



DARKEST
NIGHT

ALESSA THORN

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MERCENARIES AND MAGIC

ALESSA THORN



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Prologue

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Also by ALESSA THORN

It was a steamy August night in Paphos. Athena Edgeworth was perched on a barstool, drinking her third whiskey of the hour in celebration. She wanted to jump up and down, squeal with excitement and victory. She had just acquired one of the best finds of her life...and she couldn't tell anyone.

Around her, sunburned tourists filled the outdoor bar area and lingered on the sands of Venus Beach. Paphos was where Aphrodite had risen from the sea, birthed from the severed genitals of Uranus. As someone who apparently had been birthed from an icy forest, Athena could relate to her mysterious and bizarre origins.

Paphos was still marked with the goddess of love, the city sacred to her like the whole island of Cyprus. It was kind of ironic that one of the holiest, and until a few hours ago, lost books on communing with the Christian god had also been hiding on the island.

Athena had followed hunch after hunch, even after her own team had said she was crazy. Still, she had found the lost teachings of the Syrian Saint Simeon Stylites in a crypt in the St. Nephytos Monastery. Now, it was upstairs, sitting in a cushioned metal briefcase. She couldn't *wait* to rub it into Dante and Izabella's faces that her gut had been right.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" a voice asked over her right shoulder. Athena turned slightly and appraised the man staring at her.

He was tall, with jet black hair clipped close to the sides and longer on the top. By his husky accent, she pegged him for being Turkish. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt that was a little rumpled from the heat and had the sleeves rolled up his brown, tattooed forearms.

He was handsome, sporting an easy smile and groomed stubble, but that wasn't what made Athena pause. It was that the charming and relaxed countenance was a hundred percent bullshit.

Athena's eyes dropped to the scars on his knuckles and assessed the hint of controlled violence in his aura. Black eyes studied her as carefully, taking in her own slight scars from boxing and blade training on her hands. Athena had been raised with mercenaries and knew a man of violence and darkness when she saw one.

They were predators meeting, and they both sensed it.

"It's not taken," Athena replied, sipping her drink and looking away from him. He ordered one of the local beers and seemed to get lost in the football game on the screen above the bar. Athena turned the page of her book without reading it.

"What brings you to Cyprus?" he asked after fifteen minutes of silence.

Athena tensed. "Work. You?"

"Work too. I'm a historian."

My ass you are.

"Really? You don't look like one," she replied, turning another page.

"And what are historians supposed to look like?"

Athena raised a brow. "I have met a lot of historians, and I've never seen any with two full sleeves of tattoos." She was also sure that some of them were Turkish gang-affiliated, but she didn't want to point that out. Sometimes it was better to act dumb.

He smiled, a sharp flash of teeth that hit her low. "Remnants of a misspent youth. I'm Kon." He held a long hand out to her.

"Athena," she replied, shaking his hand. Their eyes narrowed as they hung on, both registering the calluses on each other's palms from weapons training.

"Goddess of war. I can see it," he said, dropping his voice as he leaned slightly into her space. A ripple of awareness rolled through her. He smelled of something spicy, and under that was sweat and pheromones. Athena wanted to know if he tasted just as good.

"What kind of business are you in, goddess?" Kon asked, not letting her hand go. Usually, men would've dropped the eye contact by now. Athena's icy blue stare made people uncomfortable. Kon's black eyes held hers like it was a challenge.

"Acquisitions." It wasn't a lie. She acquired all sorts of things; sometimes, it was even legal.

"Sounds...interesting," he said.

"It has its moments. I'm actually celebrating," she replied and wondered why she admitted it.

"By drinking by yourself? That doesn't sound like a celebration. Where are all your friends?"

"I'm here alone."

His expression turned curious. "Is that so? No husband or boyfriend to keep an eye on you?"

Athena shrugged. "Just me."

"How fortuitous. I'm here alone too. Do you want to be my friend?" Kon asked. Athena knew she should take her hand back, but his grip was still holding her firm.

"And what makes you think that being your friend is going to be more interesting than my book?" she asked.

"The fact that you haven't read the last three pages you just turned." Kon leaned over, giving Athena a delicious view of the tattooed chest down the front of his shirt. His breath was warm on her ear. "And if you take me upstairs, I'll give you the fucking you so badly need."

Athena forced herself to laugh, even though her thighs pressed together on the barstool. "Has that line ever worked?"

"I don't know; I've never used it before. But I can guarantee, if you take me to your room, I'll have you screaming in no time." Kon picked up her drink and drained it. "Let's go."

"I haven't agreed to it yet." Athena's heart pounded as his black eyes roamed over her, stripping her bare with a mere glance.

"Yes, you have. It's why I still have this hand of yours." Kon lifted her wrist to his mouth to taste her pulse. Without breaking eye contact with her, he scraped his teeth over it hard enough to sting and make Athena give an involuntary whimper. His smile widened, no doubt feeling her heartbeat jump under his tongue.

She knew he was dangerous, but so was she, and he was right; she did need a good fucking. Her last few hookups had been so boring, she had wondered why she had bothered. This man would not be boring.

Kon sensed the moment she gave in, placed some notes on the counter to cover their drinks, and tugged her off the barstool.

They stood opposite each other, sizing each other up like they were getting ready for a fight, not a fuck. Neither one of them spoke.

Athena's gaze flicked back up to his, and she smirked in challenge, letting the public face she wore in the bar slip off.

Athena was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and she did what she had never done with a lover before. She let him see her own violence and darkness. Other men would be backing out, making excuses, and walking away. Kon didn't. He just flashed his teeth in a not-quite smile.

He followed her upstairs to her room, a coiled ball of energy that had the hair on her neck rising. As soon as her door swung open, he pushed her up against a wall and kissed her roughly. It was tongues and teeth and taking.

Athena let go of any semblance of politeness. She bit his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. Kon hissed, grabbed her wrists tight, and dragged them above her head.

Athena leaned forward and licked the blood off his bottom lip. Kon's eyes darkened.

"Oh, goddess, you are fucking gagging for it, aren't you? I could smell it on you in the bar. Been in that cage of yours for a while, have you?"

Athena snarled softly, brought her leg up behind his, and knocked out his knees. He controlled his fall, tugging her with him and rolling to pin her to the bed. A soft chuckle vibrated in his chest.

"If that's how you want to play, let's do it right," he said. Kon lifted his knee slowly up between her thighs and ground it against her

mound, making pleasure streak through her as she canted her hips up against him.

Kon lifted his knee higher across her stomach and used it to pin her down. He released her wrists and grabbed her breasts hard enough to make her gasp. His fingers twisted in the flimsy fabric of her cotton sundress and tore it in one long rip down the front.

"Well now, what do we have here?" he purred, reaching for the small knife that was nestled between her breasts.

Athena always carried a knife somewhere, a product of her upbringing. He pulled the blade free of its leather sheath. It was only as long as Athena's pinkie, but it was big enough to do damage in hands as well trained as her own.

"A girl can never be too careful. There are all kinds of bad men out there," she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

"And in here," Kon replied, sliding the blade under the front of her bra and lifting it. The lace shredded, and her breasts fell free. She didn't move, her heart pounding as he moved his knee back down between her thighs, dragging the remnants of her dress from her.

"I hope you have spare panties packed," he said, lip curling. He slid the tiny blade under the fabric on her hips and cut the sides. With one casual flick, he sent the knife flying across the room and buried it into the bathroom door. Athena's nipples went hard, and he shook his head.

"Where have you been hiding all my life?" he mused.

"With my husband and four kids," she lied breathlessly. He ran his lips and stubble over the curve of her stomach.

"He's going to be devastated when he learns it's me you masturbate over every time he fails to please you," Kon replied and lowered his mouth over her ruined panties. Athena squirmed as his warm breath soaked into her pussy, his teeth closing over the lace and pulling it free.

With a quick, rough move, Kon grabbed the underside of her thighs, forced her legs up and wide, and held them tight so she couldn't move. Athena never let a man have such control over her. She wanted to move, throw him off her, and take over, but then the tip of Kon's tongue flicked once over her clit, and she whimpered.

"Already wet for me, and I've barely touched you," Kon growled, pinning her tighter when her hips arched up. "Squirm all you want, goddess. I'm not letting you go until you're dripping into my mouth."

Athena swore at him just as his tongue went back on her, licking and laving until her eyes rolled back into her head. His stubble and teeth were causing pinpricks of pain mixed with the pleasure of his tongue. Athena fucking loved it.

Kon's tongue speared inside of her, working her into a frenzy. Her hands tangled in his hair, holding him down on her as her hips rocked up, thrusting in time with his tongue. He looked up at her, dark eyes shining, and bit down on her clit. Athena screamed as an orgasm shot through her hard enough to leave her shaking.

"You're Russian?" Kon asked. "Your accent is British."

"I'm...from everywhere," she replied, trying to catch her breath. She hadn't slipped into her birth tongue for years. She moaned as he blew softly over her swollen flesh and released her legs.

Athena lurched forward, grabbed him around the throat, and rolled him onto his back. He laughed, hands gripping her hips.

"Well, Athena from everywhere, are you going to just sit there, or are you going to fuck me?" he asked.

Athena ripped his shirt open and ran her nails down the tattooed muscle and fine dark hair. She opened his belt and pants, dragging his hard dick free. She didn't bother to even get his pants all the way off before she was lowering herself down on him.

"Fucking hell, goddess," he groaned.

Athena couldn't talk; his dick filling her up had robbed her of the ability to speak. She rocked forward, one hand pinned to his sternum. He went to raise his head, but her other hand came to the base of his throat, holding him down.

"No. I'm in charge now," she snarled and began to ride him. She ground her hips into his in a slow circle, and Kon swore passionately.

Athena grinned. He was Turkish.

Kon's hands stroked from her hips up to squeeze her breasts, fingers tightening on her nipples.

Kon sat up and kissed her until she tasted his blood in her mouth from the cut on his lip. Two of his fingers moved between them, rubbing her clit in slow circles that had her sobbing. He pulled away

right when she was about to come and brushed his pleasure-drenched fingers over her lips and into her mouth.

"Suck," he growled, and she did. "Damn, baby, I can't wait to get that mouth around my cock."

Athena closed her teeth around his fingers, and he hissed, pulling them free. His kiss was punishing as he flipped her onto her back, lifted one of her legs over his shoulder, and slammed into her.

Athena was moaning louder than she had in years, Kon thrusting so hard into her that she could feel him hitting her limit inside of her. His fingers clasped around her neck, holding her tight. She gripped his perfectly muscled ass, dragging him harder into her as she reached her peak.

"That's it, goddess, come on my cock. Let me feel you lose control," he commanded, husky voice all dominance. Athena's inner walls clamped around him, making his eyes widen as her orgasm exploded through her. She was breaking apart, screaming his name as she rode him through it.

"Fucking hell, goddess," Kon said, kissing her moans from her mouth. His hand went between them, toying with her clit again as he took control. He dragged her up onto his lap, and she groaned, the change in position almost painful. Kon gripped her close to him, dick pounding up into her. His mouth dragged down her neck, licking at her sweat.

Athena jolted in sudden pain as he bit hard into her shoulder and came deep inside of her. Kon was trembling. He pulled his mouth away with a loud suck, eyes wide, no doubt matching hers.

Athena had known he would be good, but she was still shaking as he lowered her back onto the bed. They were both sheened in sweat, with dazed expressions on their faces.

What in the fuck was that?

"Catch your breath, goddess. I'm going to need to be inside of you again before this night is out," Kon said, curling a finger around one of her sweaty blonde locks. Athena leaned over and licked at his nipple, tasting the salt and spice tang of his sweat.

"You have ten minutes to recover, or I'm kicking you out."



ATHENA WOKE to the hot sun pouring through the windows and onto her bare ass. Her hand stretched out against the sheets and found them cool and empty. Her eyes snapped open.

She was a light sleeper, had to be in her profession, but she hadn't felt Kon get out of bed. He had fucked her until she had passed out, but she couldn't help feeling a pang of *something* that he hadn't stayed.

Athena looked about in a fuzzy daze. There wasn't a pillow left on the bed, the sheets a mangled clump in one corner. Her eyes lifted to the metal case she had placed on the small desk. She sat up, noting that the position was slightly different than when she left it.

Athena launched herself out of bed, naked and panicked. She unclipped the lid and opened it. Her heart stopped, and her vision hazed red. The case was empty, except for a note written on the hotel stationery.

Better luck next time, Edgeworth.

Over the past three years, Kon had often regretted stealing that single tome from Athena Edgeworth. Usually, it was when he was nursing a wound she had given him or when their game of cat and mouse had cost more time and money than he wanted to part with. He had thought that she would lick her wounds after Paphos, and their paths would never cross again.

He had never been so mistaken in his life.

After Paphos, Kon had gotten curious and had done some light research on the enigmatic Miss Edgeworth, finding out just how badly he had fucked up.

Athena Edgeworth was the sole daughter of Silas Edgeworth, one of the most ruthless and calculating mercenaries dirty money could buy. She had traveled the world with him, learning from him and every other goddamn hard-ass, assassin, gangster, and soldier her father worked with. The Edgeworths were spoken about in whispers of equal parts awe and fear.

And he had fucked her, both figuratively and literally.

Kon thought that if they ever did see each other again, she would put a bullet in his head. When they did, she had put one in his leg instead and had stolen from him a ring that had belonged to the Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazali.

That was only the beginning of their game of tit for tat. Every one of their encounters had ended in one of them getting screwed over. He had gone to kill her at least three times, and each time he had

fucked her senseless instead. It was a rivalry that couldn't last. Not when his boss, Liddell, was...

Crack! Kon's head snapped back as the Indonesian man in front of him punched him hard in the face. Kon spat out a mouthful of blood, his head lolling to the side.

He hadn't expected that his life would end in a gambling den in Semarang, surrounded by cobras in cages tied with rope and stinking of blood and booze and shit.

Three other men were sitting at a round table in front of him, guns, cards, and poker chips spread out over it. Cobra blood and whiskey were mixed in the glasses in front of them. It wasn't Kon's idea of a cocktail, but each to their own.

The man held up a carved wood and shell medallion in his face, shouting questions at him in Javanese. The medallion had once belonged to a priest of Semar, Indonesia's buffoon god. Whoever possessed it could commune with the god and have visions of the future. The man currently yelling in his face was the man he had tried to steal it off.

Liddell had heard that a gang leader was using a sacred medallion to make deals and had become ridiculously rich in the process. He had sent Kon at once to retrieve it. Anything that even whiffed of magic, or specifically a magical object to help commune with a god, Liddell wanted.

Kon did as he was told because he wanted Liddell. And now, he was never going to get his chance to slit the fucker's throat because...

Crack! Crack!

Kon's vision exploded into sparks of bright light. He thought of Athena's bare ass in the sunshine in Paphos, sleeping off the sex coma he had put her in.

Kon didn't have friends or a regular lover, so his last thoughts were about Athena, the beautiful rival he should've never fucked over. If he had a regret, it wasn't stealing from her, but not telling her that their encounters were the only thing that made him feel alive in decades.

He had always thought his last regret would be not killing Liddell, the man who he had worked his entire life to get revenge on for

murdering his parents.

But no. It was Athena. Beautiful, ruthless, violent...

Crack! Crack! The man's shouts sounded like they were underwater now, and Kon wondered if his eardrum was busted. The men stopped talking, all turning to the swinging doors that led out into the public part of the den.

The sound of voices singing loudly echoed back to them. Kon's Indonesian was rusty, but by the laughter and rambling nature of it, he figured it was a bawdy drinking song that the entire bar was now singing at the top of their lungs.

What a symphony to go out to, he thought grimly.

The doors swung open, and a tumble of bright pink and gold came through it.

"I love this fucking song!" the woman cried in English and let out a surprised yelp. "I'm sorry! I thought this was the bathroom." She hiccuped nervously. Bills of different currencies were sticking haphazardly out of the neckline of the sparkly dress she was wearing. All the men exchanged predatory glances before turning back to her.

"You gamble, lovely?" one of the men asked her in English.

"Yes! And I'm on a winning streak. Is this a game? What did that guy do? Cheat?"

"He is a thief; don't you worry about him. Come and play with us," the man replied.

The blonde bounced up and down, clapping her hands, her breasts jumping enough that every man's eyes dropped to them. "Yes! I want to play!"

She headed over to the table, stumbled in her gold high heels, and fell forward into the table.

"Whoopsie, Daisy!" she squealed, right before she snatched up two of the guns off the table and started shooting. All four of the men were dead before they could react. Kon bit back a smile.

"Good evening, Edgeworth. Since when did you start using guns?" he asked.

"I use whatever is best at the time. Really, they were asking for it leaving their weapons lying about where anyone could get them." Athena searched through the blood and chips on the table before

lifting the wooden medallion from the mess and slipping it over her head. She finally looked at him, her keen blue eyes taking in the beating and the blood all over the front of his shirt.

As always, Athena was a vision; her hair a chaotic ashen tumble to her shoulders, sweet freckles across her nose, full lips smirking... and eyes as cold and merciless as a Siberian wolf in winter.

Athena slowly lifted up the split in her dress and pulled a knife from its sheath.

"Don't worry, I have a blade right here with your name on it," she said, tossing it up in the air and catching it again.

"You named one of your knives after me, *güzelim*? I'm flattered," Kon replied, his fingers trying to loosen the ropes around his wrists.

Athena hummed as she sidled over and rested the tip of her blade under his chin. He stopped struggling and went very still.

"What can I say? It reminded me of you; not too bright and a bit of a prick." Athena smiled, and the tip of the blade dug into his skin. "Don't move now, in case it slips."

Athena leaned over and started to go through his pockets, stuffing his money clip into her bra. Her perfume was tropical, like frangipanis and pineapple. Underneath the sweetness was the musky smell of blood and sex that made Kon's dick twitch to life.

Athena made a soft tsking sound and swiped a finger through the blood on his busted brow. "Your face looks like shit, Konstantius."

"If you untie me, I promise I'll let you sit on it for a night," he answered, giving her a charming smile.

Athena laughed, a sound that skittered over him and made him even harder. She pulled the knife away from him, took one of the snake blood and whiskey drinks from the table, and downed it in one shot.

"Thanks, but I've had a better offer," Athena replied before turning her back and swinging her fine ass all the way to the door.

"Come on, Athena! Don't leave me like this," Kon shouted, yanking at the cords. Athena looked over her shoulder at him, a blood-stained grin on her face. Quick as lightning, the knife left her hand. Kon flinched, waiting for the pain, but the blade lodged into something behind his head with a thunk.

"Until next time, Konstantius," she called before walking out.

Kon shifted in his chair, searching for the knife she had thrown. He spotted it just in time to watch in slow motion as the rope it was stuck in frayed in two, and the door to the cobras' cage swung open.

And this was just one more reason why he regretted ever fucking over Athena Edgeworth.

Cursing, Kon threw his chair backward on top of the dead gangster. The snakes were sticking their heads out of the cage, flicking their tongues curiously.

Kon found a switchblade strapped to the calf of the asshole underneath him as the first cobra flopped elegantly onto the dirty floor. Without taking his eyes off it, he wriggled the blade free and opened it with a *snick* before working it down onto his ropes.

"Fuck you, Athena," he growled, hissing as the blade cut his palm. He pulled his hands free, grabbed the gun nearest to him, and blew the cobra's head off.

Kon rolled onto his feet as a handful of men rushed in with machetes and handguns. They saw him standing in the middle of the trashed room, bodies around him and a gun in his hand.

"*Fuck you, Athena!*" he shouted and started firing. He dived behind a crate of cobras as bullets tore into the walls around him. He checked his gun, swearing again when he saw he only had three shots left. A machete blade appeared, and Kon shrank to the side as it came down right where his head had just been. He grabbed the man's arm, shot him in the face, and took the machete from him.

"Old school then," he grunted and knocked the wall of cages down. The men exclaimed loudly in Indonesian, and in the confusion, Kon cut down anyone that got in his way.

Fifteen minutes later, covered in snake and human blood, Kon opened the phone he had snatched off a corpse and dialed a number.

"*Buongiorno*," a male voice answered cheerily.

"Leo, it's Kon."

"Whose phone are you on, *amico*?"

"He couldn't give me his name on account of my machete blade stuck in his head," Kon snapped. "I need you to hack into every decent hotel in Semarang and look for any of the following aliases." Kon rattled off a list of names he knew of legendary sword makers.

Athena had a thing for blades of all kinds, and he had faint scars on his body to prove it.

"Ah, I take it *Signorina* Edgeworth is in good health?" Leo asked as his fingers tapped away in the background.

"Fine fucking form. Call me back when you've got something," Kon snarled and hung up.

Kon knew that he should let it lie, stay far away from Athena, and let her have the win. If he hadn't learned that she was the last thing he thought about when he was faced with eating a bullet, maybe he would have.

But she *had* been his last thought, and that meant something to a man like Kon...at least it had, right up until the point she had left him to fight his way out of a literal snake pit.

The phone in his hand buzzed, and he looked at the message: **Gumaya Tower, Room 502**. Kon smiled, dark and feral.

Tonight, he wasn't going to say sorry for all the times he screwed her over. He was going to make her pay.

It was after midnight when Athena got back from meeting with the *Dukan* that had hired her. He was a seer dedicated to Semar and would ensure that the medallion got back to the guardians of the god's sacred cave on the Dieng plateau.

Maybe you should've untied Kon, a small voice whispered in the back of her head. She might have if being kind to Konstantius Zalam ever got her anywhere.

She had no doubt if their positions were reversed, he would've left her there. That was the problem...they were way too much alike. Cut from the same demented cloth.

You should've put a bullet into him three years ago. This time her inner voice sounded way too much like Silas. Her father had a point, though. In their business, if someone fucked with you, you put a bullet in them. You didn't give them a chance to do it again and again.

Athena told herself that she didn't pull the trigger because she wanted Kon to suffer forever for stealing the codex from her on Paphos. The truth was, she was addicted to the fucked up game they played. He did something to her, fucked with her brain and body like no one else did.

No matter how many times she promised herself that she would kill him next time, she would see him and would just want to rile him up. A pissed-off Kon fucked like the world was about to end.

Athena kicked off her high heels, checked her room and small balcony before sliding her spare knife under her pillow. She didn't know if Kon would come after her or if he had even escaped the club, but she could never be too careful. Konstantius Zalam was the Basty of Istanbul after all.

After Paphos, Athena had plotted her revenge on him and had Izabella dig up everything she could on the fucker.

He actually *was* a historian, which surprised her. What didn't surprise her was that he had paid for his degree by acting as an enforcer for one of the largest gangs in Istanbul. He had quickly earned the name 'The Basty' after the shape-shifting nightmare spirit from Turkic folklore. He had allegedly gotten out of the gang only by killing their top bosses in a bloody murder spree that lasted an entire night. Then he had walked away, and everyone had been wise enough to let him go.

Athena wasn't worried or impressed by his reputation. She had one of her own, and that hadn't stopped him coming after her.

Athena pulled off her dress, littering the tiled bathroom floor with sequins and money, before climbing into the shower and washing the smell of sweat and gambling den away with frangipani soap.

She thought about Kon tied up, his smile still cocky and arrogant, ready for a fight. Even covered in blood, he had smelled good enough that she had wanted to pull his dick out and fuck him right on that filthy chair. That was the most dangerous thing about Kon. He overrode her good sense and instincts.

And that's probably why it's best that you left him to die. Somehow, Athena doubted he would meet his end in a dirty den in Indonesia.

Wrapping a towel around herself, Athena stepped out of her bathroom and into the dark bedroom. She had taken two steps when a cold blade rested against her throat.

"Konstantius, is that my knife?" she asked, slowly raising her hands.

"I thought you might miss it," he growled softly by her ear. She could smell blood and gunpowder, and underneath that, something that was all him that made her mouth water.

"You left me to die. That was cold, *güzelim*, even for you."

Güzelim, my beautiful. Kon was definitely in a mood if he was throwing around pet names.

"I threw you a knife. That was generous," she argued.

Kon's hand went underneath her towel and curved around her thigh. She bit her lip, so she didn't groan. She pushed her ass up against him, feeling his dick already hard and straining against his pants.

"You tossed a knife to release cobras. It's hardly the same thing," Kon hissed.

"So my aim was a little off. I had been drinking."

"Your aim is never off," he growled.

Athena swallowed, her pulse hammering against the blade. "Are you here to finally kill me, Kon?"

"I fucking should." Kon's mouth went to her throat, nipping the skin, marking her up. Athena dropped her head to the side, giving him access. She wanted to run her hands through his thick, inky hair but knew better than to grab at someone with a blade.

Kon gripped the front of her towel and yanked it hard, pulling it off and leaving her naked in the moonlight.

"The medallion is long gone if that's what you're after," she said as he moved her toward the bed.

"I know it is. You've no idea what you cost me with that stunt." Kon shifted the blade, his hand coming to the back of her neck. He turned her around, and she saw the black staining his body, his ruined clothes. He pushed her to sit on the bed. "My employer is going to be furious, and once again, I'm going to have to pay for your mess."

"I hope you're not waiting on an apology." Athena's mouth went dry as Kon stripped off his ruined clothing. There was something about seeing Kon naked that still robbed her of her senses. Lean and scarred and tattooed. Hard all over with a fighter's body, he was a work of art.

Kon threw the knife so it landed upright in one of the pillows. He gripped her chin hard, and the look of violence in his eyes made wetness pool between her legs.

Athena knew a part of her must've been broken to respond to the threat of him in such a way, but she couldn't help it. Their sharp

edges cut everyone who got too close to them, except each other. Athena knew it and fucking hated it as much as she longed for his rough hands.

Kon's thumb ran over her mouth, making her lips open for him and smearing them with her saliva. "I know better than to expect an apology from you, Edgeworth. But you're going to make it up to me."

Kon shoved her back on the bed and pinned her biceps with his knees. He brushed the tip of his cock over her lips, and Athena's mouth opened for him. He gripped the headboard when she tongued his slit already wet with pre-cum.

Kon pushed one hand into her hair, tilting her head up so he could thrust deep into her wet mouth. Athena gripped his thighs, scratching up his skin and making him growl. She sucked him harder, loving his punishing pace and the sounds of frustration and pleasure that came out of him.

"Fuck you and your perfect mouth," he hissed, pulling free from her.

"Isn't that what you're doing," she replied mockingly. He rocked back off her and flipped her onto her stomach.

Leather slapped against her wrists as he tied her to the headboard with his belt. Kon dragged her hips up, his hand going to the back of her neck and pinning her to the pillows.

Oh, she had pissed him off alright, and this was precisely the reason why she did it.

His hands ran down her back to her ass before he spread her wider and buried his face into her wet heat. He licked and sucked at her clit, teeth and stubble rough and angry against her.

Athena cried out against the mattress when his tongue started to curl into her. She pushed back into him, and his hand came down against her ass in a hard slap. She jerked forward, but he grabbed her and dragged her back up. His hand went in-between her thighs and he shoved two fingers into her.

"You might have gotten away with the medallion tonight, but I'm going to make sure that you feel me every time you sit down for the next three days," Kon promised, his hand hitting her other cheek. His mouth ran over her skin, soothing some of the sting.

Athena gripped the mattress with her teeth, trying to hold in her cries as his fingers curled inside of her. She was so close, her orgasm two strokes away. Kon sensed it, pulling free at the last second. She yanked furiously at her bonds, and Kon's hand smacked her hard again.

"Not getting away from me tonight, Edgeworth," he snarled before licking a hot stripe right up her backbone. He grabbed her ass with both hands, squeezing hard enough to bruise. "This ass is all mine tonight, as payment for leaving me to fucking die."

"I knew you would get out," she panted, her words choking off as he thrust his cock hard inside of her.

"I had to fight my way out with a machete," he hissed, pounding into her so forcefully that their skin slapped together.

"Hot," she said, just imagining it. Kon fighting with a machete was her idea of a wet dream. "Maybe I should've stuck around to watch."

"You would've liked that, watching me cut free with bullets flying." Kon's hand went under her, squeezing her bouncing tits.

"Yes," she groaned, thrusting back against him, greedy to have him filling her up. He smacked her hard again, and she cried out, her nerve endings screaming. His fingers ran through her wetness before brushing them down her ass and toying with her hole. Athena swore as his cock and fingers worked her in tandem, making her groan into the mattress.

Kon was out to punish, and she fucking loved him this raw and furious, unable to hold in his own anger and desire. It was this intensity that she was addicted to, the way he dominated every part of her and flayed her apart with pleasure.

"Fuck, Kon," she cried out. He cursed, trying to slow down, but it was too late. She was coming hard and hot, tears leaking from her eyes as she was reduced to a sobbing and soaked mess.

"You even have to beat me at this," he hissed and pushed her down onto her stomach. He fucked her hard and relentlessly before pulling free and coming over her back and ass.

Kon kneeled above her panting, before he leaned over and ripped his belt free, releasing her hands. Athena didn't move, just let her spanked ass and body thrum with the pulsing of the aftereffects.

"Feel better?" she asked, tilting her face towards him.

Kon let out a soft, hopeless laugh. "I fucking hate you."

"Good," she replied.

They both knew the other was lying, and it didn't matter. Athena brushed his hair back from his sweaty brow.

"Did you really have to fight your way out with a machete?"

"Yes. With cobras loose from their cages and gang members shooting at me while—"

Athena grabbed his face and kissed him hard and brutal. He tasted of sex and sweat and salt. *Kon*. She had missed him but would never admit it. Not even fully to herself. He cupped her face with uncharacteristic gentleness.

"At least tell me you got a good price for the medallion, *güzelim*," he sighed.

Athena bit back her smile. "Pro bono."

Kon rolled his face into a pillow and exclaimed passionately in Turkish. "I didn't spank you nearly hard enough."

Athena only threw her head back and laughed.

Athena woke the following morning, alone and every part of her exhausted. There were feathers all over the bed from one of the pillows Kon had pierced with the knife.

Athena's eyes narrowed, and she went for her suitcase. Her passports were missing, even the one that she had hidden under the lining. She hurried to the bedside table and pulled out the drawers. One passport was still taped to the back.

"You're slipping in your old age, Zalam," she said, grinning despite the loss of five passports. She found her backup phone in the bathroom, tucked behind the toilet, and rang Izabella.

"What's up, Atomic Blonde? How did the medallion job go?" she answered, chipper despite the time difference between Barcelona and Semarang. Athena wondered if Izabella slept at all or if she had somehow evolved enough to no longer need it.

"Medallion was fine, but I'll need you to book me another plane ticket out and use the name 'Susanne Passau,'" Athena replied, tossing her things back into her suitcase.

"What happened to your other passports?"

Athena was stubbornly silent, long enough that Izabella started to swear at her in Spanish.

"Really? Turkish Delight stole them again?" she said in English finally. "What do you think he does with them all? I like to imagine he's got a whole wall of your stolen IDs that he masturbates furiously to."

Athena frowned, noticing all of her underwear was missing too. "Why furiously?"

"Because he's hate wanking. Of course it's furiously. He probably doesn't even use lube, just spits on it angrily because he's so disgusted with his own urges."

"Probably." Athena laughed loudly and tried not to get hot over the idea of Kon jerking off over her.

"How long are you going to be in London for this time?" Izabella asked.

"Why? You thinking of coming for a visit?"

"I don't know. Is Silas going to be around?"

"I don't think so. Would it matter? I thought you liked Dad."

Izabella made a strange sound at the back of her throat. "Of course I like Silas. I just don't want to interrupt if you are having catch-up time."

Athena wriggled into a pair of jeans, bare assed because Kon had been more thorough with his underwear thieving than the passport hunting.

"It's fine, Iz. Silas would like to see you too if he's around."

"You think so?" Izabella asked, suddenly shy.

Athena frowned. "Yeah, it's fine. How's that plane ticket coming?"

"It's done. It's in your inbox. I'll let you know whether to expect me," Izabella replied. "And Athena? Do try and stay away from Konstantius Zalam. That man is bad for your health."

"My ass agrees with you," Athena said, hanging up on Izabella's exclamation. The jeans were going to chafe her butt all the way back to London, and as he planned, she would be thinking of Kon every time she sat down.

There was a knock at the door, and Athena slipped one of the daggers down the back of her jeans and pulled a shirt on. Outside was one of the staff members with a cart.

"I didn't order any room service," Athena said with a frown.

The woman smiled. "Your partner stopped by the concierge on his way out and ordered it for you. He said that you were going to need the energy after such a big night?"

Athena groaned internally but smiled and took the tray anyway.

Partner! Not in this lifetime. Oh, Kon, when I get my hands on you...



IT TOOK thirty hours to get back to London, and Athena was dying for a shower and twelve hours of sleep. She stared at the rain-slicked, nighttime streets as she got off the train station at Battersea Park and wondered why she went to London for a holiday.

A few years ago, Silas insisted on at least one permanent safe house for them, and they had brought the loft in a converted warehouse. Other friends of theirs used it as well, but only those Silas vetted and trusted. It was the safest place in the world for Athena and the only place where she ever slept deeply.

Except when Kon fucks you unconscious.

It still riled her that he could leave without waking her up after a night together. Kon and Athena had threatened to kill each other more than once, so neither of them should fall asleep near the other. But she always did and didn't know what that meant either.

Athena put in the security codes of the alarm system and opened the metal sliding door. The place was empty, but there was still beer in the fridge, which told her that someone had used it recently. She pulled out her new phone and typed in Silas's number before sending him a message.

Where you at, Zeus? In London, if you're close.

Athena put the phone on the kitchen counter and walked up the spiral stairs to her room. No matter who used the rest of the place, Athena had her room that no one else was allowed in.

Silas had his own room too, and as he explained it, they didn't have a home base when she was growing up, so this was his way of making up for it.

Athena tossed her small suitcase in the corner and made sure all her knives were in their proper places. She had a wall of them, all mounted and from all corners of the world. She had been collecting them since she was old enough to own anything.

"Hello, my babies," she crooned at them before heading to the bathroom. She drowned herself in the shower for thirty minutes to stretch out the sore muscles from too much time in a cramped airplane seat.

Her body carried small marks and bruises that Kon had mapped out over her. Something had been different this time around, but she couldn't figure out what. He had wanted to mark her so she couldn't forget him as soon as they parted. Like she could.

Athena had always lived a life of adventure and adrenaline, but her rivalry with Kon was a rush she couldn't seem to give up. She might leave him in a room full of pissed-off cobras, but she had always known that her blade would never take his life. She hated that weakness. Athena could compartmentalize her emotions, was a pro at it, but Kon made her feel...messy.

"Asshole," she muttered and got out of the shower. She was tired and a bit lonely, that was all, and once she had some time off, she wouldn't give Kon and his bullshit a second thought.

Downstairs, Athena was hunting for food when her phone started ringing.

"Hey, Silas," she answered, putting her phone between her shoulder and ear as she opened another beer.

"Hey, Cub, how's London?" Silas replied, and Athena smiled at the nickname. She had been given the name from the crew of mercs Silas had been running with when he found her in a forest twenty years ago.

The guys had been fans of the old Samurai 'Lone Wolf and Cub' movies, and with eight-year-old Athena tagging along behind Silas, the name had stuck.

"London is fucking raining as usual. Where are you?"

"Dubai. Fancy bodyguard job, boring as fuck, but the price is right. How was Indo? Run into any trouble?"

Athena had a big mouthful of beer. "Does Zalam count?"

"He was there again? That motherfucking, stalking piece of—"

"He was *already* there. Same job again. He got there first," Athena explained.

"And you finally shot him and took it?"

"Not exactly. I got the medallion off him and left him tied to a chair."

Silas made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. "You two have the most fucked up idea of foreplay. Of all the people you could play with, why did it have to be the Bastard of Istanbul? You need to cut his throat and be done with it. I'm sure there's still a bounty out on his head if you want some pocket money."

Athena blew out a breath. "If it makes you feel better, the chair I left him tied to was in a room full of cobras?"

Silas laughed, a deep booming sound. "That's my girl. What's next?"

Athena walked to the wall of windows that looked out over the city. "I don't know. I was thinking of taking a few weeks off."

"Izabella coming for a visit?" Silas asked. He was the only person who ever called Iz by her full name. Always. Not Iz, Izzy, or Bella. Silas could know someone for ten minutes and give them a nickname. Not her.

"She was thinking about it. I don't know if she is going to or not. What's happening between you two anyway?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm respectful of Izabella because you never want to piss off a hacker who routinely gets you out of shit," Silas replied. "Hackers are touchy. You gotta treat them nice."

"Sure. Maybe you two need to just fuck already and get it out of your systems," Athena replied.

Silas was only just forty-eight years old and was fitter than guys half his age. Izabella was seven years older than Athena at thirty-six and eye-fucked Silas whenever he was nearby. Athena wasn't dumb. She knew Iz had thought about it. She just didn't understand why they didn't hook up and be done with it.

"No offense, Cub, but I'm not going to take dating advice from the woman whose longest relationship has been with some asshole who honey-potted her. And then instead of killing him like she should, she plays Moriarty shit with and fucks him every chance she gets," Silas replied in his usual laid-back manner.

"Don't call him Moriarty. His ego is big enough."

"Was actually calling you Moriarty, not him. I *know* you're more of an evil mastermind than him, which is why I don't get why the prick is still breathing."

"I'm sure he'll push me too far one day, and I'll do it," Athena said, resting her head against the cold glass.

"I'll do it for you as a Christmas present if you want."

Athena laughed. "I'll think about it. When is your job over?"

"Eight days. You want company?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"You sure you're okay? You sound off," Silas said, becoming the dad instantly.

"Yeah, just tired. Indo to London is an asshole of a travel route."

"Okay, well, rest up, and I'll see you soon," he replied.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do, and don't fuck your client's wife again," Athena said.

"Oh, come on, that only happened once. Get some sleep." Silas hung up, still laughing.

Feeling better about life, Athena opened her takeaway app and ordered some food. A holiday catching up with Silas was precisely what she needed to take her mind of dark-eyed assassins with attitude problems.

Istanbul was unseasonably warm when Kon arrived at midnight. He was sticky from traveling and still uncomfortably worked up from his encounter with Athena. That morning, he had watched her sleeping as the sun rose, her ass still a little red from his hand. He contemplated killing her but without any real intent.

Instead, he had pressed a kiss to the top of her head and had left before he did something stupid. Like climb back into bed and wrap himself around her. Those were his feelings for Athena in a nutshell, both extremes unacceptable.

Kon unlocked his apartment in Laleli and checked to make sure none of his security alarms or feeds had been tampered with. He longed for his real place down at the port. Still, until his business with Liddell was over, he had certain appearances to maintain. He knew he was watched, and he didn't want to give the old man any reason to suspect him. Like he knew he was thinking about him, the phone in Kon's back pocket started vibrating.

"*İyi akşamlar*, boss," Kon answered.

"Konstantius, back in Istanbul already?" Liddell asked, crisp, British, and to the point as always. "Where is my medallion?"

"In the bin where it belongs." Kon clenched his teeth in irritation. "It was a fake, boss. Total bullshit. The guy bought it from a market in Bali and told everyone that it gave him mystical powers. They all thought he was some kind of sorcerer, but he was a hack."

"A great pity."

"Well, you know how this business is. You have to go and be sure."

Liddell hummed. "I don't suppose you know anything about Athena Edgeworth being in Semarang at the same time?"

Tendrils of ice crept up Kon's spine. He knew Liddell watched him in Istanbul, but to have eyes in Indonesia as well?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"She was? I didn't see her. She must've been after something else. You know how mercs are, always chasing a buck anywhere they can get it," Kon replied nonchalantly.

"I think we both know that she's more than just a simple mercenary. She's getting quite the reputation for unique finds. If Miss Edgeworth becomes any more impressive, I think I'm going to have to recruit her to our great cause," Liddell said.

"Are you trying to replace me?" Kon asked, forcing a laugh.

"Not at all, Konstantius. I just figure if she's working with us instead of against us, we might have better luck with these magical relics."

Distract him away from Athena right fucking now.

Kon ground his jaw together. "The medallion was a fake, Liddell. I tested it myself. You really think a woman like Edgeworth can get the drop on me?"

Liddell let out a sigh. "Dear boy, don't be so sensitive. I trust your judgment, and if you say it was fake, I believe you. To be honest, I'm currently more concerned about the secret dig the Vatican is funding at Tarsus than some trinket from a lesser Indonesian deity."

Kon cleared his throat. "Tarsus? The place where Saint Paul was from? What is going on there?" he asked, knowing Liddell could never pass up the opportunity to talk about his latest obsession.

"It is, and if my sources are to be believed, they have found his lost Bible. He was the first great mystic, building his faith off the Source itself. It is my hope that the lost book will talk more about his process for accessing it. Fascinating," Liddell replied and began to rattle off information.

Kon hummed his interest while his stomach unclenched. He didn't want Liddell paying any attention to Athena.

"I'll let you know if I need your services for the dig, Kon. In the meantime, have some days off. I'll be needing you again soon," Liddell said, and Kon thanked him and hung up.

Kon walked into his bedroom and kicked off his shoes before pulling out the passports he had taken from Athena. Every photo was different, and every one of them mocked him with her smirk. He left the one in the bedside table drawer for her; he was an asshole but not unreasonable.

He opened a locked drawer in his walk-in wardrobe and dropped the passports into it. He was assembling quite the collection and would make a point of moving them to his secret warehouse in the next week.

Years of experience told him a change was coming, and he wanted no loose ends or breadcrumbs for people to follow back to him.

Kon's eyes snagged on the antique dagger in the drawer. It was one of three he had bought over the years without really knowing why. Now, in light of the events in Indonesia, he knew that he had been buying them for her all along.

Fuck. Kon ran his hands through his hair in frustration. His scalp was still sensitive from Athena yanking on it, and he grinned despite everything.

"Keep to the plan. Worry about Athena Edgeworth after the job is done," he murmured and locked the drawer once more.



IT WAS hot in the cupboard. Kon bit into the soft teddy bear in his arms to hide his frightened whimpers.

"Remember what we practiced, little one. You stay in here until baba or I come and get you," his mother had whispered. "I love you, little emperor."

"I love you too, anne," he had replied before she had kissed him and locked him inside.

There were strange voices in the house. A British man talking, demanding something. His parents always had visitors, but Kon

didn't recognize him.

Kon screwed his eyes shut as his mother started to scream, his father shouting something in a language he didn't know. A loud crack like thunder had Kon's eyes opening again. A bright red light was flashing through the room. The British man was chanting something just outside the door.

Kon risked leaning forward and peeking through the gap. He should never have looked. His mother lay dead on the carpet, strange cuts carved into her body. The British man put something into his pocket before dropping a burning lighter onto the carpet. Kon heard his footsteps trail away, and the flames roared through the house. Kon slammed his body into the door.

" Anneciğim! Wake up!" he shouted, beating at the wood with his tiny hands. The fire started to burn into the door, and Kon slammed himself through it, the hot flames searing his back as he fell onto his dead mother. He needed to get out of the house, but the flames were already burning too hot out in the hall.

He ran into the bathroom ensuite, clambering up onto the toilet and to the small window above it. It hurt to squeeze his body through it, but he forced himself out even as the frame cut his chest and tore at his burns. He crashed into his mother's small garden, only narrowly missing the stakes for the tomatoes.

The British man was standing outside the house, watching as the fire destroyed everything Kon loved. Kon dragged himself into the garden, his whole body trembling with fear. The man dropped his cigarette onto the ground in front of him before he climbed into the back of the car waiting for him and drove away...



KON WOKE COVERED in sweat and crying his mother's name. He sucked deep breaths into his lungs, his nose stinging with the smell of smoke and his scars aching under his tattoos.

Kon dragged himself out of the bed, his heart pounding so hard, his chest hurt. He stumbled to the fridge and downed a bottle of

water. He rubbed at his nose, spat in the sink to try and rid his mouth of the taste of blood and the fur of his teddy bear.

Kon clenched his fists and went upstairs to his small rooftop garden. Kon didn't bother to wrap his hands. He just went for the boxing bag and started hitting. He had been having the same nightmare for twenty years, and still, it dragged him down to a place so dark, he couldn't think. Sweat dripped down his body as he hit the bag over and over.

It had taken ten years to learn the British man was known only as Liddell. It had taken another six years to get an interview to work with him. It had been another four years of working for him, trying to get an invite to meet the man in person...

The skin on Kon's knuckles split, the pain feeling clean compared to the horror clawing at his mind. He tried to focus on anything but the fire and settled on Athena's mocking smile. The way she smelled. The feel of her body in his arms. How she said his full name like it was a curse word and fell asleep in his arms, utterly unafraid of him.

Kon could barely lift his arms when he finally came back to himself. He slumped to the concrete and wiped the sweat and tears off his face.

"I promise I'll kill him. I promise I won't stop until he's dead," he said to the ghosts of his parents.

If Miss Edgeworth becomes any more impressive, I think I'm going to have to recruit her, Liddell's voice whispered, and Kon's vision darkened with rage.

He couldn't protect his kind mother from Liddell and the rest of the fucking Aurora Aurea... but he would protect Athena. The fucker wouldn't get the chance to hurt her.

Just the thought of it gave Kon the energy to climb back to his feet. He was going to need a new plan.

Athena had been back in London for three days, and she was already bored. She had walked around the neighborhood on her first day, taking note of the new buildings and coffee shops.

Silas had always drilled into her to be aware of her surroundings and have an escape plan. Athena did it automatically now, always taking note of any new side streets or obstacles that would get in the way.

On the second day, she had done her laundry and cleaned the apartment from one end to the other. She restocked all the groceries and cooked a curry that she loved from scratch.

By day three, she was back to trying to figure out her worst obsession, Konstantius Zalam. She was tossing knives at a figure painted on a wooden board at the other end of the loft. She imagined it was Kon with every hit.

Maybe Silas was right, and she should just kill him and be done with it. It would stop him from stealing her passports every time their paths crossed. She thought about the other things they had stolen from each other over the years; the writings of Simion Stylites, a shroud owned by St. Julian of Norwich, a journal of notes written by Judah Loew the Maharal of Prague, a ring owned by the Sufi Al-Ghazali, the medallion of Semar...

Athena pulled the knives out of her target and went back to her position. She threw the first dagger and grinned when it hit the target

in the dick. What was about those particular relics that attracted a man like Kon? The second dagger hit the target in the head.

They all are mystics believed to have talked to a god... Athena swore, and the third dagger went wide and landed on the couch.

"Shit. You are so thick sometimes," she muttered. Kon didn't strike her as a religious nut that would be obtaining those kinds of objects for himself. What had he said the other night? *My employer is going to be furious.*

Who would the Bastard of Istanbul, a man known for killing all those who dared to be the boss of him, willingly work for?

Athena was still chewing it over when her lap pinged with an email tone. She glanced at the subject and did a double-take.

STAFF OF MOSES STOLEN FROM TOPKAPI PALACE.

Athena picked up her phone and rang Izabella.

"Bored already? I think this is a new record," the hacker answered.

"Very funny. But yes. I'm going to need you to look into the robbery at Topkapi. Apparently, the Staff of Moses has been stolen, and I want to know who did it," Athena answered.

"Someone with funding if they were willing to go up against Topkapi's security. Hold tight, and I'll get back to you," Izabella said but didn't hang up.

"What, Iz?"

"Tell me it is not about Turkish Delight."

Athena laughed. "Not everything I do is motivated by that asshole."

"Yeah, but it's Istanbul. You haven't gone there ever since you learned that's his...territory."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Iz, I haven't had any reason to go to Istanbul. Zalam is probably still in Indonesia, trying to get that medallion back. This is the actual staff of Moses out on the open market. Do you want it to end up in some rich asshole's lounge room? Just find it for me," Athena snapped.

"Okay, okay, I'll look. I'm only trying to watch out for you."

Athena grunted. "Well, Silas offered to shoot him for me as a present."

"Silas is a smart man."

"True. Maybe I'll take him up on that offer. Or better yet, steal back the staff of Moses and kill Zalam myself while I'm in Istanbul."

Izabella laughed. "This plan is sounding better and better. I'll call you when I have something."

"Cheers, Iz." Athena hung up and skimmed through the news articles about the theft. The city was in an uproar that their sacred relic had been stolen, but nothing else in the collection had been tampered with. It was a weirdly specific heist.

Three hours and two bowls of leftover curry later, Athena's phone started ringing.

"Talk dirty to me," she answered.

"The staff was taken by a small group calling themselves the Golden Blade," Izabella replied.

Athena snorted. "How theatrical."

"Gets better. They didn't do it for a cause, but cash. They are holding a private auction tomorrow night at the Cistern of Philoxenos."

"What? I thought they closed that years ago for restoration work," Athena replied. She remembered reading the articles and the call that went out in the archaeological community for restorers and specialists.

"Apparently, it's open for them. As I said, whoever these guys are, they are funded well," Izabella replied.

"Is that a no you can't get me an invite to the auction?" Athena asked, already taking the steps to her bedroom two at a time.

Izabella made a sound of annoyance. "Of course I can get you one, but if Silas asks, I will deny knowing anything about this. He scares me more than you."

"Fair enough. Send me through the invite when you've got it. Thanks, Iz. You're the greatest," Athena replied.

"Don't kiss my ass. And Athena?"

"Yeah?"

"What's your plan if they really do have the staff? The people attending this auction are going to have much deeper pockets than you, Cub."

Athena smiled. "I have no intention of *buying* the staff."

"No? Then why go?"

Athena took down her favorite dagger from the wall. "Because I'm going to see who buys it...and then I'm going to steal it from them."



THE CISTERN of Philoxenos was a subterranean reservoir in the Sultanahmet district, built underneath the ruins of the Forum of Constantine and the Hippodrome of Constantinople.

Athena straightened the cuffs of her silk shirt and made sure the light blazer she wore hid her daggers properly. There was no way in hell she was walking into an auction such as this without a weapon on her, a sentiment that she was sure all the potential buyers shared.

She was wearing an expensive suit and heeled boots, her hair tied in a braid and pinned up in an elegant twist. Dresses were not the kind of thing she felt comfortable in at the best of times, let alone in a cistern full of shady fuckers with no way out if everything went south. She chose antique jewelry that looked understated, but those that knew what they were looking at would be impressed.

Athena strolled down the paved street, eyes scanning the tree-lined footpath and the high retaining wall that led to the entrance.

Two well-built guards in suits stood outside the iron gates. There were telling bulges under their jackets that hid their weapons, even if they only carried QR code scanners in their hands.

Showtime, Edgeworth.

Athena took out her phone and found the code that Izabella had sent her only an hour beforehand. She flashed the guards her most dazzling smile and held the screen out to them so they could scan it.

"Welcome, *Signorina* Missaglia. I hope you enjoy the auction," the guard said in perfect English before opening the metal door for her.

"*Grazie mille*," Athena replied, fluttering her lashes before she stepped into the cool, dimly lit walkway.

Someone had placed a green velvet carpet down, elegant lamps set up intermittently for patrons to follow, and soft strains of string instruments were playing tango.

Athena joined a crowd of richly dressed people that walked down into the central cistern. Rows of columns filled the length of the room where the auction had been set up, bolts of red silk hanging from the high vaulted roof. Plain wooden chairs were set up in rows in front of a small stage holding a single podium.

Lots of blind spots, Cub. Watch your six, Silas whispered in her head.

Athena hadn't been game to tell her father about her trip to Istanbul. She would be back in London before his job in Dubai was finished, and if Izabella kept her mouth shut, Silas would never have to know about it.

Athena accepted a glass of champagne from a passing waitress so she would have something in her hand and not look out of place. She stood next to one of the columns, her eyes scanning the people, the exits, the guards.

An awareness ran down her spine, her intuition screaming at her to turn around. A hard hand curled over her hip; warm breath tickled her ear. "Hello, *güzelim*."

Athena sighed as she glanced over her shoulder and instantly wished she hadn't.

Kon was dressed in a black tux, his thick curls neatly styled and looking far too fucking hot for his own good. She counted four guns on him, and he would have a blade somewhere. His dark eyes were scanning every inch of her, no doubt figuring out where she was hiding all of her knives. His gaze settled on her face and burned with violent desire.

She was so fucked.

Of all the fucking stunts Athena had pulled on Kon, this one was the most inconvenient.

"Are you stalking me, Zalam?" she asked sweetly.

"You're in *my* city. If anyone is the stalker, it is you." Kon looked around him, trying to keep track of who was coming in.

"Don't flatter yourself. I thought you would still be in Indonesia, unless...." Athena arched a brow at him. "Did *you* steal the staff of Moses?"

Kon couldn't hold in his smile. "You believe I could pull off a heist like that all by myself? Athena, I had no idea that you thought so highly of me."

"Yeah, you're right. What was I thinking?" Athena said and turned back to face the podium.

Panic crept up Kon's spine. It was all too convenient —*too wrong* — that she was there. Three hours ago, Kon had received a call from Liddell demanding that he attend the auction to see if the staff of Moses was legitimate. If it was, he was to acquire it, no matter the cost.

"I'll pay you one million dollars to leave right now," he whispered, his hand creeping under her jacket and pulling her tighter to him. He breathed in her perfume, something rose-based and spicy that suited her.

Athena chuckled softly. "And why would I do that, Konstantius?"

"What if I told you that you were in danger?"

She looked up at him, blue eyes going assassin cold. "From you?"

"No. Never from me...but I don't like this. Something feels off," Kon whispered.

"If this is some ploy to make me walk away because you want the staff, don't bother. I'm not here to buy."

"Then why..." Kon caught her grin and swore. "These are *not* the kind of people you steal from and get to live, Athena."

"Really? Isn't that why *you* are here?"

Kon gritted his teeth. "Please, Athena."

"What did you just say?" she turned in his arms. She caught the genuine concern in his eyes, and she gripped his forearm. "Kon, what is going on?"

"I don't—" Kon began as his phone rang. *Liddell*. "Sir, I'm at the auction, but the bidding hasn't started."

"No need to worry about that. I've seen quite enough." Kon's eyes went up to the pillars around him. He spotted the tiny black cameras mounted high above. He had been so distracted at seeing Athena, he hadn't noticed them. "That's right, I can see you with your hands on your so-called enemy."

"This isn't what it looks like," Kon said, cold sweat pricking at his neck.

"It looks like collusion to me. What a shame. You had such promise as an acolyte," *Liddell* said before the line went dead.

"Kon, who was—" Athena began when a red dot appeared on Kon's chest. She threw herself at him, knocking him to the ground behind a pillar as gunfire exploded through the air.

"Gun! Gun! Someone's shooting!" she shouted, and the other attendants started panicking around them.

"Thanks," Kon managed to say as Athena reached in his jacket and pulled out one of his pistols. She pointed it at him.

"When we get out of this, you have so much explaining to do," she snapped before she swiveled and started to shoot back. Kon pulled out his own gun and tried to spot the snipers. Three men with rifles pointed at them were perched on the maintenance scaffolding on the far walls.

Kon took Athena's hand and ran as bullets rained down, blowing chunks of stone from the pillars beside them. People caught in the crossfire screamed, but Kon and Athena kept low in the crowd, trying to shove their way to the doors. Three more men appeared down the walkway, blocking them off.

"Any other plan?" Athena asked. She squeezed off another two rounds, dropping two of the men on the mezzanine before sliding behind the nearest stone pillar.

"I do, but you're not going to like it. Cover my back and head for the stage," Kon shouted over the echoing gunfire. He slid a full magazine across the floor to her.

"Go when I say," Athena replied, picking it up and reloading the Glock she had taken from him. She glanced around the pillar, aimed, and started shooting. "Move your ass, Kon!"

"Follow me. I'll get us out."

"You better!"

Kon ran for the stage, keeping a row of pillars between him and the shooters. He found the metal hatch he had spotted on the plans of the building earlier that evening. He pulled on the metal ring, and it groaned open.

"Athena! Come on, I've got you," Kon shouted, turning to find her. He lifted both of his guns and aimed at the men closing in on her. He dropped the nearest two, trying not to watch Athena, just focusing on taking out as many of the fuckers as he could.

Athena pulled a knife from inside her coat and attacked the closest man, slicing at his forearms so he dropped his gun, before she struck his face and chest in a series of fast, damaging swipes.

"Fucking hell," Kon whispered, unable to look away as she turned her assailant into screaming, panicked mincemeat. She raced to Kon's side, blood staining her face and clothes.

"Where to now?" Athena demanded. Kon pointed to the metal cover, and she glared at him. "You're going in first."

Kon didn't argue, and even though he hated enclosed spaces, he didn't have a choice. He swung his legs onto the ladder. "Don't forget to close it behind you."

"I hope rats eat your face," she snapped above him.

Kon hit the bottom of the ladder, and he pulled the small flashlight from his pocket. He shone it up as Athena slammed the hatch shut and slid one of the daggers through the handle and the ladder rung to slow down anyone trying to follow them.

Kon waited until she was down before grinning at her. "You're good in a fight."

"You owe me a new suit and a replacement dagger." Athena glared at him, blood-smeared and vicious. "Please tell me you know where we are going down here?"

"More or less," Kon said, shining the flashlight at the dirt tunnel in front of them. "This way. The old aqueducts should join up to the newer systems and run out into the sea if we head north. I have a place we can hide in Eminönü."

Athena groaned. "You owe me so much head for this."

Kon laughed despite the epically shitty situation. "If we get out of this, *güzelim*, I'll give you whatever you ask for."

"Answers would be awesome. Starting with how you knew about this tunnel," she said as they began to jog.

"I studied some plans before I came. I'm surprised you didn't."

"I thought I was going to an auction with a bunch of rich people. I didn't expect a goddamn shootout. Who were they anyway?"

Kon paused at a fork in the tunnel. "They belonged to my employer."

"Okay...why?"

Kon whirled on her. "Because of *you*. I told you to walk away, but no. You had to argue with me."

"Fuck you, Konstantius. They were there for you, not me."

"Both of us, actually."

"Why? What did I—"

"It's because of how I treat you."

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Like shit?"

"No. Like you matter. Liddell got suspicious of you when you kept stealing my shit, and I kept letting you breathe."

Athena sneered. "Maybe the Bastard of Istanbul isn't such a badass after all."

Kon turned his back on her and headed left. "I'll argue with you about this later."

They walked in tense silence for another twenty minutes before they found a ladder. Kon passed the flashlight to Athena before he climbed up and unlocked the metal door. The smell of the sea and rotting bait hit him first. They were behind a set of restaurants at the docks, near the Eminönü ferry stop.

"We are clear," he called down to Athena. He reached a hand down to help her, but she ignored it. Even covered in blood and sewer slime, she looked like the vengeful goddess she was named after.

"Where to now?" she asked.

Kon slammed the sewer hatch down. "Six blocks that way."

"I suppose it's pointless asking whether or not I should go back to the hotel for my things?" she said, falling into step alongside him.

"If Liddell can plan a stunt like this just on the off chance to catch me out, I don't think anywhere is going to be safe for you except by my side."

Athena let out a bark of laughter. "I highly doubt that."

Kon's hands clasped into fists. "Give me the night to convince you."

"I'll give you two hours to explain everything," she replied

"Good enough."

Athena didn't seem to like his triumphant smile, so she added, "And no trying to get out of answers by seducing me."

"You are just no fun tonight," he complained.

Kon had known that one day he would be forced to run, and he had prepared for it. He always thought it would be after he killed Liddell, not before.

Kon had bought the small warehouse in Eminönü when he was still working for the gangs. He had always made sure to cover his tracks whenever he visited. He only ever stayed there long enough to make sure the food was still in date, place a new item amongst his collection, and double-check that his alarms and cameras hadn't been tampered with.

After checking the streets around them, Kon went to the heavy metal door and typed in the alarm codes. Athena watched him silently, and he knew she had seen the numbers.

"I hope you have hot water in here," she said and followed him inside.

Kon switched on the overhead lights and had the unexpected pleasure of seeing her expression. She grinned at him, her first real smile of the night that hit him in the chest. "Well, aren't you full of surprises?"

"What did you expect? A dirty shipping shed?"

"Actually, yes."

"Then the exterior camouflage is working, isn't it?"

Kon watched Athena take in the open plan two-story interior decorated with artifacts, art, and ancient weapons. One wall was covered in his guns and knives, next to a basic gym and punching bag. There was a kitchen and two spare rooms, a small bathroom, and a toilet. All around them were shelves of books and interesting things he had picked up on his travels.

This was the side of him Kon didn't show anyone, the man he kept locked away. It was like letting her walk around in his head, and it didn't make him nearly as uncomfortable as it should have.

"Shower is this way. Keep your hands in your pockets," Kon said, with mocking severity. Athena slid her hands in her pants with a wink.

"Can't wait to see what you have up here," she said, following him to the upper level.

"It's not that exciting. I try and keep all the business downstairs." Kon turned on the lights and let her into his sprawling bedroom and bathroom. He knew it was extreme to have a whole level just for it, but he didn't like to be in enclosed spaces unless he had no choice.

"I don't suppose you kept any of that underwear you stole from me?" Athena asked.

"What do you take me for? Some kind of pervert?" Kon said, saw her expression, and shook his head. "I stole them to annoy you, not sniff them and jerk off over." He went into his walk-in wardrobe and found a pair of silk pajama pants and a black cotton t-shirt. "You can take these."

"I always thought you were a sleep naked kind of guy," she teased.

"I am. It doesn't mean I don't like loungewear."

Athena began to laugh but then saw the wall at the back of his closet. She slowly pushed the clothes back, eyes going wide as they followed the photos, the maps, the research he had done. He didn't say anything, just let her look.

Athena finally looked up at him. "Kon? What the fuck is going on?"

Kon's bathroom was big and luxurious with matte black tiles, dark wooden cupboards, and a decorative climbing vine that lived off the vase of water its roots were submerged in. Athena stripped off her dirty boots, wincing in pain when she was finally barefoot. That was the last time she wore heeled boots anywhere.

"Here, you're going to need this," Kon said, going into the cupboards and producing wrapped sandalwood soap and small bottles of shampoo and conditioner.

"You going to just stand there like a creeper?" Athena asked, peeling off her sweaty, ruined blazer.

"I can't let you leave after everything you just saw, so I'll be sticking close until I can convince you to help me," he said.

"Help you? I almost got my ass shot off because of you," she said, tossing her bloody shirt at him. Kon caught it and dropped it into a hamper.

"I also saved it," he replied. "It would have been a tragedy to lose it."

Athena wriggled out of her pants, pretending he wasn't there, staring at her all sexy and glowering. She turned on the hot water and sighed when it came out straight away.

Pulling out what remained of her hairpins, she unraveled her braid and stuck her head under the spray. Blood and dirt pooled at

her feet, and she tried not to think of the centuries of dried shit she had on her from the cistern.

"I'm sorry."

Athena turned. Kon was standing at the edge of the shower spray, still fully clothed. He looked like his world had imploded.

"Excuse me?"

Kon stared her down. "I'm sorry for involving you in this. For you getting shot at. For getting you on Liddell's radar. For stealing that fucking codex from you three years ago."

Athena had expected her night to go a lot of ways, but never did she think she would be getting apologies out of Konstantius Zalam. She didn't know what to say, so she tossed him the shampoo bottle.

"You can prove it by helping me get the blood out of my hair," she said and turned her back to him. She unwrapped the soap and began to lather herself down. A minute later, Kon's long fingers slipped into her hair.

"Now is your chance to tell me about your wall of crazy in there," Athena said, tilting her head back for him.

"It's what I know about Liddell," he replied, hands working the shampoo into her filthy locks.

"But you work for him, don't you know...well, everything?"

"Not even close." Kon tilted her face towards him. "Before I tell you anything else, I need to ask you something."

Athena nodded. She had seen him fake, angry, charming, sexy... She had never seen him so quietly intense.

"Do you believe in magic?" he finally asked.

Instantly, Athena tasted snow and blood. Heard the screams of the mad and dying. Felt the heat of the flames as buildings burned around her. At the center of it, there was a faceless man made of shadows.

Athena swallowed hard, forcing the images back. "Yes."

Kon turned her, cupped her cheek. "You've seen something to convince you?"

"Yes," she said again, unable to lie.

"Good. It will make what I tell you easier to believe," Kon said. He moved her back under the spray to rinse the shampoo out. "My parents were practitioners. They could use magic. Liddell killed them

when I was a kid, and I still don't know why. I was locked in a cupboard, saw my mother die, and I had to break out of a burning house so I didn't die too. I got these in the process."

Kon took her hand and ran it over the tattoos on his lower back. Athena knew they covered scars but had never taken the time to really study them. She turned him, ran her fingers over the sad-faced Byzantine saints that had been tattooed over them. They would have been horrific on a child's body. Athena pressed her palm to them.

"Kon..." Athena struggled to find what to say. He wouldn't accept pity, so she swallowed the lump in her throat and asked, "Why did you cover them?"

"Liddell. He didn't know I existed, still has no idea. Any evidence of me died in that fire, and I wanted to keep it that way. I got the tattoos so no one would have questions, and with my reputation, no one has ever been game enough to ask me."

"You've been trying to get to him since you were a kid?" Athena realized what the night's events really meant to him. "And I've fucked it up for you."

"Yes. He doesn't trust me anymore. He'll have a hit out on us because even though I know fuck all about who he really is or where he lives, I still know too much."

Athena looked up at him. "I'm kind of surprised you haven't killed me."

Kon put his hands on the tiles on either side of her, caging her in. Athena's heart rate leaped as his gaze turned molten. "If killing you were so easy, I would've done it years ago."

"Stop it. I told you no trying to seduce me," she said, poking him in his rock-hard abs. She looked down further and realized it wasn't the only thing hard. "Tell your dick to behave itself too."

"Around you? Impossible. You're just going to have to tolerate it."

Athena dragged her attention back to his face. "So you want revenge on Liddell and have worked for the asshole for years. Why haven't you killed him yet?"

"As I said, I don't know where he is or who he really is. Liddell could very well be a fake name he uses to honor one of the founding members of Golden Dawn." Kon finished washing the soap off his

body and turned off the shower. He took a towel and passed it to Athena.

Athena frowned. "The political party or the occult society?"

"Occult society. They were established in the late nineteenth century and were primarily interested in magic, metaphysics, and the paranormal," Kon replied, drying himself off and getting out of the shower.

"I thought they disbanded way back," Athena said.

"Not exactly." Kon pulled on another pair of pajama pants. "I need something to drink. Did you eat tonight?"

"Does a bag of nuts from the hotel mini-bar count?" Athena asked. She slipped into the t-shirt and pants Kon had given her.

"Fuck," Kon growled, making her glance up at his burning eyes.

"What?" Athena asked, drying her hair roughly.

"I like you in my clothes."

Athena threw the wet towel at him. "Focus, Konstantius. I still hate you."

"You say that like it's ever been an issue between us," Kon replied.

"Golden Dawn?" she prompted, her lady parts getting way too excited.

Kon gestured with his head. "Drink first."

Downstairs, Athena perched on one of the tall barstools by the kitchen counter and watched Kon pull out a bottle of whiskey.

"I don't have any cobra blood to mix it with. Is that going to be a problem?" he teased.

"I'll make do," Athena replied. "You know this relaxed Kon is starting to scare me more than the homicidal one."

"One and the same, *güzelim*."

"I suppose you've never stuck around long enough for me to see it," she replied, trying to sound like she didn't care he always left while she was sleeping.

"It always seemed safer to not be there when you woke up," Kon admitted and slid a glass of whiskey in front of her. "Also, I have nightmares. Bad ones. I find it hard to sleep with anyone because of it."

Athena lifted her glass. "Me too."

Kon frowned. "I've never seen you have a nightmare, and I've seen you asleep."

"Who knows," she said, looking away. She didn't want to think about why that was.

Kon leaned forward, so his elbows rested on the counter opposite her. "Golden Dawn, or the Aurora Aurea, technically dissolved in 1903. Publicly, they never gained momentum again."

"But that's bullshit?" Athena guessed.

"In a manner of speaking, it is true. There are no official members or anything anymore. What remains call themselves the Secret Chiefs or just Aurora. A small cabal of men and women who still practice magic and use it to manipulate the world for their own gain," Kon explained. "Liddell is one of them. One of the Aurora Aurea founding members was named Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, which is why I think it's a title as opposed to his real name."

Athena huffed out a breath. "Just so I've got this straight, you know he's a member of a very secret powerful group, have no idea who he really is, and your whole plan was what? Wait until he invited you over for tea?"

"Pretty much. I've been trying to gain his trust to let me in. I didn't just want him. I wanted his whole fucking little club. And now I won't get a chance," Kon replied and drained his glass.

"I have to ask why you are telling me all this," Athena said after a moment of silence.

"My years of planning have now gone to shit, and I need another way to find him and end this." Kon gnawed his bottom lip. "I think if anyone could help me now, it's you."

Athena snorted. "And why would I do that after you continually screwed me over for this asshole?"

"Because you are on his shit list, which means you're a dead woman walking and probably anyone you know. Don't you get it? Liddell thinks we have been working together. He suspects you know about him and will start doing damage control. We have a mutual threat. We should put aside our shit and work together. Then once Liddell is dead, we can go back to fighting each other," Kon snapped in frustration.

Athena hadn't heard past 'damage control.' She got up off the chair. "I need a fucking phone right now."

"Why?"

"Because I have people I care about, asshole! Phone!" she demanded.

Kon rummaged in a cupboard and pulled out a new cheap burner phone from its box. "I hope you know their numbers off by heart."

"Fuck you." Athena snatched it off and hoped she wasn't too late. She rang Izabella first because she was the most vulnerable one.

"Silver Lady is in and listening to your request," a robotic voice answered.

"Iz, take me off your screening. It's Athena!"

There was a series of dial tones before Izabella said, "What fucking mess have you got yourself into now?"

"No time to explain. It's a code zero. Pack your shit and get out of your place right now. I think the crew is compromised. Try and get a hold of Dante and then give Julian a heads up. I doubt he'll leave his townhouse unless it becomes dire but he should know someone is gunning for us. I'll try Silas. Call me back when you are out," Athena replied. She hung up without waiting for a reply and dialed her father's number.

No response. Athena took a deep breath and texted him: **Code Zero. Call me on this number.** She collapsed on a nearby sofa, her foot bouncing impatiently.

"I'm ordering some food. You need to eat," Kon said.

"Don't boss me around."

Kon was suddenly in front of her, lifting her chin with one finger. "I will if you refuse to look after yourself. You're no use to anyone hungry and unable to think straight."

Athena was about to break his finger when her phone rang. "Silas?!"

"Athena, what the fuck is going on?" Silas answered, a club beat thumping in the background.

"We probably all have hits out on us. I need you to bail on your job and get to a safe house," she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

"How did this happen? Was it fucking Zalam?" Silas demanded. Kon raised a brow at her, hearing every word.

"Yes, actually, it *is* his fault. His ex-employer tried to kill us tonight."

"*Us*. Athena Edgeworth, if you tell me you are casually hanging with that motherfucker, I swear I will kill you myself."

"I was trying to get the staff of Moses! He just happened to turn up," she said, exasperated.

"You're in Istanbul? For fuck's sake, you know it's his turf. What's the deal with his ex-boss?"

"It's a long story, but he's a part of something called Aurora and —"

"Shut up. Stop talking. Don't say another word over the phone," Silas demanded, his voice dropping in a deadly cold whisper. "You got yourself into some shit. I'm coming to Istanbul, and I'm telling Izabella and Dante to come as well because we are going to need them. Where are you?"

"Hiding out. I'll text you the address when you land."

Silas growled. "Are you safe with the Basti?"

Athena glanced up at Kon, who was looking irritable. "Yeah, I am. He wants our help."

"Sure, I'll help him right into his very own body bag. I'll text you flight details when I have them," Silas replied. After a long beat, he said, "Be safe, Cub. I love you."

"Love you too," Athena said, feeling like she had been kicked in the guts as he hung up. She looked up at Kon and gave him a tired smile. "My dad can't wait to meet you."

Kon followed Athena's example and sent a heads-up message to Leo and one to Frederica. They all kept their business private, so he didn't have the same worries for their safety that Athena did. Her distress was palpable, and it upset him more than he was willing to show.

"And you're sure I can't go back to the hotel for my stuff?" Athena asked. "I can't keep wearing your clothes, and I need a passport."

If Kon had his way, she would never wear anything *but* his clothes ever again. He was still trying not to look at her for too long because having an erection for hours was painful. Especially when he doubted Athena would be in the mood to put it into her mouth after his two hours were up.

"Silas can bring you clothes. As for your passport, follow me," Kon said, forcing himself to stop thinking about her mouth. He went to the other side of the warehouse and opened the door to his study. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and stepped out of the way. "Take your pick. They are all yours."

Athena bent down and went through the drawer. "I thought you would have gotten rid of these and burned the aliases."

"No, just started a collection for fun. I was going to send a box of them to you as a gift one day." Kon's smile slipped when one of the daggers he had bought flashed at the bottom.

"What is this?" Athena said, pulling it out and standing up. She was holding it as if it was as delicate as a feather, turning it this way

and that.

"It was also going to go in the box. I saw it and thought you might like it. I figured I'd have to offer you something nice one day to stop you from killing me," Kon said, talking way too much.

Athena wasn't even listening. Her eyes were scanning the scabbard with a mixture of awe and love. If she ever looked at Kon like that, he'd probably agree to do anything she asked.

"What are you doing hiding in a dirty drawer, my beautiful khanjar?" she crooned to the blade. She slid it free, held the naked blade at eye level. Then she licked the flat of it.

"Hmmm, fifteenth-century Ottoman empire. Come to mommy," she purred.

Kon didn't know whether to be disturbed or turned on. Athena balanced the dagger in her hand before shutting her eyes, tossing it up in the air, and catching it. Kon went rock hard.

"It's yours if you want it," he said, voice shaky.

Athena's eyes snapped open, and the tip of the blade was suddenly pressing to his bare chest. Blood oozed from the cut, but he didn't pull back.

"Do it if you need to," he whispered. He had expected it and wasn't afraid. "I'd rather you be the one to stick a blade into me than Liddell."

Athena's eyes narrowed, and the tip of the blade lightly traced down his chest, leaving a scratch just deep enough to draw blood. Her eyes glazed over, and for a second, Kon thought she would plunge it into his heart. Instead, Athena sheathed the dagger before stepping into his space.

"If killing you was so easy, I would've done it years ago," she said, echoing his words back to him. Then she leaned forward and licked the blood off his chest.

Kon whimpered at the back of his throat. "Is that two hours up yet?"

"Why? Do you want to fuck me?" Athena asked against his lips.

"I always want to fuck you. Even when I hate you and you've just blown twenty years of planning to shit," Kon replied and kissed her. She tasted of his blood and whiskey. She groaned against his mouth, her tongue darting against his.

Kon slid his hand down the front of her loose pajama pants and cupped her. She ground up against him, her hand dropping to palm his hard cock. Kon hissed, the feel of her hand on him so fucking good. He forced himself to step back from her touch and dropped to his knees in front of her. His mouth skimmed her warm stomach before tugging the silk pants down.

"Fuck, I never get tired of looking at your sweet pussy," he said and glanced up at her. Athena's smirk was like a gauntlet thrown down. Slowly, she pulled off her t-shirt and lifted her leg over his shoulder.

"It's not going to eat itself, Konstantius," she said.

Kon didn't need to be asked twice. He gripped her ass tight and pressed his face into her wet heat. He had wanted to do it all fucking night.

Athena's hands threaded into his hair and hung on as he licked and sucked. She was already emitting the sweet sighs and gasps that haunted his dreams, and she tasted even better than he remembered.

The front of his pants was getting wet with pre-cum, but he didn't stop his assault on her. He pressed a finger inside of her, and she rose up on tiptoes, a shudder running through her.

"Fuck, Kon, more," she moaned.

That did it. Kon was up on his feet in a blink, lifting her up and pressing her against the door of the office. He kicked his pants off and drove his aching dick inside of her tight, hot body.

"Oh god, yes," Athena cried, her legs tightening around his hips and using them as leverage to move up and down on his cock.

"I love the sounds you make; love the feel of you so hot around me." Kon groaned, thrusting hard into her. "It's all I've been able to think about for three fucking years." Athena's nails dug into his scalp, pulling him to her mouth in a messy kiss.

"I never thought of you at all," she panted, purposely provoking him.

Kon snarled wordlessly and dragged her back down onto the carpet, twisting to get her on her back. "This is where you belong, Edgeworth. Underneath me."

Athena arched up, and he caught her hard nipple in between his teeth. She only squirmed, her hips lurching up into his. "I should've killed you on Paphos."

Kon lifted her hips higher, so her ass left the carpet, shifting the angle enough that she gave a strangled cry of pleasure.

"Yes, you should have, and all the other times after. But we both know you'd miss my cock inside of you too much," he said, growing harder as her inner walls gripped him.

Athena's face was flushed and sweaty. She went up onto her elbows and hissed, "There's always another man willing to do the job. A cock is a cock."

Kon pinched her ass, making her yelp. "I bet you've told yourself that over and over, even as you finger fucked yourself, imagining it was me inside of you."

Athena's eyes rolled in the back of her head, coming hard enough that warm wetness rushed over his dick.

"Fucking hell," Kon snarled, dragging her up into his lap so he could bite into her breast, marking her as he blew deep and hot inside of her. Stars exploded behind his eyelids, and he almost lost his grip on her.

Athena was hanging onto him, shaking and sweating. Her lips captured his mouth to give him a punishing kiss. "I *do* think about you when I masturbate."

Kon groaned at the admission, wishing he could come all over again. "You really are going to kill me if you keep talking."

Athena licked the sweat on his neck. "I like the way you taste after I've made you come undone. Everything about you is so fucking sexy that I can't help but provoke you."

Kon brushed her damp hair back from her face. "I think I just came so hard, I've begun to hallucinate you saying nice things to me."

Athena smiled, a kind of sweet and goofy grin he had never seen before. "Don't get used to it. It's only because you bought me a pretty knife."

If that was all it took to get her to look at him like that, he would buy her one every week. He kissed her gently. "I think we should

have something to eat, and then I'm going to make you scream all over again."

Athena laughed. "You better because as soon as Silas gets here, there will be no more fucking."

"He can stay somewhere else then," Kon pouted.

Her fingers trailed through his sweaty hair. "You should've thought of that *before* you got your psycho boss onto us."

Despite the hit out on her life and all the revelations about Kon, Athena ended up passing out in his bed, full of manti dumplings, and had slept the night through. She woke up with Kon's warm, naked body pressed into her back and his hand between her legs. She was barely awake, and she was coming in shivering electric waves.

"Good morning, *güzelim*," he purred in her ear.

"Hmph," she replied, trying and failing to find words. Kon slid his hard dick into her, and she cried out, pussy sensitive and body thrumming. "Kon..."

"Yes?" he asked, gently working in and out of her, his hand gripping her hip to stop her from moving any faster.

Athena couldn't remember what she was going to say, just let him slip in and out of her until she was crying out into her pillow.

"That's my vicious goddess. Maybe I should have stayed all those other times. You sing so sweetly in the morning." Kon nibbled on her neck before rolling her onto her stomach.

Athena let him maneuver her, too blissed out and boneless to want to fight him. He pinned her wrists above her head, his mouth working a fiery path down her spine.

Kon lifted her hips up with his other hand, thrusting in and out of her in an almost gentle rhythm, making her orgasm build all over again. He went with her when she came again, nuzzling her neck as

she tried to catch her breath. He rolled onto his side and traced her back lightly with his fingertips.

"Can you talk yet?"

Athena huffed a small laugh and buried her face into her pillow. "No."

Kon chuckled and brushed the hair from her face. He looked tousled and ridiculously good in the morning, but Athena couldn't find it in her to resent him for it.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what did I do to deserve that wake-up?" she asked when speech finally returned to her.

"You said that I can't fuck you when Silas arrives, so I thought I better get one more in," Kon said, his hand drifting to her ass and giving it a pat. "I also like the idea of you feeling me inside of you for the rest of the day."

Fucking hell. She would be feeling him alright. She would be walking funny for days.

"Could tea also be a part of this nice side you are showing me?" she asked hopefully.

Kon gripped her ass tight enough to make her groan. "Don't get used to it. I'm only being nice so you give me what I want."

Athena rolled her eyes at him. "Is that a yes to tea?"

"Come downstairs when you want. Clothing optional."

Athena laughed and found her phone, then she checked her messages from Silas and Izabella. "You better put your pants on, Basty. We are going to have visitors soon."

"You are determined to ruin my fun," he said, climbing out of bed.

Athena rolled over and tucked her hand behind her head, loving the way Kon's eyes moved over her hungrily. "You call having a hit out on you and having to make a new plan to kill Liddell a fun time?"

Kon's smile was deviant. "Don't you?"

"Good point." Athena watched his perfect brown ass wander into the wardrobe and come out in an open robe and a pair of pajama pants.

"Better get that lovely ass of yours into the shower, Edgeworth. Wouldn't want my come dripping down your thighs when Daddy arrives," he teased.

"Keep that sense of humor. You're gonna need it when he gets here," Athena called after him.

ATHENA WAS on her second cup of strong tea when there was a knock on the warehouse door. Kon checked the cameras, a gun in his hand that he had pulled from a metal pillar near the door.

"Do these people look familiar?" he asked.

Athena looked at the surveillance screen just in time to see Dante stick his middle finger up at the camera. "Yeah, they do."

She put a hand on the deadbolt before quickly turning and kissing Kon one last time. She didn't know when she was going to get another chance. His fingers lightly brushed her cheek, eyes warm in understanding.

Athena went back to the door and opened it with her usual cocky smile. "You assholes better have brought me some clothes."

Izabella was all curves, painted red lips, and disapproval. She pulled her sunglasses down her brown nose and gave Athena the full power of her pissed-off, kohl-lined gaze. "You are lucky I don't punch you in the tit, *pendeja*."

"Cub! I haven't seen you in forever!" Dante said, pushing Izabella out of the way. He pulled Athena into his big, muscly arms and squeezed the hell out of her.

"Hey, big guy," Athena said, ruffling his sandy blonde hair.

His hazel eyes glittered in amusement when they landed on Kon. "Is that Turkish Delight?"

Kon smiled in amusement. "She calls me Turkish Delight?"

"No," Athena said, locking the door behind them. "Kon, meet Izabella Silversmith, hacker extraordinaire and acquisitions champion, and Dante Hill, the sexy muscle of the team."

"Thanks, Cub," Dante said, making a kissing noise at her.

"Guys, this is Kon Zalam, the Bastard of Istanbul. He's not nearly as impressive as his reputation makes him out to be."

Kon snorted. "Speak for yourself. Thank you for coming. I appreciate your help."

"Yeah, you're gonna need it when Silas gets here," Dante said and laughed. "You got any more of that tea or, better yet, coffee?"

"Kitchen is this way. I have some warm simit if you're hungry," Kon replied.

Dante's smile widened. He was always hungry. "They are those doughnut things with the sesame seeds?"

"Yes. I bought a bag of them but had to stop Athena from eating them all."

Izabella waited until they were gone before turning on Athena. "I thought this trip was going to be a simple auction," she complained, waving her tattooed fingers about in frustration.

"It was! I didn't do anything. Guys just turned up and started shooting at me."

"You should've let me put a curse on him three years ago. I've got a good one from my grandmother that was passed down to her from my Basque ancestors. I would have fucked him up forever," Izabella muttered.

Athena smiled at her passion. Izabella was always threatening to invoke her Basque witch ancestors on them all.

"He's into magic, so he probably has a talisman somewhere that would have deflected it anyway."

"Snakes always do," Izabella sniffed.

Athena laughed and pulled her into a hug. "I've missed you, and I'm glad you're safe, Silver Lady. I was worried."

"Safe, but for how long? I'm still going to deny knowing anything about you being in Istanbul." Izabella let her go and passed her a backpack. "Here, you better get changed out of the Bastys' clothes before Silas gets here, or he might really lose it."

"You're the best, Iz."

She tossed her glossy black ringlets over her shoulder. "I know."

Athena went upstairs to Kon's bathroom. She searched through the bag, pulling out her usual black jeans, a black t-shirt, and a pair of lace-up boots.

Izabella had even packed her a small bag of toiletries and make-up, and Athena couldn't help but grin. Iz always thought of everything. Luckily, her t-shirt collar was high enough to cover the bite mark Kon had left on her breast the night before. Athena brushed her fingers over it, her eyes fluttering closed.

No, no, no. No time for lustful thoughts.

Fifteen minutes later, with her hair braided and some decent eyeliner on, Athena felt halfway normal. She strapped her new dagger to her belt, fighting the urge to pull it out and look at it. It was as long as her forearm, the tip slightly curved. It was beautiful and deadly and would have been something she would've picked out for herself. The present gave her a warm feeling in her chest that she knew was dangerous.

Athena had only just made it back downstairs when a heavy knock boomed against the metal door. Athena didn't risk looking at Kon, just hurried to answer it.

Silas Edgeworth was six foot four of muscle, with grey sprinkled through his dark hair and green eyes that changed with his mood.

"Hey, Dad," Athena said, staring up at him. He dropped his duffle bag and wrapped his arms around her. "Thanks for coming."

"Didn't give me much of choice, Cubbie," he said, his whiskey voice tinged with worry. "You okay?"

"Yeah. No harm done despite the kill squad in the cistern."

"You got them?"

"Of course I did."

"Good girl." Silas smiled down at her, deep enough to show his dimples under his grey and black stubble. "New dagger?"

"Got it last night," she said, pulling it free to show him.

"Very nice." Silas's eyes zeroed in on Kon and went a flat olive color. "Are you sure I can't shoot him?"

"Only if he deserves it," Athena said with a laugh and sheathed the dagger. Kon was smart enough to stay where he was on the other side of the room.

"I can see where Athena gets her intimidating smile from," he said, nodding to Silas. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All the bad things are true, so keep that in mind if you decide to try and fuck us over," Silas replied. He spotted Iz, and his pissed-off glare vanished instantly.

"*Hola, Jefe*," she greeted with a knock-out smile that would have annihilated a lesser man.

"Izabella, nice to see you made it to the party," Silas said, shooting her a wink. "Where's Dante?"

"Here, boss, I was just making you a coffee and staying out of the firing line in case you were in a trigger-happy mood," Dante replied, pressing a mug into Silas's hand.

"Cubbie said I can't kill her boyfriend, so what can I do?" Silas said, bumping fists with the younger merc.

Dante clicked his tongue. "Well, he's hot and a psycho. Those kinds of men don't just fall into your lap."

"And yet they always seem to fall into yours," Silas teased. "How did that Venezuela job go for you?"

"Smooth enough, but the drama wasn't worth the payload," Dante griped.

Kon sidled over to Athena as the others caught up. "Should I sleep with one eye open?"

Athena's lips twitched. "Probably a good idea, at least for the first few days."

"I like that my blade is strapped nice and close to your ass," he whispered, dark eyes dropping to it.

"I'm keeping it within reach in case I need to stab you with it."

Kon's gaze heated. "Like you did last night?"

Athena's toes curled in her boots at the memory, tasted his salty blood and skin in her mouth. "Don't push your luck."

Kon only laughed softly. "I wouldn't dream of it, *güzelim*."

Athena looked up to see Silas watching them, eyes calculating and head tilted. Once, she had seen him give that look to a room full of human traffickers right before he pulled out a PKM machine gun and shot them all.

Athena slowly stepped in front of Kon and shook her head. Silas cast his eyes to the heavens like he was praying for patience and turned his attention back to Izabella.

Athena sighed. It was going to be a long fucking day.

The mood in the warehouse was something that Kon hadn't experienced in a long time. One look at the Edgeworths and their friends together, you could tell that they were family and treated each other as such. He didn't think that kind of camaraderie was something he missed, but seeing them made a long-dead part of him wake up. He wondered if Athena would ever want to make him a part of that circle.

It all depends if Silas kills you first. Kon wasn't an idiot. He could see that Athena was the only one standing between him and her father.

His phone buzzed in his pocket with a message from Frederica to say that she appreciated the warning about Liddell but would decline to throw herself into the fight at this time. Kon understood that and didn't hold it against her.

A loud bang on the door had everyone in the warehouse pulling weapons. Kon shook his head. *Mercenaries.*

"Relax, it's just Leo," Kon said. He still checked the cameras before opening the door.

"*Ciao capo,*" Leo greeted, "Am I late?"

"Not at all," Kon said, letting him pass. Leo was a lean Florentine with curly, messy hair and sharp brown eyes that raked over the group sitting on the lounges.

"*Mio Dio,* this looks like a bad idea waiting to happen," Leo whispered under his breath to Kon.

"Undoubtedly. Everyone, this is Leo, my hacker. I asked him to help out," Kon introduced.

Leo grinned at Athena. "The goddess in the flesh. This is a momentous day. I thought that you would've killed Kon by now."

"Well, the day isn't out. I take it you're the one that tipped off the airport security in Prague that I was carrying a bomb?" she said, her smile going sharp.

"Kon told me to," Leo replied, flushing.

"What's your handle?" Izabella asked.

Leo studied her curiously. "Vinci. You?"

"Silver Lady."

"Fuck off, you are not," he said excitedly before lapsing into Italian. Izabella replied, and they both wandered over to the back of the warehouse where she had set up a laptop. Leo put his computer bag on the table, gesturing wildly as he talked.

"And we've lost them," Athena joked. She elbowed Dante, whose hazel eyes were still watching Leo. "Stop that. There will be no eating Italian while we are on this job."

Dante only rolled his eyes at her. "I was only looking. You know I like the nerdy ones."

"Speaking of the job. I would like some information now," Silas said, glancing over at Kon.

"I know the feeling. Athena mentioned you got irritable when she mentioned Aurora?" Kon replied. "Information has to go both ways."

"Fine, show me what you have."

"I'll need a hand carrying it down."

Athena went to rise, but Silas put a hand on her shoulder. "Relax, Cub, I'll help him."

Kon led Silas upstairs to his wardrobe and pulled out one of the corkboards he had pinned his research on. Silas's eyes scanned over it for half a second before his fist lashed out and hit Kon in the face. Kon took a step back and swallowed the blood in his mouth.

"Feel better now?" he asked, shifting into a fighting stance in case Silas came at him again.

"Not even a little bit, you asshole," Silas growled. "I've spent the last twenty years trying to keep Athena away from Aurora, and now you've dragged us all back into it!"

Kon's eyes narrowed. "So you do know who they are."

"Not much, but it's enough to know never to fucking go near them." Silas pulled out the other corkboard. "Let's get on with it."

"Athena is making so much more sense now," Kon muttered, picking up the other board. "I'd like to think we can skip the conversation about me not being good enough for your daughter?"

Silas surprised him by laughing right in his face. "Listen, Basti, I don't have to say shit because if you do anything Athena doesn't like, she will take the nearest blade and slice you to pieces. I only have to sit back and watch."

"You trained her well," Kon replied, thinking of the man she had cut up in the middle of the cistern.

"I wish I could take the credit, but she's always been like that." Silas looked him over and shook his head. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she's found the most damaged and dangerous man in the world to get obsessed with."

Kon's brows shot up. "You think she's obsessed with me?"

"Let me tell you something about my daughter," Silas said with an unfriendly smile. "When she was thirteen years old, I took her to a sword museum in Toledo because she had such a thing for blades. On display was a beautiful rapier, and this look passed over her face. I swear she stared at the thing for a good hour without moving like she was hypnotized by it. Afterward, she had this dreamy grin for the rest of the day."

Kon remembered Athena licking the khanjar the previous night and could just imagine the younger version being transfixed by a sword.

"Charming story, but your point is?"

"When she looks at you when no one is watching? Same fucking grin." Silas lifted the board and headed for the door. "Unbelievable."

Kon waited until Silas was gone before allowing himself a small, pleased smile. *Well, isn't that interesting?*

Downstairs, Kon set up the boards on a wall where everyone could see them.

"I love show and tell," Leo said, going straight over to the boards and staring at them.

"Who is going to go first?" Kon asked, looking at Silas.

"Definitely you, seeing how you're the one that kicked this hornet's nest."

Kon looked at Athena. "Not to get picky, but technically, it was her that did that and fucked up four years of strategy."

"You shouldn't have stolen from her then," Silas said before Athena could reply. She lifted her middle fingers up at Kon, and he could only shake his head.

What a fucking pair.

"Fine, I'll go first," he said, outnumbered and not in the mood to fight.

It took Kon twenty minutes to tell everyone about his history with Liddell and the little he knew about Aurora. Everyone remained silent for the first time since they arrived.

"The plan was ultimately to get to Liddell and learn the identities of the other Secret Chiefs before I slit his throat. I'd still like to do that because if they are even half as bad as Liddell, they need to be stopped," Kon finished.

"The one I know about is probably worse than Liddell," Silas said, and everyone's gaze swiveled to him. He was looking at Athena. "It's got to do with how I found you. If you don't want me to tell them about it, I won't."

Found her. There had been nothing in Kon's research on her about that.

Athena had gone pale, but she still nodded. "Do it. The more we all know, the better right? Liddell isn't going to stop until we are dead, so we don't have much choice."

"Alright, Cub," Silas said softly before turning back to the others. Even Izabella and Dante looked curious, which told Kon that maybe they didn't know about Athena's origins either.

"Twenty years ago, I was hired with a group of other mercs to go and guard a dig site at Pokrovskoye in Russia. It's famous for being the birthplace of Rasputin, something that should have possibly raised a red flag, but I didn't care. I was twenty-eight years old, fresh out of the British army, and with zero fucks to give. The money was a lot for something as simple as guard duty. It was in freezing forests at the ass-end of the world. Still, after ten years of deserts in Africa

and the Middle East, I was happy for the change," Silas began, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

"There were five of us. We were helicoptered in from Moscow in the dead of night. It was very cloak and dagger shit which made me think there was some kind of secret government involved. I was used to that kind of thing, as were the other guys we were with. We saw the fire from the air, and the pilot got edgy about us landing. He had his orders too, so down we went."

Silas's eyes had gone vacant, but Athena leaned against him, encouraging him to go on.

"I've seen some shit in my time as you can imagine. But nothing like that site. We went in, weapons out and ready for a fight. There were people scattered on the ground, blood everywhere, fires burning. The dig site had been completely trashed. We split up, trying to find out what had happened. We couldn't see any soldiers or gang members, nothing that would suggest that another group had come in to fight. From what we could tell, they had...done it to themselves. They had all turned on each other with whatever they had in their hands at the time. The last ones standing turned on themselves."

Leo looked back at the corkboards. "And Aurora? How do they figure into this?"

Silas let out a deep sigh. "I went searching through the paperwork that was scattered about. Found some orders for supplies that had been invoiced to 'The Aurora.' It caught my eye because the guy who hired us said he represented them. In the historian's tents, I found a journal documenting the daily work, and in that day's entry, it said 'Visit from Gadal.'"

Kon folded his arms as he absorbed the information. "And Athena?"

"I followed a blood trail that led into the forest. Found a man's body and a bunch of small footprints. Too small to be a woman's. I kept following them until I found a little blood-drenched girl with a knife in her hand. The only survivor in the whole damn shit show," Silas replied, his shoulders tense.

"And what? You just took her?" Kon asked.

Silas glared at him. "Was I supposed to leave her there for the wolves? *Everyone* was dead. When I took her to the main village at Pokrovskoye, no one knew who she was. Athena couldn't even tell me her own name; she was in that much shock. I started calling her Athena because it was like she had been birthed from that battlefield. She wouldn't let go of her damn knife for six months and wouldn't let anyone near her but me."

Kon risked a glance at Athena. She was shaking, looking like she was about to throw up, eyes icy and blank. She got up without saying a word and headed up the stairs leading to the roof. Silas rose to go after her, but Kon stepped in.

"Don't. I'll make sure she's okay," he said. Silas looked about to argue, but Kon cut him off. "She's looking for a fight and wants to hurt something. It's better that it's me and not you."

Silas looked down at him. "Upset her more, and I won't pull my punch again; I'll put a bullet in you."

"If I upset her more, I'm sure I'll be dead before you can take aim," Kon replied with a small smile. He nodded towards Leo. "Tell him whatever you can remember, especially about Gadal. We need to get Izabella and you working."

"What are you thinking? That he's another Secret Chief?"

Kon nodded. "Whatever happened at that dig, I'll bet you anything that magic was involved."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because of how they died. I've seen it before."

Athena couldn't breathe. She slammed down the door handle of the roof access and stumbled out into the late afternoon sun. The roof had been set up with fake grass, a punching bag, and an area for entertaining with a small metal brazier to have a fire.

Athena stumbled over to the punching bag. Her vision hazed, and she drew her knife before she fell into her nightmare.

Blood and snow. Screams of the mad and dying. A man made of shadows. The small knife in her hand. How it felt when she plunged it into the man that tried to throw her to the ground.

The roof door slammed, knocking her back to herself.

She was sweaty and breathing heavily, the khanjar still in her hand. The punching bag was hanging from its chain in tatters, rags and sand littering the ground at her feet.

"Lucky I always keep spare bags," Kon said. He didn't make a move to touch her or get within striking distance.

Instead, he went to a small shed on the other side of the roof, pulled out two large flat cushions, and placed them in the entertaining area. He sat down and turned his attention to the setting sun and the Bosphorus in the distance.

Athena steadied her breathing and sheathed her dagger, her arm aching and leaden. She walked over to the other pillow he had set out and sat down.

"Nothing to say?" she demanded.

Kon was gorgeous in the fading light, his brown skin golden and dark hair messy from the sea breeze. Athena's rage simmered down at his nonplussed expression.

"Do you need anything?" he asked calmly.

Athena shook her head. "No. It just...takes me to that place again. I don't actually remember anything before that night. The only things I get are impressions and being piss-my-pants afraid. The clearest thing was Silas coming through the trees and pointing a gun at me."

"You never wanted to go back? Try and find out who you are?" he asked.

"No. Whoever that girl was, she died that day. I know remembering might help track down who this Gadal guy is, but I can't. There's just...nothing."

"There will be other ways to find him. Don't poke that wound until you're ready to." Kon grinned a little. "Besides, you just appearing all blood dripping and knife swiping only adds to your mystery."

"Very funny." Athena shifted half an inch closer to him until they were shoulder to shoulder.

These were uncharted waters. She knew where she stood with the sex and the fighting. This quiet company and easy conversation made her feel unsteady.

"What's the bet that Izabella and Leo get super competitive and start trying to out hack each other?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"I wouldn't bet against that. It might work in our favor and force them to dive deeper." Kon hummed thoughtfully. "I wonder how we can encourage a rivalry?"

"You don't think there is enough rivalry to go round?" Athena laughed.

"It always made us work harder to outdo each other."

"Is that what you were trying to do? I always just wanted to inconvenience you as much as possible," Athena said honestly. She didn't have to prove anything to anybody.

Kon's eyes narrowed. "And look how brilliantly that turned out. We both have hits out on us."

"But it's made your life more interesting, hasn't it?"

"By interesting, you mean destroyed it?"

Athena shrugged unapologetically just to rile him. "Sorry, not sorry."

Kon reached over and twirled the end of her braid between his fingers.

"You're very cocky now that your father is here. If we were alone, I'd be bending you over my knee to punish such impertinence," he said, low and husky.

Athena's lady parts clenched in excitement, and his smile turned feline.

Two could play at that game. She ran her fingers along the tattoos on his forearm.

"Hmm, but Silas *is* here, which means I can't suck you off right now before riding you like my own little Turkish sex toy."

Kon pulled harder on her braid. "Always have to try and outdo me, don't you?"

"It's true." Athena chewed her bottom lip. "Do you really think we will be able to work together? We can't even have a conversation without turning it into a competition. I'm concerned that long-term exposure will make us tear each other apart."

Kon didn't look worried, just let his fingers twirl through her hair again. "I don't know. It doesn't sound so bad. I'd rather be torn apart by you than Liddell or whoever this Gadal is."

"Thinking he might be another of Liddell's cabal?" Athena asked.

Kon nodded. "That or he is close to one of them. Once we get Liddell, we can get the information about Gadal out of him."

"He's probably the only person who knows what happened that night in Russia," Athena said, tucking her knees up to her chest. "I dream of a man made of shadows trying to find me in the forest. He's the reason I wouldn't stop carrying that knife everywhere. I thought he would come back for me, and blades...they make me feel safe." She blew out a breath. "And yes, I know that makes me sound like a crazy person."

"Not to me," Kon said softly. "I know what it's like to have a childhood trauma caught up in some kind of magic. If all of this gets overwhelming for you, and you need someone to fight with, you only need to ask."

Athena looked sideways at him. "You want to fight me?"

"Well, I don't take you for a cuddler, but after meeting your father, that makes sense," Kon replied.

"I didn't think you were either until last night." Athena had drifted off with his arm clamped around her waist, mouth on her neck. After a night of getting shot at, it had been unexpectedly...nice.

Color tinged Kon's cheeks. "I assure you that was for purely strategic purposes. I couldn't have you running off."

"Just admit it, the Bastard of Istanbul wants me to snuggle him," Athena crooned because she had never seen him blush about anything.

Kon's smile turned sharp. "The Bastard of Istanbul wants to put his dick in that smart mouth of yours and watch you gag on it."

Athena laughed loudly, the nauseous ball of tension inside of her finally dissolving. She pulled a face at him. "Aw, I bet you do, but there will be no wrestling me to the floor and shutting me up with your cock while my dad is downstairs."

"Don't worry, Edgeworth. I am keeping track of every insult and teasing remark. We'll be alone at some point, and then you will pay for every single one of them." Kon leaned forward, so she had nowhere to look but at his dark eyes. "In the meantime, we are going to find the asshole that has a hit out on us and rip him apart. Then if you are still feeling bloodthirsty, we will find the prick that killed your parents, and you can introduce him to your knife collection. Sound good?"

"God, I love it when you talk dirty to me, Konstantius." Athena grabbed his face and kissed him.

It didn't matter that they might kill each other one day or that he might be using her for his own ends; Kon got her like no one else did. His mouth opened, tongue stroking against hers until she moaned and pulled away.

"Nope, don't start that, or I'll be trying to climb on you, and I bet we have about another five minutes before—"

The roof door banged open, and Dante's sandy blonde head appeared. "So this is where you two are hiding. Silas wanted to make sure you hadn't killed each other but didn't want to come and make sure in case you were fucking. I offered to check."

He waggled his eyebrows at Kon, and Athena giggled. Dante glanced at the mess that Athena had made of the punching bag.

"Feeling better, Cub?"

"Much. I suppose we had better get back to it," Athena replied, getting to her feet. She waited until Kon rose and followed him across the roof. She touched his back where Dante couldn't see.

"Thanks for talking me down, Kon," she whispered. He didn't reply, only put his hand behind him and stroked her fingers to let her know he had heard.



FOR THE REST of the day, the team got to work. Silas and Dante were reaching out to other mercenaries, asking what they knew about the people funding the contracts out on them, and Izabella and Leo had dragged tables and created an information corner with the corkboards.

"With your permission, I'd like to look into the Pokrovskoye incident while Izabella cross-checks the information Kon has on Liddell," Leo asked Athena.

"Sure. It's why we are here, right?" she replied, weirdly touched that he would even ask.

It would've been hard to picture Kon being friends with someone as good-natured as Leo a few days ago. He was cheery and friendly, quickly making himself at home amongst them.

"I wonder if what they were looking for in Pokrovskoye has anything to do with Rasputin. You want to talk about a man with a life too weird to be real," Leo said, sitting down on the couch with his laptop.

"If you are looking for a magical or mystical connection, then that would be the place to start," Kon contributed. "Rasputin was suspected of being a part of the Khlysts, a mystical cult in opposition to the Russian Orthodox Church."

Leo brightened. "Those guys were next level. They believed the only way you could really know salvation was to sin a lot first. They

would have these services where they would sing forbidden hymns, whip each other, and then have a massive orgy."

"Sounds like a fun night," Dante said with a laugh. "Did Rasputin get his whip out or what?"

Kon shrugged. "It's unsure. While Rasputin was found not guilty the two times he was investigated, we know he was a mystic and interested in channeling and communicating with the Divine, which is what the Khylists claimed to be doing at their ceremonies."

"Liddell's favorite kink," Athena said, earning a curious glance from Kon. "What? All of the relics we were fighting over were connected to communicating with a god."

"Liddell never admitted it outright, but he's trying to find a way to speak with a divine being and gain knowledge and power from them," Kon replied.

"Or he was trying to communicate with the classical Secret Chiefs," Izabella said, jumping in. "Don't forget these assholes only like to pretend they are the real Secret Chiefs, but in occult history, they were always masters of the cosmos and holders of ancient and powerful knowledge. Tibetan Masters, Masters of Ancient Wisdom, The Elder Brothers, whatever you want to call them, it all comes down to the same thing; transcendent beings with unlimited knowledge that could be used to shape the world, who only communicated to a select few. My bet is Liddell wants to make contact with *something*, god or master, and doesn't care which."

Kon started to pace. "If he's still collecting relics pertaining to them, it means that he hasn't succeeded yet."

"Could we lure him out that way?" Dante asked. "You and Athena could find something that he wants. You can offer him a deal, the object for removing the bounty. When he comes to collect it, Silas or I can snipe him."

"Liddell would see through it. He could just wait until the bounty hunters or other mercs kill us and then take the object anyway. He won't stop his hunt for magical relics for long. Now that I'm not there to do his legwork, he might be reaching out to find a replacement drudge...Oh." He stopped in his tracks and swiveled to look at Athena. "Get your knives, Edgeworth. We are going on an excursion."

The ferry from Eminönü was packed with nighttime commuters and a rowdy bachelor party. Athena leaned against the railing at the back of the ship, watching the white foam churn from the propeller blades.

She was wearing four knives and two handguns under her leather jacket and had a dagger in her left boot. It was probably overkill, but after the auction, she wasn't going to take any chances.

Silas wouldn't let her out wearing any less anyway. He was already pissed that she was out with Kon, but he trusted her too much to vocalize it.

"I have to say, I'm kind of surprised that your father isn't tailing us," Kon said as if hearing her thoughts.

Athena smiled. "If he was, you wouldn't know it anyway. Silas knows I can handle myself. He just thinks my judgment is compromised when it comes to you."

"Is it?" Kon looking all casual and tousled from the wind definitely made parts of her feel compromised.

"Yes. He's been telling me to kill you for two years now." Athena thought back and added, "You are the only thing we have ever fought over."

"And why haven't you taken his good fatherly advice?"

"Probably for the same reason you haven't killed me. Curiosity. Amusement. The thrill of the chase."

"Not my amazing dick and charming personality?"

"I'll grant you the former, but the latter, I'm still waiting to see."

Kon grinned. "It all comes down to what you consider charming. Some women you give flowers, and others you give fifteenth-century daggers."

Athena grew hot under her clothes and cleared her throat. She needed to change the subject before she did something reckless.

"So what can you tell me about this person we are going to see?" she asked.

"Altun Buruk is a fence of beautiful and often illegal objects. She is who you go to if you need to buy or sell something that is high value. She also provides a service of authenticating objects that don't come with papers," Kon explained. "I expect you have a dealer of your own?"

"Yes and no. Julian takes care of any sales but most of the historical items I acquire are repatriated to their original or traditional owners. I'm the one that steals things and gives them back," Athena admitted.

"You're kidding me," Kon spluttered.

"What? You thought I was doing it to sell on the black market?"

"Well...yes."

Athena tsked. "Not all of us mercenaries with a weak spot for historical artifacts are out for a quick buck. That medallion I stole from you in Semarang went right back to the guardians of the god's sacred cave where it was stolen from."

"What about the rumors you kill people for money?"

"All depends if they deserve it. I don't take contracts on anyone innocent and don't need killing. Silas is the same."

"Athena Edgeworth, you are not the person I thought you were," Kon replied with a shake of his head.

Athena patted his cheek. "Try not to be too disappointed in my moral compass, Konstantius."

Kon nipped at her palm. "Disappointed is not what I am, *güzelim*."



THE MYSTERIOUS ALTUN lived in a townhouse in the shadow of the Galata Tower. Kon stopped in front of the high wrought iron gate and rang the buzzer.

"Smile, she's watching," he said, pointing to the tiny camera mounted on the edge of the building's roof. Athena waited a full minute before getting twitchy.

"Maybe she doesn't want to see you," she said.

"It's possible. She was pissed when I went to work for Liddell."

"Why? Please tell me I'm not about to meet your ex," Athena groaned. She wasn't in the mood to deal with that.

Kon laughed softly. "God no, I'm not her type. No, she was pissed because I used to work for her."

The door buzzed, and Kon pushed his way in. The gate closed and locked automatically behind them, and Athena's fingers twitched, wanting to get a knife in her hand. She didn't like being caged in, and Altun's security was definitely a cage.

The front door was painted turquoise and navy blue, Athena's eyes drifting to the strange symbols painted around the frame. They made her eyes blur the longer she looked at them, and the hair on the back of her neck rose.

"What are they?" she asked Kon, wanting to move closer to him.

"They are magical wards. There isn't much that Altun doesn't trade in; that includes magic."

"And you don't suspect her to be one of the Secret Masters?"

Kon shook his head. "Too many people know about her."

The door opened, and Athena got her first glimpse of Altun Buruk. She would have been in her forties, her curved body wrapped in an emerald green satin dress that matched the giant stone hanging around her neck. Her dark hair was pinned up in a chignon, and make-up was done with a perfection Athena would never be able to achieve. In contrast to her perfect appearance, Altun was barefoot.

"Konstantius Zalam, you have a lot of nerve coming to knock on my door," she said finally in a surprisingly deep voice. She lit a small cigar, her jade green eyes making a thorough investigation of Athena. "And this must be the girl you would be willing to screw Liddell over for."

"That's not quite how things went down. Are you going to let us in for tea? I have a proposition for you that will be worth your time," Kon said. Altun's eyebrow quirked, and he moved in front of Athena. "She isn't it."

"Shame. I like women with meat on their bones," Altun replied, turning on her pedicured toes and letting them in.

Athena tried not to gawk as she followed Kon through an elegant space decorated with all the colors of a peacock feather: turquoise, indigo, purple, black. Gold and brass objects added highlights and sheen. Everything from the plush woven carpets to the antique lanterns above her head was aesthetically beautiful.

Altun opened carved wood and glass doors and pointed to an emerald velvet chaise lounge. "Sit. I will hear you out, but only because I am so curious about the prospect of you finally pissing off Liddell."

"I never betrayed him, but he doesn't see it that way. You did try and warn me he doesn't like to share," Kon replied.

"And now he wants you dead and your pretty mercenary too," Altun said with a throaty chuckle.

"I'm not *his* anything," Athena corrected.

Altun raised a brow and only laughed harder. "Oh, sweet girl. The Basti doesn't bother keeping anything unless he's made a fierce claim to it. I watched him kill thirty-seven people on the night of his massacre, people that he had spent years being comrades with. He meets you once and then allows you to keep living even after all the trouble you have caused him. If I thought he was capable of it, I'd say it was love."

Athena laughed to show her words didn't have any effect on her. "We have a mutual goal. That's what this is about. I'll kill him when we are done."

Altun tapped her ash into a crystal tray. "I'll believe it when I see it, *balım*."

"I want to know how to find Liddell," Kon said, interrupting her.

"And what makes you think I know where he is?"

"Because you are the great Altun Buruk, and there's nothing you don't know how to get your perfectly manicured hands on."

Altun took a deep drag of her cigar. "And why would you need to get to Liddell? He wants you dead, and Liddell always gets what he wants. You should know that better than anyone."

"He killed my parents," Kon admitted, surprising Athena. Altun's expression went from ambivalence to cold calculation.

"And the true reason for you leaving finally comes out. Fuck you, Kon." Altun went to a small drinks cabinet, poured herself a shot, downed it, and poured another. "Do you have any idea who you are fucking with? I know Liddell comes across as an eccentric, rich white man, but he's so much more than that."

"I know. He's a Secret Chief," Kon began.

"*Mashallah!* Don't you say another word!" Altun hissed, making the *mano cornuto* with one hand and trying to deflect the words like an evil eye. "You bring evil down on yourself just by knowing such a thing."

"Which is why I need to kill him. I've been trying to get close enough to do it for four years."

"And your patience has run out because he's not only after you anymore?" Altun snickered. "And you think the Basti hasn't claimed you."

Athena tensed, fighting not to give the other woman the argument she wanted. "Kon has his own reasons for doing what he does. As do I."

"If you say so, *balim*." Altun downed her shot. "If I tell you how to get to Liddell, what will you give me?"

"A promise that none of the fallout will touch you and that you will have the first pick of his collection after I kill him and take it," Kon said without hesitation.

Altun hummed, inspecting her cigar. "Do you have resources to get out of the country?"

"Yes."

"And good backup? People you can trust?"

"Yes," Athena and Kon said at the same time.

Altun walked to her desk and scribbled something on a small piece of paper. "There is only one man that can get to Liddell. He's the only person I know that has ever met him in the flesh."

Kon took the piece of paper, folded it, and put it into his pocket. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for giving you your death. If you survive, it would be wise not to cheat me out of my share, Basty."

Kon kissed her hand. "I wouldn't dream of it. My word is as good as it's ever been."

Altun looked at Athena. "I can't decide whether she's plotting to kill me or not."

"This is just my face," Athena replied, giving her a sharp smile. If the woman decided to betray Kon, she would consider it.

Altun only laughed. "Now, I see what the appeal is. You're just as savage and broken as he is. Go on, get out of my house, you beasts of the night. Try not to get yourselves killed."

Athena didn't breathe easy again until they were out on the street, the high gate locked behind them. "Can we trust her not to sell us out?"

"I can trust her greed not to betray us. She wants something from Liddell's collection. It was one of the reasons she didn't seek revenge on me for leaving her to work for him exclusively," Kon explained while they walked back towards the Kasımpaşa dock.

"I suppose we will just have to trust that whatever she gave you on that piece of paper is worth it," Athena replied.

Kon took it out and passed it to her. "Name and address. It looks like we need to go to Hamburg."

"Silas is going to love that," Athena said, reading the paper and passing it back. She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket and tried to imagine a young Kon in the hands of a spider like Altun. The beauty, the elegance, the wealth; they were a nice distraction, but Athena had met enough spiders to know how to spot one.

"Altun likes to play mind games with people. Don't brood over anything she says," Kon said after a long silence.

"Is it true you killed thirty-seven people to get out of the gangs?" she asked. She wasn't judging, just curious.

"Yes. I gave them three opportunities to let me go without bloodshed, and they refused."

"And you didn't consider saving yourself the drama and just leave Istanbul?"

Kon looked across the dark water of the Golden Horn. "Istanbul is my home. I could never exile myself from her."

"Must be nice. I've never had a place I'd kill thirty-seven people for," Athena replied as they reached the stone pathways that cut through a park.

"That's because you've never lived in Istanbul," Kon said, stopping under the trees. His smile was a white gleam in the dim light. "Altun was right about one thing."

"And that is?"

Kon grabbed her by the biceps and dragged her into the darkness with him. "We are savage and broken beasts of the night."

Kon's mouth took hers in a bruising kiss that made Athena's pulse pound in her throat. Any other man who grabbed at her would get a knife in the ribs, but she wanted the searing embrace and heat of him. She felt like she needed it to ground her in the crazy she was now mired in. Sorcery and secret societies and spiders. Kon was the only thing that made sense anymore.

Athena moaned when he pressed her against the hard bark of the tree, hips grinding up against hers. Her hands slid under his shirt, stroking his scars and pulling him closer. His mouth broke from hers so he could run his teeth down the soft column of her throat.

"I hate how much I want to touch you all the time," he admitted. "It's distracting and constant, and the more I'm around you, the worse it gets."

"Then touch me everywhere while you can." Athena dragged his mouth back to hers.

"Say that it's not just me that feels this way," he begged, one hand pressing to her throat, turning her head so he could kiss behind her ear.

Athena's voice shook, "It's not just you." No matter how much she didn't want to give him any power or leverage over her, it was true. This thing between them was tangled and complicated and heavy. It was violent desire and obsession and addiction. It was always too much and not enough.

Kon's hands went under her shirt, squeezing her breast while the other went down the back of her jeans to grip her ass. She canted her hips against his, rubbing herself against his hardening dick.

"We need to stop, or I'll fuck you right here and damn the consequences," Athena panted. She ran her hands through his hair, taking his lips one more time.

"You're right. We need to get back," Kon groaned and let her go, pulling himself away from her, his breathing heavy. He smoothed his messy hair, and Athena straightened her shirt before they headed for the dock.

When her hand brushed his, Kon tangled their fingers together, and Athena held on.

By the time they got back to the warehouse, someone had cooked food, and they were all sitting around the table talking and eating. Leo had somehow slotted right into the group within an afternoon.

Kon could never be that easy, not when they all knew exactly what he was and couldn't lie to them about it. He had worked alone for four years and didn't know how to be in a group anymore.

Kon was still too antsy from their trip to Galata, his skin feeling tight and mood wound up. He hadn't wanted to go back to Altun, didn't want to owe her, but he didn't have a choice. And he absolutely hated that Altun was right about him claiming Athena. He hadn't even thought of it in those terms, but it was true. If anyone harmed a hair on her head, he would rip their liver out and feed it to them.

He tried not to laugh at that reaction because Athena was more than capable of carving out livers on her own. She was carving out his heart without her even knowing it.

Maybe Kon had once been interested in playing the long game with Liddell, but after Semarang and the attack on the auction, he wanted it to be over.

For the first time since he watched his mother die, Kon wanted something more than revenge, and it didn't sit well with him at all.

Athena headed over to the kitchen at once, dropping a kiss on her father's head on the way past. Kon contemplated going upstairs

and letting Athena update them, but Silas spotted him.

"Come and eat, Basti. You're looking peaky," he called.

Kon might not know much about socializing anymore, but he recognized an olive branch when it was offered.

"Who's the chef?" he asked, going into the kitchen where Athena was getting out more bowls.

"Izzy cooked paella, so you are in for a treat," she said with a smile. Athena in his kitchen was making Kon's chest feel warm. Being in close quarters with her and not being able to touch her was a new kind of torture he had never experienced before.

"Cooking helps me think," the hacker said from her place beside Silas. "It's nice to have other people around to eat my food, instead of me just grazing for the whole duration of a job."

"Usually, when I'm on a job, I live on energy drinks and whatever sweet thing I can get my hands on," Leo said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sure we can find you something," Dante replied. "Istanbul has great sweets."

Athena rolled her eyes at Kon when Dante couldn't see. Kon accepted the bowl of food from her and held it while she squeezed a lemon wedge over it.

"Thank you, *güzelim*. It looks delicious," he murmured, looking her over. The tips of Athena's ears turned pink, and she quickly stepped away from him and prepared her own bowl.

"How did it go with Altun?" Izabella asked.

"She's a total fucking spider," Athena replied, sitting down on the other side of Silas. Leo moved closer to Dante and pulled an empty chair in so Kon could join the circle.

"I could've told you that before you went. I've heard enough rumors about Buruk to convince me to never meet her," Silas replied. He looked at Kon. "Did she give you anything useful?"

Kon pulled out the piece of paper and passed it to him. "Just this. She said he's the only person she knows to have met Liddell in person."

"This address is in Steinwerder. It's a shipping, import and export area," Silas replied, giving the paper to Dante.

"Sounds like a useful area for someone trading in black market antiquities and God knows what else," Dante said. "Ryker Lange. Doesn't ring a bell."

"Altun wouldn't give us anything fake. She wants us to succeed too much so she can rifle through Liddell's collection," Kon said. He ate a mouthful of the surprisingly good paella and then another. "I can get on a flight to Hamburg tomorrow and check it out while you all keep digging."

"You're not going alone," Athena said stubbornly.

"Why not? I always work alone."

"Not when you've got a hit out on you!" Athena put her bowl down on the table with a thunk. "I'll come with you. You need someone watching your back in case Ryker is feeling like making some quick money off you."

"I think Silas will agree with me that you should stay out of the line of fire. There's a hit on you too," Kon said calmly.

A trip across the Bosphorus was one thing; going to Germany was quite another. He didn't want to put her at risk like that, and he would be worried about her if she was there.

"Don't drag me into this," Silas said, putting his hands up in surrender. "She's going to do what she wants whether I think it's a good idea or not."

"We can travel separately if you're worried about us being spotted together."

"You should get separate hotels too," Silas added innocently.

"Yeah, if we have to. But you're not stepping one boot into Steinwerder without me, Konstantius," Athena insisted. "Iz? Can you take care of the tickets? Leo can sort Kon out with a new identity in case Liddell has burned his other aliases." As Athena began to rattle off instructions, Kon looked at Silas for help. The bastard only grinned.

"Yeah, she's always like this when she's fixated on a plan. No point in fighting her about it."

"Did you have any luck with your contacts?" Kon asked.

"We found out the bounty on us is being funded by a private bank in Switzerland, but the name they gave us was just a shell company," Silas replied.

"And Athena is worth more than you. Your amount is half a mil, and Athena is seven-fifty," Dante added with a chuckle.

"But I'm the one that so-called betrayed him," Kon complained.

Athena laughed wickedly. "It's because I'm clearly more dangerous than you."

Kon shook his head, his brain catching up with his outrage. "No, it's because he blames you for me betraying him. He wants you to die first so I can see it happen and know it was my fault. He's right into suffering."

"Speaking of which, you said you had seen something like the site at Pokrovskoye," Silas prompted.

"It was the closest I ever got to Liddell." Kon put his bowl down, the words robbing him of the rest of his appetite. "About two years ago, I was asked to go to Belfast to look into a relic of St. Patrick. I got a call while I was there from Liddell. He usually never rings while I'm already on a job, so I knew something was up. He was irritable, told me to get to Dublin as quickly as I could because a deal with a branch of the Irish mob had gone badly."

Kon swallowed hard, the smell of hops and blood and magic hitting his memory.

"I missed Liddell by fucking minutes. He had left his driver there to greet me and to guard the entrance of a club. When I went inside, there were bodies everywhere. It was exactly like you said. It looked like everyone in the bar, mobsters and party-goers, had turned on each other with whatever they had in their hands at the time. Then they turned on themselves."

"It was a nightmare. There was a sensation in the air, something similar to the day my parents were murdered...a wrongness. There was a smell, sharp like ozone. I don't know how else to explain it. It was the reek that is sometimes left in the air when magic is used. It's one of the few things I remember from my childhood, the feel of energy in the air when magic is happening...." Kon shook himself, forced his thoughts out of the memories and to the watching faces around him.

"We had to burn the place to the ground and bribe the investigators to say it was a gas explosion from the kitchen." He rubbed at his face, suddenly exhausted. "Apart from Aurora being

labeled on the paperwork you found, Silas, it's the madness magic that makes me believe that Gadal is a Secret Chief as well."

Athena's foot nudged against his calf under the table, and he risked catching her blue gaze. "We will start with Ryker and see what he knows. We get these bastards together. Deal?"

Kon nodded. "Deal."

Athena checked the exists and side streets of the bar before going inside. It was filled with dock and shipping workers, all having beers and playing darts.

She wasn't the only woman, which was a good thing. She didn't like standing out, especially when she was on a job, relying on intel provided by someone she didn't trust.

Athena waited her turn at the bar and ordered a pint of beer. It was good, like all German beer. She didn't want to get wasted; she just needed something to take the edge off.

She rechecked her phone. Kon still wasn't anywhere to be seen. They had left Istanbul on different airlines and at different times. Iz had booked them into hotels three blocks from each other, clearly taking Silas's suggestion seriously.

It's probably a good thing.

Kon was chaos and lust, and she didn't need those things distracting her while working. Athena thought of their casual hand holding the night before, their scorching make-out session in the park. She didn't want to question whatever was going on between them. It wasn't the time.

Would there ever be a good time? She doubted it. Seeing Kon daily, getting to know his secrets and other sides of him wasn't making her feel less confused but more. Going to some random address in a shipping district in Germany in the middle of the night

wasn't helping her anxiety. It was a warm night, the threat of a storm later making everything sticky and even more uncomfortable.

Athena took a selfie of her lifting her middle finger and sent it to the number of Kon's burner phone: **Where the fuck are you?**

She took another mouthful of beer, her leg bouncing on the rung of the barstool. They had used new identities, and Kon would be able to cover his tracks, but she didn't like being separated from him when there was such a high price on his head.

"It's only been six hours, *güzelim*. Did you miss me?" a voice said by her ear.

"No, I just don't like the idea of some ambitious bounty hunter shooting you before I can," she replied, shifting to look at him.

Kon stood in a pristine suit and looked so fucking good, she could probably have come just by staring at him too long. *Fuck*.

In a bar full of people in workwear and high vis, Kon stuck out like a sore thumb. Athena looked down at her usual jeans, boots, and leather jacket.

"Everyone is going to think that I'm your bodyguard because no one is going to believe you belong here."

"Maybe I'm not wearing it to fit in." Kon's eyes sparkled with amusement. "You look like you're about to eat me alive."

Athena picked up her beer. "I was just thinking about my husband."

"The one you have the four kids with?"

"The very one."

Kon slid his arm around the back of her chair and leaned closer. His scent of wood and spice and sex invaded her senses. Athena wanted to bury her face into his neck and suck on his collarbone.

"Does your husband know that you masturbate over me?" he whispered. "Or was that a post-coital lie you told me."

Athena smirked. Kon was trying to play? She would play. They were going to be staying in different hotels, so she would give him something to think about. She slowly leaned back into him.

"I do think of you when I touch myself," she replied in his ear. "And when I get into my big empty bed tonight, I'm going to slip my fingers into my panties to touch my sweet pussy that you like so

much. I'm going to whisper your name over and over as I come all over my fingers."

Kon's nostril's flared, the hand gripping the edge of the bar tightening. "Fuck Edgeworth. If you do have a husband somewhere, I'm going to have to kill him."

"What about my four kids?" she asked innocently.

"Them too."

"Even little Timmy?"

"Especially little Timmy."

Athena grabbed his tie and tugged him closer. "You're a sick fuck, Zalam."

"Keep pretending that's not what you like most about me," he replied. "Be careful not to crumple that tie."

Athena smoothed it down again. "We wouldn't want your pretty outfit to get ruined. Everyone is going to think you're a drug dealer or a prostitute."

"Really? And how much would you pay to spend the night with me?" Kon asked, a challenging gleam in his eye.

"All depends. Can I do anything I want to you?" Just the thought of it made goosebumps rise on her legs.

Kon bit his bottom lip slowly, and Athena's skin went hot. "Like what?"

"Like go and meet with the person we are actually here for and stop fucking about?" she said, draining her beer and hopping down off her barstool.

Kon pouted, and no one had a right to look that good when they were sulking. "Oh, very well. Let's get this over with so that you can get back to your plans in your hotel bed."

Outside, Kon pressed the key fob to a black Jag, and Athena rolled her eyes. "You couldn't grab a cab like a normal person?"

"We are too isolated out here. If something goes wrong, I don't fancy trying to swim across the fucking Elbe in a Gucci suit to get away," Kon replied, opening the passenger door for her.

"Fine," she sighed and got in.

Kon drove them slowly towards the prongs of the docks, cruise ship ports, and container transport yards that made up the district of

Steinwerder. It wasn't the type of place Athena imagined the graceful Altun frequenting.

Kon pulled up in front of the warehouse that backed onto its own dock. The parking lot was packed, and the lights were burning.

"Nightshift workers, maybe?" Athena suggested. She spotted four guards, two outside a metal access door and another two on the waterside. There had to be more in a yard this size.

"I'm sure it's made to look that way," Kon said. He reached into the glove box and pulled out a Glock. "You have some daggers on you?"

Athena snorted. "Of course."

"Good. I don't like the vibe I'm getting off this place." Kon's hand paused on his door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another fob for the car. "If things go south like it did at the auction, I want you to leave. I'll swim the Elbe if I have to. Don't think about how I'll get out. Just go."

Athena took the key from him. "Careful, Bastard. If you keep this up, I'm going to start to think you care."

Kon gave her a look she didn't know how to interpret before it slipped into his cockiest smile. "I care about that ass of yours getting shot off before I get to sink my teeth into it again. Just keep that key safe, and let's get this over with."

Athena slid the key into her bra, alongside her tiny dagger, and got out. The two guards at the central door gave them long, calculating looks.

"*Guten Abend*," she greeted them cheerfully, giving them her biggest smile. "We are here to see Herr Lange."

They looked her over, eyes assessing. "He only talks to winners. You here as a fighter, pretty girl?"

Athena felt Kon tense beside her, even as her smile widened. "Why yes, yes I am."

Kon was going to kill Altun. She would've known what they were walking into and could've warned them about what to expect. Clearly, she still wasn't ready to forgive him for leaving her for Liddell.

The guards let them inside, one taking the lead to direct them through the primary production and fabricating floor and down a broad set of metal stairs.

It had to be in a fucking basement.

Kon's hackles rose; if anything got out of hand, they would have no way out. Athena's smile was wide and reckless, like a shark who smelled blood in the water.

"We have a contender," the guard told the doorman at the bottom of the stairs. He gave Athena an assessing glare. Her smile shifted to something violent, her pale eyes going wolf. It disturbed and aroused Kon every time she looked like that.

"Who's the guy?"

"He thinks he's my manager. All betting amounts should be checked and approved by him," Athena replied, her confidence magnetic. "Now, do you have a place a girl can stretch and get ready to take all your money?"

"I like you," he replied and opened the door for them. "Back of the pen is where you can get ready. Your manager can introduce himself to the bookie."

"Bet big on me," Athena replied, shooting the guy a wink. His laugh was a boom that did nothing to put Kon at ease. Athena went through the door and into the dim light.

"Have a look around. I'll find you after my fight," she said, and before Kon could reply, she vanished into the crowd. She was way too comfortable with what was happening.

How do you know she hasn't fought in a hundred illegal dens? It was something he could see her doing.

Kon pressed his way forward and almost tripped down the stairs. They were in a large underground warehouse smelling of sweat, piss, beer, and blood.

People were sitting on concrete benches that looped around a caged fighting ring. Inside, two scantily clad women were kicking the shit out of each other, every hard smack of flesh making people shout out.

Behind the cage, he took note of a guarded shipping container that fighters were going in and out of.

Back of the pen. He couldn't see Athena, but she could take care of herself. She was less concerned than he was.

Kon glanced up at the metal walkways above him and saw more guards around one stocky man with white hair, smoking a cigarette. He was watching the crowd and the fight with calculating brown eyes, people coming and whispering in his ear intermittently.

Ryker.

Kon contemplated walking up the stairs and shooting his way to him, demanding an audience. Still, there were too many people, too many guards, and only one way in and out.

What a fucking nightmare.

Kon was suddenly glad that Silas wasn't there. He doubted that he would be okay with Athena fighting for the entertainment of sharp-eyed men. Although he really couldn't say that for certain. Athena had grown up surrounded by mercenaries in some of the roughest places in the world. She had no doubt seen worse than an illegal fight club.

Kon knew he was being overprotective and possessive. He had never felt either thing for another human being, and he didn't like the messy inconvenience of it. He might have teased Athena at the bar

for missing him, but he had felt like he had angry ants under his skin for the six hours that they were apart.

They might have booked two rooms for the night, but if they survived the next hour, there was no way in hell he was letting her out of his sight.

To keep up appearances, Kon found the bookie. He was a short, greasy looking man with a bald head, a black notebook in his hand, and two guards flanking him.

"Hundred Euro on the Goddess of War," Kon said, passing the notes over.

"Ah, that the new girl who just came in? We haven't had an unblooded fighter for a while. It's going to make for some fun," the bookie said, taking his money and passing him back a piece of paper with a number in.

Kon tried not to laugh at the man referring to Athena as 'unblooded.' Athena Edgeworth probably had more blood on her hands than the majority of people in that shithole.

A roar rose up around them, drowning out whatever the bookie had been saying. Kon turned in time to see one of the fighters in the ring snap their opponent's neck.

Fucking hell. Kon should've known that these were lethal fights. Just breathe. Athena can handle it.

If she looked compromised, Kon would shoot whoever she was fighting and anyone else that got in his way.

He found a space to the side of the row of seats, one with a clear view of the pen and Ryker, who was sitting like a caesar in his balcony. A woman in a glittering dress appeared as the body of the dead fighter was dragged away. She started talking in a microphone in German. Kon was rusty, only roughly making out that she was announcing the next fight.

His breath caught as Athena stepped out of the shipping container. Her hair had been braided back tight, and her hands were strapped. She was still in her jeans and boots, but her shirt had been replaced by a lacy black corset.

She had gotten hold of some make-up from somewhere, and black now circled her eyes like a mask of war paint. She stuck both

of her middle fingers up at the jeering crowd and stepped into the ring.

Seconds later, her opponent followed her, dressed in silky shorts and a crop top. She was a massive woman, at least six foot tall and all muscle, her hair clipped short and a scar down her cheek.

"Bärchen! Bärchen! Bärchen!" the crowd shouted.

"You don't look like much of a bear cub," Athena said, her voice cutting through the noise.

"You don't look like much of a goddess of war," Bärchen replied.

Athena only rolled her shoulders, the wolf coming back into her gaze. A buzzer went off, and Kon's whole body tensed.

Bärchen was quick, throwing a series of rapid strikes at Athena. She ducked and wove, letting Bärchen lead her around the ring.

Athena threw a high punch, distracting the other woman from the boot Athena kicked out with. Bärchen shifted so the blow connected with her thigh instead of her knee and missed, Athena's left hook smashing into her ribs.

The crowd went crazy. Kon tore his eyes away from the fight to Ryker above. He had a fresh cigarette in his hand, and unlike the previous fight, this one he was paying attention to. It would be hard for any straight man to look away from Athena in that tight lace corset, her beautiful breasts bouncing with every punch thrown.

Fuck. Kon was going to truly enjoy ripping it off her once he got her back to a hotel room. Or the car.

The crowd cheered, and Kon's eyes went back to the fight in time to see Athena wiping blood from her nose. She looked down at it and let out a loud laugh that turned into an eerie wolf howl that rattled around the warehouse.

It made all the hairs on Kon's body stand on end and senses prickle like they did when magic was in the air.

Bärchen had her bloody fists up, but she didn't look nearly as confident as she had when she stepped into the ring.

Athena's face had shifted like the blow had knocked all the civility to the back, and the bloody girl from the woods had come out. Kon stepped forward, unable to help himself, drawn to that primal side of her like he always was.

Bärchen lunged forward, but Athena didn't dance back. She shifted forward, catching Bärchen's arm between her forearm and bicep in a tight grip and tugged. Knocked off balance, Bärchen stumbled, and Athena drove her fist into her ear and temple in brutal, quick blows.

Bärchen threw up and then screamed as Athena, still gripping her arm, snapped her wrist. Athena dropped her. Bärchen went backward, somehow managing to remain upright.

Bärchen's good hand dipped to her boot and Kon caught a glimpse of a slim knife before she went for Athena, swiping wildly. Athena let her get one cut in on her bicep before she disarmed her and danced out of reach.

Athena didn't even look at the blade, just tossed it once up in the air and caught it like she had with the khanjar.

Kon stopped breathing.

Athena went for Bärchen, all humanity gone from her face as she attacked like the feral creature she was. She moved so fast, like she had in the cistern, slicing Bärchen's thighs, her stomach, breasts, and flailing arms as she tried to cover her face. She collapsed on her knees, bleeding pouring from her.

Athena didn't hesitate, just grabbed Bärchen's shorn hair, ripped her head back, and stabbed down between her collarbone and shoulder. Athena shoved her away. Bärchen was dead before she hit the filthy floor. Athena threw her head back and howled again.

The crowd lost it. They were screaming and shouting in equal parts applause and disbelief. Kon tried to shove his way towards the ring. He had to get her out of there.

"Ryker!" Athena shouted, pointing the small, bloody dagger up at him. "I want you to buy me a fucking drink."

Kon looked up as Ryker lifted his glass in salute to her. Athena grinned wide before wiping a bloody hand over her mouth. The guard outside the pen looked like he was debating on whether or not to let her out. One snarl from Athena had the door swinging open, and she stepped out. She saw Kon coming through the crowd, and her smile was back, wild and reckless.

As soon as he was close enough, she grabbed the lapels of his jacket with her bloody hands and pulled him into an electric kiss. He

could taste blood on her tongue, feel her rapid pulse and feral energy vibrating through her whole body.

"God, I want to fuck you so bad right now," she said breathlessly.

"Focus, *güzelim*, we can play later. We need to go and have that drink with Ryker first," Kon said, his hands clasping her corseted waist.

Athena's eyes seemed to refocus on him, and she let him go. "Y-Yes, I'll just grab my shirt." She stepped away, looking a little confused like she wasn't sure where she was.

That's troubling. Kon didn't have the luxury to wonder about it just then.

Athena reappeared five minutes later, the straps on her hands gone, blood washed from her skin, and a t-shirt back on.

"Please tell me you kept the corset," Kon said, trying to lighten the mood.

Athena's frown eased, and she gave him a saucy grin. "I've been wearing it this whole time."

"Were you planning on seducing someone tonight?" Kon asked as they began to make their way towards the iron stairs leading to Ryker's balcony. Athena took the lead, and Kon moved in behind her to watch her back for anyone keen on getting revenge for killing their prize fighter.

"Hmm, well, this does seem like a good place to pick up. What do you think?" she asked over her shoulder.

Kon's hand went to her hip and squeezed. "I think that if any man tries to approach you, I'm going to feed him his spleen."

Athena raised a brow. "Konstantius, are you getting possessive of little old me?"

"Not 'getting.' Am." Kon tugged her closer, so her ass pressed up against him. His mouth went to her ear and licked the shell of it. "You're fucking mine, Athena Edgeworth, and when we get out of this fucking slaughterhouse, I'm going to prove it."

Athena reached one hand behind her and gave his ass a tight squeeze. "Then we had best get this over with."

When they reached the stairs, there was already a bodyguard waiting to escort them up to Ryker. Kon let Athena take the lead, swinging her fine ass with all the swagger of a winner.

"What would you like to drink, *Frau* Edgeworth?" Ryker asked. Kon stiffened, debating whether to pull a gun or not. Ryker only smiled and patted at the seat beside him.

"I would love a vodka with no ice. Your bear cub made me thirsty," Athena said, sitting down. One of the guards poured her half a glass and passed it to her.

"*Danke schön.*" Athena tapped her glass against Ryker's beer and downed it in one gulp.

"I never thought I'd see the day when one of the famous Edgeworths would enter my pen," Ryker began, watching Athena with calculating eyes. "You know there's a big bounty out on you, *Liebling.*"

"I'm sure there's one out on you too," Athena replied with her wolfy smile.

"Altun Buruk sent us," Kon said. He wasn't going to sit down and drink and dance about. He wanted information, and then he needed to get the fuck out. Kon was at his limit for being stuck underground with no way out.

"And how is the lovely Altun?"

"In the mood to do business," Athena said before Kon could. She leaned forward, one of her hands going to Ryker's thigh. "I want to ask you some questions about Liddell."

"*Liebling*, you are very beautiful, but if you know about Liddell, you will know I won't live long if I tell you anything," Ryker replied. His smile slipped. Looking down, he saw the blade Athena was pressing into his thigh.

"You're going to die a lot quicker if you don't tell me," she said sweetly. "I'd like us to be friends like we are friends with Altun. You should really hear the Basty and I out. We are going to be generous with Altun once all this is done, and we could be with you too."

"You really are as crazy as the rumors say. At least I know the Basty can be reasoned with." Ryker's gaze snapped to him. "You need to learn to control your woman."

Kon smiled. "No, I don't. She's magnificent."

Ryker took out another of his cigarettes and lit it. "You went to considerable effort to get to me tonight, so that has earned you one question and one only."

"Where is Liddell?" Athena demanded.

Ryker blew out some silvery smoke. "The last time I saw Liddell, he was at the Amun-Ra House in Edinburgh. He was having fun breaking his toys as he is prone to do." Ryker waved his guard closer. "Heinrich will see you out. Out of courtesy, I'll give you a head start before I release my dogs on you."

"Do it, and I'll give them the same treatment I gave your bear cub," Athena replied, getting to her feet.

"Be careful hunting on a full moon, *Liebling*. It's when predators are strongest," Ryker called in a cryptic farewell.

Both Kon and Athena looked back at him with almost identical feral expressions. Athena finger waved at him. "We know."

Despite their threats, Kon and Athena didn't linger. Heinrich took them to the doorman, who locked the door right behind them.

"Don't look back, just keep going," Kon whispered, taking the last flight of stairs up to the main work area on the ground level. His hand drifted inside his coat to his Glock. "Get the key fob ready."

Athena reached into her back pocket and pulled it out. "There are three men following us."

"Another two coming out of the corner office on your left. Focus on the exit. The lights are about to go out."

"What—" Athena began. The men from the office raised their guns, tiny red dots appearing on them.

Kon gripped his gun tight with one hand while making a series of small gestures with the other. The air charged hot like an electrical storm, and Kon released the spell. The fluorescent lights above them exploded, popping loudly and showering them with glass.

Kon grabbed Athena by the back of the jacket to avoid losing her and fired some rounds at the shouting guards to confuse them more. They pushed out of the exit door and into the parking lot. All the car alarms were going off, their lights flashing.

Athena pressed the fob and jumped into the driver's side. A bullet struck the side mirror, and Kon whirled, firing at the man on the roof of the building.

"Get the fuck in!" Athena shouted, the car roaring to life. Kon shot at the men trying to come out the exit before leaping into the passenger seat.

Athena tore out of the lot, clipping a guard trying to pull the gate shut on them.

"Are you hurt?" she demanded. Kon opened the glove box and pulled out a fresh clip, reloaded, and looked behind him.

"No, I'm fine. They had shitty aim."

"Or they were confused as fuck as to why all their electricity blew. What the fuck was that, Kon?" Athena demanded.

"Magic, what do you think?" Kon said.

Headlights appeared in the distance behind them, but they were far enough that Athena lost them as soon as she hit the B4 motorway.

"Take us to your hotel. I'm not leaving you alone tonight. If we are compromised, I want us to be together," Kon said.

"What about your stuff?"

"It's in the back. I didn't unpack it when I checked in," he replied.

They dumped the car at the parking garage of the town hall. Kon took his bag from the trunk and the stash of money, passport, and guns from the spare tire well.

"Do I have any obvious blood anywhere? I don't want any people looking too closely," Athena asked.

"I think they will be too distracted by your war paint," Kon replied, zipping up his overnight bag.

"If anyone asks, I'll just say I'm going to a Viking party."

"You certainly looked like a berserker tonight," Kon commented. They avoided the restaurant-lined canals and nightlife, keeping their heads down and pace quick. They both scanned around them for any sign of Ryker's men. Kon hoped their distraction was enough to slow them down, but they needed to get off the streets.

"This is me," Athena said, pointing to a hotel sign. She took his hand. "Try and look like you're about to get lucky, not murder everyone."

"Am I about to get lucky?" Kon asked.

Athena laughed drunkenly as they crossed the foyer, and she pulled him into the nearest elevator. Three stories up, they got out, and Athena took out her key card.

"Let me go first," Kon said, hand drifting to the inside of his jacket. The halls had cameras, so he waited until he was inside before pulling his gun free. Nothing looked out of place. He scanned the bathroom and the small balcony. Athena closed the door behind them and opened the wardrobe.

"We are good for now," she said.

Kon put his bag and gun on the table. He managed to turn just in time to catch Athena. She half climbed up him as she devoured his mouth in a searing, desperate kiss.

She pulled back, breathing ragged against his mouth. "Tell me about magic."

Athena's adrenaline from the fight was wearing off, and the few blows that she had caught were starting to ache. Kon lifted her hand that was streaked in crimson. "You're bleeding."

"Shit, it must be the scratch the bear cub got on my bicep," Athena complained. She stepped out of Kon's embrace, and he helped her take off her jacket. Sure enough, her entire arm was covered in blood.

"Let's get you into the shower so we can assess the damage," Kon said.

"I need to message Iz and Silas first. It looks worse than what it is." Athena dug her phone out of her pocket and opened her chat with Izabella: **Ryker's visit went shit. We are okay. Need a way out of Hamburg that's not on commercial lines.**

"I'll find us another car and drive us back to Istanbul if I have to," Kon said, reading over her shoulder.

"Iz will sort it out." Athena tossed the phone onto the nightstand and kicked off her boots. She stopped at the bathroom door. "Are you coming?"

Kon slowly took off his jacket. "Aren't you worried about Ryker's men finding us in a compromising position?"

"No. I think he sent guys after us in case Liddell finds out we went to see him. Besides, I used a brand-new alias for this room. He would have to possess some amazing resources to track us down

tonight," Athena replied, walking into the bathroom and unbuttoning her jeans.

"I wouldn't want you to faint from blood loss and face plant on the tiles," Kon said, coming in. His shirt was already open, showing off muscle and tattooed skin. God, it wasn't natural that one man was so hot.

Athena dragged her eyes away and pulled off her shirt, revealing that the lace corset she was wearing was actually a one-piece bodysuit. Kon made a strange choking sound in the back of his throat.

"Are you sure this lingerie wasn't for me?" he asked, running a hand over her ass.

"That would be telling. Help me undo the back, will you?" Athena turned on the hot water. Kon's fingers tugged at the laces, pulling them free. "It would've been a lot sexier if I wasn't covered in sweat and blood."

Kon's lips pressed to the back of her neck. "I don't know about that."

"Stop distracting me so you don't tell me about magic," Athena said without conviction. She loved Kon distracting her. He tugged the lingerie down, and she stepped out of it and under the stream. Her arm stung when the water hit it. She carefully washed the blood away.

"That's deeper than a simple scratch," Kon said, stepping into the shower.

"I have a first aid kit in my bag. You can play doctor when I'm clean and not smelling like a fighting pit."

Kon squeezed some of the hotel body gel into his hand and began to wash her back. Athena's eyes fluttered closed. She never thought that she would enjoy a man washing her, but here she was. It was probably because it was Kon.

The Basti of Istanbul had seen her darkest side that night and hadn't walked away. He had not only stayed but faced her dark side straight on and kissed her.

"Do you always go to a different place when you fight?" he asked curiously.

Athena swallowed hard. "Not always. Sometimes it's like a trigger goes off in my brain, like the day on the roof when I cut up your bag. It's like my emotions turn off."

Kon hummed and undid her braid, shampooing it gently without saying anything.

"Are you freaked out?" Athena asked when she couldn't handle the silence or the anticipation anymore.

"No," Kon said, his arms going around her. "We are what we are, Athena. I wouldn't want you if you weren't a wolf."

Athena's heart spasmed, and she put her hands over his. She didn't know why his words made her feel so vulnerable and raw. She needed to change the subject, so she didn't feel like she was drowning.

"Tell me about the magic in the warehouse, Kon."

"There's not much to tell. It's one of the only things I know how to do," he admitted. Athena turned in his arms and began to wash him to return the favor.

"My parents were practitioners, but I didn't get to learn a lot before they died. The way they explained it to me was that magic is manipulating energy. The human body generates a lot of energy. Everyone calls it something different like prana or life-force or chi. Other people call it mana. Being able to draw on it, manipulate it, and cause an effect is magic. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of? Keep going," Athena encouraged.

"A magician is a master of the elements around them because everything carries some kind of vibration or power. Magicians use what energy is available to them, like pulling the life out of a plant or taking their own. It's dangerous to do it if you don't understand that everything needs to be balanced. Manipulating the natural world has a cost."

"All magic comes with a price," Athena murmured.

"Yes, exactly. Because of that one child's trick tonight, I feel like I need to eat a horse to restore the energy that was used." Kon got a strange, open look on his face. "I remember teaching myself how to manipulate the lights as a kid so I could turn them on and off to read at night when my parents were in bed."

"Your parents didn't teach you any spells?"

Kon shook his head. "Not exactly. They believed that everyone accesses magic differently, and while they taught me about balance, they wanted me to learn my own way to use it. I created the light spell because I wanted to use it without getting out of bed."

"Have you kept teaching yourself all this time?" Athena asked.

"No. I wasn't sure if magic was the way Liddell had tracked down my parents. If he sensed them manipulating the energy or something and found them that way. I don't know if it's true or not, but I never wanted to risk it."

Athena's eyebrows furrowed. "But you risked it tonight."

"I needed the distraction, and also, I no longer care about Liddell finding me. He knew I had some ability because I could read objects if they were fake or legitimate. He just didn't know whose child I was," Kon said, leaning his back against the tiles. "I had the extra energy to burn because I was worried. Emotions create energy too, enough that you can draw on them to create magic."

"You were worried? Why?"

Kon stared at her in disbelief. "I don't know, maybe because we were locked underground, and you put a knife to Ryker's dick? Or that you cheerfully got into a cage match to the death? That every man in that place looked at you like they wanted to fuck you? Take your pick, Athena."

"Is this you being possessive again?" she asked.

Kon grabbed her and pressed her up against the tiles. "No, it's me not wanting to watch the only person I've ever given a shit about die in front of me."

Like his parents had. Fuck.

"Both things were a calculated risk." Athena's chest felt like it was cracking open, and her hands shook as they rested on his cheeks. She needed to say something to get rid of that too intense, haunted look in his eyes.

"You aren't going to have to watch me die, Kon. If for no other reason than if we do get into a firefight, you're going to die waaayyy before me."

"That arrogance is going to get you into trouble one of these days," he whispered, with the edge of a threat in his voice.

"Probably. You want to tell me where this newfound possessive thing has come from?" she asked. She didn't have the experience or trust herself enough to guess what he was thinking. She wanted him to say the words so she knew it was safe to feel the way she did.

"I've just stopped fighting against the obvious. That you make my blood turn to fire, that your rage echoes mine, that our sharp edges and inner demons match. That you are mine." His large hand curled around her throat, thumb pressing into her pulse. "Your heart is beating so fast."

Athena ran her finger down his slick side, her brain struggling to process what he had just admitted. "It's because you're touching me."

"You're not trying to deny what I just said either." Kon leaned in and licked the water from her lips. "Is it because you know it's the truth?"

"Y-Yes," she stammered. Kon had always made her feel flayed open, and the look that he was giving her at that moment told her that she wasn't alone in that feeling.

Kon's hand tightened on her throat, pinning her to the shower wall as his other hand went between her legs. Athena whimpered, spreading her stance to let him have better access. His mouth crushed against hers, fingers stroking her, thumb pressing into her clit.

"Say it, *güzelim*," he demanded, touch becoming more aggressive and sending her desire higher.

"I'm yours," she replied. Her hand grabbed his dick, stroking him hard. "And you're mine." She jerked him roughly. "Never forget, you aren't the only one that's possessive of its things, Basti."

Kon hissed through his teeth and pushed her to her knees, trapping her between the wall and his body, "Prove it."

Athena tongued the tip of his cock, before sucking up one side. Kon's arm went up to brace himself against the tiles, his other hand sliding from her throat to the back of her head. She made sure he was staring into her eyes before taking him deep into her hot mouth.

Kon trembled, a soft curse escaping his lips. "God, your mouth is perfection. You can take more of me. I know you can."

So, Athena did, sucking him down. Kon's grip on her hair tightened, and he began to fuck her mouth slow and deep. Athena grew wet, loving the power she had over him. The worshipful look in his eyes undoing her. Athena reached her hand up to stroke and tease his balls.

Kon groaned. "Fuck, that feels so damn good. I'm not going to last if you keep doing that." He pulled himself free of her and lifted her back to her feet. He ran a thumb along her swollen lips. "I need to be inside of you."

"I was hoping you would say that," she panted.

Kon turned her, stroking the curves of her wet ass before spreading her and sliding his dick against her. His hand curved around her thigh and went between her legs, his fingers slipping into her, making sure she was ready for him. Athena let out an involuntary groan and ground her ass against him.

"God, Kon, just get inside me already," she said. His free hand went back around her neck, holding her tight as his fingers stroked and dick teased.

"You'll get it when I'm ready to give it to you, goddess."

Fuck, she didn't know why him being bossy was so fucking hot, but it was. Her pussy was aching for release.

Kon moved away from her, making her hiss in protest. He only laughed and switched off the shower. She thought she was going to combust as he grabbed a towel and dried them both roughly, the bristly fabric against her hard nipples almost hurting.

"Kon..." Athena slipped her hand between her legs, but he smacked it away.

"None of that."

Kon picked her up, and Athena kissed him, her mouth urgently taking his. Kon dropped her on the bed on her back and slid in her in one unexpected, hard thrust. Athena's head tilted back, gasping as her body adjusted to the sudden hot invasion.

"Fuck, Kon."

He let out a husky chuckle. "You are so beautiful when you are craving me, goddess. I can't get enough of it." He began to move at a frustratingly gentle pace. Athena thrust her hips up, fucking his

cock, trying to make him go faster. He gripped her hip and held her down. "You really don't like not being in control, do you?"

"I want it rough, Kon. Stop acting like I'm fragile," Athena complained, almost weeping with need. His grip on her neck tightened, pinning her. He dipped his head, biting and sucking on her nipples hard.

"That's...more..." she stammered, words failing her. Kon's body crushed her into the mattress, and he began to fuck her hard and so deep that stars danced over her vision. Her eyes began to close, but he kissed her, biting her lips.

"No. Look at me," he commanded, voice ragged.

Athena opened her eyes, forced herself to look at the emotion swimming in his dark gaze. It wasn't like the other times; he was fucking her like she meant something important to him.

This was Kon possessing her. All of her. She knew at that moment he would never let her go. It should have scared her, sent her running. It didn't. It made her feel more powerful and seen than she ever had in her life. Athena stroked his tense jaw, gripped his silky dark hair.

"Fuck me like you own me, Zalam," she snarled against his lips.

Kon's smile was triumphant, vicious. He pulled her legs over his shoulders, dragging her up, and fucked her even harder, her breasts bouncing every time he rocked into her.

The change in angle made his dick hit her G-spot with each stroke, robbing her of all thoughts but the blistering electric jolts that began to shoot through her. Kon's hand went between them, stroking her clit in hard, slow circles.

"Come for me. I want to feel it," he demanded. Athena's body short-circuited, responding to his command. Her back arched, the walls of her pussy gripping him tight as she exploded into a million pieces.

"Fuck. That's it." Kon's breathing got ragged, his dick swelling even bigger inside of her before his own release had him crying her name in a hoarse shout as he filled her. He released her legs, and she wrapped them around his waist, holding him inside of her. Kon kissed her before his head dropped to her neck.

Athena stroked her fingers through his wet hair, her heart beating too hard, lungs struggling to steady her breathing. She didn't want him to let her go. She pressed her lips to the top of his head, breathing his scent in, wanting to imprint the moment onto her memory forever.

Kon was almost asleep when Athena shifted under him, and he roused himself enough to lay a kiss on her chest.

"Kon, I'm really going to need to put something over this cut," Athena said drowsily.

Kon shifted off her and switched on the bedside table lamp. Blood was staining the sheets, her arm, over both of their torsos. "Shit, Athena. You should've said something."

"There was no way in hell I was going to interrupt what just happened for a bit of blood," she said, sitting up and heading back to the bathroom. She threw a provocative grin over her bloody shoulder. "I think we both need another rinse."

They made quick work of the shower, both of them quiet. Kon felt a little rattled and rough around the edges, his emotions a roar inside of him.

Wrapped in a towel, Athena sat on the edge of the toilet seat as Kon went through his first aid kit. He checked there wasn't anything in the cut before treating it with an antibiotic cream to ensure there was no infection already starting.

God only knew what was lingering in Ryker's shit hole of a fighting pen. He took out some steri-strips and started placing them evenly on the wound.

"You are looking very serious for someone who just got their brains fucked out," Athena said softly.

Kon didn't look up. He just kept applying the strips. He forced his jaw to unlock. "You're hurt. I don't...I don't like it."

"It's really just a scratch, Kon. I've got worse wounds training. Silas would just frown and tell me to suck it up."

"Well, I'm not your gruff mercenary father, and you are not my daughter that I'm trying to turn into a tough ass. You are..." Kon faltered, unsure of what to say or how to say it.

"I'm what, Konstantius?"

Kon took out a bandage patch, peeled off the edges, and placed it over the wound. "You're the only thing that's made me feel alive since I dragged myself out of that fucking fire. All I've ever wanted is revenge, and now you have me in fucking knots all the time."

"Don't worry, we'll get your revenge and then figure out those knots." Athena leaned forward, pushed her hands through his hair, and kissed him. "You're suspiciously sweet tonight, even after I admitted that I belong to you."

Kon stroked her cheek. "Well, I only get tonight before we go back to Istanbul, where I'm barely game to look at you for too long."

Athena's phone buzzed, interrupting the moment. She hurried to answer it and put it on speaker. "Silas? What's up?"

"I got you and Kon a flight out, but you have to be at the airstrip in the next two hours. Hamburg will be too hot for you if you leave it any later. Ryker has put up a notification saying you were spotted in the city. It won't be long before you have every bounty hunter and merc close by up your asses," Silas replied.

"Great. Where's the flight, and who's it with?" Athena asked. Kon dug out some fresh clothes and dragged them on.

"You need to get across the river to the Finkenwerder Airport, Hanger Four."

"Should I ask what they are transporting apart from us?" Athena said.

"It doesn't matter. They will get you both back in one piece. Pilot owes me a favor. Tell me this trip was worth it," Silas replied.

"It was. Ask Iz to look into the Amun-Ra House in Edinburgh."

"Will do. I'll see you in five hours."

"You better have some pancakes ready for me by the time I get home," Athena said. Kon's fingers faltered on his bootlaces. She had

said *home*.

Don't read too much into it. She might have agreed that she belongs to you, but that doesn't mean she's ready to move in.

Kon shook himself. He didn't want to be thinking about anything but getting the fuck out of Hamburg.

"What are you frowning at, Kon?"

He pulled on a shirt. "The Amun-Ra was the name of the Golden Dawn headquarters in Scotland back when they were active. Liddell can't have been there because it's been closed since the society disbanded."

"It can't hurt for Iz and Leo to have a look anyway and see what they can dredge up. If Ryker was lying, we can always come back and shoot him." She said it so matter-of-factly, Kon had to smile. She was so ruthless that he was gaining a new understanding of how much she must like him to let their rivalry go on for so long.

Athena dressed and slid a holster of daggers over her shoulders. She rolled her bloody leather jacket up before pulling out a replacement from her bag and putting it on.

"So much for our one night. Lucky you got all those sweet words out while you could," she said, throwing him a teasing grin. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Kon raised a brow. "I'm not worried. No one would believe you anyway."

Athena started braiding back her hair. "Did you mean it?"

"Which part, Edgeworth?" Kon said, doing a quick inventory of how many spare magazines he had for his handgun.

"About me making you feel alive," she replied.

Kon pulled on his jacket. "Yes. I meant it. I had only one thing keeping me going, and that was revenge. And now I'm thinking of a life beyond killing Liddell. I blame that on you."

"I'm about as sorry for that as you are for stealing from me in Paphos. Kiss me," Athena said, standing on her booted toes to press her lips to his. Kon's brain hazed when her tongue touched his, his dick remembering that tongue on it.

He let out a frustrated growl. "I can't believe that instead of getting to fuck you all night, I now have to get a flight out with fuck knows who."

"Silas's pancakes will make up for it," Athena assured him, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"Pancakes are no substitute for pussy, Athena. Especially yours," Kon replied.

Athena rolled her eyes at him. "Come on, Zalam. Let's get out of here."



DAWN TURNED the sky a rose stained pink when they landed at a small private airport outside of Istanbul. Kon hated small planes and had remained strapped to a hard chair as the turbulence caused by the high winds threw them about.

Athena spent the flight in the cockpit, talking to the pilot, hanging onto a cargo strap, and moving with every plane rock. It turned out that they weren't bringing in drugs like Kon had imagined, but guns.

From the snippets of conversation that had drifted back to him, the pilot owed Silas a debt for saving his ass in Sudan five years prior.

Kon had always worked alone, but Silas and Athena seemed to have friends and debts everywhere.

Kon's shoulders didn't relax until they got back to the warehouse in Eminönü. He didn't expect anyone to be awake, but as soon as they opened the door, the sweet smell of pancakes hit them.

"Ohhh, that's what I'm talking about," Athena said, dropping her bag and hurrying to the kitchen.

Silas gave her a one-armed hug and kissed the top of her head. Athena sat down on a stool and started tearing into her steaming pancakes with her fingers. Kon wanted to collapse in bed, but Silas put a second plate down on the counter.

"How was Hamburg?" he asked.

Kon drizzled some syrup on the pancakes and looked at Athena. "Yes, how about you tell him about Hamburg."

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Traitor."

"Spit it out, Cub," Silas said, putting the kitchen towel over his shoulder and pouring some more batter into the pan.

"Only way to get an audience was to fight in the cage. I won."

Silas looked at Kon. "What's she leaving out?"

"That it was a cage match to the death, and when we finally got a meeting with Ryker, she pretended to feel him up and put a knife to his dick," Kon replied. He thought Silas would lecture her, but the big mercenary just tipped his head back and laughed.

"For fuck's sake, Athena. What was your opponent like?"

"She was called Bärchen and tried to pull a knife on me," Athena said around a full mouth.

Silas snorted. "She took a weapon into a cage match? She deserved it for being so dumb."

"That's what I thought. Ryker told us that the last time he saw Liddell was in Edinburgh. He said something about Liddell breaking his toys and got all cryptic about predators hunting at the full moon." Athena let out a big yawn and put her already empty plate in the sink. "I'm sure Iz will figure it out."

"Go on, go get some sleep," Silas said.

"Thanks for the pancakes, Zeus," Athena replied, kissing his cheek.

"You're welcome, little war daughter."

Kon tried to ignore his throat tightening at their easy and teasing affection. He hadn't allowed himself to miss his parents in years, but seeing them together sometimes made his chest hurt with longing.

"Thanks for having her back. I know she can seem really impulsive, but she wouldn't have gone into the fight without calculating the risk," Silas told him once they were alone.

"She gave me a heart attack," Kon admitted.

Silas's smile widened. "She does that. I'd like to say you get used to it, but it's a lie. She's taken your bed, by the way."

"Ah, fuck." Kon washed up their plates and tried not to sigh. The pancakes would help restore some of his energy, but he had been counting on his bed.

"Thank you for breakfast. I've never returned from a job to find a meal before," Kon said.

"Pancakes is tradition to Athena. One of the few she holds sacred." Silas gave him a knowing smile. "You should go up and get some sleep too. I'll wake you guys up if we find anything."

Kon frowned. "You wouldn't care?"

"Athena was the one that went up to your bedroom, which means she's chosen and is making that choice known whether I care or not." Silas raised a finger. "But I better not hear you two fucking."

Kon laughed softly. "Noted."

"Kon? She doesn't get attached to people very often, so try and keep that in mind," Silas said, the worried father coming through.

Kon pushed aside his pride and admitted, "When I was in Indonesia, I was about to get a bullet in the head. Right before I was about to die, she was the last thing I thought of."

"Well, shit." Silas's blue eyes filled with understanding. He had been in enough near-death situations to know you only thought about the thing that mattered the most to you at that moment. He jerked his head. "Go on, go get some sleep."

When Kon got upstairs, Athena had drawn the heavy curtains and was tucked under the sheets. Kon pulled off his clothes and climbed in beside her. He had never come home from a job to find a woman he cared about in his bed either.

Instead of overthinking it, Kon wrapped an arm around Athena's waist and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. Home safe and guarded by the mercenaries downstairs, Kon finally let his magical toll pull him under and was asleep in moments.

Athena woke hours later, Kon sprawled out beside her. She ran her fingers down his warm chest to the semi-hard erection he had in his sleep. She wanted him as blissed out as she had been when they had last slept together.

Athena pulled off the dark sheets and took a long look at his beautiful lean body. She carefully moved between his legs and took the tip of his perfect dick in her mouth. He shivered in his sleep but didn't wake.

Athena licked down his shaft on one side and then up the other, wetting him down before taking him in her mouth once more.

Kon moaned softly, moving his hips, but Athena pushed down on his abs with one hand and worked him with the other. She could taste pre-cum and knew he was getting close to waking and coming.

"Ath...Oh, fuck, that feels amazing," he murmured drowsily, stroking her hair. Kon started to groan loudly, and Athena clapped her hand over his mouth, sucking him as hard and as fast as she could.

Kon bucked his hips up, his exclamations muffled by her palm, before coming hard and filling her mouth. Athena swallowed him down, licked his dick clean, and only when she was done, did she move her hand away from his mouth.

Kon looked half asleep, half confused and shaken. "Fuck, Athena, you almost gave me a heart attack with that wake-up."

"Shh, go back to sleep, Kon," she whispered and tucked the sheet back around him. He mumbled something about crazy, beautiful women and was out again before she made it to the bathroom.

Athena changed the bandage on her wound and pulled on her clothes. She was tempted to stay in bed, but she was too buzzed and knew she wouldn't be able to leave Kon alone to sleep. He was too tempting. She would want to lick all of his beautiful muscles and get on top of him.

You're the only thing that's made me feel alive since I dragged myself out of that fucking fire...

How was she meant to process that? She couldn't think straight around him, especially when he was being sweet and sexually aggressive at the same time. Her poor heart and body couldn't deal with any of that. Not with a bounty on their heads.

Downstairs, Athena made coffee in the empty kitchen, her brain still a bit hazy. Iz and Leo were both wearing noise-canceling headphones and were busy typing away. They hadn't even looked up to say hello, but Athena knew better than to interrupt hackers when they were busy. They would surface when they were ready to.

"Heard you got into a death match last night," Dante said, coming in with a grin. He put some bags of fresh groceries down on the counter. "Can't stay out of trouble for five minutes, can you?"

Athena shrugged. "It was a mess, but we got a lead which is all we needed. How's it been here?"

"Quiet, and a bit boring for me. I can't really complain about the view, but..." Dante replied, eyes darting to a tousled, focused Leo. He really was a hot nerd, and Dante did have a type.

"You're incorrigible," she said with a laugh.

Dante raised a brow. "Me? You're the one bunking with the very hot psycho upstairs. He's soft for you, Cub."

"What can I say? I'm just so fucking lovable," Athena replied.

Dante snorted. "You are not. He seems to like them mean and violent."

"Where's Silas?" she asked, noting his absence.

"Upstairs working out. Said to tell you to join him when you woke. I'll keep a close eye on things down here," Dante said innocently.

"I bet you will." Athena's mouth twitched. "You even talked to him properly yet, or are you just shamelessly ogling him whenever he's not looking?"

Dante, the biggest man whose she had ever met actually looked bashful. "Bit of both."

"Did you ask him if he's even interested in boys before you started flirting with him?" Athena asked. Dante had gotten himself into trouble more than once by chatting up the wrong straight guy.

"Leo definitely likes boys," he replied without hesitation.

Athena shook her head, grabbed her coffee, and headed up to the roof. It was mid-afternoon, and her body felt all out of whack from staying up for twenty-four hours.

Someone had gone through Kon's storage and had set up the outdoor area with the rest of the flat sitting cushions and carpets.

Silas was going through drills with a sabre, his eyes vacant as he moved through the motions. Athena's earliest memories were of watching him train. She always expected her body to be like his one day and marked with the scars of battles past.

"Join in or fuck off with your antsy energy, Athena," he said, barely glancing at her.

Athena pulled back her hair in a ponytail and picked up the spare sabre.

Despite everyone teasing her about her blade fetish, Silas had been the one to teach her how to use them properly. Even though he usually used guns, he still carried a sword on jobs. Blades were better for stealth and Silas was the king of the silent kill.

Athena took up her position a short distance away from him to avoid getting in his way and started moving through the drills with him. It was as close to meditation as she could get on most days. Her mind was anything but quiet.

She thought about what Kon had said about the Amun-Ra being the old Golden Dawn headquarters in Scotland and how it would've been shut for a hundred years. Athena knew when people were lying, and Ryker hadn't been. He hadn't wanted to be helpful, so he had been cryptic, but he wasn't lying.

Iz and Leo will find the link. That's their job.

It wasn't like Athena didn't have anything else to worry about. Kon had started talking about feelings, and she didn't even know how to...

Silas appeared in front of her, his blade catching hers. "Out with it, Cub, you're stressing me out."

Athena slid into a fighting stance and raised her blade. Silas grinned and did the same.

"I don't know how to do feelings," she said, attacking him. He blocked her and sidestepped.

"Feelings about what?"

"Konstantius."

Silas groaned. "I don't know if I'm the best person to be asking relationship advice. It's not like I've had any long-standing love affairs."

"That's just the point. It's not... it's not how we are made," Athena replied. Their blades began to clash and sing in a steady rhythm.

Silas swore as the tip of her blade almost caught his thigh. "If it's only about the sex, then you should probably be honest with him about it. Think it's a bit more for him."

"It's not just about the sex with me either. You said it yourself; if anyone but Kon had given me this much grief over the years, I would've killed them. I couldn't do it." Athena started to sweat, her breath getting labored. "I mean, what would a full-time love affair even mean to people like us? And we *are* the same, Kon and I. He's not about to retire and get a corporate day job."

"Why would he have to, Cub? You worked well as a team in Germany, despite you starting your bullshit. He stuck around and had your back. I'm not saying you're going to ever have a white picket fence or anything, but fuck, you like the guy. That's hard for you at the best of times, but you connect with him, and that means something."

"Connect," Athena snickered and dodged his swipe.

"You know what I mean. You talk each other's language or whatever. You both scare the shit out of everyone but each other," Silas replied. "Maybe I moved you about too much. You didn't have experiences like other girls with dating and whatnot."

"Oh God, could you imagine me trying to deal with high school drama? I would've knifed the first person who looked at me wrong."

"That's exactly why I didn't bother trying to force you to go. Kon is like us, kid. We can make space for him after this Liddell job if you want."

Athena got a warm, glowy feeling about that prospect, which made her feel lame in a nice way.

"You know, you should really ask Izabella about this kind of thing. She could pull her cards and tell you whether or not you're making a mistake," Silas suggested, straightening and knocking her strike aside.

Izabella had a deck of cards unlike anything Athena had ever seen before. She claimed as she often did that they were cards that had been passed down through every generation of the women in her family. Because of this, they were an eclectic mishmash of tarot, playing cards, oracle cards, and ones that had been hand-drawn.

The only thing that was the same was that the back of them had all been decorated the same way with a gold and black bee on a ruby red background.

According to Izabella, it was her family symbol for the soul and miracles from her ancestors.

Whatever the case, when Izabella pulled cards, you had to be damn sure you wanted the answers because she would tell you the truth with them with such an eerie accuracy that only the desperate, brave, or stupid dared risk it. Athena didn't know if she was any of those things just yet.

"Since when have you been game enough to ask IZ for a reading?" she asked.

"I haven't been, but I know she's good at it, like everything else she does." Silas gave Athena a crooked grin. "I don't need cards to tell me how good of a father I am or how badass of a mercenary."

"Up itself much?"

"I don't need Izabella to tell me you're in love with the Nightmare of Istanbul and can't handle it because you're worried that you'll lose him."

Athena hissed, attacking harder like she could force him to take the words back. Silas retreated across the rooftop, waiting until the

last minute to hold a defense.

"Admit it to yourself, Cubbie. Being in love doesn't make you weak." Silas kicked out at her exposed side while her brain was fighting against the words he was saying.

Athena rolled to miss the kick, but Silas chased, and by the time she was on her feet again, he was behind her with the tip of his sabre lightly touching her ponytail.

"And you're dead, Athena. What have I always told you about showing off and getting on the ground?"

"That you're wasting time, and if you're on the ground, you're dead," Athena chimed, slowly turning. She still felt winded and nauseous, like his words had physically kicked her in the gut. "Did you ever think you were in love, Dad? I mean, obviously, we are talking about before I came along because clearly you don't get laid half as much as you should."

Silas lifted his middle finger at her. "No, I didn't have a lady love before you. I was in the army by eighteen, and I'm not into dick. After I got out, I didn't think I had the capacity to give a shit about anything or anyone. I was so fucking dead inside. Then I found you and knew I couldn't walk away. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, Cub. You made me learn to be a human again."

Athena frowned playfully and sheathed her sabre. "But I was half-feral then."

"You're fucking half-feral now," Silas replied with a laugh. "And just so you know, I've gotten laid a lot more than what you think over the years; I just don't feel the need to tell you about it, like you do."

"Who's getting laid?" Izabella asked, coming through the roof door. Her eyes skimmed over Silas's sweaty, muscled chest and her neck flushed red.

"Hopefully me," Athena joked, lifting her fist to bump.

"Good to know one of us is," Izabella said, pushing Athena's fist away with a half-smile. "I was actually coming up here to tell you to go wake up Turkish Delight. I think Leo and I have found something."

Kon woke a second time to find the other side of his bed empty. Had he dreamed Athena waking him up by sucking his cock so hard he saw stars?

He got up and showered, his body slowly waking up and trying to adjust to the time differences. The sun was going down, and he was surprised he had slept so late. He told himself that he trusted the people currently living in his warehouse despite years of being alone.

Kon rubbed at his chest, a strange ball of new emotions sitting there. Something about eating pancakes that morning with Silas and Athena made him miss his parents. It didn't matter how bloodthirsty they were. The Edgeworths *were* family, and they had included Kon into that circle.

Kon dressed, and after fighting it for a full minute, he reached to the very back of his wardrobe and pulled out a wooden box. It was the type of trinket box made of cheap wood and sold to tourists at the Grand Bazaar. Kon would know because one of his first jobs had been hawking them.

He sat down on his bed and tried to swallow the emotion clogging up his throat. He opened the box and took out the photo.

Kon had only gone back to the burned-out house once. It was the day after the fire had been put out and taped off. In the charred rubble, he had found only two things worth taking. A photo of him and his parents burned around the edges and a half-melted medallion of the emperor Constantine and his mother, St. Helena.

His mother, Azra, had always worn it and venerated Helena.

"She was born of nothing, and yet she gave birth to Constantine, the great emperor. It was because of her and her son that our precious city became the center of the world. This world is what you make of it, my little emperor, my sweet Konstantius."

Kon clutched the medallion in his hand as the memory of her voice came back to him for the first time in decades. He looked at his father, Eren, and could see the likeness in his own face. Kon was leaner, and his eyes didn't hold the same kind of happy warmth his father's had, but their cheekbones were the same, their hairline, their full lips.

Kon wondered what they would make of their little emperor now. He didn't even know how to come back from all that he had become. After they had died, he had survived long enough to fall in with the gangs. He had learned to lock up parts of himself, and because of that, he soon became known for his ability to kill efficiently.

He wasn't the type to crave redemption for past sins. He had done what he must to survive. The only things he had ever craved were revenge and Athena Edgeworth.

Once he got the former as well as the latter, what would he do with his life?

He had been a ghost. Unseen by everyone, utterly expendable, until her.

Absently, Kon flicked his fingers and made the lights go on and off. After he had done it once, the little magic returned to him and was getting easier and easier. Would he finally be able to study it properly when he had no fear of discovery?

Now that he had open the gates of his memories, little things were coming back to him. He grabbed a notebook from his bedside table and started writing notes in it, the bits of advice that his parents had been willing to share. He wrote down what he had told Athena about energy transference and kept going.

Half an hour later, he had a piece of the decorative vine from the bathroom and was slowly pulling the life from it and replacing it with his own over and over again. He could feel his mother's disapproval from the Afterlife. She always told him that it was one of the greatest

sins and most dangerous to the magician to take the life of another living thing.

If you get used to stealing power that way, it is a path that is impossible to come back from. The dark will have you...

The vine wasn't attached to roots, so Kon liked to think it didn't count. It wasn't like the dark didn't already have him.

"Look who's awake," Athena said, coming in with a smile. She looked ruffled and sweaty around the edges.

"What trouble have you gotten into now?" he asked.

"Sabre training with Silas. He kicked my ass as usual."

Kon grinned. "A good thing I wasn't around to watch. I don't think Silas would appreciate me having an erection the whole time you trained."

Athena came to stand in front of where he was sitting and ran her hands through his hair. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Like the dead, thanks to you," Kon replied and tugged her closer.

"I'm sweaty and gross; you might not want to make out—"

Kon ignored her protests and pulled her into his lap so she was straddling him. "I like you sweaty and gross." He gave her a leisurely kiss, tasting salt and coffee on her lips.

"What's with the vine?" she asked, taking it from the bed and rolling it between her fingertips.

"I've been trying to remember things that my parents told me about magic," Kon admitted. He took the vine from her. "Watch." It was more challenging with an audience, but after a moment, something clicked inside of him, and the vine withered before he fed his energy into it, and it turned green and strong once more.

"That's amazing! Do it again," Athena said, face full of awe he had never seen before. He did it a few more times before she started kissing him, her hands running over his back and chest until he began to get hard.

"If we aren't allowed to fuck, you better stop that right now," he growled.

Athena smirked and ground her hips against him in a slow, teasing circle. His hand came down hard on her ass.

"Cut it out, Edgeworth."

"And you complain I'm no fun." Her eyes went to the wooden box. "Treasure or secrets?"

"Both, I suppose." Kon opened it and took out the picture. Athena's whole demeanor softened.

"God, look how cute you are," she said, staring at his mop of dark curls and missing front teeth. "Your mom is so beautiful."

"Their names were Azra and Eren. I don't...I don't remember my surname. The boss of my old gang called me Zalam, the Arabic word for darkness. He said that he could see it in my soul. It stuck," Kon replied. He lifted the necklace and showed it to her.

"Saint Helena and Constantine the Great?" Athena asked, turning it between her fingers.

"Good guess. It was my mother's. She was into saints, but Helena especially. She always liked that Helena and Constantine were close enough that their likenesses were put together. She used to call me little emperor."

"Could explain why you are so bossy," Athena teased. "Is that why you went with saints for the tattoos on your back?"

"Yes, though at the time, I told people it was because I needed them watching my back. That I missed my dead mother wouldn't have seemed very tough."

"You can be both, Kon." Athena slipped the chain over his head. "Keep her close. You're lucky that you have memories of her at all."

The necklace felt heavy around his neck, but he didn't take it off. Overwhelmed, he kissed Athena's cheeks and was heading for her mouth again when there was a knock at the door.

"Get off him, Athena! We are waiting on you two," Dante said through the door.

"What's happened?"

"Iz thinks she might have found something," Athena replied, slipping from his lap. "Kissing you and talking about your family was more important."

Kon's chest swelled dangerously, and he had to fight not to pull her back into his arms.

Downstairs, Dante was pouring more coffee for Leo. He looked up and saw Kon and pulled out another cup. Kon contemplated the coffee before passing it to Athena and making himself tea instead.

"I hope Athena woke you up the nice way," he teased.

"If you hoped that, you wouldn't have interrupted," Kon replied.

Dante looked utterly unapologetic, and Athena nudged him with her shoulder. "Don't be jealous because I'm getting some, and you aren't."

Dante snorted. "Just for once, Cubbie. Although now that I've met Turkish Delight, I can see why you've turned down everyone else after you met."

Kon knew his smile was smug as shit by the way Athena's ears went red. "Is that so? Tell me more, Dante."

Athena's eyes zeroed in on Dante and went ice cold. "If you want to keep your manhood, you'll shut your gob, Hill."

"Don't be touchy because Kon was probably still getting nailed, and you weren't."

"*Mio Dio*, we have other things to talk about than Kon's penis," Leo complained.

"Like talking about yours?" Dante retorted with an innocent smile.

"We don't have all night," Leo countered.

"Will you lot stop talking about dicks and get over here," Silas called from where Izabella had connected her laptop to the TV screen.

Kon waited until the other two men had left the kitchen before snagging Athena's hand and nibbled at her wrist. "There was no one else for me either, *güzelim*."

Her ears went even redder. "Stop talking, or I'll stab you."

"Keep threatening me with a good time, and see where it gets you."

"Oh my God, stop," Athena begged.

"Words that have never come out of your mouth when you've been in bed with me."

"Shut up." Athena was bright red as she pulled her hand free from his grip. Kon finished making his tea before they went and joined the others.

Izabella waited until everyone was settled before pulling up an old black and white photo of a man in a garden.

"Time for a brief history lesson. This white guy you see is John William Brodie-Innes, a lawyer by profession and the founder of the

Amun-Ra chapter house of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in Edinburgh in 1893," she began, before flipping to an old map of the city. "Now, we couldn't find any official place registered for the temple in all of the data we dug through. Nothing came up in any kind of deeds or land titles. What we did find was a list of the forty-eight members that were inducted into the temple from the years 1888 to 1896."

Leo pushed his glasses on the top of his head and took the lead. "We started to cross-reference any rental properties under the names that were down as members. Many of them that came up were residential properties, family homes, etc., but one particular name jumped out at us. *Drummond*."

Izabella clicked again, and lists of names popped up on the screen. "Emily and Edith Drummond, a mother and daughter, were both inducted into the Amun-Ra house and made it a Second Order which allowed them to use practical magic. Emily's husband, William Drummond, was also a lawyer and could have been acquainted with Brodie-Innes."

"But he wasn't a member of the Amun-Ra?" Kon asked, not seeing his name on the lists.

"No. He didn't seem to share their interest in the Golden Dawn, theosophy, or Freemasonry, which they were also fascinated by," Izabella replied. "The reason we bring him up is that we found his name on a receipt for a basement area in Edinburgh's Old Town. The documents were a part of the heritage listings of the development of the area, and they were scanned. It was not an expensive rental, something that on the records looks like it was leased as a storage space. The interesting thing is that William Drummond died in August 1915, but payments kept getting deposited until January 1924."

"So who was making the payments?" Silas asked, frowning at the date.

"If I had to guess, it would be Edith. One of the strange things we discovered is that both Emily and William named Edith and Florence as executors of their wills, not their son Charles," Izabella replied. "Going back to our good old founder, John William Brodie-Innes. He died in December 1923."

"A month before the payments to the basement stopped," Dante commented. "So who or what was still there? And why did she keep paying for it?"

Izabella shrugged. "My guess is loyalty. We know Brodie-Innes was a mentor to Edith and, allegedly, the one and only Dion Fortune. Also, another woman. At that time, women weren't allowed into any academia or clubs, but the Golden Dawn did. That alone could have secured the support of someone like Edith who wrote and published articles on Scottish freemasonry amongst other things."

Athena got up to pace. "Okay, so Ryker said that the last time he saw Liddell was at the Amun-Ra. What is it now? I'm assuming it's not still just a basement in Old Town."

"A basement night club to be precise," Leo said, clicking the mouse and bringing up a photo of a black and gold sign that said 'Earthly Delights.' "It could be that Liddell likes to go there to be close to the history of the order."

Kon shook his head. "No, Ryker mentioned he was breaking one of his toys. Leo, can you look into any reports of assaults that have happened there? If Liddell hurt someone while he was there, maybe they complained or went to the police?"

"I'll look, but I doubt it. For one thing, Earthly Delights is a gay bar. Statistically, even though assaults on LGBT people are four times higher, half the time they're not reported," Leo replied, the muscle in his jaw throbbing.

"Also, if Liddell is 'breaking toys,' I'll be surprised if anything comes up because he's a rich, entitled white guy, and they usually pay for problems to go away," Izabella added.

Athena ran her hands through her hair and unraveled her braid. "Even so, please have a look. Ryker wouldn't have mentioned it if he didn't think there were breadcrumbs to follow."

"You're assuming Ryker was trying to be helpful," Silas argued.

"I had a knife to his dick, so he was invested in being helpful," Athena replied.

"Also, Ryker is greedy. We said that we would reward his help like we agreed to reward Altun. Ryker could have stopped us from leaving his warehouse if he wanted to. Instead, he let us go and put on a show of trying to go after us," Kon added. He toyed with the

pendant around his neck and looked at all the information on the screen. "I definitely agree with Athena on this; Ryker was helping. We just need to figure out how."

Athena took a small blade from her boot and started twirling it idly through her fingers. Izabella and Leo were tapping away on their laptops. Dante and Kon had gone out to buy some ingredients for dinner. Beside her, Silas was cleaning a gun.

Athena stared at the pictures that Izabella had left up, and the corkboards of information Kon had put together and added to over the past few days.

"What are you thinking, Cub?" Silas asked.

"There's something that I'm not seeing," she replied, the knife sliding through her fingers. "Did anything pop up about Gadal while I was in Germany?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. Izabella thinks it's a code name like Liddell. There was a French guy called Antonin Gadal. He was a historian and a mystic who was obsessed with the Cathars, their history, and spiritual beliefs. It seems to fit the theme of magic and mystics," Silas said. He leaned back on the couch beside her. "What do you reckon about this magic business?"

"It's legit. I've seen Kon do it more than once. It feels like a dangerous thing to have someone like Liddell using it however he likes. Especially because normal people wouldn't believe that he's capable of it, to begin with."

"It's a weird old world," Silas said in the most Silas way. Athena didn't think anything could fluster him. She always wondered if he kept a level head so she would keep hers.

"Yeah, it is, and I think the further we go down this rabbit hole, the weirder it's going to become."

Kon and Dante came back in, arms full of bags from the markets. Dante was laughing at something Kon had said, and Athena's heart did its strange flutter.

"God, you are pathetic. I didn't think anything but a sword could make you get that look," Silas teased her.

Athena tried to be cool about it, lifting her shoulder in a half-assed shrug. "He gets me, I suppose. It's weird, but I like it. I don't have to wear my polite face, and he doesn't want me to."

Silas hummed. "Yeah, I guess I can see the appeal in that. Still, if he breaks your heart, I'll cut his out."

"Thanks, Dad," Athena said, dropping her head to his shoulder.

"How's the search going?" Dante asked as he came to look over Leo's shoulder at whatever was on his screen.

"Police reports," Leo replied, his voice distant. His eyes refocused. "What smells so good?"

"That's me," Dante said and placed a paper bag on the table beside Leo. "Or it could be this. It's called Lokma; it's like doughnut balls that are sweet enough to make your eyes water."

"*Grazie, grazie, grazie,*" Leo hummed, opening the bag and putting one of the sticky balls into his mouth, and made a happy groan. He offered the bag to Dante. "You want some?"

"No, I'm good," Dante replied with a downright filthy smile on his face.

Athena shook her head. She had seen Dante flirt with everyone he met, but it was the first time he went out of his way to get treats for someone.

"I've found some reports of incidents at the club or near it," Izabella said, pulling her headphones off. "A lot of them are theft, an argument that resulted in fistfights. Some of them are strange, like this one two years ago where a French tourist was found in Holyrood Park with no clothes on, covered in scratches and babbling about the devil chasing him."

"Stick to the weird ones," Athena replied.

Izabella got up. "Not until I stretch. I feel all cramped and bunched up. Who's up for some yoga on the roof?"

"I was going to help Kon cook," Silas said, getting up and retreating. Iz watched him go, eyes narrowed even if they went straight to his ass.

Athena sheathed her knife. "I'll come, Iz. My brain isn't working properly. I know there's something I'm missing."

"I'm in if you lead it," Leo added, closing the bag of dough treats.

"If you're up for a real workout, Iz, I'll be happy to join you. Yoga is just stretching," Dante said.

"Fine, stay down here and be an alpha male cliché," Leo said, giving him an arched look before pulling his shirt off and following Iz towards the roof stairs. He had leaner muscles than Athena would've guessed on his tall frame. Surprisingly, he also had hidden tattoos.

"Yeah, you're right. I should definitely give the stretching thing a go," Dante babbled.

"Try to keep your tongue in your head, Hill. You're getting pathetic."

"Fuck off, Cub. You're the one that's spent the last three years getting frothy over your nemesis."

Athena glanced sideways to Kon. He was rolling up his sleeves, ingredients spread out on the counter in front of him. "Still getting frothy over him."

"Ew, Athena. Get focused. We have stretching to do," Dante said, steering her up the stairs.

"Just don't set up right behind poor Leo like a total creeper."

"Come on, give me a bit of credit." Dante pushed open the door, and Athena couldn't help but notice Leo's slightly smug smile. He already knew what buttons to press with Dante, and Athena would have a good time watching him twist the merc up in knots.

Athena found a space where she wouldn't accidentally crash into anyone and toed off her boots. Izabella was already folding herself into graceful moves that Athena knew she could never do.

"Alright, you rabble, let's start in a mountain pose," she said, and Athena got ready.

Closing her eyes, Athena let Iz's instructions wash over her, her body obeying as her mind went elsewhere.

What aren't I seeing? There was something about the club, and toys, and Ryker's smug words that she wasn't getting. She went

back to her memories of the fight and going up to see Ryker afterward.

The last time I saw Liddell was at the Amun-Ra House in Edinburgh. He was having fun breaking his toys as he is prone to do... Ryker's bored voice came back to her. Athena rolled her body into a downward dog.

Be careful of hunting on a full moon, Liebling. It's when predators are strongest. Athena's hand slipped, and she almost toppled out of the pose.

"Son of a bitch!" she exclaimed.

"What is it now?" Iz asked irritably.

"The full moon. When Kon and I were leaving the fight club in Germany, Ryker told us to be careful hunting on the full moon because it's when predators are the strongest. I thought he was just a bit obscure and threatening, but what if it's more than that?" Athena said, pacing the roof. "What if he was trying to tell us that's when Liddell searches for new toys to break?"

"Sounds like you're reaching to me," Dante commented as he straightened up.

"We need to check those police reports for any incidents that happened on a full moon. My gut tells me—" Both Iz and Dante groaned.

"What's wrong with your gut?" Leo asked from a side-angle pose.

"Athena has a thing about her gut always being right," Dante said.

"And the worst part is that it usually is," Iz added.

"That's right, it is, so chop chop! Let's go and look."

"It can wait fifteen minutes for me to finish my flow. Get your ass back into position. You can finish it up too."

Athena muttered under her breath, but there was no getting around her when Iz had made up her mind.



KON WAS RUBBING spice into chicken pieces in the kitchen and trying not to feel intimidated by Silas watching his every move. Kon

hadn't made this particular recipe in a long time, but talking about his parents with Athena had made him crave it.

"You got any family hanging around?" Silas asked, sipping his beer on the other side of the counter.

"Not that I know about. After the fire, I took off because I was scared of Liddell finding me."

"And you never tried to find relatives?"

Kon shook his head. "I never met any of my parent's siblings, if they had any. I don't even know my own last name. I didn't want to bring anyone else into my revenge plots anyway."

"And look how that turned out," Silas said with a glimmer of amusement in his green eyes.

"Athena put herself into my revenge plot. It's not my fault she dragged the rest of you in." Kon sliced up a lemon. "I did try and deflect Liddell's attention from her. He talked about recruiting her, and I didn't want him anywhere near her."

"It wouldn't have been a problem if you had killed her. Thanks for not going down that road," Silas said. He toyed with his beer bottle. "If we do take down Liddell, what then? Have you thought about what you would do?"

"I've been trying to. I like the idea of working as an actual historian for a while, and I want to be able to use my magic again. I want Athena. That's as far as I've gotten," Kon admitted.

There was no point lying to Silas about it. He *did* want Athena. And after an afternoon of touching his magic again, the thrill it gave him, he wanted that too. He remembered what it was like to look at the world with...wonder.

A part of him would always be the Basti, the nightmare monster, but this new Kon that cooked for people and used magic could also work out for him if he didn't fuck it up.

It was almost as terrifying as being in love with a woman who, until two weeks ago, he thought of as a rival.

"If you take out Liddell, he's going to have a big collection to sort through, and a lot of that is magical from what you've said," Silas said thoughtfully, picking at the label on his beer. "Athena... she's big on giving things back to traditional owners. Maybe you can use that

historian degree *and* your magic skills and help her find where they belong."

Kon stopped chopping. "Are you playing matchmaker?"

"No," Silas said unconvincingly. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Look, Kon, I know my daughter, and underneath the swagger and her focus on getting this job done, she's panicking that you won't want her once it's over."

"But that's the complete opposite of what I want. And what I've been telling *her* that I want."

Silas chuckled. "Yeah, Athena can be a bit tricky. She doesn't really process emotions like other people, and she was raised around a group of hard-ass guys that didn't talk about feelings. It takes her a bit to figure it all out. Maybe if you give her something to think about, like tell her you want her help re-homing all Liddell's stuff, she might chill out a bit."

"Hmm, I see. We can't forget about trying to find Gadal too."

Silas's smile vanished. "Only if Athena decides she wants to go down that path. It'll mean going back to that place, and it'll dredge up her nightmares all over again."

Kon looked at the knife in his hand. "Maybe if she slits his throat, she won't have any more nightmares."

"Well, you let me know how that works out for you once you kill Liddell, and then we can pitch it to her," Silas replied.

Kon slid the chicken into the oven as Athena came thumping down the stairs barefoot and flushed. "Kon, I've had the best idea."

"Uh oh," Silas said, his grin back. Athena took his beer and had a mouthful before passing it back.

"You remember how Ryker got all 'Predators hunt on the full moon' at us? What if he was trying to tell us when Liddell likes to go out and pick up?" she said, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet.

"Maybe. I thought it was a bit strange, but then Ryker was strange all round," Kon replied. "What do Iz and Leo think?"

"They are going to look through the police reports and cross-reference them to the full moon."

"I dunno, Cub, lots of crazies tend to come out on the full moon," Silas said. Athena opened her mouth to argue, but Kon beat her to it.

"That's true, but you didn't see Ryker, Silas. He was making a point; otherwise, he wouldn't have said it at all."

Athena's smile widened. "Look away, Zeus. I'm going to have to make out with Kon for a second."

"Yeah, no thanks," Silas said, getting up and walking away.

Athena closed in on Kon, pressing him up against the counter and planting a messy kiss on his lips. "Thank you for having my back."

"Anytime, goddess. I plan on getting you onto that back later on," Kon teased.

"Oh yeah? And how are you going to do that?"

"Seduce you with my culinary skills, and if that fails, I'm going to wrestle you."

"Let's hope your food is good because I can guarantee my wrestling is better."

"Keep telling yourself that." Kon ran his thumb over her jaw. "It's a good guess about Ryker. Maybe he was trying to help. I had forgotten all about it. I was too worried about getting you out in one piece."

"Me too. Turns out I only needed to get into downward dog and get some blood to my brain," Athena said, her fingers skimming under his t-shirt.

"In the future, I'll have to remember when you get stuck on a problem, I just have to get your ass in the air," Kon replied, his hand drifting to the luscious ass in question.

Athena leaned closer and licked his bottom lip, making his dick twitch to life. "How about you get my ass in the air tonight, and I'll tell you all the things that I'm thinking."

Kon tipped his head back and laughed. "You got yourself a deal, Edgeworth."



KON HAD MANAGED to convince Athena to stay in the kitchen and chop up ingredients for him when Izabella and Leo started talking

loudly, hands gesticulating passionately as they fell in and out of Italian and Spanish.

"What has got you so excited?" Athena called, putting down the knife. Izabella picked up her laptop and brought it over to the kitchen counter.

"Look at this. We picked out the craziest reports like you suggested and cross-referenced them with the full moon. There have been five in the past two years," Izabella said and brought up the reports for them. "In all five cases, they were male and claimed they were out drinking and were drugged. When they were tested, their results came back with a combination of Rohypnol and ketamine in their systems."

"Ooff, I bet their hangovers were killer," Dante said, taking a beer from the fridge.

"Not only were their hangovers killer, they were terrified, all claiming some kind of horned animal, god, or demonic figure had been chasing them to feed off their fear," Leo added. "One of weirdest parts was that even though they were hit with date rape drugs, none of them showed any signs of being sexually assaulted."

"No, the weirdest part was the cuts on them," Izabella said, pulling up photos. "Their stories all seemed to differ, but they all mentioned a forest, so the police thought that trees had done it to them. When you look at them all together, the cuts are all in the same places and are too precise."

Ice dumped down Kon's spine. "Show me," he said through his teeth.

"They aren't pretty, just to warn you," Izabella opened all the pictures up on her screen so they were a collage of mutilated arms and legs, stomach, backs. All cuts were about five inches long and were in parallel pairs.

"What is it, Kon? What do you see?" Athena asked, her hand resting lightly on his back.

"It's a ritual. I don't know what it does, but I know it's magic," he said, his voice breaking. "Liddell...he did it to my mother before he killed her."

Kon fought back the memories of the heat, the smoke, his mother's screams, her eyes as her life slipped away. Athena's arm

curled around him, pulling him back to the present. He cleared his throat.

"The full moons...do they align with an equinox?" he asked.

Leo's dark brows drew together. "I'll check for you."

"There's a lot of lore about the power of full moons in every culture. Magic and rituals have always been tied to them. If Liddell is choosing people and then letting them go, he must either not be getting what he wants, or he is. No one is game enough to look too deeply into it," Kon continued, his hand going to the pendant around his neck.

"But in the past two years, there's been five incidents, not the eight, that would line up with your equinox theory," Dante said.

"What if the other three died?" Athena replied, voicing Kon's own thought. "I mean, if you fill someone up with a heap of drugs, cut them up, and use a demonic beast to feed on their fear, then it's easy to assume they could've died of an overdose or shock."

"Or the ritual he was trying to perform killed them," Kon added.

Silas leaned his elbows on the counter next to Izabella and looked at the photos. "Why let the others that survived go? I mean, it's sloppy. They all randomly turned up with similar stories."

"You're all forgetting who we are dealing with. Liddell could be paying the police to look the other way. He's done it before. I know because I've personally bribed anyone who he's needed, including judges, politicians, border security, you name it," Kon said irritably.

"It could explain why they were all from other places," Izabella mused aloud. They looked at her. "I mean...it was something I noticed along with the horned god thing. The victims aren't from Edinburgh. They aren't even Scottish. All of them were tourists or international students."

"Maybe because Liddell and the police didn't want upset or grieving families up their asses," Dante replied. "That means that the victims probably were spooked enough to leave Scotland and go home to get over what happened to them. No one would be around to tell cautionary tales."

Leo hurried back over. "You were right, *amico*. The incidents were all on an equinox moon, not just a full one."

"When's the next one?" Athena asked.

"September 22nd is the Autumn equinox," Izabella replied. "Two days' time."

Athena's hand bunched in Kon's shirt. "Fuck, we need to get to Edinburgh."

Athena had been ready to pack her bags and head out on a flight to Edinburgh that night, but Kon only shook his head. "No. Liddell will still be a motherfucker if we leave now or tomorrow, and I don't just cook for anyone," he had said stubbornly.

Silas had agreed with him that they needed to be smart about how they would all get there and plan out how they would scope out the club Earthly Delights. If Kon was right and Liddell had police on his payroll, they would have to be twice as careful.

Athena left them talking and went upstairs to have a long shower. Fatigue was starting to nibble away at her, and she doubted she would get much rest in the next couple of days.

If they lived through it all, and Kon got to put a bullet in Liddell, maybe she could convince him to get away with her for a little while. They could go back to Cyprus for old times' sake. She *had* promised herself a holiday after all.

You're assuming you are both still alive and that you haven't gotten sick of each other by then.

Athena rolled out the sudden tightness in her neck. She knew it was only her anxiety messing with her, where it never had before. Silas had said she looked at Kon like he was a beautiful sword...and that was a problem.

Athena knew how obsessed she could get with things and people. Hell, they had met Iz by accident in Belarus, and Athena decided to keep her. She had demanded that she and Silas save Iz

from the drug lords keeping her locked up. Iz had also stayed with them until she was off the shit her old boss had been dosing her with. Iz had been a part of their crew and loyal as hell ever since.

That was the thing with Athena's obsessions. She knew when something was worth having, and she did what she could to keep it. Her gut hadn't failed her yet. It was probably why she had played her Moriarty games with Kon and not killed him because deep down she knew she wanted to keep him.

Kon's words from Berlin wrapped around her like silk. *I've just stopped fighting against the obvious. That you make my blood turn to fire, that your rage echoes mine, that our sharp edges and inner demons match. That you are mine.*

Now they had stopped fighting it, they were easy together. Athena liked to be around him, watch him cook her dinner, and show her his hidden excitement when he did magic.

His expression when he had shown her the trick with the vine had cut right through her. It was like something had sparked behind his dark eyes that she hadn't seen before. *Joy.*

Athena turned the shower on to cold, her body suddenly hot enough to make her dizzy.

They needed to get rid of Liddell, and then she would tell Kon how she felt. With words. No matter how badly she stumbled her way through it, that if he wanted her, then she wanted him. Athena groaned. She couldn't even say it straight in her own head in a way that made sense.

Athena put on a pair of Kon's soft satin pajama pants and one of her fresh tanks and went to find where everyone was.

The whole warehouse smelled like whatever delicious thing Kon had cooked, and her stomach grumbled that it had nothing in it but the pancakes from breakfast.

Upstairs on the roof, food had been put onto platters, and drinks crammed the small table in the entertainment area. It had a definite party vibe to it that Athena could get behind.

Maybe they needed the night of normality before they got plunged into the madness and magic again.

Kon's eyes went to the pants she was wearing and heated a perverse amount.

"Helping yourself to my wardrobe again, I see," he said as she sat down beside him.

"I was running out of clean clothes, and you have so many. Why? You don't want me to wear them?" she asked innocently.

Kon's expression sharpened dangerously, and her thighs clenched together in excitement.

"It's fine," he said, conscious of the others around them. Athena grinned, knowing exactly what he was thinking. She grabbed a piece of warm flatbread. "This looks so good."

Kon had roasted chicken pieces with fragrant spices and made a variety of salads with couscous and pomegranate seeds, as well as a bunch of other things Athena had no idea about because she couldn't cook. She never had the time or the patience beyond her basics.

"I think you have just nominated yourself to officially become the chef of the crew," Dante teased Kon.

"I thought I was the historian and dashing hitman?"

"You can be all three," Athena replied.

Izabella raised her hands. "*Gloria a Dios!* It's not only me who knows their way around a kitchen anymore."

"Don't be like that, Izabella. I love your food," Silas said from beside her.

Izabella's cheeks went a little rosier. "Okay, I'll cook for you, but only because you're always so grateful."

"That's because Silas's idea of cooking is to throw a ration pack at you," Athena laughed.

Silas shrugged unapologetically. "Okay, I want to hear ideas for Scotland," he said, and the mood went more serious.

"Liddell always targets foreigners, so I thought it would be a good idea to use me as bait," Leo said, scooping some chicken onto his plate.

Dante choked on his beer. "Absolutely not."

"I don't recall needing to ask your permission." Leo ignored his death glare. "It makes sense. I could go into Earthly Delights, talk to a few people, and pretend that I'm a tourist looking for some fun. If Liddell hunts on a full moon, we might as well make it easy and give him what he wants."

"You seem to be forgetting the part where the asshole will drug you and cut you up for his demon," Dante growled. "Silas, tell him no."

Silas didn't. He looked thoughtful. "Do you have any self-defense training to back you up?"

"I do. I've done boxing since I was a child. If things get too full-on, I know I'll be able to fight my way out. I'm good," Leo said.

"You're not going to be able to fight shit if you're full of ketamine!" Dante argued.

"Settle down, D. Let's think this through. Leo is right. He's the perfect bait. And—" Silas held up a hand to stop Dante from interrupting, "and you can go into the club separately from him. Be on comms with us. You can keep an eye on anyone suspicious."

"And it's my choice," Leo said simply, shutting down Dante before he could start. "What about tracking?"

"Liddell will check you over. He's thorough and highly secretive. We can make sure Dante doesn't lose sight of you, but anything like your own comm device will be noticed straight away," Kon replied. "While Liddell won't expect us in Scotland, Athena and I should keep our heads down until we can close in on him."

They talked logistics, Izabella taking a few notes on her phone about what transport, accommodation, and gear they would need once they got there. It was strange to have Kon and Leo there and contributing like they were part of the crew, but it wasn't like they were amateurs. Athena could just sit back and let them talk it out while she ate delicious food and watched the stars come out over the city.

"That will do for now. Without getting to Scotland and seeing what other obstacles will be there, this is about as good as it gets. If we leave tomorrow, it will give us a day to scout the streets around the club and hotels," Silas said. He looked over at Athena and gave her a gentle smile. "Go to bed, Cubbie. You look like the last few days have been too much for you."

"You didn't have a cage match with Bärchen the bear yesterday," Athena said. God, had it only been yesterday? She felt like it had been a week ago which told her she was getting sleep deprived.

"Kon, make sure she doesn't collapse down the stairs, will you? We can take care of all the dishes. Dante loves washing dishes when he's pouting," Silas said.

Kon's head tilted curiously, realizing he was being dismissed. Then he smiled and took Athena's hand. "Come on, goddess, let's get you into bed."

"I think your father is trying to make sure you get laid before Scotland," Kon said when they got back into his bedroom.

"Is that so? I was coming down here to have a bath and go to sleep," Athena said.

Kon shut the door, and his eyes darkened, predator sharp and hungry in the shadows. A tingle of anticipation ran up her spine as he closed in on her.

Kon's hand grabbed the bundle of laces of her stolen pants and hauled her to him. "Did you think you could wear my clothes and there would not be consequences, Edgeworth?"

Athena's pulse leaped as his other hand went to her hair and tugged, baring her throat to him. Sharp teeth and stubble ran down her skin.

"Nothing to say? What's the matter? Did you think that just because I'm playing nice with others, I've become sweet and domesticated?"

"Why? Are you looking for an excuse to go soft, Bastard?" Athena said, her breath stuttering as his mouth licked and sucked down to her shoulder.

Kon snatched her hand and pressed it to the bulge in the front of his pants. "Do I *feel* soft to you? I've been suffering from this all night, and there will be no baths or sleeping until it's dealt with."

Athena squeezed his dick through the fabric. "We have a warehouse full of people that will overhear everything."

Kon tilted her head back. "Then I'll find you something to bite down on. How about a belt? You are certainly asking for one wearing my clothes to drive me mad."

"I'm not wearing any panties either," Athena said against his lips, wanting to provoke him. "You're going to smell me on these forever."

Kon took her mouth in a punishing kiss and yanked the front of her top and her bra down. Rough hands palmed her breasts, Kon's tongue licking the groan from her mouth. He pinched her already hard nipples, and her brain hazed, wetness rushing through her.

Kon didn't let go of her mouth while his hands guided her back towards the bed. Unbuckling his belt, he pulled it out of its loops with a jerk.

Kon pushed her down to sit on the edge of the bed, folded the leather belt in half, and pressed it to her lips.

"You're going to want to bite down hard. Wouldn't want Daddy to know what deviant things you're up to now, would we?" Kon growled, and Athena bit down. Kon stripped off his shirt and went to his knees. He pulled the pants off her and tossed them to the other side of the room.

"Spread them wide for me," he demanded. Athena smiled around the leather and opened her thighs. Kon stared at her pussy without touching her, making Athena even wetter with anticipation. There was no way she could hide it even if she wanted to.

Kon gripped her ankle before his hot palms slowly slid up her calves. He kissed the inside of one knee and then the other.

Athena's hands tightened in the sheets. His pace was torturously slow, eyes never leaving her core like he wanted to see what every nip and caress did to her. When he finished with one side of her inner thigh, he turned to the other.

Athena swore but didn't try to rush him or ask him to stop. He blew softly against her aching flesh, and Athena trembled, almost ripping out the belt and tying him down with it.

The Bastard of Istanbul gave her his most wicked smile before running the tip of his tongue over her. Electric tingles danced along Athena's nerve endings, and she bit into the belt, muffling her groan. Kon didn't speed up his pace, just slowly licked her like he had all the time in the world to watch her squirm.

"God, you're beautiful when you're dying for release, your luscious little cunt just weeping to be filled," he murmured, hands roaming over her breasts before he gripped her hips, tugging them up and wider. His tongue darted into her, and Athena's eyes went back into her head. When Kon was like this, she would let him do whatever the fuck he wanted, so long as he didn't stop.

He tongued her clit as his fingers slid through her wetness, dipping into her just enough to make her squirm and fuck them. Kon's teeth nipped her in warning.

"So impatient. I woke up on fire today because of your mouth, and I've burned for your taste, your heat, all fucking day," he said.

His wet fingers plunged hard into her, and Athena cried out as pleasure rocked her. Kon put his mouth back on her, devouring her, fingers moving deeper with every thrust.

Athena let go of the bed and buried her hands into his thick hair, holding him in place as her hips moved in rhythm. Her orgasm hit her so hard that hot light burst behind her eyes. Athena let Kon go and flopped back on the bed, her body shaking, her gasps so ragged she had to spit out the belt to breathe properly.

"Fuck, Kon," she managed. Kon stood up and looked down at his handiwork. He undid his pants and kicked them off.

Athena trembled at the sight of him naked and hard. Kon slid up her too sensitive body, his bare skin so hot, it almost burned wherever it brushed against hers.

"Kon," she whispered.

"Yes, Athena?" Kon's lips closed around her nipples, stubble and tongue moving over them in a maddening soft and sharp sensation.

"I want you inside of me. Stop playing, and please, please fuck me."

Kon lifted her hips with a sudden, violent jerk and thrust his cock all the way into her, kissing her at the same time, so her desperate cries were smothered by his lips and tongue. His finger went to her lips.

"Shhh," he whispered, eyes full of mischief.

Athena put his hand all the way over her mouth like she had done to him that morning. Kon's expression turned savage, his hand tightening over her mouth right before he began to pound into her.

Athena's heels dug into the mattress as she lifted her hips high to meet his.

Working together, having feelings, playing nice...it hadn't changed a damn thing. They both fucked like it was a competition to see who could turn the other into a weeping mess first. Reckless. Violent. Intense.

Athena knew it would always be this way. She was obsessed, addicted to Kon's brutal side when he fought and fucked. Craved the gentler side he only showed her.

Kon hissed as her teeth sank into his palm hard enough to taste blood. He rolled her, so she was straddling him.

"Just for that, you can work for your next orgasm," he snapped, grabbing his ruined belt and placing it back into her mouth. Athena jumped as both of his hands came down hard on her ass and gripped it tight. "Ride me, Edgeworth, and don't be gentle about it."

Athena grabbed him around the throat with one hand, the other twisting roughly a handful of his hair. Kon's pupils blew out as the pain of her grip clashed with his pleasure.

"Do you need another smack on the ass to get you moving?" he snarled. Athena shrugged to sass him, and his hand cracked against her flesh hard enough to make her groan. She started to rock into him, his dick so hard and wet with her arousal that another tremble shot through her.

Kon buried his face into her neck. "Always feel so damn good. Harder, my goddess, that's it. *Fuck.*" Athena slammed into him, grinding her clit against him. Kon's hand tightened and began pulling her faster onto him, his other hand going between them to play with her clit. Athena spat out the belt and took his mouth, thrusting her tongue against his with every pounding of her hips.

"I want you like this always," she panted, pulling his head back so she could bite his throat. "Underneath me. Hard and willing and coming undone for me. Fuck, I'm never going to be able to let you go."

"Don't you even think about it. I told you that you're mine now, but it seems like I need to fuck a reminder into you every day until it sinks in," he whispered, voice harsh and deadly. His wet fingers pressed a slow circle around her clit.

"Are you going to come for me, or are you going to fight with me about that too?" Athena bit into his shoulder as his words started to undo her. Kon laughed breathlessly. "That's it, I can feel you. Fuck, I can't...."

Kon flipped her again, snapping his hips into her in a way that had his cock hitting the bundle of nerves inside her. Athena smothered her scream of pleasure into his skin, light blazing across her vision as she came.

Kon's cock swelled in her, making her groan again as he came deep inside of her. Their bodies were slick with sweat, but neither one let go. Athena tasted blood and quickly let her mouthful of Kon go. He pressed his forehead to hers, kissed his blood from her lips.

"I want you. Not just until this job ends. I want you permanently," Athena stammered, her throat getting thick with emotion she didn't know how to express. Kon's stern gaze went soft above her. He kissed her cheeks, her nose, her jaw with aching tenderness.

"I'm yours for as long as you want me, Athena. I'm not going anywhere until you want me to go. Understand?"

Athena smiled, wrapped her arms and legs around him so they were as close as two people could get. "Okay."



KON COULD FEEL the words in his mouth. Those three little words he never thought he would say to another person...that he hadn't spoken since his mother had died.

He held off, Silas's comments about Athena needing time to process things ringing in his head. She had admitted that she wanted him permanently, and that was all he needed.

"You know, I've been thinking," he said, trailing his fingers up her bare spine. She had her head on his chest, and it felt so damn good to have her pressed against him.

"That sounds dangerous," Athena replied and lifted her face to look up at him. "What's on your mind?"

"Liddell. If we manage to get him, and his actual residence is in Scotland, we will have our hands on a large collection. We will have

to deal with that," Kon began, his fingers gliding back down her skin. "I'm going to need your help. I thought that we could figure out exactly what everything is, and then you can return them to their traditional owners."

Athena broke into a smile that was so sweet, it made Kon feel stupid in the head. "I'd like that. I was also thinking about Liddell's collection. The main snag I had was, what if we find something magical and dangerous? Something that no one should have or be able to use? We can't give them to people like Altun and Ryker."

"I suppose it's a good thing I bought a warehouse," Kon said thoughtfully. "We won't know until we see it. I'm sure he's got a lot of books about magic too. I want those for myself to go through and learn more about it. I like using magic. It sounds dumb, but it makes me feel closer to my parents."

"That's not dumb at all, Kon. You loved them. It's okay to miss them," Athena replied. Kon tightened his grip on her, pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Just don't get sappy and soft on me, Konstantius. I like your hard edges."

Kon laughed. "I don't think there is much of a chance of that. I might be trying to connect to my heritage again, but I was the Basti of Istanbul for a long time. It's who I am, just like you're the wolf from the woods. There's no changing who we are, *güzelim*."

Athena kissed his chest. "Good. Otherwise, I would have to start stealing from you and force you to hunt me down again."

Kon rolled on top of her. "If you want me to hunt you, goddess, you only need to ask."

Athena's smile was sly. "I'll keep that in mind, Basti."

Kon and Athena arrived in Scotland the following afternoon. The others had all left Istanbul at different times and on different airlines. Kon had toyed with the idea of taking a separate flight from Athena, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"They want us both, and we will be weaker separated," she had said, and he had to agree. Being alone would make it easier for an ambitious bounty hunter to take them out. Together, they were a bigger target but also a more formidable one.

Leo and Izabella had fixed them a new set of identities, and they had risked the flight together.

Kon had to admit that it was nice to have her sit beside him and steal his in-flight snacks. He couldn't wait until Liddell and the hit out on them were dealt with so he could find a beach to lie on with her beside him. They had earned it.

Edinburgh was cool and cloudy when they landed and took a cab to their hotel in the Old Town. He had always thought that Liddell would have a mansion in England with his prim British accent.

It might be the Aurora history that makes him come here.

Liddell's motivations didn't matter. Only finding him did.

Kon's hand drifted to the medallion about his neck. He would make sure no one else died like his parents had, their bodies slashed up for whatever ritual Liddell had been trying to perform. Like they had been nothing but meat.

"Silas and Dante have picked up the cars for us," Athena said, from beside him, her fingers dancing on the screen of her phone.

"Good. One less thing to stress about. Any idea if Leo is still calm?" Kon didn't like the idea of using the hacker as bait, but he was the one that had offered.

"As far as I know. I'm sure if he changed his mind, Dante would've said something. I think he's hoping Leo won't go through with it."

"It's good Dante doesn't like the idea. It means he will keep a closer eye on him."

Athena smiled knowingly. "He keeps a pretty close eye on him as it is."

"What is it with you Edgeworths trying to play matchmakers?"

"I'm not playing anything. Dante will handle it on his own. He's like a dog with a bone when he wants something."

Kon laughed. "How did you guys meet?"

"A few years ago, he took a job in Baghdad and bodged it up. Silas was a part of the crew that got sent to clean it up. He pulled Dante out of a basement, half-dead from being tortured for three days," Athena replied, lowering her voice so the cab driver couldn't hear them. "Silas looked after him and his wounds. After that, Dante asked him to be his mentor. Silas is soft as shit and agreed."

"Soft is the last thing I would call Silas," Kon said with a frown.

"Oh, he's a tough bastard, but he's got a thing for strays. Me, Iz, Dante...he can't say no. He's already collected you under his wing even if you don't know it yet."

Athena told Kon how they had found Iz in Belarus, and Silas had looked after her until she was clean again.

"He's a good person," Kon said, taking Athena's hand.

"One of the best. He's also a cold-hearted, murderous son of a bitch."

Kon grinned. "Aren't we all?"

They pulled up in front of their hotel on Holyrood Road, and Kon scanned the streets, the rooftops, the people walking by. He turned to see Athena doing the same thing. Her glacier blue eyes were taking notes of the cars, the exits of the hotel, the windows.

It made Kon want to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

They really were perfect for each other.

They checked in, pretending to be a couple of tourists. Athena went so far as to ask the concierge for their recommendations on local restaurants and attractions. They picked up the extra suitcase Silas had left for them earlier and gave them a hefty tip for looking after it.

"You are so good at this. I can't believe you made that poor receptionist draw tourist spots on a map for you," Kon said when they had been shown to their room.

Athena checked the windows, the wardrobe, and the bathroom. Kon opened the suitcase of weapons, courtesy of Silas, and tucked a handgun into his coat pocket.

"Maybe I want to see some sights when this is over," she replied before pulling him close and giving him the reckless kiss he had been craving. He ran his hands under her jacket and squeezed her ass.

"Hmm, don't start that. We are going to have visitors any second," she said between kisses.

"You should've told them we were delayed, then I could've bent you over that sofa—" There was a knock at the door, and Kon groaned.

"I told you," Athena said, giving his ass a pat before going to answer the door. Her hand turned the handle, and the door was suddenly forced in. Kon saw the barrel of the gun and dove behind the couch as bullets sprayed. He pulled out his handgun and went to return the fire.

Athena was faster, two blades left her hands, and the shooter collapsed, a knife in his cheek and the other between his eyes.

"Fuck. Just what we need," Kon snapped. He checked the hallways, and seeing no one else, he kicked the dead man's feet the rest of the way inside and locked the door. Athena had already wrapped a towel around the man's head to stop any blood drips.

"Grab his feet," she said, and they carried him into the large shower stall. It had a shower head at each end, and Kon lamented not getting a chance to use it before the bodies started to drop.

"I want to know how he knew that we were here," Kon muttered. He went through the man's pockets and found a phone. He used the

dead man's thumb to open it and checked the last message.

Think I just saw Athena Edgeworth. Going to check. Payday, fucker!

Kon swore, took a deep breath, and messaged the number back. **Mistaken. Just a hot blonde with a great ass.**

Athena had cleared out the dead man's ammo and was checking his gun over. "One more to add to the collection."

The phone in Kon's hand buzzed with a return message. **Didn't think your luck would be that good, dumbass.**

Kon filled the sink with water and dropped the phone into it. He glanced at Athena, but she didn't look half as worried. She took out her phone and put it to her ear.

"Please tell me you have a kit ready to go. Ah uh. Yeah, the guy tried to do both me and Kon in our hotel room. The audacity. Okay, I'll get him ready." Athena hung up. "Silas is on his way. Just breathe. We will sort it out."

"Had to get rid of unexpected bodies often?"

"More often than you would think. And this bathroom is nice and big to work in. Help me strip him."

Kon took off his jacket and shoes. "For the record, this wasn't what I was planning to do with you this afternoon."

"Every day with me is an adventure, Zalam," Athena said, pulling her knife out of the man's face and passing it to him.

By the time Silas and Izabella arrived ten minutes later with two suitcases, the body was stripped and laid out. Kon had cleaned up the small amount of blood that had marked the tiles.

"Fucking amateur," Silas grumbled when he looked at the body. "The size of that shower stall is going to make this easy."

"Did he start shooting when he was already inside or out in the hall?" Izabella asked, sitting on the couch and opening her laptop.

"Pretty sure when he got in, but scrub the footage of him entering the hotel. I don't want him being traced back here, even without any sign of a gun," Kon said.

Silas opened the small suitcase he had arrived with and tossed some gloves at Athena. "You know the drill, Cubbie. Great aim with those knives, by the way."

"Thanks, Dad," she replied with a beaming smile. She pulled off her boots and put on a disposable set of plastic coveralls. "I'll set the timer. Let's see if we can beat our personal best."

"You're on, kid," he replied, putting on his own suit.

Kon had disposed of bodies before, but he had never experienced anything like the Edgeworths working as a team and chatting like it was just another day...because it actually was.

"It's better just to stay out of their way," Izabella said, not looking up from her laptop. "Any phone on the guy?"

"I drowned it," Kon replied.

"Good. Make sure it gets scrubbed and put into one of the bags with a body part."

A high-powered buzz, no louder than an electric shaver, came from the bathroom.

"Fucking hell, is that a saw?" he muttered.

"Oh yeah, they are thorough. They have this thing about beating their personal best time. I once watched them cut up and bag a body within twenty minutes. Unreal. This guy is pretty big, so let's see how they do."

Kon laughed. "And I thought I would be the weird one."

"Not even close. Hang around the Edgeworths long enough, and you're going to get a whole new perspective of what you consider weird," Izabella replied.

Unable to help his own morbid curiosity, Kon stood in the doorway of the bathroom and watched. Silas and Athena worked in tandem, Silas cutting the man's arms and legs in three pieces each. Athena went behind him, putting the pieces into bags and using a machine to seal them.

When she was done, she repeated the process and placed the clean bag into a large suitcase. Izabella was right. They didn't say a word, didn't look up from what they were doing, just moved as one perfectly oiled machine.

Just how many times had they done this?

They managed to get the whole body packed into the suitcase without breaking a sweat.

As Izabella had predicted, it took them less than twenty minutes, and that included bleaching down the shower, putting the gloves,

coveralls, glasses, and hair covers they had been wearing into another bag. Athena had even used bleach wipes on the tiles Kon had cleaned up the blood.

"Time!" Silas called, and Athena stopped the watch.

"Seventeen minutes, twelve seconds," she said triumphantly.

"Fuck yeah, team Edgeworth for the win," Silas replied, high-fiving her. "You okay there, Basti?"

"Are *you*? I've never seen anything like that in my life," Kon admitted, shaking his head. If he didn't love Athena beforehand, he would undoubtedly be in love with her after that display. A woman who could clean a body in seventeen minutes? She was a hitman's dream come true.

"Welcome to the family," Silas said, winking at him as he zipped up the suitcase. "Damn, this guy was heavy. How did you do with the hotel security, Izabella?"

"No problems, *Jefe*. He was good at avoiding cameras, but the few elbows and stray legs that were caught on the CCTV are gone." Izabella shut her laptop. "Now what?"

Silas checked his watch. "Sundown in an hour. How about coming for a twilight drive with me and dumping some body parts in the North Sea?" he asked, giving her a charming smile that showed both of his dimples.

"Only you could make that sound like a fun time. You better be buying me dinner too," Izabella replied, hands on her hips.

"You got it. I feel like a steak. We'll see you two opposite the club at ten. Get room service, and don't show your faces out on the street. We have other shit to do tonight than deal with another fucking body," Silas replied, wheeling the bigger suitcase behind him. Izabella took the smaller one with all the equipment in it.

Athena stripped off her shirt and wriggled out of her jeans. She gave a bemused Kon a dazzling smile. "Want to come for a bath with me?"

He laughed, unable to do anything else. "Absolutely."

Athena had dressed warmly, the autumn equinox already turning the night chilly. There was a hum in the air and in the nighttime streets.

Kon had stepped out of the hotel room and had become something sharper than he had been all day with her. She couldn't help the tiny thrill that tingled along her bones every time she looked at him. The Basti was on the hunt.

They walked the four blocks to where Silas and Izabella had set up in a transit van. The basement club, Earthly Delights, was across the street. Its entrance was only a door painted with vines and flowers.

"Ohh, Dante is going to love that," Athena murmured. There had to be another entrance or exit, and she was sure that once he was inside, Dante would find it. The merc in him wouldn't like not knowing all the exits.

Everything is going to be fine.

Athena opened the back door of the van, and they got in. Leo looked the most relaxed out of all of them in his dark jeans and white shirt tight enough that showed off his broad shoulders and olive tan. He was bait alright, but he would catch more than Liddell if he wasn't careful.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know why people keep asking me that. I can take care of myself. *Mio Dio*, it's only a club."

"Well, if you don't feel okay once you get in there, you can leave. Athena and I will be keeping an eye on the streets, and Dante will be with you," Kon reassured him.

There was another rap on the door before Dante opened it. He was dressed in a black button-up shirt and black jeans. He had even managed to run a bit of product in his clipped hair, so he didn't look like he had just fallen out of bed. Athena tried not to smirk. Dante didn't dress up for anyone.

"You still want to do this?" he asked Leo gruffly.

"Yes. Stop asking."

"You won't have any comms on you, but I'll be keeping a close eye the whole time," Dante said as Leo got out of the van. "You get into any situation that makes you uncomfortable, you find me."

"So you can swoop in and save me like my very own knight in shining armor?" Leo asked sarcastically.

Dante's hazel eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer so that Leo had to tilt his head back to look him in the eye. "Not like a knight. Like a mercenary with some brass knuckles and a set of pliers for anyone who so much as grinds up against you in a way you don't like."

Leo's cheeks were stained with color. "I'll be fine. I'll see you in there." He turned around and headed across the street for the vine-covered door.

"Breathe, D. You look like you're about to bust a nut," Silas said from the front seat.

Dante made a frustrated noise and pushed a small comm device into his ear. "Leo should be safely holed up behind his computer somewhere, not trying to be a snack for a psychopath."

"I have sparred with Leo in a boxing ring; trust me, he's got this," Kon said.

"You'd want to hope so, Basti. If anything happens to him because he's trying to impress you, I'll use my pliers on you," Dante said, slamming the door to the van and moving across the street towards the club.

"What was that about?" Kon asked with a frown.

Athena only shook her head and fitted her own earpiece in. "I do believe Dante has a crush."



INSIDE, the club was lit with gold and green lights. Leo moved down a steep staircase that had been muraled to look like a rainforest. When he had reached the bottom, he looked back and saw Dante coming down behind him.

God, the man radiated menace when he glared like that. His hazel eyes narrowed in on him, and Leo suddenly felt like the bait he was meant to be playing. He quickly looked away and let a woman in a pixie costume stamp his hand.

"Welcome to the autumn equinox, beloved!" she chirped happily at him.

"*Grazie, bella*, I can't wait," Leo said, laying on his accent. They didn't know if Liddell had someone working in the club to help him choose his victims, so Leo was already playing tourist just in case.

"Ohh, I love an Italian! You have fun!" The music was thumping as the pixie opened another door for him to grant him entry.

Leo walked through an archway of greenery and fake orange and brown fall leaves and into a cave of low, warm lights. The packed club had two stories that overlooked a dance floor. All along the exposed brick walls were booths with people drinking and laughing. The fall theme had gone wild inside, and the railings for the stairs were lit with sparkling lights.

Leo didn't need to turn around to feel Dante's eyes on him; it was like a warm touch between his shoulder blades.

God, he needed a drink if he was going to have to deal with the sexy, glowering mercenary all night.

He made his way down to the lower-level bar and ordered a vodka and soda. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Dante come down the stairs. More than one curious head turned to look at him, and Leo really couldn't blame them. He was hot when he was relaxed, teasing Dante.

Dressed in black, his sleeves rolled up those impressive forearms, his expression aloof and calculated, Dante looked like someone's new daddy fetish waiting to happen.

And he was watching Leo's every move, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. At the thought of Dante's brass knuckles, Leo

went hot all over.

Jesus Christ.

Leo quickly looked away and drunk half of his drink. It was going to be a long night.

He pulled out his phone and checked his messages, half hoping there would be something to distract him.

"I'll have a scotch," Dante's deep timbre cut through the music from the other end of the bar. Leo finished his drink. He needed a buzz to get his head in the game and far away from his moody bodyguard and his perfect ass.

Leo ordered a shot of vodka, downed it, and ordered another from the handsome, smiling barman.

"You celebrating something?" he asked in an excellent brogue while topping up Leo's drink.

"I just landed from Roma and need to blow off some steam before I have to start work at my new job on Monday." Leo smiled flirtatiously. "It's very grown-up and important."

"Oh yeah? And where are you working?"

"National Gallery of Modern Art. I got an internship there," Leo replied.

"Congrats. I hear the competition can be brutal." The barman gave him a wink. "You enjoy your night, Mr. Rome."

Leo laughed, downed the vodka, and headed for the dance floor. The DJ was playing something melodic with just the right amount of beat. He was meant to be partying, so that was what he planned on doing. He hadn't had a night off in weeks, and technically, this one wasn't either. If he was going to be bait, he was going to be a *good* bait.

Leo let the churn of bodies drag him in until he was moving with the beat. After a few minutes, a large warm hand snaked around him from behind, and a hard chest pressed into his back.

"You might want to slow down on the vodka, *Mr. Rome*," Dante said into his ear.

Heat rushed over Leo's chest, his heart beating too hard under Dante's palm. "I might not. Didn't you hear? I'm about to start a new job."

"I was too focused on the bartender who was about to drool into your glass." Even with the beat, Leo heard the annoyance in Dante's tone.

"He was very cute. I wonder if he has a kilt he can put on and play Jamie Fraser with me," Leo replied.

Dante tensed behind him. The hand on his chest slid down to his abs, and he was tugged roughly up against Dante's chest.

"Try and remember that we are on a job, and you're not actually here to get your fine Italian dick wet," Dante growled in his ear.

"Maybe you should remember that you're here to observe and not act like my jealous, over dominant boyfriend every time someone smiles at me," Leo snapped.

He froze involuntarily as Dante's fingers slipped under the hem of his shirt and pressed hard into his too hot skin.

"I haven't even *begun* to show you my dominant side. Now, get focused, or I'll call this whole shitshow off," Dante warned, and then his hands and heat were suddenly gone, leaving Leo shaken, his pulse hammering in his throat.

Maybe he shouldn't have had that second shot after all.

"Are you okay? Was that guy bothering you?" a new voice said from beside him, shaking him out of his stupor. Leo turned to the barman, who was now amongst the crowd.

"No, he just doesn't like getting told no," Leo replied and let his flirty smile return. "What are you doing in here? Aren't you working?"

"I'm on a break and wanted to see how your celebrations were going. I'm Caleb, by the way."

"Leo. And that was nice of you. Celebrations are warming up."

Caleb smiled cheekily. "I have to say I'm relieved that Rick Flag wasn't your boyfriend or anything."

"Like Rick Flag from Suicide Squad? No. Not at all. Just a guy looking to dance," Leo laughed. It wasn't an unfair description, especially with Dante's soldier attitude and sandy blonde hair.

"And you turned him down?"

"Not my type," Leo lied smoothly, and because he knew that Dante was watching from somewhere, he put his arms around Caleb's neck and danced with him.

Afterward, they went back to the bar, and Leo ordered another drink that Caleb happily went to make.

"You know, there's a real equinox party happening at a friend of mine's house tonight," he told Leo as he mixed ingredients. The hair on the back of Leo's neck stood up.

"Really? What kind of party?" he asked.

"They can get pretty wild, but worth it for the experience. He's one of these bored rich guys that go all out. Unreal place." Caleb smiled, all Scottish charm, and placed a colorful drink on the counter.

"What's this?" Leo asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's an equinox-themed cocktail. Don't worry; it's mostly orange and pineapple juice."

Leo had a mouthful of the sweet and sour mix. "Not too bad at all. When do you plan on getting off to go to your friend's place?"

"Not long now. He's got a bunch of drivers. He'll send us one. Just relax and drink up," Caleb said, his hand messaging on his phone under the bar.

Things were getting weird. Leo turned to spot Dante, but his vision blurred.

"Woah, what else was in that drink?" he asked.

"Just some tequila. You okay?"

"Yeah, maybe the heat is getting to me," Leo replied, rubbing at the back of his neck. He looked for Dante again, wondered where he had gone. If he was making out with some twink in a dark corner.

You told him to back off, remember?

Leo swayed again, and Caleb was suddenly by his side, his arm propping him up. "Let's get you some air, Mr. Rome. You aren't looking hot," Caleb said, helping him up and through a staff door behind the bar.

Leo stared around at the colorful bottles that he was led past. A rush of cool air met him as Caleb half carried him up a short flight of stairs and into a back alley.

"Just breathe, Leo. You're going to be okay," Caleb assured him, his face blurring. A car pulled up, and the back door opened.

"You're working fast tonight, Mr. Fairfield," a crisp voice said from the inside of the car.

"He literally fell into my lap, so I took what the gods gave me. He's sweet," Caleb said, accepting a pale blue envelope from the driver.

"Wass happ..ning..." Leo slurred. Their voices turned to a distant hum, and Leo was put into the back seat.

"Just relax. You're in for the night of your life, handsome," Caleb assured him before kissing him and shutting Leo into the darkness.

Athena was contemplating going for a snack run when the comm device in her ear crackled to life.

"Athena! Leo's gone," Dante exclaimed over the noise of the club.

"Okay, I'm on it." Athena opened the door of the van and hurried out in the streets.

"The alley," Kon said from behind her. "I'll watch your back." They went down a service lane behind the club just as Dante charged out the back door.

"Did you see him?" he demanded.

"I thought you had eyes on him," Kon said coldly.

"I did! He was at the bar, and then he was gone..." Dante trailed off, and his expression darkened. "Go get a car and meet me here in five." He vanished back inside.

"Better do as he asks," Athena hurried back to the van. "Iz, start pulling up any surveillance you can on the traffic cams. Leo's been taken. Silas? You have the spare keys?"

Silas handed them over and pointed to an SUV parked two spaces up. "What's happening?"

"Dante has a plan. Stay with Iz. I'll let you know what's happening when I know."

"Will do."

Athena jumped in behind the driver's seat, Kon beside her, his handgun out and its silencer on. Athena pulled up behind the club

just as Dante reappeared with an unconscious man over his shoulder.

"Who is this?" she asked, opening the back for him.

"He's the fucker who drugged Leo. We are going to find out what the fuck happened."

"And where are you planning on questioning him, Hill?" Athena demanded.

"Don't worry, Silas and I organized a place in case Kon wanted to interrogate Liddell. Head for Sighthill," Dante replied, getting into the back seat.

"You made me a kill room? I'm strangely touched," Kon said with a small smile.

"We get to use it sooner than we thought. Lucky us."

Athena pulled out into traffic, Kon plugging in the address Dante rattled off into his phone so it would give her directions.

"So what makes you think the bartender knows anything?" Kon asked.

"Because he was all over Leo from the moment he arrived. They danced, and Leo went back to the bar. I saw him sitting there, and everything was fine. I got hit on, and by the time I shut the guy down, Leo had vanished, and so had the bartender. I went back downstairs, and the guy was back to serving. I checked the bathrooms, but Leo was just...gone," Dante said, so worked up he was almost rambling. "When I asked the bartender about what happened to Leo, he gave me some shit about minding my own business and that Leo was fine, got a bit smug and said I should leave Leo alone. So I hit him and took him out the back. Found an envelope of cash in his back pocket."

Athena laughed. "Fucking hell, Hill. I hope you're not wrong about this."

"Don't care if I am," Dante replied, lowering his voice. Athena looked at him in the rearview mirror, saw the killing calm that had suddenly come over him.

Fuck.

"Message Silas, Dante. Let him know where we are going," Athena said and focused back on the road.

Kon was silent and alert beside her, a tenseness in his shoulders that hadn't been there half an hour ago.

"Don't worry; we'll have Leo's location in no time. Nothing is going to happen to him, Kon," Athena said softly. He surprised her by resting his hand on her thigh but didn't reply.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled into a storage facility with rows and rows of locked sheds. They had rented a shed on the far end of the property, choosing something outside and not in the main enclosed buildings. Athena backed the SUV up as close as she could to the door.

"Dante, where are the cameras?" she asked, not getting out of the car.

"At the very end, and Iz already has been into their system to rig this end to be invisible. Silas had her do it right after we rented it. You know what he's like with his 'always be prepared' motto," Dante replied. He still checked all around them for any eyes before he unlocked the padlocked roller door.

"Let's see what this asshole has to say for himself," Athena said and found some black zip ties.

Dante hauled the unconscious bartender out of the back of the car and dropped him onto a metal chair. Athena helped him zip tie his arms and legs to the metal frame.

"Silas sure makes quick work of setting up in a new place," Kon said, stepping into the storage shed and closing the door. It had tubs of equipment and a box of plastic sheeting.

"Silas is always prepared for everything. Help me with the sheeting," Athena said, and they rolled out the plastic under the chair. "If you're squeamish when it comes to this kind of thing, Basti, you might want to wait outside."

Kon gave her a look somewhere between contempt and amusement. "You seem to be forgetting who you're talking to. If Dante wasn't so eager for his pound of flesh, I would have cheerfully made this fucker squeal for you, Edgeworth."

Athena grinned. Not many men out there offered to torture someone for you. "You say the sweetest things."

Dante went through the plastic tubs of equipment and took out a bottle of water. He had a mouthful before he tipped the contents over

the bartender. He came to with a start, thrashing against his restraints.

"What the fuck is going on? Who are you—" his gaze focused on Dante. "You! What the fuck, man?"

"What's your name?" Athena asked.

"Caleb," he shouted and struggled again.

"Where is Leo, Caleb?" Dante pulled out his brass knuckles and slipped them on. "Spit it out, or this is going to get messy."

"How would I know?" Caleb demanded. Dante's fist whipped out, and Caleb's nose broke with a sickening crack. He screamed, blood rushing all over him.

"Where is Leo?" Dante asked.

"He...he wanted to go to a party. All I did was get him a ride," Caleb spat.

"What party?"

"E-Equinox party."

Dante gripped the man by the face and tilted his head up. "Really? Then what did you put into his fucking drink?"

"Just...something to help him relax. He wanted to party."

"Rohypnol is going to make him relaxed, alright," Athena commented, and Caleb flinched. She wanted to give the guy a few hits herself, but Dante and Kon had it handled. She had a feeling that her hands were going to be bloody enough by the end of the night.

"If you were so helpful, what was the money for? Does Liddell often pay you to feed him fresh meat?" Kon asked, his dark eyes narrowing.

Caleb went pale and thrashed. "I d-don't know who you're talking about."

"Athena, beloved, cover his mouth for me," Kon asked. Athena grabbed a towel from the plastic box and wrapped it around a panicked Caleb's head.

Kon placed the tip of his silencer on top of Caleb's knee and pulled the trigger. Caleb screamed, a high-pitched wail through the cloth.

"I'm going to ask you again. Where has Liddell taken Leo?" Kon asked. He nodded to Athena, and she lowered the cloth.

"S-Silver End," Caleb whimpered.

"What is that exactly?"

"It's his place... it's outside Silverburn."

Kon smiled, and it sent a chill through Athena's bones. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Dante shoved him out of the way. "Do you have any idea what Liddell does to the guys you procure for him?"

Caleb muttered. "He promised he wouldn't kill anyone else. You don't understand. I had no choice. He's got... he's got this power that forces you to do whatever he wants. If I didn't help him, he was going to hurt my little brother."

"Well, then you'll understand how I feel about you hurting Leo. He's like a little brother to me. Like those other men were someone's brothers," Kon replied. He looked at Dante and nodded, giving him the option.

Dante didn't hesitate; he just took Kon's gun and put two bullets in Caleb's head.

"We need to go. We can fix this mess later," Athena said. Wrapping the towel around the dead guy's head. They tipped him onto the plastic and wrapped him up before shoving him into the corner.

Athena's phone buzzed, and she lifted it to her ear. "Iz, what did you find?"

"The number plate of the guy that picked up Leo. Traffic cams have him heading out of the city towards—"

"Silverburn."

"God damn it! I don't want to know how you found that out," Izabella sighed. "Do you know where it is?"

"A property called Silver End. I don't think it's going to come up on any Google Earth searches."

"Then it's a good thing you have a beautiful hacker you interrupted before she could tell you that she got the VIN number from the registration records and has pinged the GPS antitheft security on the engine. I'll be able to let you know as soon as it stops. For now, head to Silverburn," Izabella instructed.

"Iz? Have I told you today that I love you?" Athena asked.

"Say it with diamonds, *pendeja*," Iz replied and hung up on her. Athena grinned. The fun was finally about to start.

Tension was coiling tighter and tighter inside Kon the closer they got to Liddell. He had waited over twenty years for this moment, and never in all that time did he think he would be doing it with other people. *Especially* not with a woman he was in love with.

A part of him was anxious about her getting in the line of fire, but this was Athena fucking Edgeworth. There was no one that Kon would rather have on a murder spree with him.

Athena drove fast, all of them eager to find Leo and get the fighting started. Kon thought they would be more hot-headed before a fight, but it was the opposite. Athena's expression had gone wolf-like, and Dante was dead-eyed. It reassured Kon that they would be able to take care of themselves if they were met with any resistance. They were out for blood as much as he was.

Dante leaned in between them from the back seat. "Iz just sent me through the location of where the car stopped. We are ten minutes out, and they have found a spot at the back of a small wood."

"That explains why all the other victims were babbling about a forest," Kon murmured. He put spare magazines into his pockets. Liddell would have people out guarding the woods if he was paranoid enough. "Tell Silas to keep an eye out. Liddell will have cameras or men on the ground."

"On it," Dante replied, typing away.

Following Izabella's instructions, they drove through the small town of Silverburn and out along a side road to get close to the Pentland Hills Regional Park.

So much for thinking he would be living in a city. Liddell was playing the country gentleman with his own estate and parklands. It made Kon mentally rethink just how big of a collection he had.

They found Silas and Izabella a short time later, the former loading a large black rifle. "How are we doing, kids?" he asked.

"Ready to find Leo and get this over with," Dante said. He slung on a holster of guns. "Have you found him yet, Iz?"

"Working on it," she said from the front seat but didn't look up.

"I'm going to find some higher ground and get some eyes on the mansion. Liddell seems to be having an actual party, so be careful where you're shooting. We don't want the police up our asses before Kon has got the bastard," Silas said, shouldering the gun. "You going with him, Cub?"

"Someone's got to have his back. Besides, the more people trying to find Leo, the better," Athena replied. She fixed a tiny camera on Kon's jacket before fastening her own. "So Iz can keep an eye on us."

"And make sure no one tries to jump you," Izabella called back to them. "I'm in his system. Idiot is on wireless, and for someone with so much to hide, he skimmed on cyber security."

"Finally, some good news." Silas glanced over at Kon. "What are you thinking, Basti?"

"That I'd like to go through the front door," Kon replied with a smile that was all murder. "It will also give you a chance to sneak in the back. I'd like Liddell to be surprised I'm working with a team."

Silas nodded. "Fair enough. Just don't get Athena shot."

"According to her, if we ever got into a fight, I would die way before her," Kon replied.

Athena slid on the last of her knives and two handguns, her black jacket going back over the top. She tugged a beanie over her pale hair and looked so damn adorable, Kon wanted to kiss her.

"And don't you forget it. I plan on using you as a human shield to get you back for being a pain in my ass all these years."

"Keeping mouthing off, and I'll show you what a pain in the ass I can be," Kon threatened.

Athena only smiled slyly. "Really? You promise?"

"Stop flirting right now before I shoot the both of you," Silas said. "Keep your comms on. I'll see you out there."

Athena kissed Silas's cheek before he and Dante melted into the trees and were gone. She looked at the side road that led up to the property's main gate.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

Kon nodded and then hesitated. "Athena, if I don't make it...."

Athena's blade was suddenly under his chin. "Not another word. We don't have time for you to get all pathetic on me, Konstantius."

"Fine. I'll wait until we are done, and I have my dick in your mouth, so you can't talk back when I try and tell you I give a shit about you!" Kon shoved the knife away and kissed her until she melted against him, her hands twisting in his shirt.

Athena hummed against his lips. "It's a deal."

"Now, we can go," he said, releasing her.

Izabella cleared her throat. "Ah, comms were on for that, guys."

"Sorry about that, Dad," Athena giggled, her cheeks going red.

"Fuck you both. I'm going to have to kill so many people tonight to get that shit out of my head," Silas's reply came in Kon's ear.

Athena tossed her daggers two-handed and winked at Kon. "Let's go get your revenge, handsome."

Kon took out his guns, and like shadows, they slipped down the edge of the woods. They reached the tree-lined road that led to the main set of gates. Two armed guards were smoking cigarettes outside of it.

"You want them?" Athena asked, just as the two men both dropped to the ground.

"Too slow, kiddies," Silas said through the comm. Kon looked around to try and spot him. Athena only laughed softly.

The mansion in front of them was made of pale stone and wrought iron. A fleet of identical black BMW sedans was parked on a gravel area that overlooked extensive gardens with pretentious statues of naked women.

"Looks like he owns a limo service. You think they were picking up other people like they did Leo?" Athena murmured and opened the front door.

"I wouldn't put it past Liddell. I bet none of them know who he really is," Kon replied. He kept his guns lowered as he stepped into the main entranceway.

Music was coming through hidden speakers, and everywhere he looked was fine antique furniture, rich oak paneling, and overpriced carpets. They pushed open a set of double doors, and Kon stared.

"Shit. There is a lot more to collect than I thought," he murmured. He knew that Liddell was obsessed, but it was like stepping into a museum of magical and religious arcana.

There were glass cabinets and cases packed with relics and jewels, grimoires and athames, crystal wands, and deformed skulls... Kon had to pull his attention away from it all so he wouldn't start touching things to see what they were. Some of the items Kon recognized as things he had procured, including the manuscript he had stolen from Athena in Cyprus.

"If this is the stuff he has randomly lying about, I can't wait to see what he's really hiding," Athena said slowly.

"Hey, you two aren't meant to be in here. This is the Grand Masters' private area," a man snapped. He was wearing a flimsy velvet robe and nothing else.

"We are the extra security. Liddell asked us to do a sweep. He was worried about an intrusion," Kon said calmly.

"Probably just someone stepping too close to the warding. The hunt will begin soon, and people are already starting the ceremony," the stranger replied with a gleeful smile and went back through the stacks to a far door.

"Kon, what the fuck did we just walk into?"

"I'm not a hundred..." Kon began when he felt a surge of magic roll through him. He looked up and saw metal rods carved with symbols that had been placed on the walls. They led from the gallery and through the door the man had disappeared through.

"What's wrong?" Athena asked, pulling out a dagger.

"Magic. Something is happening, and those spikes up there are acting as lightning rods to channel power through the house," Kon

murmured. He had never seen anything like it.

"The creepy naked guy did say something about a ceremony," Athena said. She moved over to the door on the other side of the room and opened it a fraction. Sounds of moaning and ecstatic shouting echoed out of it, mixed with heavy drumming.

"What the actual fuck?" she muttered, sticking her head around the door. Kon followed her quickly, worried she would accidentally step into whatever fucked up ritual Liddell was in the middle of.

They walked down a dark corridor, and the sounds of people fucking and the drumming got louder and louder. There was a cloud of smoke in the air that smelled of...

"Shit, don't breathe too deeply. That's opium and incense," Kon muttered. At the end of the corridor was a velvet curtain. Kon hid his gun by his side before pulling the edge of the drape to the side and looking in.

They were in a large circular room lined with velvet curtains. Burning stands of coals and braziers of the opium concoction were placed around the room. In the center were at least twenty naked people with symbols painted on their bodies in blood and gold. They were dancing and fucking, crying out in the throes of ecstasy.

Three figures stood, watching on and beating on drums. They were wearing black robes and horned masks that obscured their faces. Each was carrying a golden spear and had a hunting horn on their golden belts.

"Kon?" Athena whispered, but he only shook his head and held a finger to his lips. He didn't know what the ritual was, but it was generating a massive wave of energy. Kon glanced up and pointed at the rods in the walls that were leading in another direction.

"That's what we need to follow," he whispered in her ear.

They were about to move when the drumming got louder, and a figure came through the other side of the curtain.

"Fuck, it's Leo," Athena murmured. They had stripped him down and put on him a golden loincloth. His hands and feet had been cuffed with golden bands. The same symbols in blood and gold had been sketched on his skin. His eyes were blurred, and he swayed, drugged off his face. On his head, they had put on a pair of golden antlers.

"Give thanks to our Golden Stag that brings in the Autumn with his blood," one of the horned figures declared. The people stopped whatever they were doing and, in their opium fuelled haze, started chanting.

"Let the sacred hunt begin!" The three figures pushed Leo past their adoring hands, and they went back through the curtain.

"This way," Kon said, and they skirted around the back of the velvet drape to where Leo had disappeared. The hall had been decorated with freshly cut pine and fir bowers and made to look like a forest.

"Iz, I need some eyes on the back west end of the property," Athena said low. "We've spotted Leo, and I think they are going to hunt him."

"Headed that way through the woods," Dante's voice came through, deep and pissed.

"Leo's wearing golden antlers, don't shoot him by accident," Athena replied.

Kon pointed to more of the rods. "These will lead us to whatever ritual Liddell is attempting."

Athena nodded. "Let's see if we can find those creepy bastards with the horns before—"

They froze mid-step as a cry of pain echoed back to them.

"Leo." Kon took off running, pushing aside the branches, and went through another curtain.

They were outside in a sloping terraced garden, with burning torches lining a path for them.

Sticking to the shadows as much as they could, they followed them through a winding path that made the hair on Kon's neck stand up. He gripped Athena's arm, halting her.

"What's wrong?"

"This path, the torches, it's...I don't know. It's a part of the ritual, and if we stay on it, we will get sucked into the magic," he struggled to explain.

"Okay, then let's cut straight through that way," Athena said, pointing through a row of decorative flower beds. "The torches are looping back around, so we go the easy way."

Kon nodded, his heart kicking involuntarily that she didn't question him or think he was crazy, just followed his lead. He pushed down the soft feeling and refocused on Leo.

They trampled through the flowers and decorative hedges until three horses came into view at the edge of a looming forest. The horned figures were mounting, their golden hunting horns at the ready.

"God, they really are dramatic," Athena muttered. "No sign of Leo."

"The stag is released. Let the glorious hunt begin!" the master of the hunt declared and blew his horn. The other two followed suit, and their horses sprang into action, racing into the woods.

Athena tapped her comm again. "Dante, you have incoming. Hunters are in the woods with Leo. He's hurt. We heard the screams."

"On it," Dante replied.

The master of the hunt raised his arms. "May Cernunnos grant us good fortune and—" Kon shot him twice in the chest, and he fell off the horse with a scream.

Kon ran over and pulled the horned mask off his head. It wasn't Liddell but a balding man in his fifties.

"Where is Liddell?" Kon demanded as the man coughed up blood. His eyes went to Athena and went wide.

"It's you." He reached out a bloody hand toward her. "T-the girl from the forest."



THE WOODS WEREN'T the worst that Dante had slogged his way through in his life, but it was the first time he had been worried about someone's life other than his own. The full moon was bright enough that he didn't even need a flashlight. It didn't make the whole thing any less eerie. He kept his SA80 rifle high as he scanned the trees around him.

Dante hesitated and then swore. He was tired of being subtle. "Leo! Where are you?" he shouted. He shifted as a golden spear

sailed through the air towards him. "Fuck!"

"Intruder!" a man's voice shouted, and a horse charged through the undergrowth, a monster on his back. "You dare interrupt the sacred hunt!"

The creature lifted a horn, but Dante shot him three times before he could raise it to his lips. The horse reared in fright, and the dead man toppled off the saddle.

Dante kicked the body in sheer frustration. How many more of these fuckers were hiding about? He pressed the small button on his earpiece.

"Silas? We have assholes on horses loose," he said.

"Noted, thanks. Do you have eyes on Leo?"

"Not yet." Dante looked at the golden spear, imagined it in Leo's body. He hurried away, burying the horrible image amongst the mire of all the others in his brain. He was getting turned around in the darkness, so he switched courses to aim back towards the mansion.

Leo is going to be okay. Other men less intelligent than him got away.

A hunting horn echoed through the trees, and Dante ran towards it. A flash of light caught his eye. Dante turned as a creature with golden horns came through the brush.

"Leo? Leo! Over here!" he shouted. The golden flash turned its course.

"The monster is coming!" Leo screamed and followed it up with some kind of shout in Italian. The horn sounded again as another mounted hunter crashed through the trees, golden spear raised.

Dante caught Leo with one arm and shot the hunter off the back of the horse in a rain of bullets. The horse reared, and Dante pulled Leo out of the way and underneath him. One hoof clipped Dante in the back of his Kevlar vest, and they tumbled down. The horse neighed again and raced away.

"Dante, Dante, Dante," Leo murmured, his hands gripping his back tight.

"You're okay. Just breathe. There are no more monsters. It's the drugs." Dante eased off him. Blood was smeared all over Leo's body from slashes in his arms and legs. Dante gently pulled the antlers from his black curls and tossed them away.

"I'm burning. It hurts. Dante," Leo murmured, reaching out for him again.

"You're going to be okay. Let's get you somewhere safe." Dante lifted Leo up in his arms. Leo began murmuring under his breath in Italian and wrapped his arms around Dante's neck.

"You came to rescue me," he said in English and then began to cry.

Dante tightened his grip on him. "Of course I did. No one's going to hurt you ever again. I promise."

Athena stared down at the bloody man and gave him a hard kick. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"He's dead." Kon stepped back from the body and swore. "I don't think Liddell is any of the hunters. He's somewhere else."

Athena's hands clenched around her daggers. She didn't recognize the dead man from her memories.

"We can figure out who he is later, Athena. We need to stop whatever Liddell is about to do," Kon said and shined the flashlight on his phone around him.

"What are you looking for?" Athena asked, dragging her eyes away from the dead man.

"More of those spikes. If my guess is correct, all of this, the relic room, the ceremonial orgy, the hunt...all of it is to generate the power Liddell needs. I know it doesn't make sense," Kon replied.

"It doesn't have to. Clearly, nothing about these fuckers is normal. Where you go, I follow," Athena said. There was no way she was leaving Kon's side. Everything was getting too weird.

"There," Kon said, pointing to the rod.

"Can't you just rip them out?" To Athena, they only looked like metal spikes with nothing attached to them.

"No, don't touch them. Either the energy being generated through them will electrocute you or suck all of your energy into the spell and

make you another kind of rod," Kon warned. Athena took an automatic step back from them.

They followed the spikes, the hair on Athena's body rising as they were drawn deep into a maze of hedges. She had her daggers raised and ready. There was a strange smell in the air, not like opium but herbal and copper. Like blood and earth and burning ozone.

"Stay close, something isn't...something is off," Kon said from the darkness in front of her. Fog seeped up from the ground around Athena's ankles, and she kicked at it.

"Kon? What's with the fog?" she whispered. "Kon?" He was gone. Athena ran to catch up. "Kon? Where did you go? Iz? Can you hear me?" The comms in her ear were silent.

Athena stopped and took a calming breath. It was just a damn hedge maze, and she had daggers that could cut her way out if she had to.

Athena turned to do just that, but the wall of greenery already had an opening. She shook her head as if to clear it.

What the fuck is in that fog?

Athena went through the opening, checking around corners before turning them. She didn't call out for Kon. He was on his own and wouldn't want her giving her position away to Liddell or anyone else that might have been lurking.

Like the horned demon that makes people crazy? She needed to stop thinking about that. Anything could be killed with a sharp enough dagger. This she knew.

"Athena," a voice called softly.

"Kon?"

"Athena, this way," the reply came.

Athena hurried through the maze, following Kon's voice, almost crashing over a statue to reach it. Fear and panic rushed through her.

"Kon? Where are you?" she called, uncaring that she sounded like a scared little girl.

"Athena, you're so close...." She ran faster and faster, her daggers slashing at the hedges and their reaching branches.

There was a light burning up ahead, and she bolted towards it. She rounded a corner and stumbled into a circle of bright and

glowing light. A man stood on a marble platform in a simple grey suit. He would've been in his fifties and had grey threaded into his brown hair.

"Athena Edgeworth, it is an honor to meet you at last," he said in an elegant British accent.

Athena raised a dagger to throw at him, but suddenly they were too hot to touch, and she dropped them with a cry of pain.

"Now, now, my dear. There's no need for that," he tsked with a kind smile. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Really? Because your kill squad in Istanbul says otherwise," she snarled.

"I apologize for that. If I had known who you were, I would've gone about things differently. Come closer, and let me look at you. It's been so long."

Athena didn't want to move, Kon's warning about being pulled into the spell echoing in her mind. Invisible hands gripped her legs, and she began to march like a demented puppet towards Liddell.

Symbols made of blood and white candle wax were sketched on the marble around him. Small gold coins and objects were pressed in them, but she couldn't make out what they were.

Athena stopped outside the circle. Whatever was happening inside of it was making Liddell glow softly.

"The girl who survived the massacre. Who would've thought that you would return to us? Gadai will be so glad to hear that you are back where you belong," he said, looking her over with a pleased smile.

"What are you talking about?" she whispered.

Liddell tilted his head. "You don't remember? Oh, my dear girl. You are one of a kind to survive that level of magic. It all worked out so much better than we hoped. Join us, come back to your family."

Athena stepped back. "Thanks, but I already have a family."

"Athena! Get away from him!" Kon's voice cut through the air, his commanding timbre like a cold breeze blowing the fog out of her head.

"Konstantius. I wondered where you had gotten to," Liddell replied, his smile vanishing. "You can still join us. If I had known who

Athena was, I wouldn't have been so upset about you betraying me for her all these years. Now she's home where she belongs."

"The fuck she is. Athena is mine," Kon snarled. He was starting to shimmer around the edges, and Athena wondered if she was high from the smoke. She backed away from Liddell, forcing her body to move towards Kon.

"You will stay where you are," Liddell hissed, and the grass and earth rose to wrap around her feet and hold her. She struggled against it, kicking out and trying to free herself.

Liddell swore. "God, you are so powerful and don't even realize it. I have the mana of thirty-nine people pulling through me right now, and you can still resist it. Gadal is going to be thrilled."

"The fuck he is. I'm going to stick a dagger through him for what he did to my parents," Athena said, reaching for the khanjar at her back. She pulled it loose and started swiping at the grass and earth.

"Your parents, what do you...you think they were at Pokrovskoye? You really don't remember, do you?" Liddell looked confused.

Athena kicked out at the earth and freed her boots. She stumbled towards Kon. He was definitely glowing, and Athena remembered the day on his bed where he had been doing magic with the vine. The look in his eyes was pure murderous hate.

"Do it, Kon, before he kills you!" she shouted as branches shot from the hedges and began to drag her back.

Kon didn't hesitate, didn't give any last speech about who he was or why he wanted to kill Liddell. Athena couldn't feel magic like he could, but the invisible force that pulsed out of him was enough to knock her to her knees.

She rolled onto her back as she was dragged by the hedge. She slashed out at the branches, but there were too many, and she was pulled up into the greenery.

Kon was below her, walking towards Liddell who was still in his circle.

Athena didn't know much about magic, but she knew daggers. She stopped cutting the hedges, kissed the flat of the blade that had been bought with love, and threw it.

Liddell dodged reflexively, but the blade hit the marble at his feet. His shout of victory died on his lips. The tip of the dagger had knocked one of the golden medallions out of its wax. The circle was broken.

Kon's smile was pure violence as he raised one hand towards Liddell and gripped the air. Liddell screamed, his hands scratching at his face and neck. All of the golden light around him vanished as Kon closed in on him.

"Stop! I'll give you...whatever you want." Liddell screamed as he curled in on himself.

The Basti of Istanbul didn't bargain.

Kon gripped the man's face with his hands and pulled the literal life right out of him, his expression of hatred and nightmares the last thing Liddell was ever going to see. The man shrunk as his cells died, his body disintegrating until he was a husk.

Kon shoved the body away from him with a shout. He was crackling with energy like a Tesla coil.

"Kon..." Athena whispered, and his head snapped towards her. "Let the power go, *aşkı*." Kon's expression cleared, the murder leaving his face as he studied her.

"Athena Edgeworth, did you just call me your love?" he asked, truly shocked. He looked down at his hands, small electrical snaps of power dancing off his skin. Kon dropped to the ground and buried his hands in the earth. Like he was a living lightning rod, Kon forced the magic into the ground with a shout of pain.

"Kon!" Athena kicked and thrashed against the greenery holding her. Her arms and chest broke free, and she fell forward with a cry.

Strong arms caught her and held on. "I have you, *güzelim*. I have you." Kon helped free her legs, and Athena pulled him close.

"Don't ever scare me like that again," she snapped and kissed him. His hands buried in her hair and dragged her up against him. He tasted of lightning, and copper, and Kon.

"You called me *aşkı*," he said against her lips. "You do know it means, 'my love.'"

"That's what you're taking away from everything that just happened? Not that asshole recognizing me from Russia? Or that you finally got your revenge?" Athena demanded, shoving him away.

Kon laughed, a big joyful sound. "God, you're a pain in the ass."

"I am. Come on, Gandalf, we need to find the others."

"This conversation isn't over, Athena Edgeworth."

"It is for now," she said, her ears going red. She went to the marble slab and picked up her dagger. "Come to mommy, you beauty." She kissed it again and tossed it in the air.

Kon was giving her an amused, besotted grin, and she flushed hotter.

"Stop looking at me like that, Konstantius. What are we going to do with that?" she toed Liddell's shriveled body with her boot.

"He can feed the crows until we know the others are safe. Let's go back to the house and see who we can find. My comm is fried," Kon said, taking it out of his ear. He held out a hand towards her.

Athena twisted her fingers around his and hung on tight.



THE HOUSE WAS EERILY quiet when they made it to the back doors. Kon's skin felt like it had thousands of ants crawling under it, the echoing after effects of having so much magic running through him.

"Dante! Over here!" Athena called, letting Kon go and hurrying to the other mercenary coming out of the woods. He was carrying a limp Leo in his arms, and Kon's stomach dropped.

"Oh god, please tell me...."

"He's not dead," Dante said. Kon went to help carry him, but Dante pulled back protectively. "It's fine. I got him."

"Dante, the monsters..." Leo murmured.

"There are no more monsters. We killed them," Dante said.

Leo started speaking softly in Italian, and Kon grinned. "He's quoting poetry at you. Something about you eating his burning heart."

"It's the *La Vita Nuova*," Athena said with a wicked smile. "He's quoting Dante Alighieri at you. He's your Beatrice."

"Fuck off, Cub. He's off his tits. Help me get him inside," Dante grumbled.

Kon opened a door into the house. "Let's find somewhere to see to his wounds."

"We also have an orgy to break up," Athena reminded him.

The back of Kon's skull tickled in awareness. "I don't know if that's going to be a problem." He couldn't feel any magic in the house like he had before.

They left Dante and Leo in a bathroom on the second floor and tried to find their way back to the study and ceremonial room.

Silas came through the front door, gun high. "Alright, Cub?"

"One piece? Where's Iz?"

"On her way to help with clean up. No one else was answering their comms."

"Magic blew them out. Dante and Leo are upstairs. Both seem rough around the edges."

Athena hugged Silas tight, and he lowered his gun. "What happened, Athena?"

"Liddell knew me from Russia. Said Gadal was going to be happy I survived. That my parents weren't there...."

"Shit. Okay. We'll deal with that later, little one. Let's sort out this clusterfuck first," Silas said, releasing her.

Kon pointed to the study door. "We might need your help. I think things are going to be messy."

"Lead the way," Silas said, his brows knitted in concern for Athena.

"Here's hoping they have their pants back on," she muttered.

Kon led the way, gun out but low. All of the rods that had been used to channel the magic were twisted and charred. They opened the door to the ceremony room, and the smell of cooked meat instantly hit them.

"Fuck, I know that smell," Athena cursed.

All the people that had been in the circle were dead. What was left of them was ashen bones and fat staining the floor.

"God, what happened to them?" Silas asked, lowering his gun and staring about.

"Magic," Kon replied. "Liddell used the mana they created from the ritual and then drained their energy too. The spell shattered when Athena disturbed his circle."

"You mean...I did this?" Athena asked, her voice breaking.

"No, *güzelim*. They were dead before that. Do you remember when Liddell said he had the power of thirty-nine people? He had already killed them. You just made the power bounce back and... fried them," Kon explained.

Athena nodded and gave Silas a sudden bright grin. "Well, at least the clean-up is going to be easy."

Kon stared at Athena, relief and love twisting in his heart. It was over with Liddell, but he never got his answers why he had killed his parents. In the end, those answers weren't as important as killing Liddell to keep Athena safe from him.

Kon shook his head as Silas and Athena talked about being able to hose out the room. "Mercenaries."

Istanbul was warm for fall. Athena tried to imagine the terrible grey wet that London would be and smiled at her decision to move their operation. Not that Kon was going to give her the chance to run away back to London.

"If you dare, I'll keep you tied to my bed," Kon had threatened. She had instantly tried to leave and had spent a pleasant afternoon with her face screaming into his mattress as he made good on his promise to tie her up.

It had been two weeks since Edinburgh, and instead of the holiday they both wanted, they had to deal with the fallout of Liddell's death. Kon had boxed up Liddell's collection with Athena. They had organized it and the rest of his records and books to be shipped to Istanbul.

And then Kon had burned Liddell's fine country mansion to the ground.

Athena's phone rang, and she hurried to answer it. "What's up, Zeus?"

Silas, Iz, and Dante had taken over Kon's old apartment in Laleli while they worked on finding Gadal. Silas especially had been edgy ever since she told him about what Liddell had said about Russia and all he had implied about Athena. Gadal would go down, and then she would get her holiday.

Leo had gotten himself an apartment close by in Ayakapı and still wasn't willing to talk to anyone about Scotland. No one would push

him either because Dante was still acting like a guard dog whenever someone brought it up.

"Izabella and I are coming over in an hour. The first lot of Liddell's collection is going to be arriving at the docks. Make sure you got pants on," Silas replied.

"I will, I promise. Bring me something good to eat. Kon's had his nose buried in books all day, and I'm starving," Athena complained, staring into the empty fridge.

Silas's laughed. "You know you could actually try and cook something for yourself."

"I could, but Kon is better at it than me, and if you're already on your way over...."

"Okay, you win. We'll be there soon for a brainstorming session and to help with the crates."

"You're the best dad that anyone could ever find in a forest," Athena said.

"And don't you forget it."

Athena hung up just in time to see Kon emerge from his office. His hair was ruffled from his hands running through it, a habit he had when he was really into whatever he was reading.

He grinned at her, and her chest exploded into happy butterflies. She still hated that he could do that to her.

"Was that Silas?" he asked.

"Yes, he'll be here in an hour along with the first of Liddell's stuff."

Kon's smile turned deviant. "Excellent. We have plenty of time for me to give you this." He brought his hand out from behind his back, and Athena's brain fizzed with delight.

She bit her lip. "For me?"

"Something I picked up last time I was in Milan. I thought you might like it," Kon offered her the dagger.

"Ohhh, it's so pretty," Athena hummed, studying the fine engravings on the hilt. "Hmm, sixteenth-century Milanese."

"The man who sold it to me claimed it was made for one of the Dukes of Urbino," Kon replied.

Athena moved closer to him. "And now it's going to be used for removing buttons."

Before Kon could stop her, she slid the knife in the top space of his shirt and slid the blade down in one smooth move. Buttons and thread fell to the floor.

"Look at that, still sharp," she mused.

Kon's eyes darkened. "I liked this shirt, *güzelim*."

"And?" Athena said with a slight rise of her shoulder. Kon took a step toward her, but the tip of her new dagger halted his progress.

She mused, "This dagger is so well balanced, I could probably carve my name in cursive on your chest." The tip of the dagger went lower to the button of his jeans which joined the rest on the floor at his feet. "Oops."

"Be careful that dagger doesn't slip any lower," Kon warned. He disarmed her with a quick move and sent the dagger sailing through the air to bury into the corkboards of information that they had kept up.

"Lost your dagger so soon? You must be getting slow," Kon said. His wicked smile slipped as Athena's leg shot out and knocked the back of his knees. He went down with a curse, and Athena ran up the stairs laughing.

Kon caught her as she reached the bedroom, tackling her to the red and blue woven carpets. Kon pinned her on her stomach and straddled her ass, strong hands holding her arms down.

"You're in a fine mood this afternoon. Is it because I wasn't paying enough attention to you?" he purred in her ear. When she didn't reply, he ran his stubbled chin up her bare neck. Athena kept her mouth shut, fighting the urge to throw him off.

"Obstinate as always. If you want my dick in you, you only need to say the magic words," Kon said. His hand went underneath her to undo the clasp on her pants.

Athena squirmed as his palm dipped down to rub her pussy. The hand was gone seconds later, and she let out an involuntary mutter of disapproval.

Kon gripping the back of her tank top and tore it. "A shirt for a shirt, Edgeworth." He unclipped her bra and ran his hot tongue up her spine.

"Kon," she murmured, her skin breaking out in goosebumps. "We should...the bed is just there."

Kon lifted her hips up and pulled her pants down her ass. "You wanted to cut things and run. You're going to get fucked where you fall. You know the rules."

Athena went to ask him what rules they were, but Kon's mouth closed over her, and she emitted an inarticulate cry. "Kon..."

Kon's hands tightened on her ass, spreading her legs wider as his tongue swirled. "Yes, Athena?"

"Get inside me," she begged.

Kon hummed against her clit, and Athena's back arched. "I don't think I will. I think I'll keep you wet and needy and not let you come at all. Then you'll have to sit through the rest of the night, wishing you had just asked politely."

"Please, *aşkim*," she said, rising up on her forearms.

"You only call me that when you're about to die or want to be fucked," Kon growled and pressed two fingers inside of her. Athena trembled underneath him, pushing her hips back onto him, needing the relief.

"Because that's when I love you most," she admitted breathily.

Kon made a strangled sound. "Fuck, Athena." He removed his slick fingers and thrust his dick inside her. Athena cried out, fingers gripping the carpet, trying to get purchase as he pounded into her. This was precisely why she only used it during sex. Calling Kon her love drove him crazy like it flicked a switch in his head, and he had to be in her as quickly as possible.

Kon's arm went around her, and he hauled her up and slung her over the edge of the bed. His hand curled around her face, and his fingers went to her mouth. Athena sucked on them, and he shuddered behind her.

"Say it again," he demanded. His hand moved from her mouth to clasp around her throat. "Say it, Athena."

"Or what?" she said breathlessly. She reached around her to grab at his thigh that was resting on the edge of the bed. He shifted angles and slid back into her, and she babbled something inarticulate against the sheets.

Kon bit her shoulder and licked the sweat on her back. "Now that I have you unable to escape, there's something I need to tell you...."

"Don't you dare," Athena warned.

Kon laughed like the devil he was. She started to wriggle to throw him off. His hand hit her ass, so she jerked forward. "So predictable. I love you, my mean, beautiful girl." Athena surged forward and off him. He lost his balance, and she rolled him over, climbing on top of him, and slid back on his hard dick.

Kon laughed breathlessly underneath her. "You hate that you love hearing it so much. Just say it, *güzelim*."

Athena rode him, her orgasm starting to dance inside of her. Kon clasped one of her breasts, eyes hot as they watched his dick slide in and out of her. Athena gripped him with the inner walls of her pussy, and his eyes rolled in the back of his head.

"Say it," he groaned, growing harder inside of her.

Athena gripped his face, kissed his parted lips. "I love you," she hissed like it was a curse. "Now fuck me until I scream."

Kon got her on her back, legs around his hips as he drove into her. Athena pulled his hair hard, dragging his mouth to hers. "I love you," she repeated and then shattered underneath him.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" Kon purred with a satisfied smile.

"Shut up and come for me," Athena demanded, dragging her nails down his back. Kon obliged her, his teeth clamping down hard on her breast.

"Fuck, Athena," he murmured against her sweaty skin. "You sure like to make me work for it."

Athena brushed his sweaty hair back from his brow, studied his sharp, unforgiving face. "And you do every time, without fail."

"Devil woman," he murmured and kissed her, his lips and tongue claiming her.

Downstairs, someone banged heavily on the warehouse door. Kon looked down at her, his expression full of love and mischief.

"You ready to begin the hunt again, Ms. Edgeworth?" he asked.

"All depends. Is there going to be danger, magic, a psychopath to kill, and lots of hot sex in exotic locations?"

Kon ran a thumb over her lip. "Would I offer you an adventure without your favorite things? Are you in?"

Athena kissed him hard and with all the love she had in her violent, demented heart. "As long as it's with you, *aşkim*."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

Come say hi to me on Instagram, or keep track of all of the gossip early by subscribing to my blog newsletter at:

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Thank you for reading 'DARKEST NIGHT' if you loved it please consider leaving me a short review or a rating on Amazon as it helps other readers find my books.

Need more mercenaries? Keep reading for a sample of SET, a book about the Egyptian God of War working as a soldier of fortune in a modern day Egypt.



SET



PROLOGUE

Long ago, the world was void and chaos. Out of the churning mass of the dark and wild waters of Nun, the god Atum rose. He began to do what he did best, and started creating.

In time, and with no small effort on behalf of Atum's children Shu and Tefnut, the turbulent waters receded. Geb, the primordial earth, and Nut, the sky, separated. Re, the sun, finally found a place to rest, and everything started to get warm.

And thus, the world was born along with four new gods: Set, Osiris, Nephthys, and Isis.

Then life started to get really complicated...

Once, he had been a god of the deserts, with the storms and fiery, red sands in his veins. He was a wild dog, a beast of cunning, strength and protection, annihilation and destruction.

Every night, he fought Apep, the demonic serpent of the Duat, to save the worlds and the petty gods that ruled them.

Set had been war on the wind and burning lust between the sheets. He had been worshiped, revered, feared.

Now, his typical day was reduced to guarding a group of drug dealers as they ran cocaine out of Cairo.

How the mighty have fucking fallen, he mused, stubbing out a cigarette in the hot, sandy street.

The world changed; stories became myths, and even those were more twisted than the waterways of the Nile. Set had seen Egypt change so many times throughout the centuries, he had lost count.

Currently, just about every city and *nome*, or district, in Egypt was run by a different government party, and the majority were puppets to gangsters or warlords. He never bothered to keep up with current power changes unless they affected him directly.

The only thing that time never changed was people. The strong preyed on the weak, the rich on the poor, and only power ever seemed to matter.

Set knew all about power because he was the strongest of them all. The men he worked with didn't need to know that. He tended to keep a low profile these days.

Only his boss, Kader Ayad, knew of his divine status, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it.

"Hey, he wants to see you now," a prison guard said from his booth at the front of Cairo prison.

Set ducked under the boom gate and made his way through security. They let him keep his phone because he was well-known, and they knew better than to try and take it from him. He relinquished his two handguns and an ancient khopesh sword that hung on his back.

Set was kind of pleased to see swords being used more often. Bullets were expensive, but blades could be used over and over. He liked his sword, and his back felt naked without its weight.

A guard escorted Set even though he knew his way around the labyrinth of cells. It was all for show; they were all ready to play pretend as if Kader Ayad didn't run the whole place.

Kader himself was a well-built man in his early fifties. His cell was bigger than everyone else's, decorated with rugs and a proper bed. He had a desk with neat notebooks stacked in one corner.

"Ah, Set, it does my old heart good to see you," Kader greeted as the guard opened the cell door to let Set in. They shook hands, Kader acting like a benevolent father figure who was always worried that Set wasn't taking care of himself.

"Why don't you get yourself a decent house already?" Set asked him, leaning against the cool iron bars. He checked that the guards were gone, and they had some measure of privacy.

Kader chuckled. "You know as well as I that this is the safest place for me."

Set did know. He was the only one of Kader's men that actually supported him going to prison. It was a lot harder for his rival bosses to get to the richest man in Egypt if he was behind bars. It kept the killings in Cairo down, and that was good for business.

Kader owned the prison like he owned the judge who had sentenced him. Kader was kept comfortable, and he kept his business running as efficiently as he had ever had.

"So tell me what's on your mind, boss?" Set asked.

Kader scratched his graying stubble. "I have a problem, and I don't trust anyone to handle it but you."

"Sounds serious." He'd had Kader give him death squad orders with more cheer.

"It is. I received word this morning that Moussa Omar has...found my daughter."

Set cocked his head. "What daughter?"

It was rare that Set was surprised. He'd thought that Kader couldn't say anything that would shock him anymore.

"My daughter, Ayla, that I've kept hidden for the past thirty years. I don't know how that slimy shit found out about her."

"Does she know who you are?"

"Of course not! I'm a bastard, Set, but I would never do anything to compromise her safety or her mother, Amara. I loved them, so I walked away from them and kept them hidden." Kader raked his hand through his hair. Set had never seen him so shaken.

"I've kept tabs on her over the years, making sure she had enough money for school, that sort of thing. I never made contact with her, even after her mother died. Never wanted to risk it."

"How do you know the Adder is after her?" Set asked.

Moussa Omar had been the leader of their rival syndicate for the past five years. They had an uneasy truce with the Adder and his snakes, but that didn't stop both men from circling each other and wearing down each other's businesses.

They were a few insults away from a skirmish, and if Moussa killed a family member, it would be an all-out war.

"Abasi got intel from one of our spies that are working their way through the Adder's ranks. Moussa was boasting that he would topple our family as soon as he had Ayla. They are going after her tonight." Kader sat heavily on his chair. "This is the exact reason why I kept her a secret, so she would never be used as a bargaining chip."

"Looks like they have men in our ranks, too, if they have found out. Better get Abasi to plug that leak," Set said.

Abasi was probably the only other person Kader trusted implicitly. His second in command had been like a true son to him and was good at getting information out of people. Kader liked to say that Set was his hammer and Abasi was his scalpel.

"Where am I heading, and what information can you give me?" Set asked.

Kader opened one of his books and pulled out an envelope. He passed Set a photo of a woman wearing a white doctor's coat and an easy smile. Her long, curly brown hair was held up in a messy bun, her arms around a group of laughing children. Set took a picture of it with his phone and handed the photo back.

"Pretty. She must take after her mother," he teased. The old man managed a smile.

"She does. She's a doctor with *Panacea*. They are a Doctors Without Borders sort of setup, run on philanthropic funding. She's been working all over Egypt and Africa but is currently based on the malaria outbreak just north of Aswan," Kader said, pride in his voice. His expression clouded. "They said they are going to snatch her tonight. I need you to take the helicopter and get there first."

"How messy do you think it's going to be?" Set asked, mentally going through his inventory of weapons.

"I would like you to get her and get out of Aswan before they can reach her and cause a fuss. *Panacea* is important to her, and I want to keep civilian casualties at zero if you can." Kader's fatherly face slipped away, leaving only the cold mob boss behind. "If you encounter Moussa's men, you can be as messy as you like. He needs to know that there are some lines he can't cross without consequences."

"Understood. What should I tell the girl?"

"The truth, if you have to. Get her out of there. I don't care what it takes," Kader replied. "When things cool down, I'll set her up somewhere. Until then, she's your responsibility."

"You said this was an extraction, not a fucking babysitting job."

"Just do as you are told, Set," Kader snapped. He flinched at his tone and added apologetically, "Please do this as a favor to me." A favor carried a lot of weight in their world, so Set nodded.

"Fine. I'll let you know when it's done."

Set headed out of the prison and breathed a little easier as he slung his sword on his back.

He checked the picture on his phone, the doctor smiling up at him. He didn't know her, but he was sure she didn't deserve the shit

that was about to rain down on her.

Set climbed onto his motorbike and headed towards the airfield where Kader kept his helicopter and an excellent collection of weapons.

He grinned at the afternoon sky. He knew when a good fight was coming, and he could just about taste blood in the air.

Moussa didn't hire complete idiots. At least he wouldn't use the idiots for a job this important. Set would get in and get out before they knew he was there.

As for the doctor, how much trouble could she be?

Doctor Ayla Neilos was trying to tackle her never-ending amount of paperwork and wished for the hundredth time that they could hire another medical administrator.

Only on days when it got out of control did Ayla miss the private practice she had worked at in Alexandria.

At least with *Panacea*, she felt like she was making a difference, and that was worth it. It didn't matter if she was working out of demountable buildings, and tents with no air-conditioning. Even the moments of utter boredom felt more endurable.

Helping people who really needed it and seeing the good their work did was worth the painful paperwork and justification for every pound they spent.

Ayla put down her pen and rubbed at her tired eyes. She would need more tea if she was going to finish the stack of work before midnight.

Ayla had been working north of Aswan for the past month where a strange case of malaria had broken out at Nagaa Al Hajar. With any luck, she and her boss, Pierre Abras, would wrap up the inoculation project soon, and she would be able to go home to Alexandria for a few months.

Ayla hadn't had a break in years, and she was exhausted emotionally and physically. She had been avoiding going home since her mother had died of breast cancer.

The apartment felt too empty without her, and only when she was there, did Ayla feel truly lonely.

Can't run from it forever. Maybe not, but she had been doing a damn good job so far.

Outside, the sun was setting, staining the Nile River with red and gold streaks of light. Ayla stopped to admire it for a few moments, so she didn't see the man making his way to her through the small demountable buildings.

"Are you Ayla Neilos?" a voice asked behind her.

"Yes?" she said, turning around. She didn't have time to scream as she was struck in the face, and a black bag was put over her head. Rough hands pushed her to the dirt, pulling her hands together. Ayla wriggled until something cold was pressed to the back of her neck.

"Relax, little mouse. I really don't want to shoot you," a man said. Plastic ties were looped around her hands and zipped together. "Your father should have hidden you better."

Her father? "You have the wrong person. My father is dead!"

The man only laughed as someone grabbed her feet and arms. She was tossed into a van, more voices shouting outside as they drove away.

Ayla tried to keep her breathing steady under the hot hood, her cheek throbbing in agony.

She had some self-defense and weapons training; it had been a prerequisite for working in the war-torn places *Panacea* went to. She was someone whose presence would be missed, and if her attackers wanted a ransom, *Panacea* would pay it.

All Ayla had to do was stay calm and wait for an opportunity to get away. At least, that was what she told herself over and over.

The drive wasn't long. The sounds of traffic were loud, and the smell of the city coming through the open windows told her that she was probably in Aswan.

"If you make a sound, I'll put a bullet in you. Understand?" someone asked, nudging her in the ribs with a gun.

"Yes," she replied. He hauled her upright and out of the van. Night had fallen, and through the fabric of the hood, Ayla could make

out the glare of streetlights. A door opened, and she was marched up a flight of stairs.

"So this is the lost princess?" a new voice sneered, and the bag was ripped off her head. A man stood in front of her, a scar curving along one black cheek and disappearing under a cap. A serpent had been tattooed on his neck in white ink. "Ah, it's going to be a shame to wreck such a pretty face."

"What do you want with me? I have money. My company will pay you. Just let me go," Ayla said, licking her dry lips.

"It's not about money. It's about the respect your father owes us."

"I'm telling you, my father is dead. Look, the locket around my neck." Ayla turned her head so they could see the silver chain. "There's a picture of my father in it. He died in a car accident when I was a baby."

The man tugged the necklace out, Ayla flinching when his fingers stroked against her breast to pull the locket free. He opened it and started to laugh.

"This is not your father, and you know it. Tell us how he is getting his cocaine into Cairo," he demanded.

"I'm not lying—" The man struck her hard and fast in the ribs and stomach, and Ayla dropped to the dirty floor wheezing.

"Lock her in the room." He stared down at her with pitiless eyes. "You have an hour, and then if you don't start talking, I'm going to get creative."

Ayla was dragged into a windowless room. The man who had snatched her hauled her up into a wooden chair and fastened her arms to it.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be, Doctor," he said, the door slamming behind him.

Ayla's eyes filled with tears as she wriggled and pulled against her bonds. She swallowed down her fear and tried to think.

Ayla knew little about her father, only that he had been a doctor and died when she was a baby. That's what her mother always used to tell her. She never remarried, and as Ayla got older, she stopped asking questions that only made her mother sad. If he *was* alive, which was impossible, why would her mother lie about it?

Ayla didn't know anything about the person that these men thought he was. She had to think about what else she could offer them to spare her because she didn't know about cocaine in Cairo.

You are so fucked, a small voice whispered, and Ayla began to panic.



An hour later, the door opened, and Ayla was dragged, chair and all, into the other room.

Five men were staring at her, heavily armed and marked with the same snake tattoo on their necks.

"You ready to talk yet, Doctor?" one asked. He pulled a knife from his belt, and Ayla jerked in her chair. Heavy hands pushed her shoulders down and pulled her head back.

"I'm telling you, I don't know anything about cocaine or the man you think is my father. I can't give you something that I don't have," she said. The cool flat of the blade was pressed to her cheek.

"Such a shame. This face is so pretty," the man hissed.

A heavy knock sounded at the door, and all five men tensed. Ayla let out a breath as the blade was taken away from her face.

"No one knows we are here, boss," one man said, looking nervously at the door.

"Check who it is."

The nervous man pulled out a gun and opened the door a crack. The weapon dropped from his hands as a knife was pressed under his chin. He backed up, and another man stepped through the door, kicking it closed behind him.

"Gentlemen, you have really fucked up tonight." The stranger was tall and powerfully built, with a neatly clipped beard and long hair tied back. Dressed in black and heavily armed, his golden gaze rested on Ayla, and the world went silent.

Power radiated from him, and Ayla suddenly knew that he was the true predator. The others were only playing.

The air seemed to suck out of the room as their gazes locked in a long, tense moment. The hair on the back of Ayla's neck rose as he

took in the bruises on her face and frowned. He dragged his golden eyes from her to the man beside her.

"Do you idiots know who I am?" he asked in a deep growl.

"You're Set Akhom," a braver man answered. "I thought you were a myth." This seemed to amuse Set, who flashed a sharp smile.

"Good, so you know what I'm going to do to you if you don't give the doctor to me."

The leader of the group shifted behind Ayla and pressed his knife to her throat.

"Not going to happen, dog. I don't care who you think you are. Moussa will have his prize and take Cairo with it."

"Moussa is stupid to think he can win a war against Kader, and you know it."

Ayla went cold as the edge of the blade dug into her skin, and wetness dripped down her neck. Set's eyes glowed like those of a feral animal. A gun went off, and the knife fell away from her neck.

"Down!" Set shouted, and Ayla threw her body forcefully to the left, tipping the chair and hitting the floor hard. Hot blood that wasn't her own splashed down over her, and she screwed her eyes up tight.

Men were screaming, guns exploding. Then all went shockingly silent.

"It's over," Set said from beside her. He cut her hands free and lifted her to her feet.

Carnage was the only word that crossed Ayla's mind as she took in what remained of her kidnappers. Bile rose in her throat, and strong fingers gripped her chin, pulling her gaze up to the blood-splattered man in front of her.

"Don't look. Can you walk?" Set asked. Ayla nodded numbly. "Good, we need to get you out of here before the others arrive."

"Who the fuck are you?" she demanded.

Again, that too sharp smile flashed on his dark face as he took her hand. "Isn't it obvious? I'm your knight in shining armor."

Set had never been a knight in shining armor in his long life. He wasn't in the hero business, but he needed to put the doctor at ease enough to trust him.

That's not something you need her to do either.

He was surprised that he wanted her to feel safe with him.

Set had been late by mere minutes. The doctor's camp had been in an uproar by the time he arrived, and Ayla was gone.

It didn't take him long to track them to a shitty neighborhood in Aswan. He expected more from Moussa's men. He had planned to prevent a war by not killing them...and then he got his first good look at the doctor.

A photo hadn't done Ayla Neilos justice. Even dirty and sweaty with one cheek bruising, she was fascinating. The image hadn't captured the intensity of her big hazel eyes that felt like she had physically grabbed his guts and pulled hard.

Set hadn't been sucker-punched by destiny in a long time, but he knew it when he felt it. He had been a god of protection before a god of war, and this woman with a death sentence hanging over her head and full, utterly fuckable lips was about to become his number one priority. She just didn't know it.

For fucks sake, not now. Not her.

Set had been mentally scrambling right until the moment the bastard holding Ayla made her bleed. He suddenly didn't care about avoiding war and being diplomatic to ensure Cairo didn't become a

battleground. That one drop of blood trickling down her throat had woken the sleeping monster.

Now the whole shitty apartment looked like a slaughterhouse.

Fucking pull yourself together. You're not out yet.

"Let me help," Set said. He picked Ayla up, carried her over the bloody piles of men to the front door, and placed her back down on a clean spot. "Stay close and behind me."

Set took her smaller hand in his, and she nodded. She looked pale but wasn't going into shock yet, which was a surprise.

In this part of Aswan, people had learned to look away when blood-stained people stumbled out of a building.

Set led them down side streets, eyes scanning the cars driving past, the people on the footpaths, constantly searching for anyone Moussa might have sent as backup. They would find the mess at the apartment soon enough and would be hunting both of them.

Let them come.

He was more than ready and wound up enough to really do damage.

"Where are we going?" Ayla whispered, dousing his fiery bloodlust.

"To a safe house, then I can figure out how to get you to Cairo in one piece," Set replied. He stopped at a market stall to buy her a scarf and tossed it to her. "Here, cover that blood on your shirt."

He knew that anyone around them would happily tell Moussa's serpents about the big mercenary and blood-stained woman.

Only a handful of Kader's people knew about the apartment in Aswan. There were safe houses scattered all over Egypt for his men to use for whatever business they had in the area. Set knew Ayla only had a certain amount of time left before the stress of the night got to her.

She's a doctor. Maybe she's used to it.

"We are almost there," he said, gruffly trying to reassure her. Sweat was starting to bead on her increasingly pale face.

Set checked the address on his phone again, and three streets later, they found the right building.

Inside, the narrow winding stairwell was littered with cigarette butts and smelled of cooking. Set opened the door and rested a

hand on the small of Ayla's back, pushing her gently inside.

"Let me check the rooms," he said, locking the door behind them. He did a quick scan of each room, but a rattle at the door had him stepping back into the hall.

"You don't want to do that, doctor," he said. Ayla's hand froze on the deadbolt.

"You have no right to keep me here," she replied, a spark of fire in her hazel eyes. Anger was better than panic.

"For the time being, it's what's in your best interest. You don't think Moussa has men watching your camp? Or the apartment you're renting while you're here? You are a wanted woman, and you will die tonight if you leave here," Set replied, crossing his arms.

"And what makes me any safer with you? I don't know you! You killed all of those men!"

"Because I don't want you dead, Ayla. I'm going to protect you, and you might not like being stuck in here with me, but you'll like being tortured, raped, and murdered a lot less."

Ayla turned her back to him, rested her head against the door, and sobbed. Set would rather face an army alone than deal with a woman's tears.

"Why is this happening?" she whispered.

"Because of your father."

Ayla let out a choked laugh. "God, not you too. My father is dead."

"No, he isn't." Set had the disturbing impulse to bring her into his arms and comfort her.

Ayla turned, tear tracks down her dirty face. "Do you have a way to prove it?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Well?"

"I'll tell you, but only after you've had a shower and had something to eat. You'll feel calmer once you've washed the blood off," Set said, pointing to the bathroom door. "I'll find you some clothes. They will be men's, but they will be clean."

Ayla wiped at her cheeks and looked him dead in the eye. Again, he felt that clenching pull on his Ka, telling him that she was important and needed his protection.

"Can you promise me that I'm going to get out of this alive?" she asked.

"I can if you stay with me."

"You're just as much of a killer as those other men were."

Set laughed. "No, I'm so much worse. That's why you should be glad I'm on your side."

"I should be glad?" Ayla snapped, anger taking over. "I was just kidnapped, beaten, and almost killed for a man who is meant to be dead!"

"But you weren't because of me. The words you're searching for are 'thank you,' doctor."

Ayla glared at him, and damn if he didn't love that furious challenge in her eyes. She stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

"New soap is in the top drawer," Set called, grinning when she called him an utterly filthy word.

Keep hold of that fire, doctor. You're going to need it.

A search of the apartment produced a clean t-shirt and a pair of jeans that Set placed outside of the bathroom door. The window in there was too small for anyone to get through, so he left her to it.

Set washed the blood off his arms and face in the kitchen sink. He needed to message Kader to reassure him he had Ayla. She had nothing of her father's looks at first glance, but he had seen the same kind of anger in her eyes.

When Kader got that look, Set knew he was about to kill a lot of people. Kader's anger inspired bloodlust. Ayla's fiery glare hit him...elsewhere.

Shit. You have no right to think about the boss's daughter that way. Especially a soft healer who cries.

Set had an unnatural weakness for things that were forbidden, and she certainly was. He could hope she was the kind of person who responded to threats to her life by fucking the nearest man senseless, but he doubted it. He didn't need this kind of distraction in his life.

Set splashed his face with water again and went to see what food they had. Maybe if he ate, it would calm down what she had woken in him, and he would be able to think clearly again.

Ayla had expected the safe house to be dirty like the place she had been held in, so she was surprised to find everything neatly organized and relatively clean. She locked the bathroom door behind her and tried to steady her heart rate.

The brute of a man in the other room could probably kick it down, but the lock made her feel better.

Ayla slowly took off her ruined clothes and, with a doctor's eye, checked her injuries. Bruises were blooming like purple flowers along her ribs, and her shoulder ached from slamming into the floor.

There was a bleeding cut in her hair, her cheek was swollen, and she had red and blue bracelets around her wrists from being tied.

Apart from that, all of her other wounds were psychological. In the basin mirror, her eyes looked back at her hollow and grieving expression.

My father is alive. Set said he could prove it and seemed like he was willing to convince her. Who was her real father if it wasn't the man in her locket?

That wasn't what hurt her the most. Her mother, the only person she had really loved and trusted, had lied to her for her thirty-two years of life.

Was it because her real father was some kind of a drug dealer? That was the last kind of person she imagined her gentle-natured mother being involved with.

It's hardly the first time she lied to you about something, is it? Ayla pushed the voice down. She could deal with only one emotional crisis at a time.

Ayla searched the cupboards and found sealed packets of soap, shampoo, and other toiletries. It took a while for any hot water to come through and felt like heaven when it did.

Ayla hugged herself, rubbing her arms, trying to get warm as the shock she had been pushing back finally hit her. Tears rushed out of her, and she gripped the cool tiled walls to keep upright.

She hated feeling so powerless. All of the training she had done in case she was snatched while working in war zones meant absolutely fucking nothing when faced with the real thing. She hadn't been given a chance to fight back, to use anything she had learned.

If it wasn't for Set...she didn't want to think about it. Violent, powerful energy vibrated off him, and as much as Set scared her, she didn't feel like he was a threat to her.

Knight in shining armor, my ass.

She had met soldiers with hero complexes, and he certainly wasn't one of them. Set wasn't just a mercenary. He was a killer.

Ayla thought of the piles of bodies they had left behind them. Then she remembered the warm hand that had gently pulled her face away from the sight of the massacre before he carried her in his arms so she didn't get blood on her shoes. Confusing didn't even begin to describe her night or the man that was now protecting her.

When she finally felt like she had gotten herself back together, Ayla dried off and opened the door a crack. She grabbed the clothes left for her and quickly locked the door again.

After washing her bra and underwear in the sink, Ayla hung them over a towel rack and hoped they would be dry by morning. She didn't particularly like the idea of not wearing any or having Set seeing them drying, but she didn't have much choice. She dressed in the borrowed clothes that swam on her.

"You can get through this," Ayla told herself. She combed out her wet curls and opened the bathroom door.

Set was in the kitchen, cooking something that smelled good enough to make her stomach grumble.

"I made tea if you want some," he said without turning around.

"Thanks," she replied and poured herself a steaming cup. She slid onto a chair at the small table and sipped. It was mint and tasted good, the heat spreading to the cold parts inside of her. She didn't know where to start, so she said nothing, just watched him moving about.

A killer who cooks. Could the night get any stranger?

"Not my best koshari, but I had to work with what we had," Set said, setting a steaming bowl in front of her. He topped up her tea before joining her.

"I can't cook, so any food is good food," Ayla replied before having a spoonful. "Definitely better than what I can do."

Set smiled. "It'll do. If we get out of this alive, I'll cook properly for you one night."

"If you get me out of this alive, I might just agree to that," she replied, surprising herself. She was clearly more traumatized than she thought.

"It's a deal," Set replied. He sipped his tea, watching her through the steam with his predator gold eyes.

"You are calmer than I thought you would be," he admitted after a while.

"I had my breakdown in private." Ayla pushed some rice around her plate. "And you're right. I'm kind of stuck with you until whatever is happening stops. I'd like to know what *is* happening. I have showered and eaten, so tell me the truth."

"Your father's name is Kader Ayad. He runs a large operation out of Cairo," Set said without hesitation.

"Operation. Illegal, I'm assuming. Those men asked me about his cocaine."

"Illegal is kind of a relative term in Egypt, and you know it. He would call himself a businessman, but he is a gangster, for lack of a better word. His rival is a man named Moussa Omar. He found out about you somehow and wants to use you to get Kader to hand Cairo over to him."

Ayla shook her head slowly. "That's ridiculous. Kader doesn't even know me. If he is a criminal, I doubt he would hand over anything for a woman he's never met."

"He kept tabs, though." Set placed his phone down in front of her. There was a picture of her with a group of children taken in Sudan last winter.

"How did he get this?" Ayla asked.

Set shrugged his big shoulders. "No idea. Kader kept you a secret from me and everyone else."

"So how did Moussa know about me?"

"An excellent question. One that I want to know the answer to," Set said, his expression changing to one of cold violence. Ayla glanced away and spotted blood dripping out from under his sleeve.

"Set, you're hurt," she said, the doctor taking over. "Let me have a look at it."

Ignoring his protests, Ayla searched the kitchen cupboards, coming up with a first aid kit, and wet a clean cloth.

"It's nothing. I heal fast," Set insisted.

"Roll up your sleeve. I'll decide if it's nothing," she said stubbornly.

Set gave her an amused look before pushing up his black sleeve. He had wrapped a scrap of cloth around the wound. Ayla untied it to reveal a gash that was bleeding steadily.

"I told you it was nothing."

Ayla ignored him, wrapping the wet towel around it. "I hope you didn't bleed into that koshari I just ate."

"It's why it tasted so good," Set teased.

"This could do with some stitches," she said, inspecting the cut. "Doesn't look like there's anything in it."

"I washed it. It's really nothing, though if you must play doctor, I'll allow it." There was enough innuendo in his tone that made Ayla roll her eyes.

"Like I haven't heard that one before," she said, pressing the towel against the cut again. "I can't have my knight in shining armor bleeding everywhere, can I?"

Set raised a brow. "I think we both know I'm not knight material."

"You don't say," she said. Once the bleeding slowed, she rubbed some antiseptic cream on it, covered it with a sterile patch, and wrapped it in a bandage.

"You going to kiss it better, too?" he asked with a hopeful grin.

"I don't like you that much." Ayla threw out the bloody cloth and washed her hands.

Set was watching her, golden eyes assessing as if he was trying to figure her out. Ayla dried her hands and stared right back, refusing to be intimidated.

He was big and brutal, but with his thick black hair out of its tie and around his shoulders, his strong features softened into rough handsomeness. Not the type of man Ayla would usually go for, but there was something about him that made his presence...arresting.

"Thank you. It was unnecessary, but thank you," he said when she sat back down.

"Thank you for saving me tonight," she replied, picking up her spoon. "Even if you were paid to do it, I won't ever stop being grateful. What's he like? My father."

Set turned thoughtful. "Ruthless. Cunning. Scary smart. He cares about very few people, but he treats his friends well."

"Are you his friend?"

"He likes to think so. He's a good boss, as far as gangsters go, and pays well."

Ayla nodded. "Does he have a family?"

"No. Only you, apparently. No wife."

"Do you know why he never bothered to reach out?"

"Isn't it obvious? He didn't want you anywhere near this shit. It's why he sent me to protect you. So you might get out of this as easily as possible, and I can give you back a normal life."

"He trusts that you can do that, so what makes you so special?" she asked.

Set's answering smile tugged at something low in her gut. "Stay alive long enough, doctor, and you might just find out."

Set and Ayla's adventure continue [here!](#)

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