

ADELAIDE BLAIKE

A RIEHSE ESHAN  
SERIES NOVELLA



A  
GUARD AND  
A GARDENER

A Guard and a Gardener  
A Riehse Eshan Series Novella  
ADELAIDE BLAIKE

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

While some of the practices and languages in this book share similarities to real cultures, this is for fictional entertainment purposes only and (many) changes have been made to suit the story told. As such, nothing in this book is intended to be an accurate reflection or commentary on any real culture or person, alive or deceased.

It is recommended that this book is read after completing the four books of the *Riehse Eshan* series, as it is set after *An Oath and a Promise* and contains spoilers for that series.

This book contains a major trigger warning for torture and PTSD. It also features mild daddy kink (although there is no age play or regression). This book is intended for mature readers only, and reader discretion is advised.

# MAP



# CHAPTER ONE

## *Jiron*

*“Does that hurt?”*

The words, whispered in my ear by someone I couldn't see, made me go rigid.

But my limbs were bound tight, as they had been since I'd first been brought here, leather straps lashing my arms, neck, and ankles to tall posts driven into the ground until I could barely move an inch. I'd broken one of the restraints the second day, pulling against the cord that bit into my wrist until it snapped, but my captors had responded quickly and viciously, beating every inch of my body until darkness took hold and I'd woken secured twice as effectively as before.

“You're a tough one, big guy.” The whisper was back, and fuck, I'd hoped to never hear that voice again. “I can always get my guests to scream, but you're holding out on me, aren't you?”

I didn't respond.

Ademar would have backtalked them until they took his tongue. Luis would have cracked jokes. Elías, I expected, would have delivered his flattest, most unimpressed look until they withered under his stare.

I favoured silence. Pretending my captors didn't exist, that I wasn't here but was back with Ren and Mathias in that hut in the woods, that was how I was getting through this. Feeling the reassuring hilt of my sword under my fingertips, the grip worn and familiar, as I kept one wary eye on the door and the other on the two boys curled up together on the ratty bed. The way my prince's fingers entwined with Mathias'; how the northerner pressed his face into Ren's hair in turn. Sleepy little gestures of effortless affection between them that warmed my

heart and confirmed that watching over them was not a chore, but the greatest honour I could have received.

“Let’s try this again.”

Vicious pain blossomed through the side of my head, sending flashes of light and colour across my vision. Through the agony and disorientation, I saw the hammer that had just been used to hit me drop to the ground at my feet, soil coating the blood in a sticky, gruesome mess.

“You’re going to die from that, big guy.” The tone, as always, was conversational. “It’s taken a nice chunk out of your skull, all that shattered bone and brain matter, and you really don’t have long left. Want to tell me where that prince of yours is?”

I couldn’t think of anything I wanted *less*.

The inside of the basement I was being kept in swam before my eyes, refusing to stay still.

“We’re going to find him, you know,” the man said as nausea made my stomach roil, the pain bitter and horrid. But it wasn’t as foul as the words that rolled from my torturer’s mouth as he sank into the part of the endless cycle I hated the most.

The taunts. The sick promises.

“And when we do find little Renato, we’ll be sure to make you watch as we cut out his eyes. As we fuck his pretty corpse. We’ll send him to the afterlife with your name carved into his fucking heart so Dios will know who was responsible.”

He leaned in to whisper his next words in my ear.

“Tell us where he is, big guy, and I can promise you both quick deaths instead.”

*Never.*

The thought...the *oath*, echoed around my head and darkness began to take me.

As I wondered if this was it at last, the day I was finally allowed to die, the flicker of blue and red sparks flashed in the

gloom. The rebel healer sighed as he restored my body whole, patting my shoulder as if in reassurance.

“Very well.” He bent to pick up the bloody hammer. “Let’s try that again.”

A grunt pushed its way between my lips, a scream threatening to follow on its heels, but something clamped my mouth shut before it could erupt. I struggled against the gag I didn’t remember them putting on me, feeling warm flesh on my lips and-

“Jiron!”

No. They’d never known my name: that was something else I’d refused to give them. How did...

“Jiron, you daft bastard. Come back to us!”

The tension left my body as I finally recognised the voice, the familiar scent of baked goods and seed oil helping me to place it through the horror of the nightmare.

*Luis.*

I forced my eyes open, snapping them to the other man’s. Luis had a knee tucked onto what little space was left at the side of my cot, pressing a hand firmly over my mouth. He was one of the few people who could hold me down with nothing but his own strength, and only because my limbs had become uselessly tangled in the thin, sweat-soaked bedsheet.

“You’re in the palace,” he told me, reciting the usual assurances. “The pricks who did all that to you are dead. Ren is safe.”

“That one comes *first*,” I snarled at him, grabbing his wrist and removing his hand from my mouth.

“He does,” Luis conceded. “He always does.”

There was a clatter of plates from the royal antechamber next door, followed by a loud, haughty Mazekhstani curse that left neither of us in doubt as to its speaker.

“They both do,” Luis amended, grinning through his snort of amusement as Mathias continued to hurl insults at our king.

I pushed myself up so I was sitting on the cot, stretching out my shoulders and grimacing at the bitter taste in my mouth that made me realise I’d bitten my tongue sometime in the night. Luis handed me a clay cup of water without being asked and I grunted out my thanks, downing it in a single gulp.

“Jiron,” he began hesitatingly, scratching at his knee. Realising that he was still sitting naked on my bed, I waved him back to his own on the other side of the room. He went begrudgingly, keeping a wary eye on me as if he expected me to relapse any moment.

Which, I supposed, was entirely possible. And that was the worst of what had been done to me: I’d rebuilt the muscle I’d lost from the torture and starvation, and Starling had healed the remainder of the physical damage that the rebel healer hadn’t fixed before he died, his only goal being to keep me alive so they could continue to fuck me over.

But what all that had done to my mind? By the Blessed Five, I hadn’t even realised at first, sinking into that place I’d retreated to when the pain became unbearable, and it was only after I’d been rescued and saw the worried expressions of my friends that it began to dawn on me that something was wrong. I’d fought it as fiercely as I’d defended both my princes that day in the north Quarehian woods, but also like that day, determination itself wasn’t enough to stave off my defeat. The trauma and damage continued to steal pieces of me: a few minutes of lost time here, a flashback there, nightmares nearly every night.

“Jiron,” Luis said again. “I don’t think keeping you quiet is the answer.”

Neither did I, but I wasn’t having anyone else hear me cry out. The king had more than enough shit to deal with for me to add mine, and the guards’ bedchamber we occupied was too close to his own rooms to hope my screams wouldn’t make their



way to him just as his consort's frequently drifted in here. The pair of them liked to play particularly rough.

"I appreciate what you're doing for me," I told my friend, watching Luis' expression twist between half a dozen emotions as he tried to work out if he was helping or not. "It won't be for much longer."

*I hope.*

"Better not be," he retorted, stretching out on his bed with his hands tucked casually beneath his head, his hair pulled loose from its ties. "The rest of us need our beauty sleep if we have any chance of snagging ourselves someone as young and pretty as you have."

My fingers fumbled at the shirt I was pulling over my head. Dios damn it, the simple reference to the boy's existence stripped away every layer of professionalism and calm I'd carefully built up over the years. "We're not...Wyatt's not..."

"Uh huh." Luis closed his eyes. "Then you won't mind if I relax after my long shift by jerking off to the fantasy of all that blonde hair wrapped around my fist as he sucks me off?"

White hot fury surged through me, and the other guard grunted as my tossed pillow hit him squarely in the stomach. I fought the urge to follow it over there and wipe the smirk from his smug face.

"Fuck *off*, Luis."

He just laughed.

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# CHAPTER TWO



My heaving breaths echoed loudly in my ears, my mouth dry and my legs aching. All of that was perfectly acceptable for this lovely sunny morning – and not just acceptable, but even *normal*, considering how often I slept in and had to sprint to the palace to avoid being late for work – but the huge man blocking my path was not, in any way, acceptable, and nor was his reason for doing so.

“Come on, Wyatt,” Macario Aiza coaxed, flashing crooked teeth as he offered me a warm grin. I hated that I’d once lived for those smiles. “Just give me it, and then I won’t need to bother you anymore.”

“I’ve already given you too much,” I said, my stomach churning as it always did when I said *no* to someone. It was only because it was Mac – incessant, demanding, *cheating* Mac – that I could say it at all. “And you always come back for more.”

“Not this time,” he said. “It’s just a one-off, I swear.”

That’s what he’d promised last time. And the time before that.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I don’t have any.”

“That’s bullshit.” Mac instantly dropped the pleasantness, the sweet act that was all most people saw and had half our neighbourhood in Máros admonishing me for ‘*abandoning that nice boy*’. If only they knew.

“Don’t forget I know how much that cushy job in the palace gardens pays you,” he said darkly, taking a step towards me. I took one back, acutely aware of the differences in our height and weight. “No one likes a fucking liar, Wyatt.”

“I’m not lying. Mother needed a healer last month, and then there were the repairs to the door that you broke, and-”

“You can afford *one* gold coin.” Macario cocked his head, considering me. “Even two, for what you put me through.”

What I put *him* through?

I must have stared at him for too long, my disbelief over his hypocrisy rendering me mute, because my ex-lover’s expression turned even uglier.

“If you insist on pretending you have no money,” he snapped, grabbing me by the hair and pulling it sharply, “then at least get me something to sell. There must be enough fucking riches lying around that place to fill the ocean.”

He nodded behind me at the palace and continued his angry mutterings, ignoring my pained whimpers and the way my fingers scrabbled uselessly at his hand.

“Mac, you’re hurting me-”

He yanked harder on my hair and I yelped, tears springing to my eyes.

“...you’ll do that for me, won’t you, Wyatt?”

“*Si*,” I gasped, willing to agree to whatever he was asking of me now if he’d just let go of me. Which he did, mercifully, patting down the lock of hair on the left side of my head that never seemed to sit flat. It was such a familiar gesture, as was the way Macario scowled when it didn’t stay in place, that my heart felt all squishy and painful and confused.

“Of course you will,” he said softly, all smiles and soothing words again once more. “Things are really tough for me right now, Wyatt, and you’re too good a person to kick a man when he’s down.”

He stepped to the side, graciously waving me past. The thick muscles in his arm flexed with the movement. “Have a lovely day at work. I’ll see you later.”

I knew I should tell him that I didn’t want to ever see him *again*, but that hadn’t gone down so well the last time I’d said it, me on the doorstep of the small set of rooms I rented in

south Máros and Mac staggering down the stairwell, his stomach full of ale and his tongue sharp and bitter.

I also didn't want him to hurt me again, and I was now actually late for work.

So I gave him a faint smile and edged past, trying not to brush against his outstretched arm. Yet he moved at the last moment so I bumped into him anyway.

Mac chuckled and clicked his tongue. "Always so clumsy, Wyatt."

The words echoed around me as I darted up the rest of the road, the steep incline to the palace pushing the final breath from my body. And when I tripped while passing under the raised portcullis, the humiliation did nothing to ease the sting of proving Macario right.

A strong hand closed around my arm, catching me just before I faceplanted onto the cobblestones. My heart leapt as I saw the blue coat sleeve in my periphery, its gold edging marking my saviour as a guard.

"Jiron!" I said delightedly, only for disappointment to flood through me when the man set me back on my feet and I recognised the Comandante instead.

"Uh, sir," I corrected, trying for a salute like I'd seen the palace guards do. I didn't think I quite managed to pull it off, but Elías seemed to get the gist and his face cracked into a small smile.

"Wyatt," he said. "Please be more careful. I'd hate for you to hurt yourself."

He looked at the sky. "Jiron would be insufferable," he added under his breath, and I tried to hide how much the comment pleased me.

"Sorry, sir," I mumbled.

Elías glanced back down at me. "Unless you're an hour early for your shift, which from what I've heard of you would be a Dios-damned miracle, I expect you're late for work, Wyatt."

I squinted past him to the huge clock face on the central tower of the palace. It was visible from most of the grounds, including the gardens where I'd been due to report ten minutes ago.

Ah, well. My mistress would forgive me. There were some in our team who resented her holding the role of head gardener merely because she was a woman: they'd been depressingly slow to adapt to the new way of things in Quareh, just as I understood there was still unrest in the northern countries over their recent legalisation of same sex and gender relationships. I didn't give a shit. Our mistress was competent and decisive and knew more about plants than any of us, even though she'd had to learn a whole new climate of flora when she moved to Máros.

"I don't suppose you'd tell señorita Zovisasha that the clock winder was overexuberant this morning and it's fifteen minutes fast?" I asked with undisguised hope.

The Comandante chuckled before nudging my shoulder to shoo me on. "No, but I may be convinced to mention that you were running an errand for me this morning which made you late, *if* you work hard to make up for it."

"I always work hard," I told him sweetly. "But today, I promise I'll work as hard as our king does."

Elías' eyes shot to mine, and when he frowned, trying to work out if I was being treasonously sarcastic, I gave him a cheery wave and skipped past him to the archway that led to the gardens.

\*

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Jiron*

Closing the door on Luis' snores, I instinctively scanned the antechamber for Ren, only allowing myself to relax when I had confirmed he was safe.

The young king was lying on the rug and staring in thought at the ceiling, with his knees bent and the soles of his expensive boots resting audaciously on his husband's back.

Mathias himself was sitting cross-legged on the floor, elbows resting on the coffee table. An open bottle of ink rested next to his right hand, which was dutifully scratching out words with a tattered quill that I knew had been in much better shape only yesterday. He paused, frowning, and began to absently pluck barbs from the feather's vane, confirming my suspicions.

"How many Ps are in 'appropriate'?"

"Twenty," Ren said promptly. He pulled himself upright and peered over Mathias' shoulder at the parchment he was glaring at. "Ah. You only used four. That's your mistake."

His consort scowled and shoved his face away.

Ren pretended to pout. "Why are you writing to Astrid Panarina, anyway?"

"I wanted to ask how she was," Mathias admitted quietly, tossing the ruined quill down onto the half-finished letter. "I haven't spoken to her since our wedding."

Ren cocked his head, sprawling himself across the lounge and winking at me to let me know he'd noticed my arrival. "Then why don't you ask her in person? We could be in Stavroyarsk within the fortnight."

Mathias' eyes lit up. "Really? We can do that?"

The king laughed, long and loud, and it buoyed my heart to hear – and see – him so happy.

“*Mi amor,*” he said fondly. “You can do whatever you want, and you fucking well know that. If a long ass carriage ride to the hellish north to visit a woman with the personality of a glacier herself is what you want...who am I to complain?”

Everyone in the room, including the royal guards at the door standing appropriately alert and wary, knew he would indeed be complaining. Loudly, vigorously, and incessantly, but his husband was the only one who’d be stuck for days in a confined carriage with him.

Mathias made his opinions on that known by seating himself in Ren’s lap, looking extremely pleased. It was an expression he immediately doused when the king glanced at him, feigning boredom instead, and by Dios, it was exhausting to watch the two of them at it.

As the boys murmured soft words of affection to each other, littered with creatively cruel insults, my mind was already racing over the logistics of a return trip to Stavroyarsk. We’d need to pay the selected guards overtime, make sure to pack additional provisions for when we reached the colder climates, and-

I exhaled as I remembered it was no longer my job. Elías would have all those things in hand, and while I was sure the Comandante would approve my request to accompany them, I couldn’t deny the twinge of shame. If I was better, if I was *whole*, I could lead such an excursion myself. But when I couldn’t be trusted not to lose myself at any given time, how could I be trusted with something as precious as my king’s safety?

“*Does that hurt?*”

“*How about this?*”

I clenched my jaw, refusing to make a sound.

The darkness abated and I blinked at the lounge. Ren now sat alone, Mathias having entirely disappeared from the room, and

someone had cleared the tea set from the low table.

Shit.

“Jiron,” said Ren, and I tried not to show my panic at having blanked out yet again. But my charge knew me too well, and the shrewd look he was giving me said he wasn’t fooled at all. “I wish to ease my headache before meeting with Lilia and the other palace tutors this afternoon. You’ll accompany me down to Starling’s surgery.”

“Jiron’s not on duty, sire,” one of his guards murmured from where she was standing by the door.

“I don’t care,” Ren immediately shot back, offering me a warning glance that said I better not either.

Knowing exactly how full of shit he was about this alleged headache, and him knowing I’d never call him out on it, I bowed dutifully.

The king beamed, looped his arm through mine, and dragged me from his chambers to the surgery on the ground floor of the palace.

“Estrella!” Ren called loudly after making me push open the door for him without knocking. The surgery was larger than the one at *la Cortina* had been, with high windows overlooking the sloping gardens beyond and giving the room an airier, brighter feel. With the little healer’s exceptional magical ability, patients never needed to stay here long, so the additional beds that had once lined the room had been replaced with a row of bookshelves along the back wall. It was an eclectic library, featuring everything from medical journals to novels written in Mazekhstani that the king had joyfully assured me were shamelessly fun erotica. I didn’t dare disbelieve him.

“What is it today, Your Boorishness?” Starling asked, wiping her hands on a cloth and approaching Ren with a sceptical expression. Her frizzy hair was mostly scraped back into a bun, although several scraggly strands wisped around her face.



It reminded me of Wyatt, and the adorable tuft of hair on the left side of the Lukian boy's head that never sat flat.

I glanced out of the window, scanning the men and women working in the gardens and hoping to spot the distinctive blonde hair of my...friend.

"Well," said Ren, and I hid my smile at the wicked mischief audible in his voice. "After fucking Mathias into the mattress six times last night, my cock is feeling a little worn out. I believe it needs some personal, *hands-on* healing."

"That is not in my job description," said Starling with barely restrained horror, staring at him pleadingly. Evidently realising the futility in appealing to Ren's infamous lack of mercy, she turned huge eyes my way instead. "Please tell him it's not!"

I cleared my throat. "We are all honoured to serve our king," I reminded her, and she huffed out an irritated breath. Had she really expected me to take her side over his?

"If you're going to be more of a sullen ass than my husband on an early morning, Estrella," Ren drawled, "you can check Jiron over instead."

There it was.

Starling immediately gravitated to my side in relief, running sparking hands over my shoulder as it was the closest to my head she could reach even up on her toes.

Some of the tension eased from my body, but I knew that the reprieve was physical only: nothing she'd ever done had eased the mess my mind had become, or made sleeping any easier. Either I tossed and turned for hours seeking rest that never came, or I drowned in far-too-real nightmares like the one Luis had woken me from this morning.

But letting Starling do her thing made my king happy, and that was all that mattered.

"We'll be heading to Stavroyarsk in about a fortnight's time," he said casually as she worked, inspecting his fingernails even though they wouldn't be allowed to be anything less than

perfect. “You might as well travel with us rather than on your own next week.”

“I’m not-”

“Excellent, it’s decided,” said Ren, cutting off her protest.

It seemed he’d already managed to use his promise to Mathias to his own advantage in delaying the healer’s scheduled return north. Starling spent half of each year with us and half in the Mazekhstani city of Stavroyarsk, but clearly our king had decided that halves didn’t need to be equal portions.

“Now I wish to visit the gardens,” he declared the moment the healer threw her hands up in frustration, grinning at me with entirely unconvincing innocence. “Carry me,” Ren demanded, and I’d instinctively gathered him into my arms before I realised what I’d done.

“I can’t,” I said with reluctance. I attempted to put him back down on his feet, but the obstinate royal clung onto my arms, narrowing his eyes. I tried again. “Your Majesty, if I have another...episode, I could drop you.”

“You won’t,” he said cheerfully, and patted my chest as if that was all the assurance either of us needed.

“It’s not a good idea,” Starling disagreed, folding her arms.

Ren groaned into my shirt, wriggling around to do so, and I tightened my grip on him before he could fall. “You’ve never shown concern for my welfare before, señorita, so for both of our sakes please don’t start now.”

“I don’t give a shit about you,” she retorted, and I tensed as I always did when someone spoke disparagingly of Ren. I’d had sore shoulders for months after Mathias arrived in our lives. “But Jiron needs rest, and hauling your fat ass around isn’t helping.”

The king froze. “Fat?” He dragged his brown eyes up to mine, looking murderous. “Did she just call me fucking *fat*?”

“The gardens you said, Your Majesty?”

I carried him swiftly out of the surgery before he could demand the healer's head.

\*

# CHAPTER FOUR



“Woah!” I said hurriedly, dropping the bucket I was carrying and leaping forward to catch the back of the boy’s shirt before he could throw himself into the rose bushes. “Don’t you see the thorns?”

The child spun, entreating me to an irritated expression and an angry set to his shoulders. He was barely half my age but certainly more than half my size.

I let go of him and grinned before putting my hands up, palms out, to show him I meant no harm. His attitude fizzled out into shame.

“I wasn’t gunna damage them,” he muttered sullenly.

“I was more worried about them damaging *you*,” I retorted, eyeing the long, wicked thorns on the plants and spotting a flash of pale brown nestled among the soil deep within the bushes. “Is that your ball?”

The boy nodded.

“It was a gift he daren’t lose, señor,” came another voice behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to find a girl a little older than he was standing with her hands on her hips. Seeing them together made me realise I recognised them as two of the palace kitchen servants, part of the group the king had brought with him when he relocated from the smaller palace of *la Cortina* in the north east.

The smart thing to do would be to go and get one of the long sticks we kept near the shed for exactly this purpose – that and dislodging kites from tree branches too high to reach. But the determination on these two children’s faces suggested that they’d be scratching up their little hands and faces trying to recover the ball the moment I turned my back, and I wasn’t about to let that happen.

Ah, I hadn't had any excitement since Mac had tried to tear my hair out by the roots a couple of hours ago, so I was overdue a little more risk of bodily evisceration before lunchtime.

"Wait here," I said, yanking my shirt over my head and letting it drop to the grass. The thin fabric would give me no protection from the thorns, and I didn't want it ruined.

I dropped to my stomach and crawled carefully into the shrubbery, keeping my head lowered and eyes mostly closed to protect them. My fingertips impatiently brushed the surface of the inflated bladder but I couldn't properly grab the ball from this position. So I wriggled deeper, moving with the lines of the stalks instead of against them, and keeping my movements slow.

*Plants can sense your intentions just like animals can,* Zovisasha liked to tell us junior gardeners in that northern accent of hers, and while I wasn't sure I *entirely* believed that, I did know that rushing got you nowhere with flora. Flowers, weeds, grasses and trees alike all responded best to thoughtful tenderness: careful pruning, precise watering, and in this case, a gentle ushering to the side so I could sneak my arm between the threatening thorns and flick the ball out from its dank resting place.

Two excited shrieks told me I'd batted it clear of the bushes, and although my instincts encouraged wrenching myself free, I ignored loud, excitable Wyatt for the version of me that would escape unscathed. It took an age to crawl backwards, but when my palms transitioned from cool dirt to soft grass, I allowed myself to raise my head, not surprised to find I was alone. The two children were long gone.

I reached for my shirt, and paused.

Not entirely alone.

A tabby cat was curled up in the discarded fabric, paws tucked away and tail wrapped around its body. Perhaps sensing I'd

been attempting to steal its impromptu bed, one eye opened to a warning slit.

I held up my hands in surrender for the second time in five minutes. “Hey, if you’re comfortable there...”

The cat yawned in contented satisfaction, tucking its head back in and settling down for a snooze.

I shrugged. Many of the male gardeners went shirtless while working, and even if it did mean I was down to only one shirt that I’d have preferred to keep clean for Sunday mass, so what? That little creature deserved somewhere warm and soft to nestle up, starved and abandoned as it was...okay, it was extremely well-fed from the look of its clean fur and copious fat rolls, but all the same.

That same watchful eye opened again.

“I’m going!” I promised, and received a half-hearted swipe at my boot with its paw as I stepped past.

The cat turned to watch me go, the colour of its eye drawing me in. Deep amber; a dark orange glow that held a quiet vigilance. Exactly like those of a certain someone – human-shaped, this time – who tended to occupy my thoughts ever so often these days. He had a powerfully muscular body, a calm serenity, and a presence so reassuring that everything felt right in his company, even from the very first time we’d met.

I’d been at work. Pruning the hedge maze only a few feet away from me now, in fact, and so busy apologising to the perfectly healthy evergreen that I’d been ordered to cut just because some royal or noble thought it would look *sophisticated* – despite nature holding sophistication over humans to a degree our minds couldn’t even fathom – that I’d almost tripped over the giant of a man sitting cross-legged on the ground inside the maze with his naked sword laid across his lap, his head bowed to his chest.

“Sorry, sir,” I said, recognising his guard uniform. “I... wouldn’t you prefer to sit on the bench?” I gestured to the seat

a few feet away and then let my arm fall back to my side when he didn't even lift his head.

"No," the man said softly, and that single syllable held so much pain, so much *anguish*, that it cracked my heart open.

I'd dropped the pruning shears and was seated on the ground next to him before I could think, holding out a tentative hand to pat his shoulder.

The guard immediately tensed and I jerked away.

"Sorry," I muttered again, trying to scramble back to my feet and leave the poor soul alone like he *clearly wanted, Wyatt*, but froze in place when he finally raised his head and his eyes locked onto mine.

Amber. Practically jewels with the way they shone with an inner light: the colour of fire and treasure and the heart of molten steel.

"It's fine," he whispered. "I just...it's fine. Don't go."

I eased back down onto the gravelly soil we were sitting on, but didn't try to touch him again. "I'm Wyatt."

"Jiron."

It sounded soft and hard all at once. *Here-on*. The name suited him.

"You're one of the king's own guards?" I asked, having noticed the three gold bands on his collar. One denoted general palace security, two were for the guards of any princes or princesses – not that we had any of those left, Dios save their immortal souls – but three stripes represented the highest honour. The personal retinue of King Renato Aratorre and his consort.

"I am," the man said, and although he didn't sound as lost as earlier, the words still held enough emotion to steal my breath. Pride, so much pride, but there was also something of great sadness in them, too.

“Then you must be good with that thing,” I ventured, nodding at the sword balanced across his folded legs. And it was only upon realising how massive the blade was that it dawned on me how Blessed huge Jiron himself was, each of his hands the size of my whole head and his muscular thighs thicker than my waist. I hurriedly averted my eyes, feeling heat flush run down my neck.

“Not good enough,” he said bitterly, discarding the sword to the opposite side of where I sat, although he still handled it carefully despite his evident anger. “I should have been better.”

“What happened?” I asked, my voice low. I sensed it was all related: this surprising fury, the reason he was sitting all alone in the middle of the garden maze, why he’d flinched from my touch.

Jiron glanced at me sharply, his brows furrowed, but his face began to soften as he searched my own. “You’re not...are you telling me the gossip hasn’t yet made its way to the gardens?”

I shrugged, leaning back on my hands. “The elms aren’t a particularly talkative bunch, and the carnations prefer to brag about themselves, you know?”

He laughed, startling me with both the unexpected sound and the genuine humour in it, and I longed to hear it again as soon as the air fell silent once more.

And then he sobered. “I do not know how to speak it,” he whispered. “I fear I cannot.”

“You could tell it backwards,” I suggested, rewarded by a chuckle this time. My heart and body both warmed, pleased I’d been able to draw such responses from him.

“Backwards, little one? How would that work?”

“Well,” I coaxed. “At the end of the story, you’re...”

“Here,” said Jiron, catching on. “With you.”

“An excellent place to start.” I paused and then dared myself to continue, unable to believe I was being this forward with a



man I'd just met. "And finish."

The guard immediately looked away and I silently cursed myself.

"I do not have to burden you with my tale."

"That's not...really *not* what I meant," I said hurriedly. "Please continue. ¿*Por favor?*"

"I was captured," Jiron began. "It was not a...pleasant experience."

I swallowed. He didn't elaborate, which I was thankful for, but my imagination still ran wild with the horrors of what he must have endured. And I was well aware that I'd lived a relatively sheltered life: not well off, but hardly in the depths of poverty that others were, born to a good family with a father who respected my mother and had only taken his belt to me when I'd seriously fucked up. To be subjected to the deliberate cruelty of another...

"Time did not hold meaning under their hands, but I'm told it was a few weeks." Jiron's thumb brushed against mine as he copied my pose, but he did not seem to react at the contact, staring up at the sky instead. I bit my tongue to hold in the gasp that wanted to escape, because the warmth of his skin was a sharp yet welcome shock to my system.

"Before that...well. My failure, I suppose." Jiron's chin lowered and he gave me a rueful look. "A group of rebels were hunting His Majesty. I was neither fast nor strong enough to kill them all like they deserved."

I frowned. If the king had been captured, I was sure *that* gossip would have reached even my ears.

"But he got away," I said, becoming surer of that fact when Jiron did not correct me. "You protected him."

"I kept him – and his husband – from the rebels," he admitted. "But left them both exposed to a whole host of other dangers when I fell to the enemy's greater numbers."

“Doesn’t sound like failure to me. You’re one man, Jiron. Even as...”

*Deliciously fit...perfectly muscular...*

“...well-trained as you undoubtedly are, no one can take on half a dozen men on their own and win.”

His mouth curled into the slightest of smiles at that, but he said nothing.

“Oh-hoh!” I cried excitedly, squirming around in the dirt to face him. “It was more than half a dozen, right?”

Jiron stared back silently, attempting to be impassive and professional, but I saw right through him.

“Ten?” I guessed, shaking my head as soon as I said it when his expression didn’t change. “No. Twelve? Fifteen?” His cheek twitched. “Dios, you took down *fifteen men*?”

“Fourteen, little one,” he said, shaking his head at me. The smile had widened now, clearly begrudgingly but quickly consuming his entire face. He was fucking gorgeous.

“Fourteen,” I breathed in awe. “By the Blessed Five, you must have been unstoppable.”

“Not to the fifteenth,” Jiron said dryly. I snickered, even though my insides ran cold at the image that conjured itself in my head: the brave guard on his knees, blades at his neck, exhausted and yet still so fierce. His enemy crowing their victory even as they stood among over a dozen of their own dead.

“Further,” I encouraged as Jiron’s face bled of all amusement and began to mirror the same horror. “Further back. What was before that?”

“Finding my king...or prince, as he was then. Serving him. Watching over him. Originally being appointed with the honour and responsibility of his protection.”

I smiled, nudging my shoulder with his. “Tell me more about those times,” I said, sensing they were happier memories for

him. When he didn't shift away from my touch, I let my shoulder stay there, pressed to his in silent comfort as he spoke.

Jiron had talked for hours about childish pranks and terrifying foes. Perilous journeys and dull political events. Princes and princesses and nobles and courtiers and a whirlwind of different adventures. And when we'd said goodbye to each other that evening and all I could think about was that steady, even voice, the gentle way he moved, the way he looked like he wanted to reach for my hand but never did...I'd known then that my heart was entwined with his.

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# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Jiron*

The king muttered dark threats about a certain healer under his breath, only brightening when he caught sight of Mathias near the duck pond, where he was speaking with the head gardener.

“Husband of mine!” Ren called out, slipping from my arms with a sharp elbow to my stomach – deliberate or not, one could never tell with him – and wrenching his lover by the shoulders so he was turned forcibly out of his conversation. Mathias scowled. “Mat, you need more friends. I’ve decided to execute yours.”

“Excuse me?” demanded his companion in accented Quarehian, her eyes flashing.

The king beamed. “Another fiery northerner. Perfect. Have this one!”

“Ren,” Mathias said with clear exasperation. “Zovisasha is already my friend.”

“That was impressively quick work, *mi sol*.” Ren swooped in and kissed the woman on the cheek. “Pleasure to meet you, new friend.”

Zovisasha stared at him and then deliberately wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, smearing mud across it.

“For fuck’s sake. You’ve already met her,” the king consort growled out.

Ren cocked his head, looking thoughtful. “I have vague memories of that, yes. Last year? In Stavroyarsk?”

“And yesterday and the day before that and the last four months she’s been in Máros,” he snapped.

The king smirked at me when Mathias ran a hand over his eyes, returning his expression to eager innocence when his

husband looked back at him. “Then you won’t miss Starling, will you?”

And it was then that Wyatt rounded the corner of an immaculately trimmed wall of hedge, his fair hair bound into a messy plait, his trousers rolled up to his knees, and his shirt missing. I stared at the smooth, delicate planes of skin, my mouth going dry and all thoughts abruptly disappearing from my head.

*Dios, he looks good enough to eat.*

The boy was frowning at something in his cupped hands, and everything in me ached to fix whatever was making him sad.

“Little one,” I said softly. Wyatt’s head shot up, his mouth immediately curving into a smile that darted straight to my heart. I could *feel* the weight of it, or rather whatever was the opposite of weight, the thing that made leaves swirl into the sky and wafted delicious scents up to the king’s rooms from the kitchens below. A delightful lightness, airy and happy and perfect, where the whole world resided in that one smile.

“Wyatt?” someone else asked, and I blinked myself back to the reality where other people existed. It was his mistress who had spoken, the head gardener, and she bowed her head of dark hair down to his blonde one as they both peered into what he held in his hands.

Then she cursed in Mazekhstani, a string of words that had erupted from Mathias’ filthy mouth more than once but this time uttered in terror, and I had my hand on my sword hilt in an instant.

“No, señor,” Zovisasha chided, noticing the movement. “This is not a foe you can vanquish with a blade, sadly.”

“Then you haven’t seen Jiron use his weapon,” Ren promptly countered. He flashed me a grin. “Go on, whip it out and *show* them.”

I set my jaw, unable to deny my king’s orders even when they were obviously spoken in jest, and yet the double meaning

made me falter from the uncertainty of what he wanted from me.

“Ignore that, Jiron,” Mathias said with a sigh.

Ren looked disappointed – as did Wyatt, I noticed, for I noticed *everything* about him, and suddenly I wished the king consort had said nothing.

“You know, when I granted your commands the same authority as mine,” Ren grouched to his husband, digging a slim finger into his ribs and making the other man wince, “I didn’t intend for you to abuse that power by undoing all of my orders.”

“Just the so-called fun ones.”

“You see?” Wyatt murmured, transferring what he held into Zovisasha’s equally dirt-encrusted hands. Ren wavered up on his toes, trying to peer between their fingers. “The mould, there?”

“I see.”

The Mazekhstani woman raised an eyebrow as Ren continued to... Mathias would have called it making a nuisance of himself, but my king could never be such a thing. “If you’re so keen to get up close and personal with a diseased flower bud that could see our entire collection of carnations dead within the week, Your Majesty, catch.”

She tossed it at him, petals cascading from the plant as it sailed directly at his head.

I intercepted it before it could hit him.

Mathias flinched, but Ren hadn’t moved an inch, knowing I would always protect him. Nothing *diseased* was touching my king while I was on watch.

Even if I wasn’t technically on watch. I’d quite forgotten that today was my day off, having settled into the familiar routine of being at Ren’s side, although his other guards were hovering unobtrusively a few feet behind us.

Wyatt clapped happily for me, and then spun to face his mistress. “Do you want me to prune-”

“I’ll deal with it,” Zovisasha said, waving away his offer of help. How anyone could deny that eager face and the way he was earnestly bouncing on his toes as if ready to set off that instant, I didn’t know, but if it meant he wasn’t going near any more sick plants, I was happy. Dios knew what they’d do to his skin or...

“Wash your hands,” I urged him before I could rein in that protective part of me that apparently thought it had the right to tell him what to do.

Wyatt grinned, blinking up at me with those delicate eyelashes of his. Was it my imagination, or had they fluttered?

Ren snickered, and Zovisasha frowned.

“This is a plant fungal disease. It is not contagious to humans, señor.”

“Please,” I said, unable to bear the thought of it touching his perfect hands. The head gardener stalked off with an exasperated shake of her head, muttering under her breath in her native language.

“Sure,” Wyatt agreed, his smile even wider now. His green eyes sparkled in the sunlight. “If you do as well, Jiron.”

He reached out to take the affected flower from my hand and I snatched it away out of his reach.

I cleared my throat as everyone stared at me. “Uh. Show me where I should put it,” I said, and Wyatt gestured for me to follow him.

When I did, the king fell into step beside me.

“Ren,” Mathias chided in a low hiss. “That was not an open invitation, you idiot.”

Ren beamed. “A king doesn’t need *invitations*. Besides, Jiron wants me to accompany them, don’t you?”

I faltered, caught between my loyalty to my charge and my own want – closer to a burning *need* – to spend time alone with Wyatt. The boy often found himself in my thoughts, but when he was this close, he damn near *consumed* them. It was hard to look at anything else but him; his broad smile that showed perfectly white teeth, his green eyes, permanently crinkled in good humour and soft empathy, his slender but toned body that I longed to run my hands over and discover its secrets.

But I was so many years older than him, and he wouldn't want... wouldn't want *me*.

So I forced my gaze back to the man I'd sworn my life to since I was eighteen, and bowed deeply. "Of course, Your Majesty. Anything you wish."

Ren latched onto that with a wolfish grin, looking expectantly between me and the boy at my side.

"Come back inside, asshole," Mathias muttered under his breath at him.

"Nah. I'd rather stay and watch Wyatt *show Jiron where to put it*."

"I'll let you do that thing to me that you threatened this morning," his husband casually offered.

Ren's gaze snapped to his, his face lighting up with savage glee. "You mean the..."

"Yeah."

Without even a moment's hesitation, Ren grabbed Mathias' shirt and began to drag him by it back to the palace at a punishing pace. The king consort glanced over his shoulder as he was hauled away, and mouthed *you owe me one* back at us.

Wyatt's eyebrows crinkled in adorable concern as he stared after them both. "Is he...?"

"His Highness will be fine," I assured him. The pleased little smile on Mathias' face told me that he didn't consider what was about to happen to him to be a hardship at all, although I



was sure he'd make his husband work for it. "Now let's make sure you are."

The way Wyatt's expression shifted from worried to mischievous made my heart stutter. "In the same way?" he asked coyly, his tongue flicking out across his bottom lip, and I choked on the implication.

"Uh," I said incoherently, trying to remember what I'd been talking about. "Hands. Wash."

Wyatt was too positive a person to look dejected, but it was a close thing.

"Right," he said, spinning on his heel and sashaying over to the tap set into the nearby wall. He waved a hand at a bin and I tossed the remnants of the plant inside before joining him.

The boy had his back to me, the tap gushing water over hands callused by his work in the gardens. I watched as he grabbed a sliver of soap from the little alcove in the stone wall and ran it under his fingernails and across his palms, but when he was still seemingly rinsing it off after over a minute, I began to worry that the contact with the diseased flora had been more concerning than either of the gardeners had made it out to be.

"Aren't you going to join me?" Wyatt asked without turning around, and I jolted when I realised I'd been staring at the way his bare shoulders rippled with the movement of his arms.

Staring *and* damn near salivating.

"*Si*," I murmured, and moved in behind him to cage him against the wall, tucking the boy's head under my chin.

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# CHAPTER SIX



Jiron settled his broad chest against my back. I felt the heat of him through his clothes as he wrapped his arms around me and enclosed my small hands in his huge ones. I loved how calm and kind my giant was as he began to wash my hands between his, paying careful attention to each individual finger. He traced my calluses, cleaned my nails, and as if he somehow *knew*, stroked a line down that sensitive spot on the inside of my thumb, making me shiver.

He chuckled in my ear, low and soft, and that did dangerous things to the health of my heart.

“Clean enough, little Wyatt?” he asked.

I shook my head, making sure the rest of my body moved with it so I could brush against the full length of him. Jiron took the hint and nestled in even closer, enclosing me in those massive arms that made me feel so safe and secure that I could have fallen asleep right there if I wasn't so turned on.

“Not nearly enough,” I whispered back, and I hoped I wasn't imagining the interested little growl that emanated from the man at my back.

I played with his hands in turn, keeping up the pretence of *washing* as I applied similar diligence to ensuring every square inch of his skin was clean. These hands had killed, I knew. Wielded the sword at his hip with deadly precision, snapped necks, torn foes from limb to limb in defence of his king and country. Yet they yielded to my touch, gentle and tender.

Something unexpectedly splashed against my leg and I jumped, only to realise how securely I was caught by the man at my back when all that did was press us closer against each other. Jiron laughed again, a joyous sound I didn't hear nearly enough, and reached past me to turn off the tap.

Glancing down, I realised we'd been so wrapped up in each other – physically and figuratively – that we hadn't noticed the ground below the tap flooding. Clods of dirt floated in the murky puddle, the drainage here sufficient for a quick hand washing but not the amount of water we'd been wasting, and I gave the other man a sheepish grin before drying my hands on my trousers.

“Would you like to take a walk?” I prompted. Jiron was so much taller than me that I had to crane my head to see his face when we were standing this close, but I didn't mind. I liked the huge, solid mass of his body, how comforting a presence it offered, and how he didn't trip and stumble like I did. But I'd seen him in action – not that he probably knew that, seeing as I'd had to sneak away to the training fields to catch sight of him – and he could be graceful in his movements too. Like a river...or a waterfall. Powerful and unstoppable and magnificent, but also so damn beautiful it took my breath away.

A small frown line formed between his amber eyes and he glanced in the direction Zovisasha had disappeared.

“It's my lunch break,” I said. It was a *little* early for such things, but I'd make it up to my mistress later. Life was Blessed short, and I wasn't giving up time with this man for anything.

Jiron returned his gaze to mine and inclined his head into a nod. I liked what I saw in his expression: a kind of hunger that mirrored mine.

“And I'm not working today.”

“I know,” I told him happily.

He blinked, bemused. “How do you *know*? Our guard rosters are deliberately randomised to avoid security breaches.”

“I know that too.”

The furrowed brow returned.

“Nothing nefarious,” I promised, realising he was worried about his king’s safety being compromised. “Luis told me your shifts for the week.”

“*Luis?*” Jiron frowned and muttered something under his breath.

“Please don’t blame him. I was quite convincing.”

Why that made Jiron start and pull closer to me, laying a heavy hand protectively on my shoulder, I didn’t know. Why I found it so hot was much less of a mystery.

I used it as an excuse to slide my fingers into his and tug him towards the outer palace walls. His skin was already dry from the sun.

“Come,” I murmured.

No more dancing around. I’d been dropping hints his way since that first day we’d met, and the man was refusing to take them. I saw the flicker of interest in those amber eyes whenever he looked at me, and surely he wouldn’t have been so eager to press his body against mine just now if I was reading him wrong?

I didn’t know what was holding Jiron back, but today I was going to find out. I wanted him to make me his.

And if he rejected me? If he left me empty and unfulfilled and humiliated?

I refused to think about that.

\*

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Jiron*

Wyatt's small hand crept along the wide handle of the basket towards mine, proving that he wasn't really bearing any of its weight. Not that I minded. I was used to taking care of Ren, a man who gladly ceded all responsibility for physical exertion to me – other than between the sheets – and would not have hesitated even for a moment at letting me carry the heavy picnic basket, even going so far as to order it if I hadn't moved quickly enough. I was still adjusting to serving Mathias, who was his husband's polar opposite and would have stubbornly attempted to do it himself, not asking for help even if it killed him.

But Wyatt was an interesting balance between the two, gracious and pragmatic in a way neither of the royals were. He'd listened to my offer to help, agreed it made sense, and then gallantly looped his own fingers around the handle from the other side in a token gesture of support.

A gesture I was now suspecting the motives of when his little finger hooked over mine and began to stroke it. A far from innocuous act, but Wyatt didn't offer the sly smiles and overt comments I was used to from Ren. Was I misunderstanding his intentions? Was I reading something into it – into *us* – that wasn't there?

Compared to the boy's lithe grace, his delicate features, and happy, relaxed nature, I felt brutish. Ungainly. Huge and awkward and sullen, and surely that wasn't anything that interested him.

I was so afraid of crossing any lines, of straying past his tolerance for my company, that whenever I dared dream about expressing what I truly felt for him, I became sick at the thought of losing what we had now. What if I scared him off? What if he not only spurned my clumsy advances but began to

avoid me because I had so obviously misunderstood the pitying offer of friendship he'd made to the lonely, fucked-up man lost in his own trauma?

"I should take you with me to the kitchens more often," Wyatt remarked, and how was he able to keep his tone so calm when we were touching like this, skin to skin, his warm fingers against mine? "They gave us *ten* times the amount of food than usual, and it can't all be because your stomach is larger than mine."

He shot a sideways glance at me, eyes raking from my boots up to my face. Was it an appreciative look, or was he just trying to hide that my size intimidated him like it did so many others? Usually I relished that feeling, pleased that I could warn potential troublemakers away from my king and his consort with my presence alone, but now I cursed my bulk in a way I hadn't done since my body started filling out as a child.

"Little Consuela's sweet on you," he continued, accompanying the words with a faint laugh. "Are there many people I will have to fight for your attentions?"

Attentions? Like attentions, or *attentions*?

My tongue became lodged in my mouth as it sought guidance from my brain about what that *meant*, only to be met with further uncertainty from that direction too.

"You don't talk much," Wyatt said. "I like that."

Now I was even more confused. Did he genuinely like it, or was he making a complaint through sarcasm like Mathias and Ren did?

"It's nice, you know? To feel like you're being listened to rather than competing for breath," murmured Wyatt, and the smile was still on his face. Beaming, glowing. "I probably talk too much."

"You don't," I said immediately, grateful that my tongue had begun working again to be able to offer him the assurance. "I like listening to you too."

His smile became impossibly, *perfectly* wider.

“We can stop whenever you want,” he offered, flapping his other hand at the bushes around us. Unlike the immaculately trimmed gardens inside the palace walls, the grasses and trees out here were wilder, less tamed. The nature reserve cut a swathe through the city, a strip of greenery amid the rows of stone and wood buildings that formed Máros, and half a year ago would have been filled with the homeless. But the work our new rulers had been doing with social assistance had given them more palatable places to rest their heads for the night; not a perfect solution, as nothing was, but something better than what they’d had before. And it had reinvigorated these city gardens into what they were meant to be, replacing the tents and makeshift beds with wide open spaces where children could play, and winding, secretive paths to seek moments of peace within the dense foliage.

“Wherever you like,” I said to Wyatt, and I wasn’t just repeating the words I had to speak so often in my role as king’s guard. I truly meant it, happy to be led by the boy at my side as he walked with such a spring to his step that he was almost skipping. The wind plucked at loose strands of his blonde hair, whipping them around his face and flushed cheeks, and I longed to join it – to run my fingers through it with the same joyful abandon and revel in its softness.

Softness I’d briefly felt tucked up behind him with his wet hands in mine, daring to brush my chin against the top of his head.

Softness I’d probably dream about tonight.

What was the rest of him like, I wondered? Inexplicably shirtless like he was today, I was getting to see so much more of him than usual, but to my shame, I was greedy for even more. I wanted to slip my fingers beneath the waistband of his trousers and explore lower, feel the angles of his hips and the shape of his cock, watch how his hole responded to my touch as I traced his opening...

“Then let’s go this way,” Wyatt chirped happily, tugging at the basket to pull both it and me off the path and through a narrow gap in the birch trees. I had to turn sideways to fit, ducking my head under a low branch so as to not disturb a bird’s nest, but after several feet of uncomfortable squeezing through the brush, we emerged in a clearing. Wild grasses and flowers swished around our boots as he led me further from the path, and I glanced around to find it already hidden from view.

The boy exclaimed excitedly and spun on the spot, gesturing for me to lay out the blanket tucked under my other arm as he worked to flatten the grasses around the area he’d decided to make his. Ours.

“Beautiful,” I murmured, and then dragged my eyes from his face before he realised I wasn’t talking about our surroundings. Wyatt grinned and lazily dropped down onto the blanket, spreading out his arms and stretching until he covered its entire surface.

“I certainly think so.”

He wasn’t looking at the little blue flowers dotting the clearing. Or the idle drift of branches in the breeze. Or the clouds trailing across the azure sky.

He was looking at me.

I cleared my throat and turned away to hide the heat I could feel racing up from beneath the collar of my shirt, busying myself with unpacking the basket of food and wine. I heard Wyatt shift behind me but didn’t dare look back at him until I could get my expression under control, so I fussed with the cloth wrapped around the loaves instead, folding it into a neat, careful square. Wyatt hadn’t been joking: there was far more food here than we’d manage to eat in a whole day, let alone one lunch.

One perfect, idyllic lunch that was just me and him and-

I turned back around, and choked.

Wyatt was still splayed on the blanket, only he’d now rolled over onto his hands and knees with his ass in the air.



And he was completely naked.

“What are you...?” I cleared my throat, hastily averting my gaze to the sky. “What are you *doing*?”

“I didn’t want there to be any confusion,” Wyatt said cheerfully, and I couldn’t stop the way my eyes sidled back down of their own accord, meeting his as he peered over his bare shoulder at me. He did that thing with his eyelashes again, making them flutter. “Flirting wasn’t doing it. Strong suggestions weren’t enough.”

“So you thought stripping down and presenting yourself to me was...”

He wiggled his ass expectantly and the rest of my words failed me as I stared at the toned muscles jiggling in my direction. *Dios mío.*

“Incapable of ambiguity, yes,” he agreed, half laughing as he took in my slack-jawed expression. “Are you going to come over here, Jiron, or...?”

I swallowed.

Reproachful thoughts battered at my mind, sneering out all the self-deprecation I’d subjected myself to a thousand times when daydreaming about Wyatt. But it was easier to ignore when the sight of him drove everything from my head. The lines of his muscles; in his thighs and then his stomach when he flopped over onto his back, grinning up at me. Sunlight snagged on the hair between his legs as entrancingly as it did the braid trailing over one shoulder, and the downy fluff tracing his legs and arms. His cock, half hard and deliciously pink, rested against one thigh, and seemed to twitch as it caught – and held – my gaze.

I unbuckled my belt, taking the weight of my sheathed sword and tossing it aside onto the grass before sinking down onto the blanket beside him. Wyatt cocked his head.

“You’re here,” he murmured, reaching up a delicate hand to trace my jaw. I drowned in green eyes and his wide smile. “Now what are you going to do?”

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# CHAPTER EIGHT



Jiron moved slowly, as if frightened of scaring me, and I watched as he reached out a huge, quivering hand towards me.

I wondered what part of my body he'd touch first. My cock? My ass? My chest? It was all laid bare to him, his for the taking, and I held myself still despite feeling breathless with anticipation.

Only to yelp as he lifted me effortlessly at the waist and deposited me into his lap.

“Is that okay?” he asked, his face crinkling in concern. When I nodded fervently – anything this man did was okay – he wrapped those huge arms around me once more.

This was even better than it had been at the tap: Jiron wasn't just behind, but all around me, muttering sweet words against my temple and petting my hair and stroking my back. All the tension seemed to drain out of him, the stiff posture I'd thought permanent melting away as he tucked me in tighter against his broad chest and began to gently rock us both.

Oh *mierda*, that was nice. More than nice.

Yet I felt acutely aware of how underdressed I was when I realised my cock was leaking pre-cum onto the front of his shirt.

I winced. The man was lonely and seemingly just wanted company, and I'd gone and acted like a complete whore. It was hugs he craved, not sex.

But when I tried to pull away to save his clothes and reach for my own, Jiron gave a hum of displeasure and settled me closer.

“Where are you going, little one?” he murmured, grazing his fingertips up my bare leg.

I opened my mouth to apologise for my forwardness, for *misunderstanding* this all so badly, when he stole all breath from my lungs by dancing those same deft fingers along my cock.

Life surged into it with blistering speed and I gasped, jerking in his arms. Yet Jiron held firm, and while his grip on me was gentle, it was unyielding, promising safety and security and *care*.

“Nowhere,” I whispered, the two syllables aching hard to get out.

Almost as aching and hard as my cock, which was now cradled in his hand as he began to play with it. It looked tiny against his huge fingers, and maybe there was something wrong with me for finding that an incredible turn on, but I’d always been attracted to men so much bigger than myself.

Back when Macario and I had still been a thing – back before I came home from work and found him balls deep in the baker’s son – I used to love how he could throw me over his shoulder and toss me down onto the bed. I hadn’t enjoyed the roughness that accompanied it, but the feeling of being a toy in someone else’s hands, so small that they could manoeuvre and carry me as if all my weight and strength meant nothing?

That was fucking hot.

Jiron paused from where he was stroking me so deliciously to hardness, nuzzling his face into my hair. His other hand rested on my waist: holding me in place, but not holding me *down*, and the difference between the two felt huge, especially when I shifted on his lap and he moved with me instead of restricting me. The brush of rough fabric against my ass made me shiver in delight despite the warm sunlight beating down on us.

“Where do you want to be, Wyatt?”

The words were careful, cautious, as if my giant feared he was somehow taking liberties despite me offering my body up to *him*. Sadness shot through me at the realisation that he didn’t

trust himself, that he was terrified of his own strength, that he questioned what was given to him in case he'd inadvertently taken something he wasn't supposed to have.

"Here, Jiron," I whispered, snuggling up against his chest and letting out a happy sigh when he began to fondle me once more. "Just here, daddy."

Jiron stiffened, growling against the side of my head. The noise sent pleasant tremors down my spine.

"*Wyatt*," he breathed, and I knew I'd gotten it right when the hand on my cock sped up, the other ghosting over my ass to finger the line between my cheeks.

"Yes, fuck," I gasped. "Me, I mean. Fuck me?"

Jiron chuckled, and yet frustratingly when I tried to wriggle back onto his fingers, he drew them away.

"Have you eaten today?" he asked, and I blinked, thrown by the change in subject.

"Answer me, little one," he coaxed, nudging my knee.

"No, daddy," I said. "I was late for work, so I skipped breakfast."

He frowned and clicked his tongue. "You're not to do that again."

I nodded. *Anything* for him.

"Breakfast is important," Jiron continued in that low, even voice of his that I could listen to forever. "You won't skip it even if you're late."

That could be problematic. "But Zovisasha will-"

"Hush," he murmured, running his fingers over my lips. It was the hand he'd had on my cock, and I eagerly lapped at the pre-cum coating his fingertips, enjoying the way that made him groan and shift his hips beneath me. "If you're late, you come and find me, and I'll explain it to your mistress. Do you understand me?"

“Yes, daddy,” I agreed, although a part of me wanted to point out that if he was in my bed each morning, I wouldn’t have to bother finding him. “Now will you fuck me?”

“No.”

\*

# CHAPTER NINE

## *Jiron*

He whined. Dios help me, he *whined*, a petulant little sound that hit both my cock and heart at once. And when he shook his head crossly, making his hair dance about his shoulders, I almost came in my trousers.

“Wyatt,” I said sternly – mock sternly at most, for I was unable to muster anything but fondness for the gorgeous man seated in my arms. “You’ve been working all morning on an empty stomach.”

He twisted to look up at me, that grin of his turning wickedly filthy. “Won’t be empty if you-”

I stuffed an almond between his lips. The look of surprise was endearingly hilarious, and then it softened into a frown that was as pretend as my chastisement of him.

He chewed diligently on the tiny nut and I delighted in watching every flicker of his tongue and bob of his throat.

When he finished I had another ready, and I continued to feed him small mouthfuls of food. It became increasingly difficult to keep my hands off him with the cute noises he made as he ate, and how much of his tongue swiped across my fingers when he took each morsel from me.

By the Blessed Five, I was in trouble with this one. Wyatt was so damn perfect, even before he’d rocked my world by calling me *daddy*, and now that he had? If I had to let him go after this, I was pretty sure I’d die.

“Just a little more,” I said when the boy began to flag, having stolen some odd mouthfuls of food myself while he took his sweet time munching down on the hunk of bread I’d handed to him. It was a point he’d been making wordlessly and deliberately, I knew, for the food he took directly into his mouth from my fingers was consumed much more quickly,

and I made a mental note that he enjoyed me feeding him just as much as I did.

*Daddy?*

Could I really indulge that part of myself?

It wasn't the first time I'd been referred to as such. Ren and the guards I worked with frequently joked about my caretaking side and how I fussed over my charges' sleeping and eating when I knew they weren't getting enough of either.

But with Wyatt, it was...so Blessed different, and not just because he'd used the title without mockery. It was the way he looked at me, adoring and trusting. It was how he was curled into my arms, letting me take charge and ensure he was cared for when he clearly wasn't handling it himself.

*Skipping breakfast. Shit.*

And it was the way he felt against me, blazing hot and burning a similar fire through my veins wherever we touched, which was somehow *everywhere* despite his small size.

“Are you full, little one?”

Wyatt nodded, trailing a hand down my shirt and twisting his fingers in the laces. “Yes, daddy. Thank you.”

“Anytime,” I breathed into his hair, loving the earthy scent of him. And then, worried he might be *too* full but unable to stop myself, I turned him on my lap so I could take two solid handfuls of that glorious ass that had been tempting me the entire meal.

Wyatt sucked in a delighted breath, the sleepy contentedness that had been drawing across his face as I cradled and fed him instantly sluicing away.

“Is this what you want?” I asked. My doubts swirled heavy and suffocating once more. “I'm much older than you.”

He crinkled his nose, and I leaned in to kiss it. “I'm a year older than King Renato,” he told me. “And we all know what you two get up to.”



I squeezed one of his cheeks in warning, and he batted pale eyelashes at me, smirking.

“Used to get up to,” I reminded him. “His Majesty is now happily married.”

“Good,” Wyatt said with a grin.

Speaking of Ren...

“I’m also a royal guard,” I said quietly. “My duty must always come before my own needs. My own...desires.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get between you and our king,” he murmured back at me, and then ran his tongue across his teeth in an enticing flicker of wet, pink promise. “Unless you want me to?”

I pressed my mouth to his to kiss away his cheekiness, revelling in how he went limp against me.

“I want you all for myself, Wyatt,” I said.

“That’s what I want too, daddy. Will you kiss me again?”

How could I refuse such a perfect boy?

We were both breathless by the time we pulled apart, our chests heaving. His cheeks were flushed, and his cock was hard and glistening where it strained upright between us.

“And you don’t...” I found it hard to voice the last of my concerns, despite it being so easily uttered in my head. “You don’t find me too...big? Because I’d never hurt you, I promise, but I know my size can be intimid-”

“I love how big you are,” breathed Wyatt. “I love how you can lift me without effort. I love how you can fit your hands around my waist. I love how you can tuck me under your arm while we walk.”

“I haven’t done any of those things,” I pointed out, bemused and yet turned on by his words.

*Because I sure want to.*

“Oh,” he said without pause. “Must have been a dream. A *very* good dream, if you get me?”

“Are you angling for my cock again, sweet boy?” I asked, drifting my fingers closer to his opening. He gave a little squeak of interest, squirming on my lap as if to hurry me along. But I was the one taking care of him, and I was in no Blessed hurry at all.

“Yes.” The light in Wyatt’s eyes was intoxicating. “I can’t wait to feel your huge cock inside me, filling me up, daddy.” Small fingers dragged across the bulge in my trousers, emphasising his point. The filth he was spouting, combined with all those *daddys*, was severely testing what I thought had been a considerable supply of patience. “Don’t you want that too?”

“Fuck yes,” I hummed against his mouth.

Fuck patience too. I was having my boy, and I was having him now.

“Did you bring oil?”

Wyatt groaned, long and frustrated, and then dropped his forehead down onto my chest.

“No,” he admitted, although the word was unnecessary in the face of such visible disappointment. “Sorry, I didn’t think to-”

“Shush,” I murmured, stroking his hair again. I was already addicted to how it felt, and damn him, maybe Luis had been onto something about how it looked wrapped around my fingers. “Daddy’s got you.”

He nodded obediently, falling quiet, and I reached into the basket again to find what I’d spotted earlier. Crude, certainly, but if the alternative was *not* getting to sink inside that pert ass of his, the one I could still picture with its winking hole as he bared himself to me on the blanket, I’d take the half-melted stick of butter anytime.

“Lay over my lap,” I instructed, trailing a hand over his warm skin. Perhaps we’d move into the shade soon before he burned: while they weren’t as susceptible as northerners, Lukians didn’t have our same levels of resistance to the sun. “Let me take care of you and this cute little hole of yours.”

Wyatt was sprawled across my legs before I’d finished speaking, legs obligingly spread and his hands reaching behind

him to hold his cheeks apart.

“Like this, daddy?”

Cheeky little shit. He knew perfectly well that *this* was all I wanted and more.

“Such a good boy,” I murmured instead, running a hand down his spine and feeling him shiver beneath my touch. “Hold still while I prepare you.”

Wyatt happily murmured in the affirmative, and I reached out to coat my finger in the butter and bring it to his entrance.

Not daring to breathe, I slid my finger inside and stroked against his silky walls.

“Does that hurt?” I asked, and then jolted, flinching at my own words.

The boy said something, but I could no longer hear him. I was falling, falling, *falling*.

*Does that hurt?*

\*

# CHAPTER TEN



I was pretty sure I was in heaven.

Not only had Jiron *not* laughed in my face when desperation had overtaken my senses and I'd thrown myself at him in a do-or-die moment, but he'd held and fed me so tenderly, and was now offering up that same carefulness with his touch as his fingers roamed across my ass and pushed inside. Tentative, explorative strokes made me writhe against his legs with both the sensation and anticipation, and the fabric rubbing against my sensitive cock only emphasised my nakedness. Next time I'd strip my giant bare and take my time appreciating and learning *his* body, but I was enjoying how weirdly erotic this felt, being all exposed out here in a public space while he remained covered up.

For Jiron was a gift for me to unwrap later in private where no one else was allowed to lay eyes on the scrumptious, edible mountain of a man.

“Does that hurt?” he murmured, and I was shaking my head when I felt his whole body stiffen beneath me.

“Daddy?” I asked.

He didn't respond.

I frowned, twisting my neck to peer up at him. “Jiron?”

His amber eyes were glazed over as he stared past me. A single tear rolled silently down his cheek, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

*Shit.* I pushed his hands away and sat up, cradling his face in my hands.

“Jiron,” I begged. “Can you hear me? Come back to me, please?”

I'd seen him like this before, but it never got easier to bear. And we'd always been in the palace grounds before,

surrounded by other people who could help...although *help* wasn't really the right word. Nothing could draw Jiron's mind out of wherever it went when he sank into one of his episodes, not until it had inflicted its cruel torment on him and left him gasping and shaking and shivering.

Still, at least in the palace he'd be with his friends, and have the healer nearby. I cursed again and scrambled off his lap, dragging my trousers and boots on. I hated to leave him alone but if I ran, if I really pushed myself, I could be back within the quarter hour, and-

"Wyatt, you little fucker."

I froze, my head turning impossibly slowly towards the familiar voice as though my mind stupidly thought that if I didn't move, he wouldn't see me. As if a shirtless Lukian could possibly camouflage himself in this perfectly serene grove that had lost all its lustre the moment Jiron fell prey to his past once more.

Macario was leaning against a tree, arms folded and one hip cocked in that effortlessly sexy pose that had once had me drooling over him. His biceps bulged impressively under his shirt. My ex-lover was a stonemason – or at least he had been, before he turned up drunk too many times and was let go by his master – and while not as large as Jiron, had the same broad shoulders and thick muscles. I had a fucking type, alright?

"Mac," I said in relief, not daring to dwell on how he'd found me or the horrible thought that he'd *followed* us. All I could see was his huge arms, large enough to maybe even bear Jiron's weight, if I helped him. "I need to get da...Jiron back to the palace. Do you think you can carry him?"

Macario's shoulders lifted and dipped in a careless shrug. "Probably."

The word was thrown out boastfully and was dripping with ego and disdain. I held back my sigh, willing to overlook it if he'd just *help*, but the man didn't move.

I swallowed. "You're not going to, are you?"

“Got it in one.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Mac,” I hissed, my hands dropping to my hips, and he snickered like he always did when I tried to stand up to him. *Adorable*, he’d called me once, patting me on the head like I was a Blessed puppy yipping at his heels, and then held me in a headlock to remind me of our size difference when I’d attempted to bat him away.

“Speaking of assholes,” he drawled, “don’t think I didn’t see you draping yourself over him like a little whore. If you’re that desperate to get fucked, Wyatt, all you have to do is apologise and I’ll come home.”

Oh, there were so many things I wanted to say to that, starting with *I have nothing to apologise for and it’s not your home*, but...

“I don’t have time for this,” I said wearily. “If you’re not going to help, get lost. I’ll handle it myself.”

I took a step towards the undergrowth that led back to the main path, only for Macario to peel himself away from the tree and move to block me.

“Except,” he said in a low tone that sent a shiver through me – and not the good kind that I felt with Jiron – “you owe me something, Wyatt. Don’t tell me that pretty, empty head of yours has forgotten what we agreed just this morning.”

“I don’t...” I faltered, glancing back at Jiron who was still sitting on the blanket, unmoving. I could take off running and Mac wouldn’t be able to catch me, not in the thicker brush surrounding the clearing, but it would mean Jiron being alone with him. Somehow that felt worse than leaving him on his own.

“What do you want?”

Macario gave an irritated sigh. “For fuck’s sake, Wyatt, this shit is what made me need to clear my head the first time.”

“Clear your head?” I repeated hollowly. “You mean cheat on me?”

“You’re just...” Mac gestured at me with a short, sharp flick of his hand. “A lot, okay? Needy. Time-consuming. Always wanting attention but not willing to give it in turn.”

I swallowed. That wasn’t true.

*Was it?*

“We can talk about this another time.”

“No, Wyatt.” He took a step closer, not seeming to care when I flinched backwards. “You promised me this morning that you’d get me my money. Enough for me not to have to ever see you again.”

*That* was what he’d been demanding while he’d been pulling my hair hard enough to make me cry? Damn him.

“Lunchtime, I said,” Macario continued, letting out a disappointed sigh. “You’d come to me at lunchtime with gold or jewellery or whatever the fuck else you happened to find in the king’s palace. And what did you bring me instead?”

Mac paused from where he was closing in on me to peer down into our discarded picnic basket.

“Fucking grapes,” he said with disgust. “And a near comatose old man. Are you incapable of following even the simplest of instructions, Wyatt?”

“I’ll get you mone-”

“You sure will. Especially when I leave you with a little reminder.”

I nodded eagerly. “Yep, a reminder would be good. Maybe you can write me a note, or a-”

“Not a note. Something you can’t forget,” Macario said in a low tone, and then he crouched, his fingers curling around the hilt of Jiron’s sword where it lay in the grass.

“Mac...”

I continued to back up, watching fearfully as he unsheathed the blade and held it steady at chest height. It looked heavy; the thing was the size of my entire leg, and I knew Jiron kept it nothing less than impossibly sharp.

“Give me your arm,” Macario said.

“What? My arm? No, I don’t-”

“Fucking hell, Wyatt, I’m not going to cut it off. I’m just going to give you something to remember your promises so we don’t have to have this conversation again, *sí?*”

He was going to *cut* me? Or worse?

“I’ll remember!” I pleaded, trying to put distance between me and that blade but he stalked closer, the sword’s point aimed directly at my bare chest. “I’ll remember to get you the money, Mac, please!”

But the man shook his head, unmoved. “I know you too well to believe that, Wyatt. Now, stay still.”

\*



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *Jiron*

I choked on blood, spitting and swallowing the damn stuff in equal measures. I wasn't sure if it was from the knife I'd received in my side a few minutes ago, or the beating that was currently still being inflicted, fists sinking into my stomach and back without relief.

Then someone yanked out the knife – although they twisted it for good measure as they did so – and I roared out in pain and frustration, slumping against my restraints.

“Almost a scream, hmm? Come on big guy, I know you can give me more than that.”

A hand slapped at my cheek as if to rouse me, but I didn't bother to open my eyes. The healer's Touch would tell him whether I was awake or unconscious, and he was always sure to bring me back if I began to slip away.

“You've been at it for two weeks,” a new voice drawled. I knew each of my torturers: how they liked to inflict specific pain, how long it took them to get bored, what they sounded like when they were excited, or tired, or pissed off. This man had never visited me before. “Two weeks, and you still haven't broken him?”

The air in the basement changed as an awkward tension filtered through it. Despite everything, I was intrigued enough to crack an eye, determinedly not looking down at my damaged body or any of the bloody implements lying on tables around us.

“Sir,” someone mumbled, but the stranger gestured for him to be quiet, his eyes fixed on the healer at my side. A silverish scar ran across his neck and it was clear from the way he had his collar low and his long hair pulled back that the man was proud of the wound.

He probably had cause to be. A scar that wide and long indicated his throat had been slit to the bone, and I was sure that the only reason he stood before us now was magic. A Touch that had kept him alive and yet hadn't healed the skin? A result of limited magical power or a deliberate choice, perhaps for the intimidation it granted in its reminder?

"Sir," acknowledged the healer, saluting the senior rebel with a hand stained crimson with my blood. "This one has proven... resilient." He sounded almost like he was sulking, and I might have laughed if I didn't feel like my insides had imploded.

"Then I overestimated you."

The healer bristled.

I'd been cut. Whipped. Beaten. Starved. Sliced, carved, stabbed. Entreated to detailed threats about what they'd do to Ren if they caught him before I gave him up. Forced to listen to them colourfully describe how he'd become a plaything for the men until his body gave out from the abuse. Similar threats were frequently levelled my way too, but either it was all bluster or they were too afraid to loosen my binds in order to properly have their fun with me. That wasn't to say my cock and ass were left alone – they also formed part of the torturous attentions of my captors – but when the alternative was spilling what I knew of Ren and Mathias' intentions in heading towards the Temarian border, it was just something I had to quietly endure.

"More," the new man ordered, his eyes flickering to mine. Unlike the others, Sir didn't look gratified by my suffering. Only irritated. "Don't let him rest until he speaks. I want my hands around the prince's skinny little neck by the end of the week, and *then* we'll see where all that Aratorre smugness disappears to."

"Jiron!"

I shook my head. They weren't getting Ren. I'd give my life for his a thousand times over, and my suffering was *nothing* compared to the pain that splintered my heart with the mere thought of giving him up. Never mind that if all had gone to plan, him and Mathias would now be deep in Temarian

territory, likely beyond the reach of these Quarehian rebels. Because if they had been delayed, or stopped at the border, my betrayal could cost them their lives, and no amount of agony I could suffer was worth that.

Head bowed, fists clenched, wrists and ankles straining against my restraints, I waited for what I knew was coming.

“Jiron?”

That voice...it didn't belong here. It lived in a better time, a time of sunshine and picnic food and impossibly cheery smiles.

The men closed in on me with sickeningly anticipatory expressions and sharp implements still slick with my blood. Everything I saw and smelled and felt told me that I was still in that mildewed room, every inch of my skin graced with bruises and cuts and burns, but...

“Jiron, please!”

*Wyatt?*

He sounded scared.

My boy needed me! But I couldn't help. My body was broken; ribs cracked, bones snapped, and-

*My boy needed me.*

With a roar, I yanked myself free and surged forward, throwing my whole weight at my enemies. Then I blinked when the dim, gruesome scene of my torture was replaced with the sunny vista of a tree-lined clearing, long grasses and wildflowers surrounding a picnic blanket and basket.

*Our picnic blanket and basket.*

“Wyatt!” I yelled as I caught sight of him across the clearing, his beautiful face creased in fear as a stranger closed in on him with my sword held aloft.

\*

# CHAPTER TWELVE



It was strange how in one moment, Macario was all I could see – the blade in his hand, the cruel scorn on his face, the way he was *so close* – and in the next, it was like he’d ceased to exist.

Because Jiron was here, my sweet, courageous giant racing towards me and wrapping me in his arms. He normally took a while to come out of whatever tormenting evil had held him in its foul grasp, but his eyes held none of the usual horrors: now, they were full of tender concern as they raked over my body, and he patted down my arms and legs and chest as if to assure himself that I was unhurt.

“I’m fine,” I told him, although I couldn’t stop the whimper that erupted from my mouth as I clung to him. It was only partly from fear of what had almost happened: the rest was the pure relief of getting to wrap my arms around his neck and breathe in his comforting scent. The solid muscle beneath my fingers was an enjoyable bonus.

“You,” Jiron growled, pushing me behind him as he turned to face Macario. “Who the *fuck* are you?”

I peered out from behind Jiron’s protective stance, my hands clutching at his waist. Mac’s eyes darted between us and he sneered.

“The one who used up your little toy long before he came crawling to you. Has he bored you with all his whining and neediness yet?”

My giant snarled, taking a threatening step towards him. Mac, smartly enough, took one back. Jiron wasn’t wearing the coat that marked him as a king’s guard today, but it seemed even my ex-lover wasn’t stupid enough to tangle with him, despite being armed, for with a final contemptuous look in my direction, he turned and fled into the trees. I expected him to pause on the edges of our earshot and yell a final, scathing

retort – like he had that day when I’d ended things between us – but surprisingly he disappeared in silence.

“He took your sword,” I said quietly, trying to keep any trace of a whine from my voice. “If you want to go after him and get it back, I could...”

Jiron twisted and dropped to his knees in front of me, cradling my face with his huge hands. They were warm and callused, and held me so tenderly. “I’m not leaving you alone, little one. Are you alright?”

Yes, I went to say, but when I opened my mouth, all that came out was a strangled kind of whimper.

“Shush, daddy’s got you,” Jiron murmured, peppering my forehead with gentle kisses. “It’s okay. It’s all okay, sweet boy.”

“I’m sor-sorry,” I sobbed, unable to stop the tears. “After everything you went through, and I can’t handle...”

The words devolved into hiccoughs that he soothed away with a strong hand rubbing down my back.

“You did handle it,” he told me. “You handled it so beautifully, little one. You were so brave.”

“You don’t have to placate me,” I whispered, feeling the hysteria drain away as abruptly as it had arrived. I scrubbed angrily at my wet cheeks. “You probably think I’m pathetic. There’s you, taking out fourteen armed rebels, and defeating enemies for years and years, and I bet the king never cried like that when people tried to hurt *him*.”

“You might be surprised at what makes our king cry,” Jiron said, a subtle twist to his lips that I’d long since learned to read as amusement. “Wyatt, I’m not placating you. I think more of you than that.”

He stood, bundling me into his arms in an effortless move.

“It takes courage to face an enemy,” he continued, snuggling his face into my neck and making me snort out a laugh as his beard tickled the sensitive patch of skin under my ear. “But far more to face someone who was once a friend. He was...?”

“My ex-lover,” I mumbled. “Macario Aiza. Things didn’t end well between us.”

“Your ex-lover,” Jiron mused, but he didn’t sound accusatory. Or even jealous. More...thoughtful. “To stand up to a man who once held your heart and yet has devolved to using threats and weapons against you. No, little one, you carry enough bravery for all of us. Do not think anything on your mind and body releasing all that emotion through tears: it is substantially healthier than how I process my own experiences.”

“Which is how?”

He glanced down at me and sighed. “When I figure that out, I will tell you, Wyatt. For now, the memories still have their claws embedded in my flesh. I’m sorry I disappeared on you back there.”

“And I’m sorry about your sword,” I said. “I’ll help you get it back. I can tell you where Mac can usually be found.”

When Jiron nodded, slow and unbothered, I peered up into his eyes. The dark fury that had swirled in their depths before had gone, replaced by that fire-lit amber. “You’re not...angry with me?”

Jiron’s tone was incredulous. “Of course I’m not.”

Then he paused, his brow furrowing slightly as he searched my face. “Do you *want* me to be angry?” he asked cautiously, his voice wavering into something I couldn’t quite discern. “Is that something you need of me? Do you enjoy...being punished?”

“No!” I said quickly, flushing, and felt the tension instantly drain from him.

“Good,” said Jiron. He gave me a grateful smile and hugged me closer. “Because I’m not sure I could ever hurt you, Wyatt, even in play.”

I was absolutely with him on that. How anyone found screaming and crying to be sexy was beyond me, because the last thing I wanted when I’d stubbed my toe on the steps or cut myself with the garden shears was to jump into bed with someone. Or maybe I was missing the point. I squeezed Jiron’s

arm, thankful for his understanding with everything that had happened with Mac.

“I’m taking you home, little one,” he murmured then. “Will you tell me where you live?”

“*Calle Daluería*,” I said into Jiron’s shirt, reciting the name of my street. “The last building on the left, room nine.”

Jiron’s strides were long and sure, and he whisked me away without another word. The picnic items we left behind – perhaps they’d benefit a family who would otherwise have gone without tonight – and there was no sign of Macario as we returned to the park’s main path. I closed my eyes and snuggled in closer, responding when Jiron spoke but falling asleep in my man’s arms long before we arrived home.

\*

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## *Jiron*

I watched as Wyatt shifted in his sleep, his mussed hair and soft murmurs making me smile. He was so damn adorable.

But then his brow pinched and his indecipherable noises turned fretful. His hand stretched out across the bed as if searching for someone. Macario, the man we'd encountered in the park?

"Jiron," he mumbled sleepily, and I was across the room in a heartbeat, stroking his forehead and murmuring reassurances.

Wyatt's eyes opened, their mellow green catching the rays of sun that trickled into the room despite my best efforts to block the window with his thin drapes, and he smiled up at me.

"Come here," he ordered, snagging my hand and tugging me closer.

*Bossy.*

I obligingly sank down onto the bed next to him, careful not to land on any of his willowy limbs, which was made all the more difficult by the way the boy tried to curl up into the curve my body made before I'd fully settled.

"Mmm," he hummed, drawing one of my arms over him like a blanket. I supposed it was nearly big enough. "I could get used to lazy afternoons like these."

I chuckled. "It's morning, little one."

Wyatt blinked up at me, strands of blonde hair catching on his eyelashes. I stroked them free. "Morning? That's...my plants!"

My arm tightened around him as he tried to leap from the bed like someone had lit a keg of black powder beneath him.

"Steady. You had quite the ordeal yesterday. You need to rest."

"I...need..." he protested, struggling to get free, and I rather enjoyed the feeling of his small body writhing against me. "..."



to...water...”

“Let me do it,” I offered, pressing a kiss to his temple.

Wyatt fell still and eyed me dubiously.

“Look after my plants?” he asked. My normally chipper, impossibly optimistic boy had something that sounded like *scepticism* in his voice.

My heart twisted. “Forget I offered,” I said quickly. “They probably require a delicate touch, not my heavy-handed...”

I released him, but Wyatt stayed where he was.

“They do need carefully careful care,” he agreed, and then grinned up at me. A glittering spark of infectious good humour danced in his gaze. “Which you’d be perfect for, daddy. I’ve just never...no one has ever offered to do that for me before. There’s a lot of them – or did you miss the ones in the kitchen?”

I had *not* missed the veritable greenhouse of plants living in the kitchen. I’d had to move three of them just to find a bowl I could use to draw water from outside in case my boy woke up thirsty.

“I would be honoured,” I told him, bowing my head as I would to my king. “Will you tell me what to do?”

Wyatt beamed, stretching luxuriously out on the bed as I rose from it. The thing was huge: clearly it had been built with his ex-lover in mind, as it would fit even my bulk if I cared to lay on it properly. If I was *invited* to do so.

“There’s a well down the street,” he said, and then must have noticed the full bowl of water resting on the bedside table, for he added, “as you seem to have worked out for yourself. You’ll need one bucket...*uno*, Jiron,” he corrected gently as I pulled two from the cupboard he’d been gesturing to.

“One for the plants,” I clarified, holding it up in my left hand, “and one for you.” I raised the second bucket in my right.

“Daddy wants to make sure his boy is all clean so he can dirty him up again later. Is that alright?”

Wyatt blushed and squirmed gratifyingly on the bed. A thin sheet still covered his lower half, but my imagination was more than willing to supply the filthy, enticing image of what lay beneath.

“More than alright,” I heard him say as I closed the door behind me, and wasn’t sure if it was to me or himself. It didn’t matter. He sounded *happy*, and that was all I cared about.

If I made that happen...I would do anything it took to keep him that way. It was difficult to believe that I could be *wanted* like that, especially by someone who was as gorgeous and sweet as Wyatt. Wanted, not just accepted. Desired. Preferred?

That wasn’t what people normally thought of me, I knew that, but I’d heard what my boy had told me yesterday and I wasn’t going to insult him by accusing him of delusions. No matter how impossible it seemed, this perfect, adorable man wanted me in his life – not just as a friend, as I’d been careful to keep us for the last few months – but as something more.

Something that compelled him to strip for me to make those intentions clear, and Dios, now I was thinking of the lines of his body and the way his hair fell against his bare shoulders and...and getting hard while waiting in line for the public well was not wise at all.

“Señor?” a woman asked, gesturing me in front of her despite her having been already waiting when I arrived. Her eyes were wide as she took in the way I towered above her, and her hands trembled on the handle of her own bucket when I shifted my grip on mine.

But as eager as I was to return to my boy, I shook my head. I refused to let my size earn me things I wasn’t entitled to.

“No thank you,” I said politely, and set my buckets on the ground. “But perhaps I can assist you with drawing the water for yours?”

Her gaze softened and then sharpened again in an instant.

“Not necessary, señor,” she said, and I nodded to respect her decision. She showed no signs of frailty, and I didn’t wish to imply otherwise by pressing my assistance. “But perhaps...”

The woman gestured at the man who had reached the front of the queue. A lifetime of training to identify even the slightest of threats to my royal charge helped me instinctively pick out the way he favoured one arm over the other, and despite doing his best to appear stoic against the injury, he accepted my offer of help with good grace.

It was nice to be able to help someone without needing to do it with a blade in my hand, and the thickness of my arms served me well as others clamoured for assistance with their own buckets and bowls. Ten minutes later, smiling, I filled my own and went to find the man waiting for me.

\*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“I’m reasonably sure I don’t own towels this fine,” I said, burying my face into the soft fabric and feeling like I could live there forever. It was like being cuddled by *clouds*. Jiron chuckled and tugged it away so he could dry my hair.

“You didn’t,” he agreed. “Now you do.”

“How rich are you?” I asked. I tipped my head back to look up at him, loving the way his face was crinkled in concentration as he focused on rubbing my hair dry. “That part doesn’t stay flat,” I explained awkwardly when he got to that flick of hair that never sat flush against my head.

“I know,” Jiron said fondly, running his fingers through it.

I swallowed, trying to remember what I’d been asking. “Rich enough to build your own palace?”

He laughed again. I loved that laugh. Deep and joyful.

“No, little one. But His Majesty insisted on conveying...a rather large sum of money when he found out what had happened to me.”

“Good,” I said. “You went through hell for him.”

“And I’d do it again for free.” His tone was fierce, and I twisted in his arms so I could face him.

“I know you would,” I said softly. “That’s part of what I love about you, Jiron.”

“You...you love...” My giant seemed lost for words. He cleared his throat. “I’d do it for you too, Wyatt, in a heartbeat.”

“That’s the other part,” I told him, and couldn’t stop the grin that spread across my face when he leaned down to kiss me, even though it meant far too many of my teeth got kissed instead of my lips.

I didn't mind. I wanted kisses *everywhere*, even on the strange parts of my body, and when I told him that, Jiron obliged, kissing my eyelids and the inside of my elbow and the arch of skin between my thumb and forefinger. When he lifted me to sit on the table so he could kiss each of my bare toes, I shrieked in ticklishness and instinctively lashed out, immensely thankful that he caught my ankle in his strong grip before I could kick him in the face.

"Sorry, daddy," I said, contrite.

But he was smiling.

"Hmm. You will be."

Jiron yanked my leg up with his hold on my ankle, pulling me off balance. My back hit the table, rattling the bowls of fruit and cream he'd had delivered to us sometime after he'd watered all of my plants with such precise tenderness while I crooned soft praise at both them and him, and sometime before he'd given me the most thorough, erotic washing I'd ever received.

I didn't own a bath, and it would take too much effort to haul enough water up here to fill one – I visited the public baths when I needed to be fully immersed – but after experiencing what Jiron could do with a bucket of water and a cloth that went *everywhere*, I could happily swear off washing myself forever.

His nurturing nature had been strong this morning, and I'd been more than willing to indulge the daddy in him. He hadn't let me do anything for myself, fetching and carrying and lifting whatever I needed, and then seating me in his lap and feeding me when I'd tried to get away with just a few mouthfuls of food. It wasn't that the spread he'd arranged wasn't delicious – they were some of the sweetest strawberries I'd ever tasted, and the cream was thick and milky – it was simply that *he* was even more delicious.

But apparently licking his huge muscles until they glistened with saliva *wasn't a proper breakfast, Wyatt*, so I'd been entreated to the luxury of having him deliver enticing, sweet

morsels directly into my mouth while I did my best to suck on his fingers.

Those same fingers now roved up my legs, gentle and teasing until he reached my knees. And then Jiron gave me a wicked look, wrenched my thighs apart, and dipped his head between them.

“Oh!”

A hot, powerful tongue roved over my balls, down my taint, and then licked around my opening before demanding entry. One of Jiron’s huge hands splayed across my stomach to hold me in place as he proceeded to suck, nip, and slurp his damn way inside me, and I gasped out my pleasure.

The contented noise he made in response...I *felt* it, the reverberating hum echoing pleasantly through me where we were joined, and I thrashed against the table when Jiron speared his tongue deeper inside me than anyone had ever gone. Deeper than I’d ever thought possible.

My elbow accidentally came down on one of the bowls still littering the table. Cream, still somewhat chilled, splattered across the left side of my chest.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured Jiron quickly when he raised his head at the commotion – or my gasp at the cold – but he just gave me a wry look that said he’d be the judge of what to worry about, *thank you very much, boy*, and I surrendered back into that easy dynamic of ours where he enjoyed taking care of my problems and I enjoyed letting him.

Not that it *was* a problem. I didn’t give a damn about being covered in our breakfast when he was doing that amazingly momentous thing where...

Jiron straightened up, and I pouted.

That made him give me a mock glare that held far too much fondness to be sincere.

Good. I didn’t want daddy to be mad with me. *Ever*.

My giant dipped his face to my chest and began to clean me up with long, broad strokes of his tongue. He worked

methodically, almost clinically, and the patient, unceasing attentions had me gasping out my arousal. He licked up all of the cream until my skin was glistening and clean, pausing only to flick his tongue around my nipple. And if I was breathless from the sensation of his cold tongue around that hard peak, that had nothing – *nothing*, on what it felt like when Jiron swiftly ducked down and slipped it back inside my ass.

“Oh!” I said again, and it came out as a shivering yelp. “Fuck! Yes!”

His fingers joined his tongue, working me open.

“I’m going to ruin this hole of yours,” he murmured against my skin, not as a threat but in resigned warning, and I squirmed excitedly on the table.

“Yes please, daddy,” I begged. “Ruin it. Fucking *destroy* me with your cock.”

“My boy has such a dirty mouth,” growled Jiron, making my heart flutter. *My boy*. He burrowed his face back against my hole, his stubble grazing the sensitive skin. I felt more than heard his next words. “I love it.”

I clawed at the table, his hands, his hair. Anything within reach, because by the Blessed Five, he was bringing me close.

And then...he wasn't.

“I could have guessed you were spectacular in bed, daddy,” I panted desperately when he backed away, wiping his mouth with the back of one huge hand. “I didn't know you were also *cruel*.”

The fake stern look was back. “Little one,” Jiron admonished. “Do you think I would leave you wanting?”

I batted my eyelashes at him, watching as he unlaced his trousers and pulled a bottle of oil from his pocket that he must have bought along with the towels sometime between last night and now.

“No?”

“No,” he confirmed. “Get on the bed, sweet boy.”

I gave him a contented smile. “I’m not sure I can move. You’ve licked all the strength from my limbs.”

Jiron swooped down to lift me from the table just as I raised my arms to ask him to do so, and we both laughed as he whisked me over to the bed and deposited me carefully down onto the blankets.

\*



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## *Jiron*

I had the boy on all fours on the bed, his knees bent and spread, and from the mischievous glint in his eye as he glanced back over his shoulder at me, it wasn't lost on him that it was the same position he'd presented himself in at the park.

Dios, he was so innocent and filthy all at once, pressing each one of my buttons and surging the lust in my veins until I felt more beast than man. But I'd hold myself in check for him, he who deserved such tenderness and care, and I delivered soft kisses down his spine to cement that vow.

"Please," Wyatt whispered, his voice edged in the same need that infected my own insides and compelled me closer to him. One of my hands was on his slender hip. The other was on my cock, guiding it to his entrance, and-

"Don't you dare stop," he added bossily just as I prepared to do exactly that, struck all over again by the terrifying difference in our sizes. "Give me what you promised me, daddy, or I shall *cry*."

I chuckled. "We can't have that, can we?"

Yet something strange within me craved it: wanted to rock him as he sobbed, murmur words of comfort into his soft blonde hair, fix whatever problem ailed him so his tears dried up and turned to smiles once more.

But I never, *ever* wished to be the cause of his sadness.

"Whatever my boy asks for," I breathed obligingly, and we both let out identical groans as the head of my cock breached his entrance.

It was agonisingly, torturously slow progress while we gradually allowed his body to adjust to mine before I eased deeper. It didn't help that Wyatt pleaded every few seconds for more, the evocative neediness in his voice and posture pushing

me to my limits. But despite how prettily he begged, I refused to risk hurting him by forcing my way inside.

My hands were kept busy holding him in place, otherwise the little menace would have impaled himself in a single move, and I focused on that in an effort to retain my sanity and not let him.

Because the sight of my cock stretching his tight little ass?

I wasn't just a little bigger than him: the scene before my eyes looked obscene in how disproportionately sized we were. He was so damn *tiny*. Slender and delicate, and yet he took it all without complaint.

"Fuck," I gasped as I finally – *finally* – bottomed out, and Wyatt immediately began to move against me, letting out a series of delightful noises as he did so. "You take me so well."

"I do, don't I?" he said happily, the chirpy cockiness immediately descending into a whimper when I let my hips rock into him. "Yes, yes, please!"

"So good for me," I murmured. "So very good."

My boy made more of those helpless little sounds and I was done for, pounding into him with far less caution than I should have held considering what I was doing to him.

But small didn't mean fragile and Wyatt was far from breakable, taking each of my thrusts with greater endurance than many bigger foes had taken less forceful punches from me. This man made me feel powerful in all the best ways: strong and encompassing and able to take Dios-damned care of him...and still he demanded more.

"Careful, little one," I said, reaching forward to stroke his sweat-drenched hair from his face. "Much more of this and you might not be able to walk tomorrow."

Wyatt grinned over his shoulder at me. "What do I have to do to turn that *might* into a certainty?"

Oh, by the Blessed Five, I was done for. Head over heels, and utterly intoxicated.

His sheer delight and enthusiasm in everything he did – from watering plants to fucking – was marked by an unbridled eager energy that lit up the room like the sun itself.

“Just be you,” I replied truthfully, and set to ruining him just as I’d promised, soaking in every noise and movement he made because of me. *For me.*

“There!” he moaned and I set to hammering that particular spot inside him as he whimpered and writhed, my hands and eyes tracing the lines of his body to commit this perfect moment to memory.

The choked noise he made a few minutes later, one which sounded like my name screamed into the sheets, sent me cascading over the edge and I spent myself inside his sinfully hot body. It seemed to last an age, waves of pleasure surging through me in the best orgasm I’d ever had.

Wyatt gave a happy hum, but I wasn’t finished with him. In a single move, I pulled out, flipped him over, and swallowed his cock to the hilt.

“*Daddy,*” my boy gasped, and then seemed to lose his words as I took him to the back of my throat and then shallowed out over and over, fucking my own mouth with his perfect cock. My fingers found his gaping, leaking hole and slid inside, revelling in his slickness and the way he became even louder and wrigglier as I played with him.

*Come for me, beautiful boy.*

Coating my fingers in my own cum, I slid them deeper. Wyatt seemed to freeze, his lips parting wordlessly, and for a moment I panicked, thinking he was in pain.

And then his hot release shot into my mouth and I realised what was happening. His hips arched off the bed with his eyes closed and his face etched in a delightful expression of ecstasy, and I admired the mess I’d made of him: tangled blonde hair cascading around his head, fingers clenched tightly in the blankets, and wetness still leaking copiously from between his thighs.

His eyes opened, the soft, woodland green of his irises capturing me all over again.

“Come here,” breathed Wyatt, grabbing my bicep and tugging me up to meet him, and he slammed our mouths together. His tongue probed at my lips, encouraging them to open, and he moaned when I complied and he discovered I hadn’t yet swallowed him down. We shared his taste between us, tongues roving and exploring, and swapped mouthfuls until the last of his salty finish had been thoroughly savoured.

“I was wrong,” I murmured against his mouth. “My boy doesn’t need me to dirty him up. He’s plenty capable of filth all on his own.”

“But I want you to, daddy,” he whispered back, his exquisite eyes sparkling with joy as small hands raked along my arms and back. My own little ray of sunshine. “Again and again and again and again and-”

“I get it,” I said with a laugh.

Wyatt’s eyebrows waggled in amusement. “And again and again and again and again-”

I kissed him.

*Again and again.*

\*

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“And your tongue!” I said with delight, continuing to describe everything I’d loved about what we’d just shared. It was taking a while. “You’re as skilled with it as you are a sword.” I laughed at Jiron’s reaction. “You’ve had people tell you that before, haven’t you?”

He faintly coloured, the first sign of embarrassment I had ever seen from him.

“Was it the *king*?” I asked, teasing. “Have you tasted royal cock? How can a mere peasant’s compare, when his is probably cast in gold and spurts diamonds when he comes?”

I was laughing too hard to torment my daddy further although I very much wanted to, words and laughter getting jumbled in my mouth until I was a giggling mess. Jiron helped me along by reaching over and tickling me to keep me breathless, and I squirmed helplessly under his attentions.

“And yet you taste the best by far,” he murmured in my ear before kissing my cheek. I melted into his arms.

Then there was a knock on the door, two sharp raps that scraped at the edge of my consciousness with their familiarity but which I was too sated and happy to take notice of. Jiron glared at the door as if the force of his *fuck off* glower would send whoever it was scurrying away – and I was willing to bet that with enough time, it probably would – but while thoroughly depleted and spent, I planned to be even more so in a second, and wanted our unexpected visitor gone so I could get to making that happen.

“Coming!” I called out, slipping from the bed. My ass protested with delicious soreness when I moved.

“You’re not wearing any clothes, little one,” Jiron said warningly as he lazed back on the pillow, one arm tucked behind his head.

I liked the tone he used.

It said *you're your own man, but you're mine too.*

It said *I'm hella protective of you so only I get to see you naked.*

It said *wear my shirt, Wyatt, because that will make me want to ravage you again with that huge, fat cock of mine.*

“Okay,” I said obligingly and swiped it from the floor, slipping my arms through the billowing sleeves and tugging the laces together in a quick knot. The fabric immediately slipped down over one shoulder, far too large to remain in place no matter how tightly I tied it up.

Jiron stared at me.

“You’re drooling, daddy,” I pointed out smugly, not entirely untruthfully. He was wearing an open-mouthed, slack-jawed expression, his eyes dark and lidded.

My giant was so stoic when around others, and I loved that I could bring his emotions to the surface and lay them bare for me to revel in and for him to appreciate that not everything was better kept stifled and hidden.

“*Hurry*,” he growled out. “Hurry up and answer the damn door so you can get back in here.” He patted the bed beside one of his hairy, muscular thighs.

I grinned, shimmying the ends of the sleeves back up past my wrists and making sure to inject a flourish to my spin as I turned around so the shirt would briefly ride up over my hips. From the rapid inhale I heard behind me, I succeeded.

Would he fuck me in it? Would he ask me to ride him while I-

“Oh,” I said, blinking at the man standing on the other side of my door when I tugged it open. Jiron’s sword rested in its sheath on his tattered belt. “What are you...”

“Wyatt,” Macario snarled. “Get your ass dressed and give me your key.”

“My...key?”

“To this place,” he said, shrugging his shoulders to indicate where we stood. “I’m going to take care of it while you get me my money. Consider it incentive.”

“If you need somewhere to live, Mac, I can ask-”

“Key. *Now.*”

“I...” I frowned and shook my head. My loose hair cascaded over my shoulders; one covered, the other bare. “I don’t think...”

I yelped as Macario wrapped a meaty hand around my neck.

“Wyatt, I’ve fucking had it with you. You’re-”

His brown eyes widened and he stepped back towards the stairwell, hastily letting go. Another hand touched me but this time it was a reassuring weight: a gentle squeeze of my exposed left shoulder, a closeness of Jiron’s body against my back.

“What the fuck?” Mac demanded, his face drawn into an angry snarl. “Why is *he* here? You hired him as your Blessed guard or something?”

“Macario Aiza,” said Jiron in a low, dangerous voice, tugging me back against him. I could feel the warmth of his skin through the borrowed shirt, and realised he was wearing even less than I was. “You should leave, and *promptly.*”

Mac sneered at him, far more fearless than he had been yesterday in the park. “You can’t tell me what to do. This is between me and mine.”

The breath left me as I was suddenly scooped up from the floor, lifted effortlessly into Jiron’s massive arms.

“He’s not yours,” Jiron said shortly, naked and clearly not giving a shit. Mac’s gaze dropped to between my daddy’s legs and his eyes widened, making me smirk.

Jiron took a step into the hallway. He moved with deadly calm. “And I don’t give second chances.”

Yet Macario still didn’t run away like he had that first time. He just offered a cocky twist of his lip and stamped his foot

against the floor twice in quick succession. “Neither do I,” he crowed as two burly men almost as big and mean as him swelled up the stairs towards us. “Figured we’d be breaking down a door if little Wyatt wasn’t feeling cooperative, but I’m happy to put them to work breaking your jaw instead.”

He dragged his eyes back to mine. “And when your new *protector* is lying in a pool of his own piss and blood, regretting the day he ever let you bat those pretty eyelashes of yours at him to drag him into your mess, will you just find another man to cling to?”

I stopped breathing.

Jiron gave the faintest of sighs as if he found this all very tedious, carefully adjusting his shirt over my hips to ensure I was covered and hidden from the rest of the men. The fussing calmed me; a soothing balm that coaxed my lungs back into life and eased the death grip I had around his neck. He offered a smile and then took a more secure hold on me with his left arm so he could free up his right.

I realised why a moment later when one of Macario’s pet bullies swung a wild punch in our direction. Jiron stepped smartly to the side, caught his wrist with a single hand, and snapped it. The man howled and instantly went down to the floor, cradling his wrist to his chest.

With a yell, his companion threw himself at us, swerving to our left to keep me between him and Jiron’s ability to defend himself. There was something in the man’s hand, metal but dull like the handle of a frying pan or an unforged piece of steel, and I felt the reverberation when the edge of it clipped Jiron’s bicep as he turned into the blow to protect me from being hit.

My giant barely made a sound, even though it had to have hurt.

Glancing up, all I found was a steely determination in Jiron’s gaze. He caught my eye, winked, and then I was jostled slightly as he lifted his leg to kick the man back into the wall. A flurry of movement; two strikes, maybe three, and the man was on the floor, disarmed, and whimpering.



“Jiron!” I cried, spotting Mac looming over his shoulder with the sword drawn from its sheath. My arms tightened around his neck, fearing my warning had come too late. But Jiron was already moving, spinning towards where the hall gave way to the stairs so he had room to correct his footing.

Macario followed, swinging the sword at us with a furious growl and a flash of steel – only for his arm to be effortlessly batted away by my man.

There was a clatter as the blade landed on the tiles, and the two men shared equally pissed off glares before Jiron’s hand shot out and wrapped around Mac’s neck.

Competence is fucking sexy. I’ll not have anyone tell me otherwise. And the sheer sexiness that Jiron exuded as he swung Mac out over the stairwell’s edge and held him there by the throat...all while still carrying me? I almost swooned.

I was also terribly glad that I was not the kind of man who could get worked up while scared, because otherwise I might have come right then and there.

Macario’s fingernails scratched desperately at Jiron’s hand, his legs kicking uselessly in the air. How had I ever thought to compare them? My ex-lover had *nothing* on Jiron: not his size, not his talent, not his generosity of spirit that had made him put himself between me and my dangerous problems without an ounce of hesitation.

The other men got to their feet slowly, assessing the scene. One cracked his neck.

“Mac has no money to pay you,” I told them from Jiron’s arms. When they scoffed, I shook my head. “Why would he need it so desperately from me if he did?”

They eyed each other uncertainly before glancing at Macario, who was still hanging from my giant’s grip. And then they disappeared down the stairs without another word.

“You would dare hurt Wyatt?” Jiron growled at the man he held. “Rest assured, I will do worse to you in turn, Aiza.”

His fingers must have loosened, for Mac’s desperate noises turned from heaving attempts to breathe to garbled pleas for

mercy, and his hands were now clutching Jiron's wrist to avoid being dropped onto the stone floor a dozen feet below.

"Please, Wyatt! Please, I didn't mean...just tell him to put me down, please!"

I reached up to touch the muscle flexing in Jiron's jaw. "Don't kill him," I said softly.

"I should," he responded with another of those deliciously feral snarls, but before I could beg him for Macario's life, he'd already stepped us all backwards. He let go and Mac fell to his knees on the tiled floor, panting and massaging his throat.

"I wasn't..." Mac gasped, "wasn't actually going to..."

Jiron shifted me in his arms and Macario flinched at the movement, his arms coming up to shield his head as if from a blow. Looking somewhat amused, Jiron pressed a kiss to my hair and toed the other man's thigh with his bare foot.

Mac whimpered. "Don't worry about the money you owe me," he muttered quickly.

"Wyatt owes you *nothing*," Jiron said, his voice sharp and commanding. "But now, you owe him your life. Come near him again and you'll lose even that."

Macario nodded and shook his head all at once in a frantic discord of movement, pushing to his feet and scurrying away down the stairs.

I pressed my face to Jiron's chest and felt his heart thrum reassuringly against my cheek. It was impossibly fast, at odds with the calmness in his stance and the steadiness of his arms as he cradled me close.

"Would you have actually killed him?" I whispered, needing to know.

Jiron glanced down at me. I wondered if he'd lie to spare my feelings, if he thought me as emotionally weak as others did just because I avoided conflict and tried to see the good in the world when they'd long given up.

But he nodded. "Yes," he said simply. "For threatening you? Absolutely *yes*."



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## *Jiron*

Shutting the door with my heel and flicking the lock, I carried my boy back to the bed and sat him carefully on the edge of it. He tried to pull me down on top of him but I ignored the light tugs on my arm and the way the shirt began to tent between his legs as he used his entire strength against me without result. Part of being his daddy was taking care of him, and I wasn't going to indulge in as much as a kiss until I'd checked every inch of his perfect skin and ensured it remained unmarked.

"I'm fine," Wyatt assured me, seductively parting his legs and dragging my shirt up to offer delectable hints at what lay beneath. I eyed him with amusement. Having apparently given up on dragging me to bed, he was now trying to coerce me into it, and it was damn near working.

"That's for me to decide," I told him, lowering my head and nuzzling along that exposed section of pale thigh until he was gasping out pleas and rubbing his hips shamelessly against me. "Dios, little one, you could have been *killed*."

"Good thing you were here, then."

"I don't want to be your guard, Wyatt," I said, and then faltered, realising how that might have sounded. "I'll always protect you, of course, but I..."

*Time to fucking say it, Jiron. Don't let this beautiful man slip away because you're too much of a coward to let someone in.*

I cleared my throat. "I want to be something more."

"You are," he said simply, reaching out his hands. This time I let him pull me closer. "Jiron, I don't need a guard-"

I raised an eyebrow and gave a pointed glance in the direction of the door.

"Well, maybe sometimes," Wyatt corrected, beaming. "It is *very* hot to see you in action, and it means I won't have to spy

on your training sessions anymore.”

I liked to think I was too professional and composed to splutter, but it was a near thing. “Boy, *what?*”

“You heard me,” he said, fluttering his eyelashes likely because he knew how much it distracted me. This time was no exception. He stared up at me, lust and fondness flitting across his face and mirroring my own emotions. “But I want *you*,” he continued, squeezing my forearms. “All of you, Jiron. The man, the friend, the guard, the lover. All of you.”

I shook my head. “You don’t want *all* of me. Not the dark, fucked-up-”

“*Daddy*,” Wyatt said sternly, contorting his adorable features into an uncharacteristic seriousness that he seemingly couldn’t hold for long, for it soon cracked back into his usual vivacious grin. “I want everything. I may not be very good at fighting or dealing with blood or carrying heavy things, but I’m *excellent* at being here for you while you work through it.”

And he really was. Just being around Wyatt was to feel a hundred times lighter. His smile banished the shadows; his cheerfulness buoyed my heart, and his small hand in mine made the impossible seem easy.

I let out a breath. The memories didn’t leave me alone when I was with him, but they were...less intense. And had I not been able to pull myself from them yesterday with the sound of his voice? That was more progress than any other I’d made in the six months since I’d been rescued.

Perhaps if I...I’d been so scared of their paralysis over me, the way they infected both my body and mind with terror, that I’d done everything I could to stave them away. Pushing myself with work and training so I would be too exhausted to dream. Avoiding anything that could possibly trigger me. I’d even briefly considered the escape of strong drink, although that had only made it all worse. None of it had helped, so maybe I should try running *towards* the fear instead of away from it?

“It’s not pretty,” I said quietly. Unnecessary, for he’d already seen me at my worst and was still here, yet I felt the need to

utter the warning.

Wyatt nodded. “Do whatever you need,” he urged me softly, reaching out to trace his fingers down my cheek. “I’ll keep you grounded here, okay?”

I cocked my head. He gave me a playful, mischievous look, slipping between my arms and off the bed. A gentle push and I was seated where he had been, and then it was his turn to drop to his knees for me. My breath caught at the sight.

“It’s only fair,” murmured Wyatt, gathering his hair loosely over one shoulder and eyeing off my rapidly growing cock with keen interest. “You fed me lunch yesterday and breakfast this morning...now feed me something else.”

I groaned when I saw his pink tongue dart out to wet his lips. By the Blessed Five, this boy was *everything*. “Then you best open that pretty mouth of yours, little one.”

He nodded obediently, not bothering to speak because he’d already done as I asked, parting his lips and sticking out his tongue before dipping forward to take me into his mouth. Tight, wet heat enveloped me. And he once again surprised me with how flexible and determined that delicate body of his was, taking much more of my length than I would have expected.

Reluctantly closing my eyes on the arousing sight of that mouth stretched wide around my cock, green eyes crinkled in pleasure, I let myself go, surrendering to the wave of darkness that always lapped at the edges of my consciousness.

I’d never willingly embraced it before. A moment of terror seized my heart at how easy it was to invite those horrors in, but then...I was there.

Back in the basement, blood glistening across my chest and trickling down between my legs. I coughed and it felt like fire in my lungs; hot and acidic and yet just one more pain among many. My head hung low, unable to maintain the strength to keep it up.

I shifted in my restraints, trying in vain to find a position that brought more comfort. But there was no comfort here, just

agony and exhaustion and fear and...

And a hot, curious tongue lapping at my slit. I sighed at the unexpected pleasure, thrusting my hips to feel more of it. The eager mouth around my cock willingly obliged, taking me deeper, and it was distracting enough to make me miss most of what the rebels around me were saying.

“...still working on him, sir. We’ve broken all his fingers, given him the taste of the lash once or twice, and a whole host of other fun things to show him his place. But without the Touch, there’s a limit to how far we can go before we kill the royalist prick.”

Sir frowned, glancing at the healer slumped in a chair in the corner of the room. His sweat-drenched hair was plastered to his neck, his skin was flushed, and his eyes hooded. All the signs of a Blessed reaching the last dregs of their magic, and if he tried using it again before it had properly replenished, he’d be lucky to survive.

“How long until you’re better?” Sir barked at him.

The healer could barely raise his head. He whispered something, his tongue flicking out over cracked lips, and Sir glowered.

“¿*Qué?*”

The healer tried again.

“At least two days, sir,” one of the rebels standing closer to him conveyed.

“Prince Renato will be long gone by then, if he’s not already.” Cursing, Sir waved a hand in my direction without bothering to look at me. “Consider the mission an absolute fucking failure, and kill this one.”

I let out a long exhale, a breath I felt like I’d been holding since my capture.

My prince was safe, I hadn’t broken, and I was now to be permitted death.

I couldn’t ask for more.

Sir was in front of me in an instant, digging his fingers into one of the knife cuts along my ribs. I gritted my teeth, focusing the last of my strength into lifting my head so I could hold his disdainful gaze.

“Not *quickly*, brute,” he murmured. “My men will make sure it takes you a very long time to die, considering how much you’ve inconvenienced us. They’ll take you apart piece by piece, starting with your cock and ending with...let’s see. Maybe your heart? Your eyes?”

“His tongue,” rasped the healer, looking as though he was struggling as much as I was to keep his chin up. “Because I’ll have that scream from you before you go, big guy.”

I smiled and spat out yet another mouthful of bloody spittle. “I’ll take that bet.”

It seemed my late friend Ademar’s spirit was with me in my final moments, for his *fuck you* attitude in the face of danger graced my words and expression, making the smile a genuine one. With Dios’ mercy, I’d soon be reunited with him, and I closed my eyes in a futile attempt to block out what these men could – and would – do to me.

“Jiron,” Wyatt murmured, hot breath tracing over my balls. His small hands, delicate yet rough, roved down my thighs, jolting me out of my acceptance of my death and reminding me of everything I had, everything that had happened, and that all of this terror and pain was nothing but a months-old memory.

For a moment I existed in two realities: one where a man began to carve up my skin and I fought to rein in a scream, and the other where a beautiful blonde boy lavished affection on the most sensitive parts of my body, his touch sweetly provocative as he worked me over with his hands and mouth.

With the duality came clarity, and remembering that my torture at the rebels’ hands was long over reduced its hold on me. While it seemed real, such was the vividness of the memories that seized my mind, *knowing* it was anything but immediately dulled every sensation.



It was like when one realised one was dreaming. I'd had my control returned to me, and while I wasn't entirely immune to the memory's effects, it no longer felt so inescapable.

I moved my hand.

In the memory, I could do no such thing: my wrists were tightly strapped to the posts with tough strips of leather designed to keep me in place while they worked.

But in the present, my fingertips found the feathery softness of Wyatt's hair, felt his head bobbing beneath my hand as he returned to sucking me off. He murmured something incomprehensible, yet I didn't need to understand the words to feel his intent through the vibration it made along my cock.

The rebels were still inflicting their painful attentions on my body, the healer rasping out commands on how to worsen the hurt – but I forced myself to hold on, blocking out the agony and replacing it with the pleasure Wyatt was delivering on me instead. The comfort. The assurance of *daddy, I'm here*.

The head of my cock bumped against the back of my boy's throat and I groaned, clutching him tighter to me.

All the pain was gone now. It was as if I was merely watching the scene in the basement instead of living it.

“Just one scream,” the healer purred from his chair, stroking a finger down its arm. He still looked pale, but the excitement of my renewed torture had perked him up, for his eyes were bright as he watched what the others were doing with their blades and ropes and twisted shards of metal. “Give me what I want, big guy, and I'll see your corpse is properly prepared for the afterlife. Refuse me, and you'll never stand before Dios-”

I watched with a vague kind of detachment as his left eye exploded, the space where it had been replaced in an instant with the glistening tip of an arrowhead that was protruding through his skull. The healer's surprise froze on his face, echoing that of everyone else in the room as they stared at him for a second and then scattered, diving for weapons and cover.

It was too late for most of them. Two more arrows found two more targets with deadly accuracy, and then Luis was there,

polishing off the remainder with his sword and whatever torture implements were within his reach. One rebel died with a pair of pliers stuffed into his open mouth and his innards sliced open, while a second – who had slipped on the gruesome, slithery mess of his friend’s intestines – soon found himself both decapitated and with a heated poker through his leg.

Sir hissed out orders for Luis’ death, but there was no one left to follow them.

The rebel unsheathed his sword and swung it at something I couldn’t see from my position, only to be parried with a clash of steel. I caught sight of Elías’ sword before I saw the man himself, graceful yet ferocious in his movements...movements I had taught him myself, long ago.

Within seconds, the blade came to rest at Sir’s throat, bloodied by the strokes it had made along the man’s hands and arms to rid him of his weapon. He snarled out ineffective threats, making El raise an eyebrow before glancing over at me with concern.

“You alright, Jiron?”

“The tough bastard has served His Highness for thirteen years,” Luis drawled from my other side. “It would take more than this lot to finish him off.”

My restraints were cut and I slumped into his arms with a grateful nod. I heard myself groan as shredded skin was pulled taut and battered muscles forced to stretch, but thanks to Wyatt’s ministrations in keeping my head clear, felt none of it.

“Speaking of finishing off,” Elías said pointedly, using his sword to force Sir to a kneeling position on the floor. “This one, and the others we left alive outside, are for you, Jiron.” My friend’s voice took on a harsh note, the only sign of the fury broiling inside him other than the darkness in his eyes.

“I don’t want them,” I rasped.

That was his permission to kill them all. To exterminate the monsters who had been hunting my prince like the animals they were. And perhaps El would have done it, but it was at

that moment that Luis helped me fight my way back to my feet and I caught Elías' wince as he took in the full extent of my injuries.

His expression went even colder.

"I do," was all he said. He reversed the blade in his hand and smacked Sir across the temple, sending him unconscious to the ground in an ungainly heap. I didn't envy the man and the other captives the excruciating torment they were in for when they awoke under Elías' capable hands, but I had other priorities.

"Ren?" I heard myself ask hoarsely, my fingers slick with my own blood and slipping on Luis' skin where we clutched at each other. "Are Ren and Mathias safe?"

The uncertain look he shot at El as if for guidance made my heart plummet.

"Don't lie to me, Luis. Please."

"We don't know," he muttered. "No one has heard from either of them."

Panic and fear weakened my limbs and blurred my vision.  
No...

*They're both fine. You saw them just yesterday in the palace gardens, happy and laughing.*

The thought came unbidden, unexpected because I had not been thinking any such thing at the time, but also gilded in certainty, because fuck, the boy was good. Wyatt had taken the edge off the terror I'd felt when this all happened the first time: what I'd felt whenever I'd unwillingly relived it since – but his eager mouth was now sending me soaring through the clouds, stripping the memories of their darkness and forging them anew in pleasure and joy. Reminding me that Ren and his husband were safe. That *I* was safe.

I'd made Luis keep me quiet at night, but I wouldn't ask that of Wyatt. And I didn't feel the same need to hide as I did in the palace; not here, in this cozy little home with my man at my side. He let me be vulnerable and strong all at once.

Not just the guard, he'd said. But the lover and the man beneath too.

Could I let myself be more than my job?

It likely wouldn't be the last time I'd fall prey to whatever infected my mind and dragged me back to experience those horrible memories over and over, but Wyatt had helped lose them some of their bite. Writing over the experience like a worn piece of parchment, grounding me against what was *then* with what was *now* and-

I cried out my boy's name as he patiently but insistently took me over the edge, then ran my hands through his soft and now tangled hair while he eagerly lapped at my tip and milked the last few drops of cum from my satiated cock.

"Wyatt," I murmured again, dragging him up to meet me. Our mouths met, his hot and sticky, and he eagerly rubbed himself against me, ready for more. The exuberance of youth, I thought fondly as I took him in hand.

I was worn out from all of our exertions this morning but refused to let his energy go unrewarded. It had somehow – miraculously and so damn thankfully – become my job to look after this boy, and I was going to give it as much dedication as I did my appointment as royal guard. Wyatt wouldn't want for anything, I'd make sure of it. Money, protection, comfort. A hard cock in a firm ass. A shoulder to cry on, a daddy to fix his problems, someone to be at his side every day from this one to the end.

I'd give him it all.

\*

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I yawned, stretching, worn out but incredibly happy. I was still wearing Jiron's shirt – it was loose enough on my smaller form that he'd been able to do what he wanted to me without needing to remove it – and amber eyes tracked me hungrily as I rolled over.

Hungry...but also sleepy, for they were half-lidded as he lazed on the bed and watched me. Perhaps in time I'd tease him about his *advanced years*, pretending to tug at non-existent grey hairs and poke dubiously at the toned stomach that didn't hold an ounce of fat, but for now, his voiced doubts still echoed around my head. He'd thought himself too old for me? Too big? I was going to spend years proving that he was perfect in every way.

I yawned again. "I suppose I should go to work," I said reluctantly, trailing my bare foot up his thick, powerful calf and savouring the ticklishness of his leg hair beneath my toes.

But Jiron just snorted. "You, sweet boy, have an extremely loose relationship with time."

I cocked my head in question and one of his thick thighs slipped between my legs, forcing them apart.

"It's nearly sunset, Wyatt," he murmured, catching my chin and turning it towards the window where sure enough, hazy pinks and oranges graced the sky beyond the glass. "You would be several hours late for your shift...*if* I had not sent a message to the palace this morning excusing you from it."

By the Blessed Five, had we really spent a whole day in bed together? That was *incredible*. Could we try for a week?

I grinned and patted him on the head in reward for his deliciously optimistic forward-thinking. He'd *known* he was going to get laid.

My giant growled in playful warning and pulled back to snap his teeth at my outstretched fingers. I taunted him by waving them in front of his face, daring to get closer and closer, and only acknowledging my mistake the moment his own hand shot out and locked around my wrist. Jiron was *fast*, and clearly not inclined to give me the mercy I begged for when his lips closed over my fingers and he sucked and nipped at them with attentive diligence that had me squirming with the implication it promised.

So maybe I hadn't been begging very hard.

And then I realised something. "But you were meant to be working today, too, daddy."

Jiron nodded, drawing his mouth off my hand. A string of saliva stretched between his lips and my fingers, and I stared at it, entranced, as it snapped and fell. "I was."

"But you...you just..." Words were failing me. "You *never* take days off."

"Maybe that was my mistake."

When I continued to stare at him, Jiron offered a rueful smile.

"I want...no, I *need* to be the best I can be for my king before I can serve him properly once more," he said quietly, his expression sobering. "Ren needs to be able to completely trust me to have his back. I need to be able to trust myself."

"Well, *I* trust you," I muttered. "But it doesn't seem like you to-"

"I'm not giving up, little one," said Jiron, brushing his knuckles against my cheek. I leaned into it, my eyes fluttering closed. "One day I will again stand proudly by His Majesty's side, and Elías better watch himself if he wishes to retain the position of Comandante."

I grinned at that. My daddy, head of Quareh's military? Hell fucking yes, Elías better watch himself. Now that Jiron had voiced the ambition, I'd do anything it took to see him achieve it. I wasn't above a little creative sabotage if that's what it took, and I knew *exactly* which plant's leaves would leave a rather distracting rash on a person's...

“But I’ve tried pushing through and ignoring what happened to me,” Jiron added softly. “I’ve tried locking that shit down and pretending nothing’s wrong and working myself to the bone in the hope I’ll be too exhausted to remember to be scared. None of it has worked, not until...being with you today. It was the first thing to ever leech any power from the memories, and I have you to thank for that, little one.”

I leaned into him and Jiron hummed happily.

“So you’re trying something different?” I asked in a whisper, barely daring to believe what he was saying. That he was permitting himself to have something for *him*, able to be a person and not just the king’s guard. “Where you feed me more fruit and fuck me and we never, ever leave this bed?”

Jiron laughed. It rumbled through both of us.

“I was going to say that I’m allowing myself a break every now and then. That instead of forcing whatever’s fucked up in my head to heal, I’m going to give it what it actually needs to do that.”

“And that is...” I prompted.

I knew what the real answer was, the boring answer.

Rest, space, time. Acceptance.

Jiron sat up and lifted me onto his lap without effort, turning me so we faced each other. Gentle hands roved down to my hips.

“Feeding you fruit,” he teased.

He leaned in and kissed me. Our lips brushed, soft and slow and sweet.

“Fucking you.”

I smirked and stole a second kiss.

“And never leaving this bed, little one.”

“Ever, daddy.” I snuggled into his arms. Forget a week: I was determined to keep us in here for at least a month while I learned everything about him. “You forgot the never *ever*.”

\*\*\*

THE END



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never expected to write *anything* with daddy kink, but when the conviction of telling Jiron's story had hit me and I finally allowed myself to think about what kind of lover and partner he would be, the answer became obvious. All the little hints he'd inadvertently given me as an author over the four *Riehse Eshan* books: his fierce protectiveness, the 'little one' endearment, the way he constantly fussed over Ren and Mat. Jiron is a natural carer, and he deserved someone who would let him look after them – and revel in it – while they looked after him in turn.

Wyatt, the random little ball of sunshine, chose that moment to saunter his way into my head and curl up on Jiron's lap as if he belonged there. Jiron looked a little bemused, but quite content, and he was soon stroking Wyatt's hair and murmuring soft things into his ear when he thought I wasn't looking.

I actually hadn't been looking, but that didn't matter. Mathias is too perceptive to let such things go unnoticed, and Ren's love of gossip had him excitedly spilling it all to me – with plenty of suggestive embellishments – in no time at all. They made me swear to finish their story first, but I admit that it was less than a day between putting the final touches on *An Oath and a Promise* and when I began to enthusiastically scribble down Jiron and Wyatt's own tale.

It was odd, I'll admit, to delve into different voices but remain within the same world. And with Jiron and his boy only having this novella instead of a full series of books, they'll always keep more mysteries to themselves than Ren and Mat. Yet I hope that this glimpse into their lives has been enjoyable, and that it lightens your heart considering what terrible things Jiron has endured.

I'll finish with a list of people I'd like to recognise: Janice, for *gently suggesting* (read: incessant nagging) I should write Jiron his own story. The numerous readers who shared their love of Jiron from the moment they first met him in *A Knife*

*and a Blade*. The even more numerous readers who made lots of mean threats towards me should he not survive the series... to whom all I can say is be careful how you phrase your demands, for you didn't specify he had to be whole and sane in that survival, did you?

And to you, for caring enough about the characters to pick this book up and share their moments of vulnerability with them. Love you all.

Join [Adelaide Blaike's Blades](#) in the author's reader group on Facebook to discuss this book, get teasers from upcoming work, and stay up-to-date with the latest releases.

# XERXES DESCENDANT

## *Book One of the House Epsilon Duology*

With planet Earth in ruins and billions of people dead, Kyle Randall knows he's got it better than most. Even if the power goes out too often, he's never seen the sun, and the runes that keep the last of the great cities in the air are starting to fail.

Even if Kyle can't shake his attraction to his emotionally unavailable boss, the master of their lower city brothel who seems frustratingly determined to keep things *professional* between them.

And then there's the ex-client who wants revenge on Kyle, all the people mysteriously going missing, and whatever shady dealings are happening in the bowels of the city.

But that's all survivable, right?

*Right?*

The *House Epsilon Duology* is a futuristic fantasy MM romance featuring a boss/employee relationship, sunshine Dom + the competent bad-ass who subs for him, sex workers (portrayed in a positive light), floating cities, magic runes, plots and conspiracies, the usual levels of smut, kink, and banter, and ~~an unhealthy~~ a perfectly healthy amount of 1980s song references.