it is.”

Rori scoffed just as Devin entered the house, and then her posture immediately changed. She grew stiff, not just straight. The air around her became icy, although her expression remained neutral.

I wanted to block his view of her, to shield her from him. Yeah, I understood why he had issues with women, especially women in charge, but he didn’t have to be an outright asshole to Rori. Santos had been through the same shit and he had figured out she wasn’t like those whackos running the resort.

Devin came right up to us, and to his credit, didn’t have his usual sneer whenever he saw Rori with me or Santos.

“Hi, Devin.” She greeted him as cordially as she would anyone, despite her defenses being up.

He stopped a few feet away, hands relaxed on the holster of multiple knives at his hips. The guy didn’t even spare me a glance, his focus remaining steadfast on her.

“I wanted to let you know that the deed is done. Nella is no longer alive.” His gaze flicked to me before returning to her. “I did as you asked and made it quick. No drawn-out torture or anything of the sort.”

Rori nodded at him. “Thank you for honoring our agreement. I hope this kill gives you the closure you were looking for.”

Devin lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Thanks. It helps a little, but there’s no undoing what’s been done.” He

straightened again. “I’ve wrapped up the body, but I didn’t know if you wanted anything done with it.”

“It doesn’t matter to me. We can bury it out in the wilderness tonight, unless you prefer something else?”

Devin seemed taken aback that she would let him decide, but he quickly recovered. “Ah, no. No preference, that’s fine. I can help with the burial if you’d like.”

“Sure.” Rori’s smile at him was genuine, her posture relaxing and the iciness in her demeanor thawing. “I’d appreciate the help.” There was an awkward silence for a few seconds, and then I cleared my throat to cut in to the conversation.

“We’re gathering everyone out front in fifteen,” I told him. “Sadly, our little vacation here has to end soon.”

“Ah, alright. I’ll be right out there. And I’ll grab the guys from the other house too.”

“Thanks,” I told him. The moment he turned to leave, I gave Rori a shocked look, which she just grinned and shook her head at. Once Devin was gone, I said, “Am I high, or was that the most productive conversation you’ve ever had with him?”

“It was definitely a step in a positive direction,” she mused. “Not one that I expected.”

“Did Santos talk to him?”

“I don’t think so. Even if he did, I get the sense that he doesn’t really listen to Santos.” Rori shrugged and stepped away from me, her hand running down my arm and clasping my hand until the last possible moment. “I’m gonna freshen up. See you in fifteen?”

“You got it, creep.” I kissed her fingers before releasing them, then went to give everyone the message while she headed up the stairs.

\* \* \*

“THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING OUT,” Rori said from where she stood in Val’s truck bed. It was the only elevated spot we had, where everyone could see her. Behind and above her, Astarte was perched on the apex of the roof on the detached garage.

I stood on the ground next to the rear tire, while Santos took up the same spot across from me with Tezca sitting in front of him. The jaguar observed the onlookers with cool, calculated yellow eyes.

Carter, LJ, and Val were seated on the truck’s bumper, arms crossed and looking out at the gathered crowd like a trio of bodyguards. With Santos, Tezca, and me, I guess that made six of us.

“Sadly,” Rori continued, eyes scanning the crowd, “we can’t stay at these two houses forever.”

She paused and smiled at the playful chorus of disappointed groans and shouts of, “Boo, this concert sucks!” The Hunter earned another smack from his lady for that one.

“I know,” Rori laughed. “But seriously, we’re excited to help you all start your new lives. My people and I can take you to your choice of territories, either Four Corners or Sevier, where the professionals there can set you up with housing, jobs, education, or they’ll help to locate your family members.”

Rori paused and a long silence followed, with everyone staring up blankly at her. She seemed flustered for a moment before resuming her speech.

“Of course, you don’t have to take any of these options if you don’t want to. Just let our riders know where you’d like to go from here, and they’ll take you the closest they can where it’s safe.”

Another long silence stretched on, everyone’s eyes on Rori expectantly. She frowned and glanced down at me. I shrugged in response.

“Um, does anyone have any questions?” Rori called out.

“Yeah,” one ex-gladiator answered immediately. “What about the people who run the resort? You’re going after them,

right?”

Rori squinted at the guy. “Well, yes.”

The fighter crossed his arms and looked around at the others surrounding him. “What if we want to come along?” There was a low murmur of agreement and nodding heads.

“Oh no.” Rori lifted her hands as if trying to diffuse the situation. “Please, you don’t have to do that. You have your whole lives ahead of you and don’t owe us anything. I speak for all of us when I say it was an honor to help you get your lives back.”

“You misunderstand me, ma’am,” the fighter said. “We don’t feel as though we owe you a debt. We want to spill the blood of the deranged cunts who did this to us, and our brothers, until none of them are left.” He flinched. “No offense.”

Rori was too stunned to be offended, shaking her head and planting her feet wide on the truck bed. “You don’t have to shed blood anymore, though. You can return to your families, or start new families. Ending this cult will take months, if not longer, and is incredibly dangerous—”

“*We* are just as dangerous,” the fighter snarled, punching one fist against his chest. “They made us this way. Most of us don’t have much in the way of family to return to, but we all have one thing in common. Every man here is very good at killing. Why not use our skill against those who forced it upon us?”

“We’re also not afraid to die,” the Hunter chimed in. “Your riders certainly have families that would miss them, a lot to lose. We will take risks in ways that they won’t.”

“No,” Rori snapped. “You are *people*. You’re not just expendable bodies anymore. You all could matter to someone else.”

“You said it was our choice,” argued the first fighter. “This is what I choose to do.”

“Fighting at your command, how could we lose?” added the Saint, his smile cunning as he looked up at Rori. “We all



saw you liberate us in the pit, your divine bird flying above your head.” He gestured to Astarte, sitting on a nearby tree branch. “And the Butcher’s jaguar, who led their guns away from us and allowed us to be saved. These gods of vengeance wanted us to find you, Aurora. It had to be for this reason.”

The agreement and support was getting louder among the ex-gladiators, the guys nodding, grinning, and moving in place. They were itching for a fight. Rori kept shaking her head, but she was clearly losing this battle.

“Can I just address the elephant in the room, as it were?” The question came from Carter, who stood from the truck’s bumper and turned to face Rori. “You know what I’m gonna say, Ror,” he warned. “We talked about this.”

“Carter, don’t,” she growled through her teeth.

I exchanged a confused look with Santos across the truck bed. How did the two guys sleeping with Rori not have a clue what this was about?

“Why not?” her cousin challenged, spreading his arms out to the side. “These guys can fight, they’re learning to ride, they’re loyal to you and will follow you anywhere.” He dropped his arms. “Why not form your own MC with these men as your riders,” he grinned smugly, “and you as their president?”

The next look Santos and I shared was one of, *Oh sweet holy fuck, how did we not see that coming?*

“Yeah!” The Hunter pumped his fist, and his shout was followed by a wave of support.

“Fuck yeah, let’s do that!”

“We follow the light! Aurora for president!”

“I look good in leather, sign me up!”

“No!” Rori waved her arms in an effort to calm the crowd. “It’s not happening! I don’t know how to be a fucking MC president!”

“Yeah, you do.”

Rori's gaze snapped down to me, and the next thing I knew, I was climbing up into the truck bed to stand beside to her. Because that was where I would always stand, especially when she couldn't see the greatness within herself.

"You do know how," I repeated, raising my voice so everyone could hear. The crowd had now gone silent, but as far as I was concerned, it was just me and her. "You were born to lead an MC, Aurora Wilder. You sat on a motorcycle before you were crawling."

"Torr..." She was shaking her head and her voice had that low pissed-off tone, but I would not be deterred.

"You were raised by four of the greatest men and riders this world has ever seen," I went on. "Since the day you were born, you have been learning how to lead. Not just how to fight and be ruthless but how to be kind and show compassion when it's needed. You know how vital it is to lean on your family and to offer a shoulder when someone else needs that support. Don't you see, Rori?" I held her gaze. "No one is a better fit to lead a club than you."

She didn't respond, only blinked a few times. A breeze rustled some leaves, but it was dead silent beyond that.

"How does this work?" the Hunter piped up. "How do we make her president?"

I looked at Carter, who cleared his throat. "Well, for the inception of a brand new club, presidents are usually nominated. If there is more than one person nominated, members can vote if they want to be civil. The old ways used to have contests of some sort. The would-be presidents would fight hand-to-hand, race each other on a dangerous stretch of road, that kind of thing."

"I nominate Rori!" the Hunter yelled.

I nodded at him. "I'll second that."

"Third," Santos called out.

"Any other nominations?" Carter scanned the dozens of faces, barely hiding a smile. When nobody answered, he

asked, “All in favor of Aurora, the light, ‘Rori’ Wilder as your president?”

Every single hand shot up. Well, every one except Devin, who had remained off to the side, curiously apart from the other fighters. His arms were folded, his expression blankly observant. It was anyone’s guess what was going through that guy’s head, but he didn’t seem thrilled at what was happening.

“Congratulations, Prez.” Carter reached over the tailgate to pat Rori’s leg, who was still apparently too dumbfounded to speak. “Normally, a president chooses who goes into their cabinet positions. Vice president, treasurer, road captain, all that. But it seems she needs reality to sink in first.”

Chuckles rose up from the onlookers, or rather, club members, and there was a new sense of excitement buzzing in the air. I was starting to think I should bring Rori inside, give her some private time to process, maybe a stiff drink, when her hand shot out to clasp my forearm.

“Torr.” She blinked rapidly and chewed her lip, like it was just now all sinking in.

“You okay?” I spoke next to her ear.

Rori’s hand slid down my arm to clasp my hand. She pulled in a shaky breath and nodded her head.

“I’ll, um, decide on the others soon,” she said, voice raising to reach everyone. “But this man, Torrance Knight.” She looked directly into my eyes as she said, “He’s my vice president.”



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RORI



I had a couple phone calls to make and decided I might as well get the toughest one out of the way first.

It was unbelievably awkward explaining to my aunt Kyrie that I needed the two safe houses for a little while longer because, well, I was now president of a brand new MC and we didn't have a clubhouse yet.

She, on the other hand, couldn't stop laughing.

"Oh, they really ambushed you with it?" I could just imagine her wiping tears from her eyes. "That's incredible. Wait until I tell your uncles."

"Val probably already has," I muttered. My cousin was yacking on the phone earlier, and I swore I heard T-Bone's booming cackle through the little speaker.

"Have you told your parents?"

I rubbed my eyes. "Not yet. They're my next call."

"Well, best of luck, darling. Don't put those fathers of yours in too early of a grave."

"Wait, before you go."

"Yes?"

I blew out a breath and wished again that I had something to drink. It turned out the fighters had gone through what little alcohol we had on the first day. And now I had the privilege of babysitting them full-time. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"What should I tell Val if she wants to stay with me?"

“If you want her in your club, tell her yes, of course.”

“Aunt Kyrie,” I groaned. “She’s a kid. She’s only twenty-one.”

“And you’re twenty-three. Your point is?”

“She’s your only daughter, and we’re riding into the heart of a cult. If she was my little sister, I’d be shipping her back home right now.”

“Let me tell you a story, my dear niece.” I heard a creaking and shuffling noise, like my aunt was crossing her legs and assuming her tall, regal posture. “You know how your uncles and I first met?”

I had heard this story dozens of times. “They were your bodyguards.”

“That was the second time. The first time, I had been kidnapped and they rescued me.”

Now *that* was news to me. “Holy shit.”

“Exactly right. I walked right into a kidnapping plot because my father kept me so sheltered that I didn’t know how to look out for danger at nineteen-fucking-years old.”

“Whoa.” All I had known about Kyrie’s father was that he’d been the first governor of Four Corners.

“I decided a long time ago that I wouldn’t shield my children from the world to that degree. I would protect them, of course. But Val is grown now, and while of course I worry for her, I’m confident in what her fathers and I taught her. And you know what else?”

“Huh?”

“I know she’s safe with you, Rori.”

“Fuck.” I rubbed my eyes again. “All of you, I swear to God. You all think I’m some badass savior when I’m not.”

“Don’t believe the lies you tell yourself.” I heard the smile in my aunt’s voice. “You are capable of far more than what you believe.”

“I just don’t want to let anybody down.” I chewed the nail at the edge of my thumb. “I don’t want to fail anyone.”

“It’s not easy being a leader. And let me tell you, men, and bikers especially, are some hard headed sons of bitches. You’re going to get a lot of pushback for every decision you make, especially because you’re a woman.”

“Great,” I deadpanned.

“But remember you’re not alone, Rori. That’s what a club is, a family and a support system. The right people will stand by your good decisions *and* tell you when you’re legitimately fucking up.”

At least I could be certain of that. Torr was just as likely to stand by me as he was to put me in my place.

“You can do this, sweetheart,” my aunt said softly. “You *are* the right person for this. Trust your instincts. And if you’re still not sure, trust your VP.”

I sighed out a long, resigned breath. “Okay. Thanks, Aunt Kyrie. I love you.”

“Love you too. Oh, and bring back my daughter alive or I’ll kill you.”

We shared a laugh at that before hanging up, and I realized I felt a little lighter. Like maybe my newfound presidency wasn’t a totally unwanted burden. As my finger hovered over my fathers’ phone numbers, I started to think maybe *this* call would actually be the hard one.

I hit Shadow’s number and brought the phone to my ear, wishing once again for a shot of booze.

He answered on the second ring. “Rori!”

“Hey, Dad. How’s—”

“Are you okay? Do you need anything? The guys and I can ride out at a moment’s notice.”

“Oh God, Shadow, leave her alone,” said a woman’s voice in the background before yelling, “Hey, Roriiii!”

“Hey, Aunt Noelle! What are you doing with my old man?”

“I’m touching up her sleeves.” The buzzing of a tattoo machine came through the phone. “So you’re good?” Shadow pressed. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. Hey, Aunt Noelle!” I said to Reaper’s sister, who was also Carter’s mother. “Your son’s an asshole, by the way.”

“Aw, what’d he do this time?”

“Made me president of a brand-spankin-new MC.”

The line fell dead silent.

“He did *what*?” My father broke the silence first.

“Surprise,” I said in a lame singsong voice. “Guess I’m following in your footsteps after all, Dadow.”

There was a rustling on the phone, and then I heard Shadow’s muffled voice speaking to Noelle. “...later?... moment to talk with my daughter.” Another few seconds of rustling and muffled voices followed before Shadow came back on the phone. “What the hell happened, Rori? Your mother’s been trying to call you back, by the way.”

Yeah, I’d dodged a couple of her calls. Asking for her advice on my guy problems had kind of taken a backseat to my newfound leadership position, and I didn’t feel ready to have that conversation with her yet. How funny that I found it easier to talk to my mom about threesomes than a new job.

“I texted her and told her I was fine! Just busy.”

“Clearly,” Shadow said snidely. “So a mission with just you and Torr turns into you becoming president of a club, huh?”

“He’s my VP, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Uh huh. Who else do you got?”

“LJ. He’s going to be my Sergeant-at-Arms, most likely.” I hesitated before saying the next name. “Val, maybe. If she wants to stick around.”



“Are you kidding? That girl is *your* shadow.”

I smiled at the play on his name. “Also some guys we rescued. I’m still getting to know them, but they want to ride with me.” I swallowed hard. “Fight with me.”

My father sighed. “Do I even want to know who or what you’re fighting?”

It struck me then where I’d heard Sisters of Bathory before, and my heartbeat felt like getting kicked in the chest. *He’d* told me to stay away from them before I left.

A memory surfaced from when I was around five years old. Shadow was holding me, his forearm around my middle. I saw all the lines in his skin, hundreds of scars criss crossing over each other. I knew what they were. Old owies, I had called them. I understood the concept of scars being leftover remnants of being hurt. And he was covered in them from head to toe, even on his face.

Fuck.

Could my father have been an escaped gladiator? A sex slave like Santos?

“Rori? You still there?”

I drew in a pained breath, trying to calm my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. “I’m good, Dad. And no, you don’t have to worry.”

“Wasn’t what I asked,” he teased.

“No, you don’t want to know. But trust me, I got it.” My hand started to ache with how hard I gripped the phone. “They’re terrible people, but I’m gonna take care of every last one of them, Dadow. I promise.”

“Do you need help?”

“I’ll let you know if I do.” I tilted the phone away so he wouldn’t hear my nose sniffle as I wiped hot, furious tears. “I love you so much, Dad. You know that, right?”

A long silence passed before he spoke. “Rori, are you sure you don’t want us to come out?”

“No. No, I’m good.”

“Because that sounds like the kind of *I love you* someone says right before a big fucking battle.”

I forced out a laugh. “I mean, it kind of is. But I have every intention of coming home. Daren would kill me all over again if I missed his wedding.”

“True,” he chuckled. “I love you too, Ror. And you know what? I’m always gonna be worried, but I’m fucking proud of you.”

This time, I let him hear my snuffle. “Thanks, Dad.”

“My oldest daughter, an MC president,” he said. “Reaper’s gonna be so happy.”

“He’ll have a heart attack, you mean.”

“Eh. Your mom will bring him back.”

We laughed together, and then he asked, “So, does your club have a name?”

“Yeah. That’s actually why I called you. We need a logo designed for our tattoos and patches.”

Shadow barked out a laugh. “Called to solicit my services, did you? I should charge you extra.”

“Send the bill to my treasurer.” I grinned. “As soon as I decide on one.”

“I’ll get right on that.” I heard rustling like he was shuffling through papers in search of a pen. “Alright, tell me what I’m working with, Miss President.”

I grinned wider, the stampeding of my heart turning into excitement. “We’re the Vengeful Gods MC.”

\* \* \*

I GOT off the phone with Shadow and left my room to find Val hovering on the stair landing. My cousin was pacing a hole in the floor, looking apprehensive.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked her.

She stopped and turned to face me with the same pouty lips and large blue eyes as her mother, my aunt Kyrie. Rather than her mother’s blond hair though, she had thick black hair in a long fishtail braid coming over the front of her shoulder.

“Carter wanted me to tell you that he and the Valkyrie riders are leaving soon. So are Gwen and Chasing Death.” Her gaze went to the floor. “Since you have your own club now.”

“Right. Guess I oughta say goodbye then.”

“They’re taking my truck and leaving some loaner bikes for y’all. Until your club gets a hold of their own rides.”

I cocked my head at her. “So where does that leave you?”

Val shrugged and played with her braid. “I dunno. Where do you want me?”

I gave a little punch to her shoulder. “You’re a grown-ass woman. You decide.”

She blinked at me, surprised. “You’re letting me choose?”

“I’m your cousin, not your mom.”

Val pulled in a breath and lifted her chin. “I want to be your road captain.”

I grinned, grabbed the end of her braid, and ignored her yelp as I pulled her into a hug. “I was hoping you’d say that, bitch.”

“Ow! Well I take it back if you’re gonna pull my hair, asshole.”

“That’s President Asshole to you.” I squeezed her tighter and said into her ear, “Thank you. I need another woman to keep me sane here.”

“And I need to be on the road. At your side.” She pulled away, her hands on my elbows and her grin ecstatic. “Look at us. A couple of chicks following in our fathers’ tire tracks.”

“Those poor guys will need therapy.” I laughed. “Come on, let’s say our goodbyes.”

The Valkyrie Network and Chasing Death MC were already packed up and out in the cul-de-sac, trucks and bikes idling as they prepared to head out.

I headed over to Carter first and allowed him to hug me before saying quietly, “I don’t know whether to be pissed off or grateful to you.”

He chuckled and planted a brotherly kiss on my cheek. “Oftentimes, we see the potential in someone before they see it themselves.”

Both of our faces were serious by the time we pulled away. “I’ll look out for LJ,” I told him. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

“The whole club will,” he said. “You all gotta look out for each other.”

“Carter,” I breathed. “I barely know most of these people.”

“You’ll get to know them,” he said calmly. “And in time, you’ll know who to cut, and you’ll do it with confidence, no hesitation, and with the support of your inner circle.”

“Right,” I scoffed. “No pressure.”

“You’ve never been one to be too nice, Rori.” Carter smirked. “Just another reason why you’ll be a good president.”

“You’ve always been great at compliments,” I sneered. “Now get out of here and ride safe, jackass.”

“Call me if you need backup,” he said before mounting his bike.

When I walked over to where Chasing Death was lining up, Gwen and Lupa hopped out of a black SUV to greet me.

“What, no motorcycle for you?” I spread my arms out.

“Nah, not my thing.” Gwen accepted my embrace. “Just runs in the family.”

“Thank you again,” I whispered against her shoulder. “I just can’t thank you enough.”

“Sure you can,” she laughed. “I kind of started this whole mess for you.”

“And it’s been a hell of a ride already.”

We released each other, and Gwen looked at me for several seconds without saying anything. “May the gods watch over and provide guidance for you, Aurora.”

“To you as well, Gwen. May they guard you on your journey and keep you safe.”

She smiled. “I have a feeling we’ll be seeing each other again.”

“I’m sure we will. When this is over, my family will undoubtedly throw a party at our home in Four Corners. You should come.”

Gwen grinned and shimmied her shoulders. “I’ve heard stories of the Steel Demons parties.”

“There is nothing like experiencing them for yourself,” I promised her. “Take care until then.”

*I will be seeing you soon, Aurora Wilder.* Lupa gave a little yip and a wag of her tail before following Gwen into the car.

I had barely a second to think about that statement before Torr came up to stand beside me. Together, we watched the squad of trucks, SUVs, and motorcycles take off down the road until they were specks on the horizon.

“We should hold our first church meeting soon,” Torr said. “Get all the rules laid out, figure out what’s our next move.”

“Sounds good, VP.” I turned toward the houses, giving him a smack on the ass before I started walking. “Get everyone together, and let’s go to church.”



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DEVIN



**S**o, was I a gangbanger now? Some kind of motorcycle-riding dude in a leather vest?

Everyone seemed stoked at this spontaneous club formation with Rori at the top, but not me. This shit was so far out of my wheelhouse. I wanted to hop in a car and ride away with the others. Getting dropped off somewhere to start a new life all over sounded perfectly great to me.

But there was no way I was leaving Santos behind, and he was becoming permanently attached to Rori. Who, I'd begun to grudgingly accept, wasn't all that bad.

While I was still annoyed that I needed her permission to have my kill in the first place, she did keep her word. She did seem to care about Santos and Torr equally, even though the fact that she was juggling both of them still weirded me out.

And she did appear to accept the mantle of MC president with a healthy dose of reluctance. She looked tense instead of happy, nor drunk on power, like I would have expected. This position wasn't a goal of hers but an obligation, and she was trying to shoulder the weight of the responsibility as best she could.

I still wasn't her number one fan, but she had more of my respect as time went on.

"Devin, you coming?" Santos clapped my shoulder as he slid past me, heading for the open door.

They were having church, or whatever it was called, in the house with the largest living room. From what I gathered, it

was essentially a meeting. Seemed weird to call it church, but again, it wasn't my scene.

"I dunno," I said. "I'm not sure this club thing is really for me."

"Come anyway," called Rori, who stood against the door to hold it open for everyone filing in. "I'm not asking everyone for pledged membership yet, this is still new to a lot of us. But we're going to be talking about hitting the next compound, so you might want to sit in."

Well, I wouldn't say no to killing more of those who enslaved us. Trying not to drag my feet, I followed Santos inside. Rori gave me a small smile and a nod as I passed her. I returned the nod but didn't smile.

She closed the door once everyone was inside, and Torr went to stand in front of it, ever the dutiful guard.

"Welcome to our first church session everyone," Rori greeted, standing at one end of the room. "Just so you all know, this is pretty casual for how it usually goes. Normally, it's an enclosed room. The door is locked so no one can leave early or enter late. Attendance is mandatory for all patched-in members. Nothing that is discussed in church can be shared with prospective members or those outside the club." She paused, scanning everyone's faces with shrewd eyes. "It'll be a while until we have proper protocols in place, and if you decide this isn't for you, that's fine. What I'm trying to get across is that church is sacred. Am I understood?"

"Yes, president," Torr said, which was echoed softly by others in the room.

"Good. Church is where we'll discuss our most pressing business matters. Right now, that is eliminating the Sisterhood of Bathory cult. LJ?"

She nodded at a younger guy who was her cousin, if I remembered correctly. He came forward, spreading out a map on the coffee table in the middle of the room.

"This is the location that the prisoner gave you, president." He touched an index finger to the map. "And here is where we



are.” He dragged his finger down in a southwest direction. “It’d be about a two-day ride. This area here is a neutral zone. It’d be our safest bet for camping overnight. If the information is correct, the compound is in a valley with a few different lookout spots we can scout from.” He marked three different areas on the map.

“What’s our worst-case scenario?” Rori asked him.

Her cousin shrugged. “That the resort manager lied and there’s nothing there. But Carter and I have ridden the general area before. I know it well enough. Nothing will sneak up on us on our way there.”

Rori looked up and scanned the faces in the room. “Anyone have any issues with this plan?”

No one spoke up, so I raised my hand.

“Yes, Devin?”

“What exactly is our goal here? Specifically.”

“Find out who the key players are, target them, and take them out. We should be able to gather a good amount of intel from scouting.”

“How long do you intend to scout for?”

“As long as we need to. Up to a week if that’s what it takes.” Rori produced a folded piece of paper from her pocket, opened it, and laid it on top of the map. “This is what I got from Nella as far as guards, rotation schedules, and how many people there are in total. We can use it as a benchmark, but I don’t expect all of these numbers to be current.”

I leaned over the table, inspecting the numbers scribbled on the yellow legal sheet. “A population of fifty total? That’s almost twice as much as the staff and fighters combined at Mystic Canyon.”

“And it could end up being more or less.” Rori faced me, crossing her arms. Her posture wasn’t completely confrontational, but it wasn’t exactly friendly either. “We don’t have much information to go off of right now, which is why I

want us to spy on them for as long as we possibly can. The more knowledge we gather, the better.”

I couldn't argue with that logic. It seemed like a sound plan, for what little we knew.

“Do we intend to take any prisoners?” Torr asked from his post by the door.

Rori chewed on that for a moment. “Not at this time. That could change though. For all we know, this could be one of a dozen compounds or more. We should reassess later when we find out more. But my hope is that we hit their operation hard where it hurts. If we ruin them completely, well, that would be fantastic too.”

“That's a lot of ifs,” I mused. “It's a pity you couldn't get any more useful information out of the prisoner.”

Rori's head snapped back in my direction. Her eyes were wide, eyebrows up to her hairline for a split second, before a cold, detached mask fell over her features. “That's a hell of a remark, coming from you.”

There were lots more eyes on me now, including Santos' and Torr's. I felt them burning into my skin.

Rori's gaze jerked away to address the room again. “Any other questions?” When none came, she said, “Good. We leave in three days. I suggest you all practice riding and shooting. Torr, LJ, Val, and I will be available for instruction or any questions. Church is adjourned.”

Torr moved off the door and opened it for everyone to file out. I had barely turned away to leave when Rori said, “Devin, will you please stay a minute?”

I wanted to keep going, to throw a, “No, thanks, I'm good,” over my shoulder, even though it would dig a deeper hole than I was already in. And the truth of it was, I didn't know *why* I wanted to keep pushing Rori's buttons. The moment we fell into a place of mutually-respected acquaintances, I felt an impulse to ruin that. It just didn't feel right.

Fighting with her felt right.

“Want me to stay?” her boy-toy asked. Not Santos, her other one.

“No, it’s fine. This won’t take long.”

The last few stragglers left the room, and when the door closed, Rori wasted no time going off. “What the fuck was that?”

“What was what?”

“*Don’t* fuck with me, Devin. For everything you are, I know you’re not an idiot. I’m asking you a question. I expect a straight answer.”

“You need to make your question more specific.”

Rori sighed, brought a hand to her forehead, and muttered something like, “Oh my fucking God.” When she looked up again, her tone was seething. “Why. Are you trying to undermine me. In the first fucking meeting of my club?”

“I wasn’t,” I said with a shrug. “I was just making an observation, that’s all.”

“Hell of an observation from the guy who wanted to kill Nella before I could get any information at all!” She was shouting now and pacing the room aggressively. “You have no fucking right to have an opinion on the amount or quality of information I got just because you’re bitter that I made you wait to get it in the first place.”

“Okay,” I said passively, strangely captivated by her aggressive body language, the anger roughening her voice.

Rori threw her hands up and tilted her head to the ceiling. “Why are you still here, Devin? No one’s holding a gun to your head. You don’t like me, don’t want to ride in my club, fine! Just fucking leave then.”

“I’m not leaving Santos behind.” It made perfect sense in my head up until this very moment. Now it sounded a bit silly.

Rori let out a dry scoff. “Santos doesn’t need you anymore.”

“We’ve had each other’s backs for years, through all kinds of trials. This is just one more.” And because I couldn’t stop myself, I added, “Besides, I don’t trust you with him.”

Rori scoffed again, rolling her eyes. “What are you, his mother? He’s a grown-ass man, and believe it or not, I’m not manipulating him into anything. If he doesn’t want to be with me, he also doesn’t have to stay.” She cocked her head, making a blond wave fall across one eye. “I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted that you think I’m some siren with a magical charm that brings all these men under my control.” She straightened, regarding me coolly. “Sorry to disappoint, Devin. I’m just a person.”

“I don’t think there’s anything magical about you.” Shit, why did I sound so damn defensive?

“I don’t care what you think of me, quite frankly. I have more important things to worry about.” She walked directly up to me, her gaze and expression unwavering. I had a few inches of height on her, though she was still tall for a woman. Somehow, though, she held the same space and gravity as a seven-foot tall gladiator.

“Hate and antagonize me all you want, I don’t care. See what it does to your friendship with Santos. If that breaks down, you’ll have only yourself to blame. But what I’m not going to tolerate is you trying to make me look incompetent in front of my club. Am I clear, Devin?”

“Crystal,” I said.

She jerked her chin toward the door. “You’re dismissed.” With that, she turned and walked quickly through the house. I heard a back or side door open, then slam shut. Then it was just the silence of an empty house.

Damn. I had pissed her off so much, she didn’t even want to walk through the same door as me.

I went out through the front and decided to do a perimeter walk to clear my head. That...what I’d done in that meeting and just moments ago, was not like me. I had lived this long as a gladiator by *not* stirring shit up, *not* drawing attention to

myself. I knew how to keep my trap shut and not poke bears. Okay, I messed with other fighters sometimes, but that was to show that I wasn't timid. We all had to make power plays sometimes. I could hold my own in a fight and was not to be fucked with.

And neither was Rori, evidently.

She was tough for a woman. Crass, hot-tempered, and more foul-mouthed than a lot of men I'd known. For some reason, I found this hard to reconcile with her softer side—the way she smiled at Santos, how protective she was of the maid, Paige, and the rare moments when she actually spoke softly. It was so strange to me, paradoxical even. How could she be both of those people at the same time?

On a logical level, I knew it was possible. Santos was a ruthless fighter, but he also had the warmth and non-violent instincts of a teddy bear. I, too, had just as much capacity to kill as I did to care. People could be opposing things at the same time. I knew this.

So why did Rori's qualities confound me so much?

She claimed to not have any magic, and yet that woman had embedded herself firmly under my skin.

It was so fucking annoying.



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RORI



“They’re not ready,” Torr muttered under his breath.

“How does that saying go?” I walked up behind Paige, gently lifting and straightening her arms while she aimed her gun at a target, then stepped back beside Torr. “What they lack in experience, they make up for in enthusiasm.”

He groaned. “That literally only applies to sex. Not battle.”

Paige squeezed off a few rounds. She was still jumpy from the noise of the shots, which affected her aim, but she was getting better.

“Good job, babe.” I squeezed her shoulder as she set the gun down to reload, then continued my walk with my VP.

My first love.

My brother’s best friend.

My drinking, smoking, riding buddy.

My man, who knew me better than anyone else.

It was crazy to think of all the forms our relationship had taken over the years. I never would have believed second-in-command would be added to the list. And yet, it was a perfect fit.

“We don’t want to go in unprepared,” Torr was saying. “And we can’t exactly have them practice while we’re scouting.”

“We’ll give guns to the most proficient shooters,” I decided. “Everyone will play to their strengths. Give Paige a pair of binoculars, and she can be the head scout. She’s got eagle eyes and can recall all kinds of details. She’ll be the best at noticing patterns of movement. Put her with a skilled shooter so she’ll be adequately covered.”

“Roger that, president.” It was so weird to hear him call me that.

“Even if they don’t have guns, everyone should be armed for self-defense. Knives, brass knuckles, whatever they feel most comfortable with.”

Torr stopped in his tracks and turned to face me. “You’re really sure about riding out in three days?”

I peered up at him. “You don’t think we should?”

“I think they need more training, Ror. Riding and shooting are like second nature to you and me because we’ve done it our whole lives. Only LJ and Val are at a level similar to us. Everyone else?” He swung an arm at the row of people target practicing. “They need months, if not years.”

My first reaction was to push back, to get defensive. If I wasn’t president and he was shooting down any other idea of mine, I’d let him have it. But things were different now, and he was my VP for a reason. Not only that, he was *mine*. My partner. I had a responsibility to him and the whole club to at least consider his advice. And if there was one thing I knew about Torr, it was that he would never bullshit me.

“I hear you. I really do.” Continuing on my walk, I looked over to where LJ was talking to a couple of fighters and pointing out different parts on a motorcycle. “But we don’t have that kind of time, Torr. We’ve got to hit the Sisterhood while it’s still scrambling. We can’t let them regroup and get stronger. Plus,” I spun on the toe of my boot, facing Torr as I walked backwards, “I think you’re underestimating these people.”

“Am I?” He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets.



“They’ve been in survival mode for years. They’ve had to be crafty and think on their feet, make split-second decisions between life and death. They’re nothing if not adaptable.” I stopped short, and Torr nearly ran into me. “Their instincts are good, Torr. And on top of that, they’ve got major skin in this game. They don’t just want to bring this cult down, they *need* to see it happen. For their own closure and peace of mind.”

“Ror, I get all that.” Torr rubbed his jaw. “I’m not questioning their passion, or their survival instincts. I’m just worried about their lack of experience.”

“Well, they’re about to get some.”

“This is one hell of a first ride, Ror. I’m not even sure your dads would’ve been up for this at our ages.”

I glared at him. “They weren’t much older than us when they saved the whole fucking Southwest.”

Torr blew out a breath, scanning the flurry of activity in our surroundings again. “I’d just feel a lot more comfortable going on smaller rides with these guys first.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I retorted. “You’d find something else to worry about. We have to act, Torr, and not overthink things.”

“Says the queen of overthinking,” he teased.

“Trust me. I’m still doing plenty of that.” I raked my fingers back through my hair until my palm landed on my nape. “But I really think we can pull this off.”

He nodded, resigned. “If that’s what you feel, I trust you.”

We kept walking, observing how everyone was doing with their training, giving occasional pointers and answering the questions of anyone who came up to us. In the quiet moments, my brain was still a flurry of activity.

Carter had wanted to take more time too. Preparation. Planning. He and Torr were of alike mind in that. I fought my cousin tooth and nail on how long we took to attack the resort. He still didn’t feel fully prepared when we finally did leave,

but if we had been a day late—fuck, even an hour—either Torr or Santos, if not both, would be dead right now.

Preparation was important, sure. I wasn't discounting that. But there was something to be said for diving in headfirst and letting your instincts guide you. Ideally, we would have a balance of both. But time was a luxury we didn't have.

We couldn't prepare for shit we couldn't even see. Scouting would be our preparation. And gods willing, our instincts would lead us on the rest.

I looked up to where Astarte sat on the roof of the detached garage, always watching. "I'm doing it," I said quietly. "Trusting my gut. Following my instincts. Any commentary you'd like to offer up?"

Nothing but silence, as usual.

\* \* \*

THREE DAYS LATER, the first leg of our ride was delightfully uneventful. The ex-gladiators, now my Vengeful Gods soldiers, took to the motorcycles beautifully, for the most part. Due to the shortage of bikes on hand, they doubled-up without any complaints or squabbles. We took frequent breaks to check in with everyone, and everyone took turns driving.

It was the maiden voyage for us as a single unit, and it went off without a hitch. The thing about first times, though, was that they could hurt like a bitch sometimes.

As the first day came to a close and we set up camp for the night, LJ and Val teased the others relentlessly about their slow, bow-legged walking around, the grimaces on their faces, and the complaints of soreness.

"I can't feel my ass," one fighter muttered as he arranged stones in a circle for our fire.

"I refuse to believe this is the first time *that's* happened!" Val cackled.

LJ shouted, “Ohhhh shit!” Hooting and hollering, my idiot cousins were each other’s hype-men. “Hey, Fist!” he shouted at another guy. “Why you walkin’ around like fuckin’ crab?”

“Just giving room for my dick to swing, Sergeant,” the man replied. And then the ex-gladiators were cheering and hyping each other up.

“They’re getting along,” Torr observed as he shook out a blanket to lay on the ground.

“They are,” I agreed. “Once we get the booze out for these rowdy fools, you’d never know they’ve not been part of a club before this.”

“Who you calling rowdy fools?” LJ demanded.

“You, dumbass!” I laughed.

“Well, that makes you the queen of rowdy fools,” Val pointed out.

“Should’ve made that the club name,” Santos said. He was standing nearby, pulling a knee up toward his chest and doing some other leg stretches against a boulder.

I wandered over to him slowly, watching in fascination as everyone continued to rib each other like longtime friends, working all the while.

“How you feeling?”

Santos released his knee to stand normally. “I’m alright. Nothing I can’t handle.” He tilted his head with a soft smile, angling his body toward me. “Can I give you a kiss?”

I scoffed. “You never need to ask me that.”

He lowered his head, his lips making brief, sensual contact with mine. “Just not sure how it all works yet,” he admitted. “If Torr outranks me or whatever, or if certain things should not be done in front of everyone.”

“Well, I probably wouldn’t want to fuck in plain view of everyone.” I laughed. “But listen. You and Torr are equals to me. He’s my right hand regarding club matters, but when it comes to us, there’s no rank. You’re both equally mine.”

Before he could respond, my arms went around his shoulders and I rose up on tiptoes to kiss him deeply, surging my tongue inside his mouth. And damn, how lucky was I? It was always a pain finding a guy taller than me, and now I had two of them.

At the sound of wolf whistles and obscene suggestions from the rowdy fools that made up our peanut gallery, Santos groaned and palmed one side of my ass in his large hand. I completely forgot about everyone watching us, even as we parted for a breath.

“You’re sleeping with me and Torr tonight,” I told him.

He grinned, forehead rolling against mine. “As long as you’re in the middle.”

“Fine. But if you two wake up spooning, maybe that’s something you guys should explore.”

“Highly unlikely to happen.” He laughed and then looked at me quizzically. “You’d be okay with that, though? If two of your guys were into each other too?”

“Hell yes I would. I can only handle so much dick at one time.” I crossed my arms, cocking my hip out as I thought about it. “I mean, there’d be rules, of course. Whatever happens, I’d prefer my relationships to be closed. Committed. Not just sleeping around with whoever.”

“Gotcha. So Torr and I can’t see other women.” Santos raised his palms at my glare. “Or men. Not saying I want to, just making sure I’m clear.”

“Women, no,” I said. “Men?” I tilted my head from side to side. “Depends on if I like them too.”

“So you’re just greedy,” he teased.

“Yeah, and?”

He laughed again, the beautiful sound ringing out across our camp. Devin lifted his head and looked at us. With the distance and setting sun, it was hard to tell if he was glaring or just seeing what the noise was about. In the next moment, he

was back to minding his business, sharpening his knives next to the campfire that had just started crackling.

I let Santos return to stretching while I continued to watch Devin for some reason I couldn't figure out. The tall fighter's hair was loose, hanging down one side of his head like a glossy, black waterfall. It looked soft. So did his beard. His fingers were long, his movements methodical as he honed his weapons.

The guy made me curious, but only because he was so damn confusing. Just when I thought we were starting to get along, he had to go off and be an ass. I didn't buy for a second that he was staying here to watch Santos' back. Santos was fine. He was happy. I didn't wish for the two friends to be separated, but if Devin was so miserable and the MC life didn't fit him, he could just go somewhere relatively close. Santos could visit him at any time.

The club still needed a permanent home, but that would come later. Sevier and Four Corners were both great places to live, and I figured we could settle somewhere in the middle. We'd be near civilization, and I could visit the many branches of my family. MCs truly lived on the road. We'd always be within visiting distance of someone. Devin didn't need to be breathing down Santos' neck all the time. So what the hell?

He got his revenge kill. He got a room to sleep in, a roof, and a fridge full of food. He had choices now, the option to go or stay. Was he just having trouble adjusting to a life that was no longer dictated by someone else?

All of the ex-gladiators needed therapy, I decided. As soon as we finished this mission, I'd see what kind of contacts my mom had in the mental health field. My dads went to individual therapy on and off again. They could probably recommend someone. It would also help, I imagined, if these fighters knew my tough-as-nails, ruthless MC fathers had sat down and talked to people about their trauma. Because God knew it would take some convincing for these guys to accept that you could solve issues with words instead of weapons. And doing that didn't make you weak.

Hell, sometimes I even forgot it was an option.



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RORI



“Ten more minutes,” I mumbled, snuggling deeper into Santos’ chest. “S’too early.”

Torr’s body was warm against my back, but his lips were cold as they touched the shell of my ear. “You’re the president, not a princess,” he said. “You wake up and pack it in with everyone else.”

Naturally, I knew that. My dad Jandro was the early bird, but Reaper would be up soon after. Between the two of them, breakfast and coffee would always be hot and ready for my mom when she got up. Damn it. Why couldn’t I have been an old lady instead of the fucking president?

And why did Torr, who I guess was my old man, have to be such a hardass? Santos was brushing sleepy kisses over the top of my head, which made it even harder to get up.

Hmm, speaking of harder...

I threw my back into a deep arch, pressing my ass against—yep, there it was—Torr’s morning erection. “Let me stay in bed so I can take care of that for you,” I said in my best seductive whisper, looking behind me. He was pressed against me, already so close. I ghosted my lips against his neck and gave a nibble to his earlobe.

“Not gonna work on me today, creep. We gotta move out.” My VP was all business, and therefore, all-buzzkill.

“Santos,” I whined, facing forward again to kiss under his jaw. “Tell him to stop being a dick.”



“Mmm. He’s right though, paloma.”

I let out a fake gasp. “I’m shocked *and* betrayed.”

A sympathetic kiss fell on my forehead. “We’ve got another long day of riding, right?”

“Val says we have a half-day.”

“Come on.” Santos patted my hip and started to push back the blanket. “We need to set a good example, right?”

I yawned and stretched, accepting my defeat. “I’d much rather have a morning threesome and sleep in, but sure, I guess.”

“We’ll have time for that later.” Torr rose to his knees, rubbing his eyes.

“Promise?” I came up to kneeling as well, reaching for a long-sleeved shirt to ward off the chilly morning air.

Torr grabbed my arms faster than I could react, holding just above my elbows as he came directly behind me. His grip was strong enough to bruise as he pulled my arms back just enough to thrust my chest forward. Toward Santos.

Torr’s erection rubbed like a hot, heavy brand against my ass, the sensation too dulled from our layers of sleeping clothes. On top, I wore only a camisole, and my nipples were already pebbled from the cold air. With Santos waking up quickly now, those dark eyes drinking me in, the sensitive tips positively ached for some relief.

“Later, I can hold you like this, pound your sweet ass from behind.” Torr thrust his hips, driving his erection over the cleft of my ass. “While Santos takes care of you in front. How does that sound?”

The question was directed at me, but I had no words to answer with, especially as I watched Santos move directly in front of me. His long thighs pressed against mine, that firm chest blasting heat as it came into contact with my nipples. And it was not nearly enough.

“That sounds great to me.” My fighter ran his hands lightly, too fucking lightly, over my waist, tracing my contours

as he looked over me with awe. Like he was seeing me bare for the first time, and I wasn't even naked.

Between Torr's grip and Santos' legs, I was trapped between them. And there was no fucking place in the world I'd rather be.

"Me too." I finally found my voice, even though it was a whisper. "I'm dying to have you both at the same time."

And just like that, the spell was broken. Torr released my arms and swatted my ass before he crawled off the air mattress. "After the mission. We'll celebrate with threesomes."

"You're such an *asshole*," I groaned, leaning my head on Santos' chest. I looked up at him with a pout, and he gave me a sympathetic ass pat.

"Gotta give you some motivation to work, president." Torr's voice was muffled as he pulled on a shirt.

"Fine. Consider me motivated."

We got dressed and took everything out of the tent to pack it up. The moment I stepped foot outside, it was like putting on another woman's shoes. In the tent, I was just a horny girl who wanted to sleep in and fuck my men. Out here, I was president of the Vengeful Gods MC.

We were nobodies now, but that wouldn't last long. This club would go down in history for wiping an evil cult off the map. And that mantle rested on my shoulders.

These people were my responsibility. To keep in line and to keep safe. I barely knew some of them, but for their trust in me alone, I would treat them like family.

That's what MCs were at the end of the day, a family.

So I greeted everyone I passed with a, "Good morning," and, "How'd you sleep?" and, "Take some hair of the dog for that hangover. We've got a long day ahead of us."

Within two hours, we were on the road again.

The elevation began to change drastically at this stage. What started as a steady incline became a grueling up-and-

downhill battle. The terrain grew wilder, with gravel and dirt roads disappearing completely. I had Torr and LJ ride tightly alongside me, to create a wider, easier path for the rest of the club.

“You said you’ve been here before?” I yelled at LJ as we began yet another grueling uphill climb. Jandro would be having a heart attack if he saw how hard we were pushing the motorcycles. We needed some little dirt bikes for this mission, not these heavy-as-fuck road cruisers.

“Not here specifically but the general area,” he corrected, grinding his teeth as he pushed onward. “I knew it was hilly out here, but fucking damn, this has to be the steepest part of the mountain range.”

“How close are we?”

“We should be able to see the compound at the crest of this hill if the information is correct.”

I nodded and pushed my bike into its highest gear, wincing at the roar of the engine reaching a new, higher pitch. My baby, custom-made by my fathers, was a hybrid design, so she was handling the incline and terrain relatively well, but that didn’t mean riding offroad was her specialty.

“Come on, sweetheart, you can do it. You’ve never failed me.” I petted the gas tank as if encouraging a living beast.

The jaguar, on the other hand, was having a great time. Tezca’s long body raced up the hill tirelessly, often passing us by and waiting for us to catch up. At least someone was having fun.

At long last, we reached the top of the hill. I squinted through the shrubs and copse of trees and, sure enough, I could make out a small settlement in the distance.

“Cut your engines now,” I told Torr and LJ while promptly doing the same. I looked back at the others making their way up, and slashed my thumb across my throat until every single motorcycle was turned off.

On foot, I made my way back down the hill, gesturing at everyone to come close.

“I think we’re too far for them to hear us, but I don’t want to take any chances,” I explained once my club gathered in a tight circle around me. “They could also send out scouts to investigate. We stay put for now, see if they make any moves. Tomorrow, if nothing changes, we hike the ridge line on foot to check them out at all angles. All good?”

“Yes, president,” came the chorus of voices.

I nodded. “Rest, relax. It’s been a tough ride, you all did good. Let’s stay quiet.”

While the fighters broke away to unpack food and supplies, Paige stepped forward. “I can begin my scouting now, president.”

“You sure?” I eyed her warily.

“Yes,” she insisted. “The sooner I can gather information, the better. I figure the trees will cover me.”

“Okay,” I said. “But if you need a break, let me know, and I’ll have someone else take over.”

“I will.” She gave me a cheeky smile. “I’m stronger than I look, Rori.”

I grinned back and playfully knocked my shoulder into hers. “I know you are. I’m just overprotective of my people.”

We set Paige up with a telescope on the crest of the hill, while everyone else settled in to hunker down for a while. Because we couldn’t have a fire, we drank lukewarm coffee and gnawed on rations of dried fruit and jerky. Astarte stayed near me, creeping closer and bobbing her head while I chewed on some dried mango slices.

“This has chili powder on it,” I told the bird. “Don’t think it would go down well for you.”

“Oh shit, I love chili mango! Can I have some?” Santos scooted from his reclined position to lay his head in my lap.

“You can have anything of mine,” I purred, feeding him a piece.

Paige had been watching the compound for roughly an hour at that point and set the telescope down on her pack, rubbing her eyes.

“See anything interesting?” My fingers stroked along Santos’ jaw and neck, feeling the movement of muscles as he chewed.

“Not really.” Her brow pinched with frustration. “It looks like a homestead community run by women. Everyone’s farming, cooking, washing laundry by hand, feeding animals, repairing fences, stuff like that.”

“No men?”

Paige shook her head. “Not a single one.”

“How about armed guards?”

“I saw a few women with assault rifles, but they weren’t at guard posts. They were just walking around doing whatever. One had a baby in one arm and this giant gun in the other.”

“A baby?” I repeated. “There’s kids there?” Under my fingers, Santos stopped chewing.

“A few, yeah.”

I frowned, turning that over in my head for a while. Kids had to come from somewhere, and if they were pimping out men like at Mystic Canyon, that would explain it. But if there were no men at all, where did the children come from? The only explanation I could think of was women being pregnant before joining the cult.

Children also made attacking the compound a much trickier situation. We couldn’t go in guns blazing and risk killing them or making a bunch of orphans. Nor did we have the resources to take children with us.

“Take a break,” I told Paige. “Rest your eyes. When you get back to it, I want you to keep watching the ones with weapons. Find out how many there are, see if you can spot a pattern.”

“You got it.” Paige stood and stretched, then smiled as the Hunter approached with a thermos of water and cup of soup

for her. “Aw, thank you, love.”

“Always,” he muttered, eyes rapt on her.

What an adorable couple. I looked down at Santos with a smile that dissipated as soon as I saw his expression. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah.” He looked anything but, his mouth pressed into a thin line, eyes vacant as he rolled up from my lap. “I need to talk to Devin real quick.”

“Okay.” I touched his forearm before he could leave. “You know you can talk to me too, right?”

He plopped back down on the ground beside me, his eyes full of that familiar warmth and love as he took my chin and pressed a sensual kiss to my mouth.

“I know, and I will,” he whispered. “I just need to hash out something with him first. Ugly gladiator stuff.”

“Okay.” I ran my thumb over his cheekbone, then leaned in to kiss him again. “Love you.”

My eyes shot wide open, realizing too late what I’d said out loud.

*Oh fuck.*



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RORI



The words came out automatically, naturally, and easily as breathing. My momentary panic was quelled immediately by Santos' incredible smile, his forehead coming to rest gently on my mine, and the grip of his hand on my nape.

“Love you too, paloma.”

With another kiss, he stood and went off in search of his friend while I sat there in wonderment. My ass was firmly planted on the ground, but I felt like I was floating in zero gravity.

It had been so...*easy*. And that felt so refreshing, so freeing.

We loved each other. Period.

Torr and I loved each other too, but that was wildly different. It was still a process with him and I. Not exactly a struggle, but there were obstacles, both in the past and in the present. For some reason, I expected it to be similar with Santos, but it wasn't.

The words left his mouth like a bird taking flight. So natural that it was obviously easy for him.

I would never fault Torr for struggling to say the words. But knowing where Santos stood eased the ache in my heart a little. Hearing him say it gave me the reassurance I didn't know I needed. Yes, I was a tough bitch, but tough bitches needed to hear '*I love you too*' sometimes.



With a dopey-as-fuck smile, I leaned my head back against the side of my bike and closed my eyes to sink into this beautiful, bubbly feeling.

And then something really fucking weird happened.

My body jolted, like that kicking motion people do when they're about to fall asleep. But when my eyes opened, I wasn't looking at Paige and the Hunter eating lunch a few feet away. I was...up in the air?

I was weightless and soaring over a valley, heading straight for the compound, like I'd just been launched out of a cannon.

*What's happening? What the fuck is happening to me?! I tried to scream but didn't seem to have a mouth.*

*Calm yourself, Aurora, came Asarte's chiding voice. I'm showing you what you won't be able to see from your scouting.*

*Where am I? Am I in...you?* I did seem to be flying, and once I calmed my freak-out enough, I could feel the bones and muscles of wings. *My wings.*

*Not yours, Astarte snorted. I'm in control, Aurora. I'm only lending you my eyes.*

*You really don't want me to get excited about this, do you? I'm fucking flying!*

*You won't be excited after you see what I'm about to show you.* The goddess' voice in my head turned grim, and a brick of dread formed in my gut.

*Is it worse than the gladiator fights?* I asked.

*Yes,* came the succinct answer.

I didn't dare ask any more questions, despite my mind racing with them.

Astarte flew us lower over the settlement, and I could see what Paige had been talking about. Women carrying stacks of firewood or huge baskets of laundry. Women inspecting neatly aligned rows of planted vegetables. Animal pens with chickens, pigs, goats, and a couple of cows. I couldn't miss the

odd woman here or there with a toddler in her arms or walking with a child's hand in hers. Nor did I miss the ones with assault rifles who meandered too casually around the compound to be doing any actual patrolling.

We passed over the main cluster of trailers and simple, prefab houses, where it seemed the bulk of the population lived. Toward the back of a settlement was a gentle upward slope, too small to be any serious hill, but there was a structure at the top. It resembled a gazebo, with a pointed roof, support beams, and open space instead of walls. The roof and supports were covered in dark paint, like a haunted house looming over the town, which looked cheery in comparison.

Set in the center of the stairs leading up to the spooky gazebo thing was a gutter of some kind. I kept staring at it, the bizarreness of it jarring to me. What was the point of a split-open PVC pipe running down the center of a flight of stairs? The placement didn't make sense for carrying away rain, so I couldn't begin to imagine what it was for.

Astarte perched us on one of the roofs of the nearest houses, a prime vantage point to see inside the gazebo. The floor within it was dark, concrete, and there looked to be a shade tent serving as an altar of some kind. Objects like flowers and small plates of food cluttered the ground in front. And there looked to be a...a baby's bassinet under the canopy?

*I'm so confused and already freaked out by this place, I thought.*

*Just wait,* Astarte said in that same grim tone.

A commotion sounded a few minutes later—the slamming of a door, shuffling footsteps, and then panicked shouts and begging.

In a man's voice.

A man had come out of—no, was *forced* out of—one of the houses. His wrists were bound in front of him so tightly that the skin was an angry red and bleeding. Two women dragged him forward by each arm, another with an assault rifle walking directly behind them.

The man was drugged or incapacitated in some way. He couldn't get his feet under him, no matter how much he scraped, dragged, and kicked his heels. The guy was terrified and trying to run. The woman with the large gun drove the butt of her weapon into his kidney, making him freeze up with pain.

Some women gathered along the sides of the walkway to watch, even one with a child on her hip, but most of them carried on doing their business like it was any other day.

They dragged him toward the gazebo and up the stairs with the gutter running down the middle. That was when the guy really started to struggle, and even pulled one arm free of the hold. He spun around but the bitch with the AR was ready, and she crashed the butt of her gun into his face.

He crumpled to the ground with a cry of pain, hands cupped over his nose which was definitely broken. Blood coated his fingers and dripped down his chin.

“You can't escape your crimes anymore, *male*,” the woman with the gun said before she spit on him, then slammed her weapon down against the side of his head. And again, against his ribs.

“I didn't commit any crimes!” He curled up to protect himself, the blood mixing with tears on his face.

They had barely gotten started on whatever this was, and I'd already seen enough.

*Astarte, we have to do something. How do I get out of your body?*

*There is nothing you can do for this one, Aurora.* Her mental voice was sad, defeated.

*Bullshit! We can't just watch this.*

*You must watch this, it hasn't even begun. Your human body is too far away to save him, anyway.*

*Then you save him! You're a fucking god!*

*I cannot. This one is already lost.*

“Your entire fucked-up gender is a crime,” the armed woman said to the cowering man on the ground. “Gone unpunished for thousands of years, until now. We’re not your victims anymore.”

“I never did anything to any of you! Please, this is a mistake!”

“Letting you live one more day would be a mistake,” she sneered back. To the two other women, she said, “Get him up.”

He was picked up by his arms again, his strength flagging as they continued up until they were under the gazebo’s roof. Once there, they forced him to his knees and cut the binding at his hands, only to reshackle his wrists to chains attached to the support beams so that his arms spread out to the sides. His head bent low, defeated.

Meanwhile, I was fighting beak and claw to do something in this dove’s body. Divebomb and peck some eyes out. Hell, even shitting on someone’s head might be enough of a diversion.

*You don’t have control over this form, Aurora. Astarte was back to sounding permanently annoyed with me.*

*Well, this guy is about to get killed, and you’re not doing a damn thing!* I screamed back. For all my effort, I might as well have been punching a brick wall.

*There is nothing we can do for him. Other deities are standing by to guide him to a peaceful end.*

*He’s not dead yet! We can still help him!*

*Death is the most natural occurrence in the universe, even when it feels cruel. I’m sorry, Aurora, but this is how it needs to be.*

*Fuck that! This poor man hasn’t even done anything wrong, has he?*

*He was only unlucky.*

*God, no...*

While I continued to deny everything, the scene playing out before me was worse than I could have imagined. The bitch with a gun couldn't just shoot him to end his misery. No, she adjusted the strap so her hands were free while the gun rested against her back and took out a hunting knife from a sheath on her belt.

A small crowd gathered at the base of the incline now, staring up at the bound, bleeding man like he was about to break into a song and dance.

“The Dark Mother is a voracious goddess,” said the knife wielder to those below. “No longer is She satisfied with only full moon sacrifices. Now She thirsts for the blood of men at every new and full moon.”

The man's head jerked up at that, and he once again struggled to get to his feet, but the two other women held him down by the shoulders.

*Astarte, please, I begged, though I wasn't sure what for.*

*I'm sorry, Aurora. But you have to know what you're up against.*

“Too much of our own blood has been spilled by *men*.” The woman raised her hunting knife high, catching the glare of the sun on the blade. “Blood from our wombs when they invade us. Bruises on our faces and bodies when they hit us.”

“I never touched anyone, I swear!” the man cried out, pulling against his chains.

“And the pain they caused here,” the woman tapped the flat side of the knife against her chest, “when they broke our hearts.”

Low murmurs arose from the women gathered below, several nodding their heads.

*No way, I scoffed inside my head. They can't be buying this as a justification to kill him. There's no fucking way.*

*Young, vulnerable minds are the easiest ones to manipulate, Astarte said sadly.*

The gathered women did look young, no older than me. Some of them could have been teenagers.

“When we give the goddess the blood She demands, She wraps us in Her protective embrace,” the woman went on. “When we do Her work, ridding the world of these vile creatures who prey upon Her daughters,” she pointed at the captive with her knife, “she gives us peace. She gives us safety and a home to raise *our* daughters. She makes sure that no man enters our home unless he is to serve Her, either by his seed or by his blood. Because the truth you were never told is this: men are only useful for those two things.”

*What. The. Fuck.*

“Everything else is a lie.” The woman was becoming fanatical—waving her arms and yelling like an impassioned preacher on a pulpit. “Men are monsters, incapable of love and gentleness, though some are good at fooling us for a very long time. But all of you know, you *know* this in your hearts!” She swung her index finger over the growing crowd. “Because in one way or another, everyone here has been hurt by a man.”

“He almost killed me,” blurted out one woman before bursting into tears. Immediately, a cluster of arms came around her, the others giving her gentle pats and soothing rubs of support.

The woman in the gazebo nodded sagely. “Me too, sweet sister.” With that, she refocused her attention on her victim. “She has chosen this one for blood.” The knife teased along the man’s cheek until he jerked away from it. “From his spilled blood, Her power will grow. And as Her power increases, she will extend Her will and protection to the brave, lonely women who have not yet found their way to the Sisterhood.” The knife thrust outward toward the distant horizon, and I suddenly got a horrific idea of what that pipe in the middle of the stairs was for.

“Our sisters scattered across the world will hear the Dark Mother’s voice, feel the pull of her embrace, and find their new home.” The woman lowered her arms with a serene expression. “Where no man will ever harm them again.”

“Yes!” shouted the woman who had been crying a moment earlier.

“Where we’ll have *our* turn!” The knife-wielder grew impassioned again, her voice raising as she thumped a fist against her chest. “Where we’ll show every one of these animals exactly what it’s like to be abused, enslaved, raped, and bred against their will!”

The man shook his head, blood and tears continuing to drip down his face, but he was too defeated to protest with words anymore.

“Yes!” came the chorus of shouts from below.

*I can’t fucking believe what I’m hearing*, I thought, dumbfounded.

*Believe it*, Astarte said sharply. *They certainly do*.

“Sister.” The armed woman stepped out from under the gazebo, descending a couple of steps before stopping and turning the knife so that the handle faced away from her. “Would you like the Dark Mother to guide your hand?”

She was speaking to the one who had been crying, who now looked up at her with such awe and reverence, it was as if an angel were speaking. “Me? I...I don’t know if I’m worthy.”

“You will never know unless you are tested. Tap into the Dark Mother’s power within you.” The woman’s jaw clenched, and she bit out the next sentence through her teeth. “And kill this man, who would just as quickly kill you.”

The woman below started ascending the steps but hesitated when the victim started to sob.

“No...” he whimpered quietly. “Please, I would never...”

“He lies, as all men do.” The armed woman thrust the knife handle out farther to the one ascending the stairs. “Make the Dark Mother proud, Sister. Show us all that you are no longer under *their* control.”

And that was when the younger woman’s hesitancy ended for good and she became a murderer.

She reached the top of the stairs and accepted the knife. The woman with the AR stepped aside, and all I could see of the victim was his outstretched arms while his murderer blocked my view.

I saw her arm thrust forward, the jerk of his arms against the chains. I heard the sound of a knife through flesh, and wet, gurgled attempts at breath.

Blood pooled on the ground, and I figured out then why the concrete floor was so dark. The blood followed the slight downward slope of the floor to find the gutter acting as a small, morbid canal.

He had stopped moving but the woman kept stabbing him, blood coating her arms and the front of her clothes. She had to be in a delusion of some kind, seeing the man who had attacked her in the innocent man she had just now brutally murdered.

*Do you understand now what you are dealing with?* Astarte's voice cut into the horrified silence in my head.

*Yeah, and I've seen enough,* I snapped back.

Fuck, that scene would stay with me forever. I had to find out that man's name and where he was from. He had to have loved ones who missed him. How I would obtain this information was yet to be seen, but it was the least I could do when his death had been so needless and cruel.

*The goddess stuff is all bullshit, right?* I found myself asking. *It's just a manipulation tactic, like every cult leader. There's no way it actually exists.*

Astarte was silent for a long while.

Eventually, all she said was, *Time for you to return to your body.*





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## SANTOS



I found Devin leaning against the loaner motorcycle we'd ridden on together, popping grapes into his mouth, and I wasted no time saying what was on my mind.

"Paige saw kids at the compound."

He stopped chewing. "So?"

I shook my head, my mouth tight in clear sign that I wasn't fucking around. "Come on, man."

Devin finished chewing what was in his mouth and swallowed. "How old?"

"Not sure, but she said women were carrying around babies. So, young."

He pulled in a breath. "Young enough to be...?"

"We've been away for four years, Dev. So yeah, I think it's safe to assume so."

"Fuck." His head tilted back, eyes closed to the sky for a few long seconds. "Have you said anything to Rori?"

"Not yet. I came straight to you as soon as it hit me."

Devin's eyebrows lifted with surprise as he scoffed. "Why? Thought you didn't need me anymore."

"It's not about me. If Hudson's down there, he's gonna need both of us." I sighed out a heavy breath, unable to fathom what our friend had been through over the years. Or if there was even any of *him* left. "I think we should tell Rori together. It's gonna affect her plan for sure."

“You think so?” Devin sounded skeptical, and that lit me up with anger.

“If we say he needs to be saved, she’ll do it,” I barked. “The only reason she’s here is because she wants to do right by all of us.” I spread my arms to indicate all of the ex-gladiators who were here. Rori was leading us to our revenge. Why he couldn’t get his head out of his ass and see that was beyond me.

To my surprise, he nodded and tossed his plucked grape stems, leaning up from the bike. “Alright. Let’s tell her.”

*Who are you and what have you done with Devin?* I wanted to ask, but would rather not give him a reason to stop being agreeable.

Together, we took the short hike up to the crest of the hill and found a terrifying scene.

Rori was lying on her back, her head in Paige’s lap, who was bent over her and crying. The Hunter stood behind Paige, his hands on his shoulders as he looked down at our new president with a worried frown.

Torr was kneeling at Rori’s side, stroking her arm and face while he stared at her like a man about to lose the love of his life.

“Wake up, creep. Come on,” he begged in a rough voice. “Not now. Not like this...”

“What happened?” I demanded, rushing to her other side.

Rori was motionless and unresponsive except for some twitching in her hands and face, mainly in her half-closed eyelids. Only the whites of her eyes were visible through the slits.

“I don’t know,” Paige sobbed. “She was fine. And then I looked over and she was like this.”

“It looks like a seizure. Has this ever happened before?” Devin came over and touched his fingers to the inside of his wrist. Then he leaned down, touching his ear to her chest.

“No,” Torr croaked with a shake of his head. “Not for as long as I’ve known her.”

“How long has she been like this?” I looked at Paige.

“Two minutes, maybe three?” she sniffed.

Devin lifted his head, frowning. “I’m no medic, but she has a strong pulse and her heartbeat sounds normal, if a bit fast. I dunno, I think we just need to wait it out.”

“We need a *real* fucking medic. What if she’s braindead or something?” Torr lifted his head, his eyes landing on me. “Find someone with medical experience. Now.”

“Dude, none of the fighters are—”

“*Find someone!*” he bellowed.

“Wait, I think she’s coming back!” the Hunter exclaimed, leaning over Paige.

Rori’s eyelid fluttering had indeed turned into full-on blinks, her brow furrowing before her eyes opened fully to focus on all of us. “Uh. Hi, guys.”

“Oh, thank fuck!” Torr threw himself on top of her in practically a full body slam, embracing her hard. “Thank all the fucking gods you’re okay.”

“Ow! I *was* okay, but you’re crushing me!” Rori shoved at his shoulders. “What’re you all looking at me for? What’s with all the drama?”

“You were having a seizure.” Paige sniffed and wiped her cheeks. “You were unresponsive and twitching for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, you scared the shit out of us, asshole.” Torr just squeezed around her tighter. “Never do that again.”

Rori’s eyes widened with some realization, her arms coming around Torr’s back to rub up and down. “Oh! I’m sorry for scaring you guys. I was just uh, taking a nap and dreaming really vividly. Seriously, I’m okay. I didn’t mean to make you all worry.”

Devin and I exchanged a look. Yeah, neither of us were buying it.

“Must’ve been a hell of a dream,” the Hunter remarked as he helped Paige to her feet, then held her against his chest.

“Yeah.” Torr released Rori so she could sit up, and her eyes passed over him, Devin, and me with a haunted expression. “I need to talk to the three of you.”

Rori comforted Paige with a quick hug, then our president and VP walked us further away from everyone for some privacy.

“I was outside of my fucking body,” Rori said in harsh whisper the moment we were alone. “And I was in Astarte, flying and seeing through the bird’s eyes. She took me over the compound. I saw...fuck, I saw everything.” Rori brought a hand to her forehead, suddenly looking exhausted before looking up again sharply. “You guys believe me, right?”

“Yes.” The answer came from Devin, which surprised everyone. He returned our bewildered looks with a shrug. “What? The gods talk to us and inhabit animals, right? Could be weirder.”

“If you say so,” Torr muttered. “But yes, I believe you too. So what’d you see?”

Rori paled and let out a breath that seemed to take all of her strength with it. “They’re killing men as like...ritual sacrifices. I saw the whole thing.” She looked to the sky, eyes filling with tears. “And I couldn’t stop it.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault.” I followed the impulse to bring her head against my shoulder, kissing her hair. “There was nothing you could do, paloma. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Her arms came around me, fingers curling to grip my shirt. “So you’ve seen it too.” A statement, not a question.

“Not exactly, but we’ve heard it.” I looked over to Devin, who nodded.

“Heard the devotion to their goddess. The screams and the begging. We’ve even felt the blood drip from the ceiling.”

Rori's head lifted from my shoulder to stare at him. "The ceiling? So you were held underground?"

"Basements and cellars usually, yeah."

"Were you two *here*? At this compound?"

I blew out a breath. "I think so. We had hoods on or we were in a box truck when being transported, so it's hard to say for sure." I ran my palm up and down her back, meeting Devin's eye.

"But you two were never sacrificed."

Swallowing the uncomfortable knot in my throat, I said, "We were, uh, tested for other uses. Us, along with a guy named Hudson. My best guess is, Dev and I didn't produce the results they wanted, so they shipped us off to become gladiators."

Rori's eyes ping-ponged between the two of us. "And by results, you mean...?"

"Viable pregnancies. Kids," Devin spat out. "They were testing us out as breeding studs to increase their numbers. So obviously, they wanted to become pregnant with girls."

"Oh my God..." Rori brought a hand to her mouth and turned away like she was going to be sick.

"What the fuck," Torr breathed. "What if they had boys?"

"We never exactly got a chance to ask and find out," Devin answered bitterly. "But since they routinely execute men in public, you can probably make some educated guesses."

"Jesus..."

"If this is the place we came from, we think Hudson might still be here," I said. "And if he is, we want to get him out. He's our friend, and he just..." The fucking lump in my throat would not go away, no matter how much I swallowed. "He just deserves better, you know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." Rori nodded, regaining her composure despite the fact that she still looked a little green. "We can't go in guns blazing, that's for sure. Not with kids and

people we need to rescue.” She looked at me. “Any idea how many prisoners they could have?”

“Not sure. It was only us three they kept long-term. Then they usually had one or two for the monthly sacrifices at any given time.”

“Bear in mind, this was five, six years ago,” Devin added. “With how much money they’ve made from the resort and whatever other projects? For all we know, they could have a whole prison complex at their disposal now.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Rori stabbed her fingers through her hair, pulling on the roots. “How many people has this cult killed? And they’ve been getting away with it for decades. Fucking hell.”

“Hey, listen to me. We focus on one thing at a time.” Torr squeezed her shoulder, massaging upwards toward her neck. “Right now, it’s pretty clear we have to do a stealth mission. We’ll find Hudson and get him out. Maybe that’s all we do before we regroup and hit them again later. Hudson might be able to help us.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek but kept quiet. It had been years since we’d seen Hudson, and his mental state had already been deteriorating back then. If he was still alive, he was probably so traumatized that he wouldn’t be much help at all. If I was being completely honest, I wasn’t sure he was savable.

“I’m gonna need some paper. I can draw an aerial view of the compound that Paige couldn’t see from that angle.” Rori sucked her teeth. “I don’t know how to explain to the others how I know this, though.”

“They know that gods walk with us,” Devin said lightly. “You don’t have to give details, just say that your dove showed you.”

She gave a passing glance to all of us, but her gaze lingered on Devin. “I need you guys to back me up if the others push against this. I know the fighters want to, well,

fight, but it seems like we'll have to tread delicately instead. Can you all do that?"

Devin didn't hesitate to say it with the rest of us. "Yes."

Rori looked relieved, then confused, if also a little on guard. I understood it. Devin being agreeable instead of argumentative always threw me for a loop. But I knew he would keep his word.

"Alright then." Rori put her hands on her hips and jerked her chin down in a decisive nod. "Let's come up with a plan."





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RORI



The fighters took well to the new plan, for the most part, with only some minor grumbling about not being able to kill anyone on sight. The Saint even sung praises and kissed my ass about my adaptability and compassion for victims and blah blah blah.

That guy still gave me pause. Not alarm bells, but not a strong sense of trust either. He might have just been eccentric, or he had goals of his own in mind. He seemed agreeable to the stealth mission though, and that was all I could ask for. His actions would soon tell me more.

After Torr, Santos, Devin and I decided on a plan, we went over it with the rest of the club for several hours, until night fell. We went over it from several angles, answered questions, and I had everyone repeat it back to me to make sure they understood.

Once everyone broke apart to get some sleep, I thought Carter might actually be proud of me. We had the main plan, the backup plan if shit went sideways, and then the backup plan for the backup plan. Everyone was in agreement and knew their positions. We knew the layout of the compound. There was no reason for this to not work.

Later, when thinking back to this moment, I would laugh at the thought of having any shred of confidence that this would go off without a hitch.

We were supposed to head out two hours before dawn, and I actually managed about three hours of sleep. Torr was

already up and moving around when I woke, lighting his way with a small solar-powered lantern as he made coffee on the propane camping stove.

“Did you sleep at all?” I asked him, accepting a mug.

“Nah.”

I nudged him. “Something on your mind?”

“Everything. Like what could go wrong.”

“You’re starting to sound like me.”

“I’m kind of surprised you’re not more worried.” His eyes held mine over the rim of his coffee cup.

“Too tired to be worried,” I admitted, stifling a yawn. “Plus, we’ve talked this to death. I can see the map of the compound every time I close my eyes. Besides, I wouldn’t be a good president if I looked worried, right?”

“Well, you’re not the president right now. You’re Rori. My creep.” Torr pulled me forward with a warm palm on my nape, not stopping the momentum until his mouth crashed to mind. Just before I could sink into the kiss, he broke away. “Tell me what you’re really feeling.”

“I just...really want it to work.” My fingers drummed on the tin mug. “This is kind of the first test, you know? We’ll see how everyone works together. I’m glad, relieved actually, that it’s just a rescue mission, not an all-out assault.”

He nodded. “Me too. And I think we’re gonna learn a lot about the club after today.”

“Agreed.” I heaved out a sigh. “You ready to do this?”

“Ready on your orders, Pres.”

\* \* \*

A SMALL TEAM of us headed out on foot to the compound, which was roughly a mile away from the hill the club had parked on. The rest would hang back and wait for a flashlight signal to pick us up on the bikes. I left Val in charge of those

hanging back. LJ, Torr, Santos, and Devin came with me. The ones I trusted most, although Devin was still questionable. The Ghost was fast and silent though, which was exactly what I needed.

Santos' jaguar, Tezcatlipoca, also came with us. And I wasn't about to tell the big cat no.

Our plan was to slip in undetected, grab Hudson, and get the hell out. Easy like Sunday morning, right?

Running down the hillside was easy enough. The valley below was a flat, open plain with no cover, so we sprinted across the landscape. All we could do was pray no one was awake and looking out their window to see six dark figures running toward the compound.

Tezca loped alongside me just as I thought that, his gait easy and relaxed. *You are unseen, daughter. The night cloaks you.*

I was breathing too hard to say thanks, but the shadowy jaguar was gone in the next moment anyway. He picked up speed, running ahead and disappearing into the darkness. The sense of feeling calm and reassured stayed with me though, and strengthened my legs and lungs on my run.

Finally, we made it to the outer bank of houses and stayed out of view of the windows to catch our breaths.

"This is the path up to the gazebo," I said, gesturing around the corner. "The prisoner came out of the fifth house on the left. I say we check for Hudson there first. Santos and Devin will go in for him. The rest of us will look out and provide cover."

"And if people wake up as we check the house?" Santos asked.

He knew the answer. We'd gone over this several times already. He was just confirming that my orders were the same.

"Silence them any way you can," I answered. "Adults by any means necessary, but do *not* kill children."

He nodded, understanding that we could not afford to be discovered. And my sweet, submissive man was prepared to step into the shoes of the Butcher to get the job done.

“Everyone else clear?” At their nods, I un-holstered my handgun. “Positions on three. One, two...three.”

I rounded the corner, keeping my back to the wall and staying in the darkest areas of shadow possible. While ducking under windows and keeping light on my feet, I covered ground quickly, moving up the pathway until I was just past the house that the poor, sacrificed man had been removed from.

The road up ahead was clear, as were the side streets, and the main corridor behind me. I signaled to Santos and Devin, then watched them dart across to the house in question. LJ and Torr fanned out at the other end, where we’d come in from. Tezca was nowhere to be seen, but I figured I didn’t need to worry about the jaguar.

Devin made quick work of the flimsy front door lock and then they were inside. I went back to checking the area in front, letting my gaze follow the steps up to the gazebo, and nearly gagged.

The sacrificed man was still up there, a grotesque monument to their insanity and cruelty. His arms were still shackled to the posts, the rest of his body hanging limp and slumped down, no longer animated by life.

“I’m sorry,” I said in a faint whisper. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t help you.”

If we had more time, maybe more people and firepower, I’d take his body so he could be returned to his family whenever I found them and given a proper burial. I intended to find his people regardless, but it was wholly unfair that they would never get to say goodbye to him.

I didn’t know the first thing about this man, but there was a certainty inside me that he hadn’t deserved this. He hadn’t been a predator to women or children, and it was sickening that this cult had used him as a symbol for all the evil deeds of men.

I wanted to go up those stairs. The impulse was so strong that I had to dig the treads of my boots into the ground. I wanted to...what? I didn't know, see him up closer. But why? The curiosity had come over me so strongly and out of nowhere. Never in my life had I wanted to see a corpse up close. Why now?

“Rori!”

A hand came to my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my skin, spinning around with my gun pointed. Santos raised his hands. “Just us.”

Devin was right behind him, sheathing one of his throwing knives and giving me a look that seemed disapproving. I hated it, but he was right. I wasn't paying attention. They shouldn't have been able to sneak up on me.

“Sorry, guys.” I lowered my gun. “No Hudson?”

Santos shook his head. “There were a couple jail cells in the basement, but they were empty.”

“No children in there, but we silenced the guards.” Devin crossed his arms over his chest. “Permanently.”

“Okay then.” This was the outcome most of us expected but were still dreading. “Keep looking. We got your backs.”

“‘Til dawn approaches or we find him.” Devin leveled his gaze at me.

I nodded. “Whichever comes first.”

Neither of them looked thrilled, but I knew they wouldn't stop searching for their friend. And no one was better equipped to do a snatch n' grab job than the Butcher and the Ghost.

Not only did they have the right combination of skills, Hudson would recognize them and be more likely to comply with leaving than if it were me or anyone else.

“If he's here, we'll find him.” Santos seemed to be pep-talking himself just as much as Devin.

The other man nodded. “Let's go. Time's a wastin'.”

They both turned and then just stood there.

“What the hell’s wrong with you guys?” I whisper-yelled.  
“Get moving!”

Santos turned his body so I could see past him and pointed.  
“Look, paloma.”

Tezcatlipoca was sitting on a house’s front stoop, a large cat-shaped shadow with his haunches down and his tail flicking calmly over the ground.

“Well, that makes things a lot easier,” Devin mused.

Santos slapped his buddy on the back. “Let’s go.”

Together, they were off without another word. Using hand signals, I checked in quickly with Torr who was still guarding the opposite end of the pathway, then went back to checking my own surroundings. It wasn’t long before the impulse to walk up to the gazebo overtook me again.

I wanted to see...see what? Fucking hell, I felt like a child with no impulse control. This wasn’t right, wasn’t *me*. I had some anxious tendencies, but I knew how to focus, knew what was important. My job was keeping Santos and Devin safe, so why did I feel pulled away from that task?

*They’re not important. They’re just men.*

The thought came out of nowhere, and it took me a while to realize it didn’t originate from my own mind. Someone was speaking directly into my head, just as Astarte and Tezca did.

I raised my gun, sweeping it from right to left, but saw no movement. “Who’s there?” I demanded under my breath.

No answer came, and my gaze resettled on the man’s body hung between the two posts. It was completely unnerving how still he was. Not that I wanted him to pull a zombie act, but I was so accustomed to seeing fellow humans moving, even when they were still. You didn’t realize how much life moved you, even just the smallest rises and falls from breathing, a tiny twitch of the face or limbs, until that life was gone.

*You don’t have to die.*

I spun in a circle this time, eyes following the barrel of my gun, and again, saw no one. Not even Tezca guarding the house.

Despite my effort to be silent, my breaths grew louder as they left my chest, adrenaline flooding my system.

“Show yourself,” I whispered. “If you’re gonna talk to me, show your fucking face.”

*I would. Unfortunately, I don't yet have a face.*

I spun again, my heart beating so wildly I was certain others could hear it. “What are you?”

*Why don't I show you, Aurora Wilder.*

In the blink of an eye, it was no longer night, and I wasn't in the compound anymore. I was...home?

The sun was bright but not blinding. Instead of the pre-dawn chill, the air felt pleasant and warm. I looked down and saw that I was lounging in a chair, an empty beer glass in my hand.

“Another, paloma?”

I looked up to see Santos, his smile full of love and warmth as he took the empty from me.

“Yes, please,” I heard my voice say to him. “But kiss me before you go.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. Something felt so off and strange, like I was watching this happen through someone else's eyes. “I want you to rule me later,” he whispered. “After our daughters are in bed, I want you to use me hard.”

A thrilling rush filled me, both at his words and the anticipation of what we'd do later. But also...daughters? We had a family? What the hell was this?

Santos left and Torr moved a chair next to my legs. He sat down and promptly took my feet into his lap, where he started to massage my soles with his thumbs.



“I love you, Rori,” Torr said, his voice low and reverent. “I was a fool to not say those words sooner. I’ll spend the rest of my days telling you this, because you deserve nothing less. You’re the mother of my daughters and the love of my life.”

Elation, bright and warm as sunlight, filled my chest. It was everything I wanted to hear from Torr.

And yet...that off feeling persisted. Torr didn’t talk like that. Some alarm was going off within me, but it felt so far away.

*Do not be alarmed. I am showing you what your life could be. Love and family. The most precious cornerstones of human existence, are they not?*

“I still don’t know who or what you are.” My own voice felt far away, not part of this delusion or whatever playing out in my mind.

*I can give you what you yearn for more than anything, Aurora Wilder. You feel the pull of me because I am so much greater than the crumbs of approval you seek from men.*

“No...” My mind swam with the realization of what was speaking to me, the answer coming in jumbled pieces that were too unreal to believe.

*You are a rare breed of leader, strong enough to hold sway over others but soft enough to embody that which makes you a woman.*

“I’m not doing shit for you. Let me go. Get me out of this.” Torr was gone from my vision, or whatever it was, and the sunlight only grew more blinding.

*You are on the wrong side of things, Aurora Wilder. Men are trying to rebuild what they had. They want the same systems in place that drove the Collapse in the first place, because all they care about is keeping their yoke of control over us.*

“I’m not part of your ‘us’!” I cried. “I don’t murder. I don’t enslave. Fuck this insane cult!”

*Do you know how gods are born, Aurora? Whatever was speaking didn't wait for an answer. A collective of ideas. A human concept given life, given power. Your anger helped to create me, Aurora Wilder. As did your mother's and your grandmother's. I am the pain of all women who have been hurt by men. You willed me into existence, and I will not allow women to be victims any longer.*

“No!” I screamed. “I love Torr and Santos. I love my fathers, my brothers, my uncles, my cousins. I won't let you touch them.”

*Oh, but you will. You will lead armies, marching thousands to their deaths. Deities exist outside the boundaries of time, and I have seen it happen.*

“Fuck you,” I roared. “I will kill every one of your believers until *you* no longer exist before you touch anyone in my family.”

*Foolish girl. I already have, the voice taunted. Your father Shadow wears the revenge taken by dozens of my daughters on his skin.*

“I will kill you myself!” I screamed with all the breath in my body. “I don't care if you're a fucking god!”

*Your rage is a powerful tool, Aurora. It's misdirected at the moment, but that can be corrected.*

“Oh no, it's directed in the right fucking place.”

*Are you sure? The man you're supposedly rescuing looks like he's about to kill you.*

All at once, the blinding sunlight was gone, and it was dark again. I looked behind me just in time to see a thin man with bright blue eyes pointing a gun at me. I didn't need a closer look to know that he was dead behind those eyes.

Santos went to tackle him, but he was too late.

Hudson pulled the trigger.



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## HUDSON



I woke up to a palm clamped over my mouth. It never even occurred to me to struggle. If someone was about to kill me, well, that would be a relief. If they weren't, nothing was about to happen that hadn't already been done to me.

“Hudson, it's Santos,” came a harsh whisper in the dark. “We're getting you out.”

No fucking way.

I turned my head toward the voice, my body flooding with the strangest sensation as I tried to make out his features. Later, I would realize that it was pure elation and hope rushing through my system.

“Santos?” I whispered against the palm over my mouth.

“Yeah, buddy. We'll catch up later. But first, we're breaking you out. Hang on, this is gonna be bright.”

Santos' hand pulled away and a flashlight clicked on. He swung it away from me to examine my restraints.

“One of them has a key,” I whispered through a dry throat.

“No time to find it.” Santos pointed at something—a gun?—at one of the bedposts, and I saw a flash of gunfire as he shot the wooden post one, two, three times. The gun made a soft *phew* with each shot. That was one hell of a silencer.

Santos put the gun down and yanked on the post above where it had been splintered. He successfully broke it off after a few tries, then lifted the handcuff up and off of what remained of the stump.

“We’ll get those off you properly when we get back,” he said, heading for my other hand.

“This is really happening?” I brought my now freed hand to my chest, bending the elbow and rolling my wrist around. The empty handcuff that had been on the bedpost dragged and felt cold against my skin. It felt real.

“It’s happening, man. Devin’s here too.”

I let him do the same treatment to the other bedpost, shooting it, breaking it off, then sliding the cuff up and over before asking, “How? Where did they take you?”

“I’ll explain later, man, but right now we’ve got to move.”

He released my ankle restraints in the same way, and within ten minutes, I was free.

“Can you stand? Walk?” Santos grabbed my hand to sit me up in the bed.

“Yeah.” I just sat there for a bewildered few seconds, in complete shock that I was being freed by a friend who I thought had long forgotten about me.

“How about run? You got shoes?” Santos took a peek out of the small, high window. “We’re going to be running for a bit.”

“Just some sandals.” I slid down to the edge of the bed, let my feet touch the floor, and stood up. The cuffs still attached to my arms and legs jangled, but holy shit, I was fucking free.

“That’ll have to do. Oh hey, here.” He shrugged out of a jacket that sounded like leather from how the material squeaked and held it out to me. “It’s chilly out there.”

“I’m good, don’t worry.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even perceived temperature on my skin. Coldness, heat. I was numb to it all.

“Just take it,” Santos insisted. “You’re skin and bone, man.”

I accepted the jacket and put it on. The garment felt strange and heavy, although I caught a whiff of a pleasant

smell. Something soapy and floral in the lining.

“Let’s go. Follow me.” Santos moved toward the door, holding his pistol with its silencer at shoulder height.

I stuck my feet in the sandals next to the bed and trailed behind him. We went up the short flight of stairs to the main floor of the house, where more windows let in the gray, pre-dawn light.

Now I could really see Santos and the muscle mass he’d packed on in the last four years. When he glanced at me over his shoulder, his face looked older than I remembered and his eyes were sharper, the honed gaze of a predator.

Someone else was on guard next to the window, a tall Asian man with dark hair tied up on his head. He was wiping the blade of a small knife on his sleeve when he looked up at me, a familiar smile pulling at his lips.

“Hey, Hudson.”

“Devin?”

Santos immediately shushed me, moving silently to the door. “You take care of ‘em?”

Devin nodded, sheathing the knife in his chest holster. “Put ‘em in the bathtub before they could bleed out too much.”

“You killed them?” I remembered to whisper this time. “The ones who lived here?”

Devin nodded. “Hope you weren’t too attached,” he said dryly.

If I didn’t have to be silent, I would have been screaming for joy. Finally, someone was killing these monsters! I would have preferred it to have been me, but they were dead either way.

“I’m so fucking glad to see you guys.” It was hitting me with full force now. I was being rescued. By friends! I wasn’t a breeding stud anymore. And those who had made me into one were paying with their lives.

“Us too, man.” Santos clapped me on the shoulder before addressing Devin. “Is the coast clear?”

“I think so, I’m just trying to get Rori’s attention so she can give me the signal.” Devin pressed against the wall, then made two sharp taps on the windowpane. “Damn it, bitch. Turn around.”

“Don’t call her that,” Santos chided.

I felt like I must have misunderstood something. There was no way these two would conspire with a woman to get me out. They knew better than anyone not to trust them.

“What’s she doing?” Santos demanded.

“She’s walking all slowly up toward the gazebo thing, not even checking her surroundings.” Devin continued staring out the window with a frown. “We gotta move out. Something must be up, ‘cause she’s not sticking to the plan.”

“Anyone else out there?”

“Just her and our people, as far as I can see.”

“Okay, we head out and split up,” Santos decided. “You and Hudson head for the rendezvous point. I’ll get Rori.”

“Look at you being all bossy.” Devin smirked. “Sounds good.”

Santos cracked the door and poked his head out, looking all around before he signaled for us to come out. As Devin and I filed out beside him, Santos looked west, down the lane toward the sacrificial altar, where a woman with short blonde hair stood in the middle of the packed dirt path.

“Come on.” I felt Devin tug my sleeve to start running in the opposite direction, but I resisted.

A wave of euphoria came over me, along with an urge I couldn’t fight.

An urge for revenge.

“Hudson, come *on!*”

I ignored Devin and kept looking the same way Santos was. He had started approaching the woman, saying her name over and over. She wasn't listening to him, of course. They never listened.

I wanted to escape this hellhole more than anything, but not until I had a chance to put one of *them* in excruciating pain. Or, preferably, kill one of them. It was the least I could do for all they did to me.

I pulled my arm out of Devin's grip and went up to Santos. He was still holding his pistol with a silencer but had another gun tucked into the waistband at the small of his back.

It was pure instinct that guided me, not thought, as I went for the gun. Old habits kicked in as my hand settled on the grip, my thumb flicking off the safety before pointing it at the woman roughly fifty yards ahead of us. Santos didn't even notice until it was too late.

I lined up the sights on the back of her blonde head and squeezed the trigger just as I heard a shout and something crashed into me with the force of a freight train.

I hit the dirt, but so did the woman.

"What the FUCK, Hudson?" Santos screamed in my face. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

His face was clearer than ever before. Hair shaved closed to his scalp, stubble surrounding his mouth and jaw, brows slashed down over his eyes in a bewildered expression.

I realized the mistake I'd made then. In giving into the impulse to shoot one of my torturers, it woke everyone up. Santos' face was lit up because lights were turning on.

"Fuck. They know we're here." Devin had run over and was kneeling next to the fallen woman, hastily tying a length of fabric around her lower leg, and I couldn't understand why. She was the fucking enemy. Were we taking her prisoner?

"Just let me finish her off." I went to sit up and search for the gun I'd dropped, but Santos didn't budge. When I shoved at him, he shoved me back into the dirt. Then I felt the sharp edge of a blade under my chin. Santos had whipped out a



mean-looking machete and looked more than ready to behead me with it.

“She’s with us, asshole!” he hissed in my face. “You’re not going near her. You’re not even to look at her, understand?”

“No.” I was confused beyond measure. “No, I don’t understand. Why not just leave her then?”

“I’m more tempted to leave you right now,” he growled, sheathing the machete with reluctance. “But then this mission would be for nothing, so let’s fucking go.”

Devin had hauled the woman into his arms and started to run. “You’re gonna have to cover us,” he told Santos.

“I can still cover.” It was the woman who spoke as she slapped a magazine into a handgun while cradled against Devin’s chest. She aimed behind him and started firing at the armed women coming out of their houses. At the sight of that, my confusion only increased tenfold.

Santos grabbed the front of my thin shirt and jerked me upward. “Your one job is to run,” he said. “No more shooting. You steal my gun again, you won’t have a hand to shoot it with, alright?”

“Okay.” I’d fucked things up, that much was clear. And even if there was a woman around, wherever they took me had to be better than here.

We were up and sprinting through the lane between houses in an instant. “Go, just keep running!” Santos shouted. He went slower to cover my back, turning around to return fire with both handguns.

I passed Devin and the woman on my way toward the hills, and she gave me a look of pure venom as I ran by. I’d have to make sure to avoid her at all costs, least of all because I fucking shot her.

“Watch out!” someone shouted.

A couple of sentries jumped out in front of me, their automatic rifles trained directly on me. Panic flooded my nervous system and I skidded to a halt, ready to run in the

other direction, but Santos and the woman were shooting at the ones coming from that direction.

We were fucking trapped.

The rapid *rat-a-tat-tat* hit my ears, and I brought my hands up, a reflex that wouldn't do anything to save me.

“Hudson, run!” It was the woman screaming at me. “Keep going!”

I looked down, expecting to see my abdomen riddled with holes. But I was somehow perfectly intact. And once I looked up, I saw the sentries motionless on the ground. One had a knife handle in the center of her forehead, the other bleeding out from a knife wound in her throat.

“Nicely done, Dev,” I overheard the woman say as the two of them ran past me yet again.

“Can't say I've ever hit my target while running *and* hauling a sack of potatoes before, but there's a first time for everything.”

“Excuse you, I am not a mere sack of potatoes.”

“Right, you're a sack of potatoes that's bleeding all over me.”

What in the everloving fuck had Devin and Santos gotten into since they were taken from here?

“Oh, thank fuck, there's Torr,” the woman said, hissing through her pain.

Another man ran up to her and Devin, who transferred the woman to him. “What the hell happened?” asked the new guy.

“Oh nothing,” the woman deadpanned. “The guy we're rescuing just decided to shoot me.”

“What?!” He looked ready to set the woman down and take me on himself.

“I'll handle Hudson, you take her,” Devin said. “You signal the others yet?”

“Yeah, they’re coming. She’s not fucking riding like this, though.”

The woman waved him off. “I’ll be fine for a few miles.”

“Like hell you will be,” the other guy argued. “Let me drive your ride.”

“Fine,” she grimaced, wincing as she became even paler.

I had no regrets about shooting her, but everyone else was looking at me like I’d committed some kind of capital offense.

“What are we doing with him?” The guy jerked his chin at me, staring daggers in my direction.

“I’m keeping an eye on him,” Devin said, also glaring at me. “You cool if Santos rides your bike solo? That way Hudson stays with me, and you and Rori can double up on hers.”

“Sure, that’s fuckin’ peachy.”

It was like listening to a foreign language, and as growling engines became increasingly louder, I knew I was about to enter a world of serious culture shock.



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## RORI



**I**t turned out to be a good thing that I didn't drive myself. My lower leg was numb by the time we made it to the clearing where we'd camped the night before. If Torr hadn't insisted I keep my leg elevated and in his lap, I wondered if I might have passed out from blood loss.

Our campfire was still there, the circle of stones and ashes within a testament to how recently we'd been here. Was it only two days ago?

Torr circled around the campfire to face the others, cut the engine on my bike, and waited for everyone else to do the same. "We're not staying," he announced. "No more than an hour. Have a bite, take a piss, stretch your legs. But we're going straight to the safe houses after this."

Santos came over to help Torr get me off the bike, despite my effort to wave him off. "I'm okay. I'm okay, really—aw, fuck!"

The second my heel touched the ground, fiery hot pain lanced up my leg and the guys gave me patronizing I-told-you-so looks.

"Get Val over here," Torr ordered, bracing my dead weight against his body. "She'll know what to do."

While Santos left to do just that, Torr had me lean against the bike while he got out a blanket to spread on the ground. He also pulled out a fifth of vodka, and I would've swayed if I wasn't already hanging over the seat. That shit was gonna hurt.

“Come here.” Torr manipulated me like a doll, letting me hang all over him while he eased me down to the blanket with the least amount of impact.

“Look at that, you get to save me for once.” I grimaced.

“Seems like Devin already did that.” Torr unbuckled his belt and pulled it through the loops. I was about to make a dirty joke when he folded the strip of leather in half and stretched it out in front of my mouth. “You’re gonna want to bite down on this.”

“Fuck me,” I groaned before accepting the belt between my teeth.

“Good girl.” Torr smirked, and I rolled my eyes.

Santos returned then with Val on his heels. She carried a small, metal white box with a red cross on it. I recognized it as the kit from the field medic class we’d taken together, taught by none other than my mother.

“Alright, let’s see what we got.” My cousin knelt next to me on the blanket as she proceeded to glove up. She nodded at the vodka by Torr. “Already got the disinfectant out. Good job, Torr.”

She swiftly cut away my pant leg while I looked at Santos who was scowling and keeping his distance.

“Hnnn,” I said through the belt in my mouth and gestured for him to come closer.

He shook his head. “It’s my fault. I let this happen to you.”

Oh, fuck that. I spit out the belt and ignored Torr’s annoyed glance. “Stop it. You didn’t know what he was going to do. Nobody could have predicted this.”

“I should have been watching him.”

“You were trying to get my attention. If anything, Devin should have had a hold on him, but neither of you could have thought to restrain him.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but you need this now.” Torr shoved his belt against my mouth, and I took it again, like an obedient

horse accepting a bridle.

Val wasted no time after that. She unscrewed the vodka and proceeded to dump the alcohol over the bloody mess on my leg.

The nearest hills and canyons were miles away, and my scream still made an echo. Tears sprang to my eyes and my legs flailed out to escape the sharpest pain I'd ever felt in my life. Torr restrained my legs, and my distress prompted Santos to move in closer.

My sweet Butcher sat behind me, drawing my back to his chest as his arms came around me. He was restraining my arms so I'd stop flailing, but he also provided comfort.

"Even if you don't blame me, I'm sorry anyway," he murmured with a kiss below my ear.

Val finished her torture and began wiping my skin with a sterile cloth while I breathed in harsh, ragged pants.

"Good news," she announced chirpily. "You have an entry and exit wound. Looks like the bullet went through the meat of your calf muscle and didn't hit any bone. It's pretty clean as far as I can tell. I can close you up for now, but you'll need an actual doctor when we get back to the safe houses."

I spat out the belt, the leather now drenched in saliva and covered in deep teeth marks. "Fan-fucking-tastic, cuz."

Torr fed me water and small handfuls of trail mix while Val packed and covered my wound. My whole right side was throbbing now, the adrenaline wearing off and the pain of reality settling in.

I'd never been shot before. And I still had trouble wrapping my head around the fact that it wasn't from an enemy, nor was it an accident. Hudson saw me, pointed the gun, and fired. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Val gave me some extra-strength pain tablets, which I swallowed down with more water. After she left, I spoke in a low voice to my two men.

"So, is Devin watching him?" I asked Santos.

“Yeah.” He rubbed a palm over his short, buzzed hair. “I can’t really stand to be around him right now.”

“Don’t blame you,” Torr muttered. “We have to figure out what we’re gonna do with him.”

What to do with Hudson? Yes, that was ultimately my decision. One I should have been turning over in my mind right then, but pain and blood loss made my brain go fuzzy. I just wanted to sleep until my leg didn’t hurt anymore.

“Paloma.” Santos paused, hesitating.

He didn’t speak again until I prompted him. “Yes?”

When he finally met my eyes, his expression was full of worry. “Before he...did that, I was calling out to you. I called your name several times, and it was like you just...checked out. You didn’t respond at all until the moment before Hudson shot you.”

Torr shifted so that he was seated right in front of me. “I thought I heard him calling out to you. What happened, Ror?”

Fuck. How to explain the visions I had of them and that I had been talking to...some entity? An entity that wanted to recruit me, by the sounds of it?

I blew out a breath and tried to shift to a more comfortable position, thinking of how to explain myself without making them panic.

“The cult worships a goddess, right?” was the best my exhausted, blood-deprived brain could spit out.

“Yeah, they call it the Dark Mother,” Santos confirmed.

“Well, I think their belief has become so potent that it’s...real. As real as Astarte or Tezca. And it talked to me.”

The two of them immediately stiffened. Torr cursed and brought his face close to mine. “What did it say?”

I shook my head. “A bunch of bullshit. It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that these guys were right, and we have to listen to them.” I nodded at Tezca, who was ambling over toward us. His coat had a glossy sheen in the bright sunlight,



the spot pattern appearing and disappearing with his graceful movements. Astarte was hitching a ride, perched on the big cat's shoulder blades.

“Right about what?” Santos scratched under his jaguar's chin, and Tezca emitted a low rumbling purr.

“This whole fight started with humans, but it has the potential to get out of hand quickly,” I remarked. “Especially now that they have a god on their side.”

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AN ETERNITY LATER, we finally made it to the safe houses. It was nightfall by the following day, and everyone was practically falling off their bikes by the time we arrived. I'd have to hold church and talk to everyone at some point, but that could wait until I'd slept for a solid day or two.

Santos and Torr had both fallen into bed with me, and I was too exhausted to even celebrate that fact. When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was that my leg no longer hurt, except for some twinging soreness.

The second thing I noticed was that I wasn't boxed in by two bodies, but three.

My foot hit something warm and furry at the foot of the bed as I turned over, and then I yelped as something hot and scratchy slid over my ankle.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Tezca,” I gasped, bringing my hand to my chest as I sat up. “Warn a girl before you start licking her feet.”

The jaguar just stared at me through half-lidded yellow eyes, then stretched out long across the bottom of the bed, paws and tail dangling off the edges.

All the commotion had roused my guys and they both stirred, turning in towards me as if their first instinct, even half asleep, was to protect me.

Since I was sitting up, the two of them nuzzled up to my waist. Torr threw an arm over my knees and Santos rested his head on my thigh.

“How you feelin’?” Santos asked sleepily, his eyes still closed as he stroked down the side of my leg.

“Better.” I reached down and dragged my hands over both of their heads, enjoying the two different textures—Santos’ buzzed scalp and Torr’s longer strands. “Good as new, almost.”

“Thank fuck.” Torr planted a kiss on my hip and hugged around my legs tighter.

“And I’ve decided I want Hudson gone,” I announced.

That got both of them stiffening and then sitting up.

“Can I shoot him first?” Torr rubbed sleep out of his eyes and then stretched. “An eye for an eye and all that shit.”

“You want him gone...where?” Santos asked at the same time.

“I don’t know yet. But I don’t want him near me, and especially not near other women like Val and Paige. Actually, I’m not too worried about Val, but I don’t want him in the same territory as Paige.”

“He’s...not well.” Santos rubbed his face and looked tired enough to fall back asleep. “Not just in the head, that much is obvious. But physically, he’s not doing great either. I haven’t talked to him, but Dev says he looks malnourished.”

“So when the doctor comes out to look at my leg, he’ll be examined too.” I sat up straighter. “Did anyone else get injured?”

“No.” Torr shook his head. “Those sentries had big guns but obviously weren’t trained on how to use them. You were the only one who got shot.”

“Lucky me,” I said drolly, and leaned back against the headboard. “Obviously, we need to ensure it’s a male doctor we get out here.”

“I can make that call.” Torr started getting out of bed.

“No, I can do it. I should talk to my mom anyway.”

“Fine, but you stay resting, creep.” He picked up the jeans he’d discarded on the floor. “I’m getting us breakfast.”

“You go with him.” I kissed Santos’ neck. “Check on everyone for me.”

He grinned and kissed my cheek before sliding out. “You just want the bed to yourself.”

“Obviously. Now that I have you two, starfishing will be a rare luxury.”

My fighter chuckled as he too picked up his pants from the floor and began sliding them on.

“Oh hey, Santos?” I said after a moment of thinking.

“Yes, paloma?” He leaned over the bed, reaching for another kiss, which I gave him.

“If you see Devin, tell him I want to talk to him.”



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DEVIN



**M**y chest felt weird as I rapped my knuckles on Rori's door, then stood back and waited. What was this sensation, all tight like my rib cage was constricted while also feeling light and fluttery at the same time?

Could this be...nervousness?

"Come in," she called from the other side.

I let myself in to find Rori dressed, thankfully, although it was less than her usual getup of dark jeans and black leather jacket. She had on a tank top and shorts and was doing pistol squats next to the bed, her bandaged leg extended in front of her as she raised and lowered herself with the other leg.

"You wanted to see me?" I cleared my throat, unsure why my voice was more hoarse than normal.

"Yeah." She pressed up to full height, then sat on the foot of the bed, looking over at me with a sheepish smile. "I've been told to rest, but I'm just going stir crazy in here."

"Have you tried a disguise to escape unnoticed?" I asked. "Maybe growing a beard and putting on a trench coat?"

She laughed and rubbed at the nonexistent facial hair on her cheek. "Working on it. Come in. Shut the door."

A prickle rose along the back of my neck as I did what she asked. It wasn't alarm or even discomfort alerting my senses. This just...felt all wrong, being in a closed bedroom with my friend's girl. Who he shared with another guy, but that was

neither here nor there. They had their triad thing going on, and I was not part of it. Nor did I have any desire to be part of it.

Still, I tamped down the urge to escape the room and stood with my back against the door.

Rori remained sitting on the foot of the bed, looking thoughtful for a while before she spoke.

“I know you and I haven’t exactly been friendly since we met. That being said, I just want to say thank you for what you did out there.”

Outwardly, I gave a sharp nod. Inside, I was too confused to know what to feel. Brushing it off was always a safe bet, right? “Santos had his hands full, and he would’ve killed me for leaving you to bleed out in the dirt.”

Yep, blame my buddy who was in love with her. It was always the most convenient excuse.

A smile pulled slowly at her lips as if she knew it was exactly that, an excuse. “Well, look at you being so considerate of others.”

I ducked my chin to hide my laugh, but it was too late. Aw, fuck, I was in trouble if she could see right through me.

“Really, though. You acted quickly and most likely saved my life, so I’m grateful. This would have gone all cockeyed without you, Devin.”

Damn it, now the discomfort was setting in. Her praise made my body and brain send off all kinds of opposing signals. She was being genuine, I knew that at the surface. But every other time I’d been in this position, alone with a woman complimenting my achievements, it had been a manipulation tactic. A means of softening me up before using me.

“Anyone else in my position would have done the same,” I answered stiffly. “Is there anything else?”

Rori straightened, her relaxed expression hardening. “How’s Hudson doing?”

The question took me aback, and I did not hide it. “I’m surprised you would ask.”

“So am I,” she said dryly.

“He’s...well, not great,” I admitted.

“He’s dangerous.”

Now that got me defensive, and I squared my shoulders in her direction. “He’s been through an insane amount of trauma. What me and Santos went through doesn’t hold a candle to him. I’m actually shocked he’s held on this long. But what he needs most is help, Rori.”

Her expression softened by only a fraction. “I can understand that. But we can’t have someone around who will shoot at people indiscriminately.”

“He won’t do that again,” I protested. “He will need *lots* of time to adjust to a normal life again, but Hudson is not a violent person at his core. He’s like Santos, kind of. He just...lashed out because he’s basically a cornered animal.”

Rori narrowed her eyes. “I thought we were about to start getting along better, but here you are, defending the man who could have killed me if Santos hadn’t jumped him.”

“Obviously, that was wrong, full stop.” I extended my palm out to her, imploring her to understand. “But all he’s known, all day, every day for *years*, is being tied to a bed and raped by women, Rori. He’s never even had the tiny freedoms that we had as gladiators. He never got to choose weapons to defend himself. He was never given the choice to fight for his life or die. It’s just been endless women in his face, on top of him, touching him, and there’s nothing he could do about it. And I’m sorry, but can you put yourself in his shoes just for a minute? What would you do, if that had been your life for six years and you saw a man as you were making your escape? If you had access to a gun, would you take the chance of *not* shooting?”

Rori said nothing and her expression didn’t change, but I knew my words had hit home. The silence stretched out between us until she asked quietly, “What do you suggest be done with him?”

I sighed and rubbed my forehead, the responsibility of Hudson hitting me then like a ton of bricks. Who knew if he ever would be able to return to a normal life? Could ever safely interact with women again? Hell, even be in the same room as one?

“I’ll work with him,” I said. “He’ll stay in the other house with the fighters, as long as you and the other women don’t mind staying here. I think it’ll help if I’m around him and he’s around other guys, you know. It’ll make him feel safer.”

“And then?” Rori prompted.

“I guess we’ll have to see.”

She sighed, the breath of air deflating her. “I’ll see if a trauma therapist can come up here. Frankly, I think you, Santos, and all the other fighters could use some therapy.”

“I guess that’s fair. As long as it’s a male therapist.”

“Of course.”

She gave me a strange look then, one that got me all kinds of defensive. “What?”

“Are you in love with him?”

“Who?” I demanded.

“Hudson, who else?”

“I—no.” Her stare didn’t waver, and it felt like being under a microscope. “I...wouldn’t call it that,” I amended with an awkward chuckle. “I’ve always carried a torch for him, somewhat. But you know, the situation we were in didn’t exactly lend to anything romantic developing.”

“So, working with him, as you say.” Rori steepled her fingers. “Is it personal to you?”

“I want to see him get better,” I admitted. “I want to see him thriving and healthy again. But as far as hoping for something to happen between us?” I waved that away. “It’s been years. He’s fragile, and I’d never take advantage of him while he’s like this. Besides, I’m fucked up in my own way.



I'm not what he needs." I shrugged. "I don't even know if he's into guys, to be honest."

A slow smile pulled at Rori's lips again, the one that said she knew more than she was letting on. "We're all fucked up in our own ways, Devin. That doesn't mean we'd be terrible friends or romantic partners. I mean—" she raised a hand, catching herself. "I don't mean you and me but in general."

"I know what you mean." I laughed softly. "And I appreciate the sentiment."

She smiled wider. "The fact that you're willing to look after Hudson this much is a testament to how un-fucked up you really are. As is you saving my life out there."

I looked at the floor, for some reason unable to look her in the eye. "Thank you for saying that."

\* \* \*

AN HOUR LATER, I knocked on Hudson's door. He didn't answer, so I opened it just enough to stick my head in. "Hey, just me."

"Hey." He was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling with his feet out wide. It was eerily just like the position he'd been kept in, only now his hands were on his chest.

"Is it cool if I hang for a bit?"

"Do whatever you want," he said in a flat voice.

I tried to not take that tone personally as I slipped inside and closed the door behind me. "You not hungry?" I gestured toward the untouched plate of food on the bedside table.

"Don't trust it," he answered.

"There's nothing in it, man. Santos made it."

"Someone else could have put something in it."

I marched over and picked up the plate of cold chicken tacos. Standing in front of Hudson, I took a big bite out of one,

making a show of chewing and swallowing. The meat was grilled to perfection, though it could have been spicier.

“See?” I put down the plate and spread my hands out. “All good.”

Hudson didn't look convinced. Shit, he didn't look *alive*, staring blankly at the paint up there. “Is Santos still pissed at me?”

I stroked my beard. “Well, yeah. He gets why you did it, but he's protective.”

Hudson scoffed like that was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. “Protective.”

I sucked in a breath, at first unsure of how much to tiptoe around this with him, but fuck it. He was an adult when he got captured, we all were. His brain was developed enough to know that not all women were the enemy.

*And so's yours, big guy*, I thought to myself.

“Her name is Aurora. Rori. And yeah, Santos is in love with her. She's his woman.” I crossed my arms, watching for a reaction from him. “She's the one who led and organized this effort to get you out. So yeah, he's pissed that you shot her unprovoked. And he's not the only one.”

“You including yourself in that?” Now Hudson turned his head to look at me, those once electric blue eyes now dead and dull.

“Hudson, man,” I sighed. “You're back in the real world now. You're gonna have to interact with women. I mean, we'll provide a buffer for a while and give you some time to acclimate, but that's just how it is.”

He shot up and came to stand in front of me almost faster than I could track. The guy had always been quick and decisive in his movements. I almost wanted to say it was a shame that he hadn't ended up in the gladiator ring with us. He would have been honed into an incredible fighter.

And maybe he wouldn't be looking so dead and haunted.

“I don’t want *that* woman, or any other, coming near me,” he hissed. “Distance is fine. I can control myself. But no woman will *ever* touch me or get within range of touching me again. Do you get what I’m saying, Devin?”

“Sure, man. That’s fair—”

“If they do, I swear to God, I won’t miss this time.” He scowled, the burning hatred in his eyes the only thing lighting him up. “If a woman so much as breathes on me, I *will* kill her.”

# EPILOGUE

RORI



I woke up with three animal faces staring at me in the darkness. Astarte, Tezca, and Lupa, Gwen's wolf, were all sitting on my bed, their faces inches away from mine. And yet the bed felt weightless, like there were no animals on top of me at all.

"Okay." I sat up and leaned against the headboard. "I know for a fact that this is a dream. So what's up, guys?"

Astarte spoke first. *Remember what I told you, Aurora. We cannot tell you the events of the future or anything that would alter the decisions you make out of free will. That being said, we are here to guide you. The decisions you make going forward are tantamount to the objective you seek. Listen closely and remember. You will not know what any of this means now, but you will when the time comes.*

I blinked at the white dove, looking like a sliver of bird-shaped moonlight in this dreamscape. She usually sounded annoyed with me, but I barely recognized her tone now. I'd never heard her sound so dire and serious.

"Okay, I'm listening."

Tezcatlipoca's velvety, thunderous voice filled my head next. *You must hold onto yourself, Aurora. Even when your mind shatters and you lose sense of who you are.*

I sat up higher. "Wait, what?"

*You must not lose your voice, Lupa said next. Even when you're choking on toxic sludge and only poison comes out.*

“What the *hell* do you guys mean?”

*You must not lose sight of those you love, Astarte said. Even when your eyes show you horrors that break your heart.*

“What could possibly...okay, I know you said I wouldn’t understand, but seriously, what the *fuck*?”

The wolf and the jaguar faded away like they were apparitions made of mist and only Astarte remained.

*This will be the hardest battle you, or any living human, will have to face. And you cannot afford to lose it.*

I tried to pull in a deep breath, but my lungs felt seized up and unable to take more than small sips of air. “You can’t tell me anything else?”

For the first time, I wasn’t asking to get on the bird’s nerves but because I was scared shitless of what was coming

*I can tell you one more thing.*

“Yes?”

*When it’s pulling you under, and you feel yourself losing the fight and letting go, scream.*

\* \* \*

Thank you so much for reading Harmless! The story concludes in the third and final Vengeful Gods MC book, Deathless.

**[Deathless is available for pre-order now!](#)**

\* \* \*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crystal Ash is a USA Today Bestselling Author from California. She loves writing steamy, heart-wrenching romance with tortured heroes, especially if they're in a reverse harem. Crystal's other loves include animals, mythology, and well-crafted alcohol, most of which can also be found in her stories.

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