



Fang

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Biker, Mc

Description: One Hack. One Kiss. One deadly mistake...

I live in the shadows, keeping my club safe from behind a screen—until Mina Bishop crashes into my world. A ghost, a hacker, a woman with cartel secrets and a past that could destroy us both. I don't trust her. I don't even like her.

But I want her.

She's fire and chaos, pushing me to the edge. The cartel wants her dead, and now I'll kill to keep her safe. She swears she doesn't belong in my world, but it's too late. She's already under my skin. And this time, I'm the one who might get burned.

Total Pages (Source): 69

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

Chapter 1: Fang

I park my bike between a row of black SUVs outside the West Texas warehouse. The blazing afternoon sun burns through my disguise. Back at the motel, I stuffed myself into a suit and dress shoes, but threw on a rival club's cut over everything. Don't ask me how I got it. I still can't believe I'm wearing another club's colors, but that was the only way I could safely infiltrate Los Serpientes de Cristal's black market auction.

Everyone in the cartel would love to take a shot at someone from my club, especially after we took out their leader back in New Orleans, but I'm not going to make it easy by announcing my affiliation. They think I'm representing Rough Hog Riders MC, not Underground Vengeance MC, but they're wrong. I'm not even here on behalf of my club. If Vapor—my pres, the NOLA club's pres—knew I was here, he'd kick my ass himself.

No. That's not why I'm here. It's personal. Someone's been hacking my system and whoever it is will be here tonight. All I know is that it's a hacker that goes by the alias Loba. Probably a chick, but who the hell knows these days. That's just one little piece of a much bigger puzzle. I can't figure out what Loba's after, but she's going to tell me. One way or another.

My mission's simple. Get in. Find the bitch. Get out.

Armed guards stand at every exit, their assault rifles glinting in the fading desert sunlight. I count twelve men before I stop. Being vastly outnumbered isn't making me feel any better about this. But it's not like I could tell anyone in my club. I'd have to admit some hacker, possibly some chick, was good enough to get into my system.

There's no fucking way I'm letting anyone know about that. Not until I find out who's behind it. And figure out why she's poking around in my network.

The guard holding a clipboard checks my fake ID against his list of approved customers. Getting onto the cartel's list wasn't too hard; I hacked my way onto it. As long as there isn't someone here from NOLA, I'll be fine. There are much closer cartel auctions to NOLA, but this is the only one where I might find Loba. That's why I rode over nine hundred miles to get here.

Inside the building, red floodlights turn everything the color of dried blood. I push deeper into the crowd, scanning for anyone else wearing Rough Hog Riders colors. According to the cartel's invite list, I'm the only one representing that particular MC. I checked again when I left the motel this morning. As far as I know, I'm still safe.

A bunch of plastic folding tables covered with cheap plastic tablecloths line one wall. They're covered with snacks. Nice. The coffee I drank two hours ago gurgles in my belly. I could go for aconchaor two.

Surveying the options, I feign intense interest in the variousconchas, but I'm looking for the person running the techie side of the auction. I spot a thick bundle of wires leading up the wall to the second floor of the warehouse. She's got to be upstairs.

I snag one of the half-pink, half-chocolate-colored brioche-like sweet doughs and bite into it. Sweet. The pink's strawberry. I assume the other side's chocolate and not false advertising. As I skirt the perimeter of the crowd, I bite into it. Yep—chocolate. Damn, I love these things.

After casually circling the auction space, which is basically rows and rows of folding chairs already partially filled with people, I spot a staircase. It's the only way up, so that's the play.

No one's guarding the stairs. I wait until the speakers crackle to life and use the distraction to swiftly make my way up to the second floor.

When I reach the top, I spin, ready to take on anyone coming up behind me. The stairs are empty. The second floor is filled with cardboard boxes. There's no sign of movement, but I'm cautious, nonetheless.

Making my way through the stacked boxes, I walk toward the spot where the cables ran up the wall. I find them snaking deeper into the gloomy darkness.

I glance back at the stairs and then over the railing to the auction below. The crowd moves with the restless energy of predators at feeding time. Cartel dealers in expensive suits mingle with arms buyers, whose eyes scan constantly for threats. A few tech brokers huddle near the back, their nervous energy betraying them as the weakest links in this particular food chain.

The air is charged with nervousness and a hint of fear. Everyone here knows they're one wrong move from being dumped in a shallow grave.

The auctioneer, a thin man with gold teeth and nervous hands, gestures toward a table at the front of the room. It's laden with devices that probably shouldn't exist. Hard drives, encrypted phones, data storage units that look military grade. Some really cool shit I'd love to get my hands on. But that's not why I'm here.

I'm hunting a ghost who's been making me look like a script kiddie for three weeks running. The first time I encountered her code I thought someone had slipped me bad coffee. I was running a routine data sweep on a cartel money-laundering operation when my screens suddenly filled with the most elegant penetration sequence I'd ever seen. Clean lines of code that moved like poetry, with variable names in Spanish that made me reach for a translation app. She didn't just crack the system—she made it look beautiful while she did it.

Then she wiped the entire cartel ledger from under my nose and left a single message in my root directory: “Mejor suerte la próxima vez, chico.” Better luck next time, boy.

The gall. Unbelievable.

I spent the next seventy-two hours straight trying to trace her digital footprints, following phantom signals and ghost protocols that led me in circles until I admitted what I’d known from the start: she was better than me. Not just better. She was an artist, and I was still finger-painting with ones and zeros.

But here’s the thing about being good with computers—you learn to be patient, methodical, and obsessive. The same qualities that make me excellent at finding vulnerabilities in firewall systems also make me very, very good at finding people who don’t want to be found. And Loba made one mistake, she kept the Spanish flourishes in her code. Elegant, personal touches that were as distinctive as a signature.

Three weeks of tracking led me here, to this blood-red warehouse where the auctioneer holds up what looks like a standard FBI encrypted drive. “Ladies and gentlemen, direct from a federal raid in Houston, we have the largest photo collection of children we’ve ever offered for auction. Huge resale value to the right customer. Shall we start the bidding at fifty thousand? Do I hear—”

Blood rushes through my eardrums, drowning out the auctioneer. All I can think about is Tommy. Guilt floods my chest, pressing down until my heart feels like it’s about to burst. I struggle to take a breath, but all that does is replace the guilt with rage. A rage so wild I’m ready to burn this place to the fucking ground. It takes everything in me to regain control.

Every missing person case I’ve cracked, every trafficking ring I’ve helped the club

dismantle, it all traces back to that ten-year-old boy who wanted to play one more game of basketball while his little brother rode home alone.

Tommy never came home. He's never been found. I'll probably never know who took him, but someone did. And I'm going to kill everyone who has anything to do with abusing kids. Vengeance is the only thing that keeps me sane.

The auctioneer's voice fades as I move back into the maze of boxes. Somewhere in this warehouse of thieves and killers is the person who's been making me question my own skills.

I follow the cables until I spot a hallway that looks like an administrative area. The red floodlights give way to standard fluorescents, and the constant hum of the overhead fans fades to something more manageable. My footsteps echo differently here. Instead of walking on a metal floor, this one's polished tile. This is where the real business happens, away from the theater of the auction floor.

I follow the corridor's gentle curve, noting security cameras positioned at every junction. Standard placement, nothing creative. Whoever designed this system thinks like a textbook, which makes my job easier. I quickly link one of the cameras into a bypass loop so whoever's watching won't see me coming.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

A series of offices line the left wall, their frosted glass doors revealing the shadows of empty furniture. To my right, the corridor opens periodically to show glimpses of the warehouse floor below, where the auction continues its deadly dance.

The room I'm looking for appears around the third corner, marked with a brushed steel sign that reads "Server Control—Authorized Only" in both English and Spanish. The door at the end sits behind three separate security measures, which tells me I'm in the right place.

The first security measure is interesting—a pressure plate built into the floor directly in front of the door. Step on it without the right authorization, and alarms scream loud enough to wake the dead. The plate sits flush with the surrounding floor, but there's a tell-tale outline where the installation didn't quite match the original surface.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a piece of gum. After working it between my fingers until it's pliable enough, I shape it into a small wedge and press it against the plate's eastern edge. Then comes the magnet, a neodymium disc about the size of a nickel.

The pressure plate operates on a simple principle: weight triggers a circuit that sends a signal to the security system. But if you can create a counterbalancing force at precisely the right angle, you can step on the plate without actually engaging the trigger mechanism. The magnet, positioned correctly against the gum, creates enough magnetic interference to trick the sensor into thinking the plate hasn't moved.

I step carefully onto the left side of the plate, distributing my weight, and hold my breath. Nothing. No alarms, no flashing lights, no armed guards charging down the

corridor. Sometimes the simplest solutions are the most elegant.

The second obstacle is a biometric scanner, its red eye glowing with the patient malevolence of artificial intelligence. I pull a small device from my jacket pocket, something I've been calling a pulse override, though the technical name involves too many syllables and not enough poetry. The device looks like a hearing aid crossed with a USB port, and it connects to the scanner's data stream with a magnetic coupling that would make any computer geek proud.

The scanner's red light flickers as my device floods its sensors with conflicting signals. Biometric scanners rely on consistent electrical patterns to verify identity, but when you introduce controlled chaos into the equation... well, let's just say there's a way to bypass the system. The light turns green, and I'm over the second hurdle.

The third security measure is just a standard electronic lock, the kind that thinks it's secure because it uses a six-digit code. I connect my phone to the lock's data port using a cable that looks like it belongs to a different decade, and let my custom software run through the possible combinations. It takes forty-seven seconds to crack, which is embarrassing for whoever installed it.

The door opens with a whisper, and I step into a different world.

The control room consists of multiple monitors arranged in a semicircle around a central workspace. The screens show scrolling code, network diagrams, and data streams that paint the walls with shifting patterns of light and shadow. The air hums with the quiet energy of serious computing power, punctuated by the occasional click of a mechanical keyboard.

She sits with her back to me, a figure in a dark hoodie with the hood pushed halfway off her head. A long braid of black hair falls down her back like a rope made of midnight, and her fingers move across the keyboard with the fluid precision of a

concert pianist.

I watch her work, captivated despite myself. This is real skill, the kind that takes years to develop and natural talent to master. She's not just coding—she's conducting a digital symphony, coordinating multiple data streams with the easy confidence of someone who speaks binary as fluently as her native tongue.

The code flowing across her screens has the same elegant structure I remember from our previous encounters. Clean, efficient, beautiful in its simplicity. She's building something complex, weaving together databases and security protocols with the delicate touch of a master craftsman.

I take a step closer, trying to get a better view of her work, and that's when she freezes. Her fingers stop moving across the keyboard, her shoulders tense slightly, and she tilts her head in a way that suggests she heard me.

Without turning around, she speaks with a slight accent that turns consonants into music: "You gonna stand there breathing like a serial killer, or are you gonna say something?"

Chapter 2: Fang

The question hangs in the air between us like a challenge, and I find myself smiling despite the circumstances. I had prepared several possible opening lines during my journey through the warehouse, each one calculated to establish dominance. Instead, I hear myself saying, "I had a line prepared, but yours was better."

She turns in her chair with the slow, deliberate movement of someone who's never been surprised by anything in her life. The monitor glow illuminates her features, which are sharp enough to cut glass. Her high cheekbones, a straight nose, and dark eyes hold the kind of beauty that makes men do stupid things. She's younger than I

expected, maybe mid-twenties, yet she radiates the type of intelligence that doesn't announce itself, but leaves lingering whispers in your mind long after she's gone.

What strikes me most is her complete lack of fear. No startled expression, no defensive posture, no reaching for a weapon. She simply looks at me with the calm assessment of someone evaluating a mildly interesting puzzle, and I realize that in a building full of the most violent and deadly people in Texas, she might be the most dangerous of all. She's the type of calamity you don't see coming until it's too late.

"Fang? That's what they call you, right?" she asks sweetly.

"You know who I am?" I narrow my gaze. How much does she know about me and what I do? If she knows my club name, she must know I'm with Underground Vengeance.

"Mina," she says, extending her hand. "Though I suspect you already know that."

"Loba," I reply, deliberately ignoring the offered handshake.

Her eyes narrow slightly, and for the first time, I see a crack in her composed façade. "Don't call me that."

"Why not? It suits you. Lone wolf, hunting in a digital forest, picking off the weak and unwary." I step closer, noting how she doesn't retreat. "Very poetic for a cartel hacker."

She laughs, a sound like silver bells wrapped in barbed wire. "Cartel hacker? Is that what you think I am?" Her gaze travels from my polished shoes to my glasses, and her expression shifts to something that might be pity. "That suit doesn't fit you, by the way. The shoulders are too wide, and the fabric screams 'bought in desperation at a department store.'"

Heat rises in my cheeks, which irritates me more than her accuracy. “My fashion choices aren’t the issue here.”

“No?” She spins her chair in a slow circle, whipping her head around so she never breaks eye contact. “Then what is the issue, exactly? You sneak into a cartel warehouse, bypass a state-of-the-art security system, and sneak into my workspace to... what? Critique my coding technique?”

“You’ve been ghosting my systems for weeks. Wiping data, leaving little love notes in my directories. I want to know why.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Maybe I was bored.” She shrugs, but there’s something else in her expression now—a flicker of something that might be regret. “Maybe I was impressed by someone who actually noticed my work instead of just suffering from it.”

The admission hangs between us like a bridge neither of us wants to cross first. I study her face, looking for tells, for weaknesses, for anything that might give me an advantage in this conversation. Instead, I find myself noticing the way the monitor light catches in her eyes, creating depths that seem to go on forever.

“You said you’re not working for the cartel,” I say, keeping my voice steady. “So what’s your story? Freelance chaos artist? Digital Robin Hood with abandonment issues?”

Her laugh this time is different—bitter, sharp-edged, with no trace of silver bells. “Working for? Sweetheart, I’m owned.”

The word hits the room like a physical presence, changing the atmosphere from charged banter to something darker. I see it now in the set of her shoulders, the way her fingers unconsciously touch a spot on her wrist that’s hidden by her sleeve. The elegant code, the Spanish flourishes, the careful way she moves through systems—it’s not artistry for art’s sake. It’s survival.

“Owned,” I repeat, and the word tastes like ashes.

“Bought and paid for when I was sixteen.” She hesitates, making me think there’s a whole lot more to her story. “Turns out being good with computers makes you valuable to people who like to keep their business transactions off the books.” She

turns back to her monitors, but I can see her reflection in the screens, and her expression has gone carefully blank. “I hack what they tell me to hack, steal what they tell me to steal, and in return... nobody dies.”

The heat in my chest shifts from anger to something more complex. I know about being trapped by circumstances beyond your control, know about carrying guilt for choices that weren't really choices at all. The difference is that my prison is internal, built from memory and regret. Hers has walls and guards and very real consequences.

“Then why are you talking to me instead of calling for backup?” I ask.

She spins her chair to face me again, and this time there's something different in her eyes, something that might be hope wrapped in layers of careful cynicism. “You don't kill me, and I'll show you what I've really been doing in here.”

“Which is?”

“Not what they think.” She gestures toward her monitors, where lines of code continue scrolling past in a three-language symphony. She's coding in English, Spanish, and Portuguese without missing a beat. “They want me to break into FBI systems, steal classified data, make their lives easier. What my owners don't know is that I've been documenting everything—every transaction, every operation, every dirty cop on their payroll—and I'm feeding it back into the FBI databases.”

I step closer to get a better look at her screens, and I can smell her perfume—something subtle and expensive that makes me think of naked skin and silk sheets. She's built a digital surveillance network inside the cartel's own systems, using their resources to gather evidence against them. It's brilliant, dangerous, and probably suicidal.

“You're building a case,” I realize.

“I’m building an escape route.” Her fingers dance across the keyboard, bringing up files that make my eyebrows rise. Names, dates, financial records, communication logs—enough evidence to bring down their entire Southern operation. “Problem is, I need someone who can get this data to the right people. Someone I can trust. I tried sending some of the info to the Feds, but they brushed me off because I refused to reveal my identity. They thought I was making everything up.”

“Feds are generally useless.”

“Right. So, I thought about leaking details about the cartel’s operations to the media, but there’s no guarantee they’d run the story, or even if they did, that anyone would care. The world is on fucking fire, and it feels like no one’s paying any attention to it.”

“Overwhelm. Apathy.” I nod in agreement.

“I need someone with connections to law enforcement, someone who won’t just bury the information in a bureaucratic maze.”

“Well, I can’t help you with that,” I quip, knowing that’s a lie. Thanks to my club’s Montana chapter, we’ve got a Fed on our side now. But I’m not about to reveal this to Mina. She could be lying about everything. Every word out of her mouth could be complete bullshit.

The screens blur slightly as my proximity triggers some kind of motion sensor, and that’s when I spot a small countdown timer in the corner of one of the side monitors. It’s running backward from what looks like five seconds.

“Mina,” I say, my voice suddenly tight. “What’s that timer for?”

She follows my gaze to the countdown, and her face goes white. “Oh, mierda.”

The timer hits zero.

The explosion rocks the entire building with the force of a small earthquake. The lights flicker and die, plunging us into the blue-white glow of battery-powered emergency systems. Somewhere in the warehouse alarms begin their electronic screaming, and the sound of gunfire erupts from multiple directions.

“The virus,” Mina says, her fingers clicking across the keyboard even as the building shudders around us. “I planted a virus in our systems six months ago, and made sure this place would burn to the ground if my bosses ever started snooping around in my files. I couldn’t afford to have them looking through these servers to see what I was doing behind their backs. I set up explosives to destroy everything, including these servers. Thought I had more time.”

Another explosion, closer this time, sends books tumbling from a shelf on the wall behind her. Through the walls, I can hear several people running and shouting in Spanish. Someone screams from the hallway, a sound of pure terror that cuts through the mechanical noise of dying electronics.

“Time’s up,” I tell her, reaching for her arm.

I grab Mina by the wrist and try to pull her out of the control room. Instead, she moves faster than I anticipated, her body fluid and responsive as she snatches both a flash drive and a compact pistol from her desk drawer in one smooth motion. The gun disappears into her hoodie pocket while the drive goes into something that looks like a waterproof pouch. I should have taken the gun, but there’s no time.

“This way,” she says, taking the lead before I can object.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

Getting out of the room is a lot easier than getting into it. We run through corridors that seem to be collapsing in slow motion around us. The overhead lights flicker and die in sequence, leaving us stumbling through patches of emergency lighting that cast everything in hellish red shadows. Smoke pours through the ventilation system, bringing with it the acrid smell of burning electronics and something else—something organic that I don't want to identify.

Behind us, the sounds of chaos grow louder. Boots on grating, men shouting orders in rapid Spanish, the distinctive crack of assault rifle fire. Someone's screaming about data corruption and system failures, while another voice keeps repeating "¿Dónde está la chica?" Where is the girl?

Mina leads me down a stairwell that shudders with each new explosion. The handrail vibrates under my palm like a tuning fork. She moves with the confidence of someone who's planned for this exact scenario, taking stairs three at a time while I struggle to keep up.

"How did you know your bosses found your virus?" I shout over the noise.

"They've been monitoring my access for weeks," she calls back without slowing down. "I got sloppy tonight and made a mistake during the auction."

We reach the bottom of the stairwell, and she pushes through a door. The corridor beyond is filling with smoke, and the emergency lighting has failed completely. She pulls out her phone and activates its flashlight, revealing a narrow hallway lined with supply closets and maintenance equipment.

“Dead end,” I point out.

“Is it?” She kneels next to what looks like a standard floor grate and produces a multi-tool from somewhere in her hoodie. The grate comes up with practiced ease, revealing a crawlspace that disappears into darkness. “You wanted into my world, hacker boy. Hope you brought your boots.”

The sound of pursuing footsteps echoes from the stairwell behind us. Mina swings her legs into the opening and drops from sight. I follow, landing hard on what feels like a concrete drainage pipe. The space is tight, barely large enough for crawling, and smells so musty I’m sure I’ll never get the smell out of my lungs.

“This way,” her voice drifts from ahead, muffled by the confined space.

We crawl through the darkness, guided only by the dim glow of our phone lights. The building continues to shake above us, and I can hear the groaning of stressed metal and concrete. Something explodes close enough to rain debris through the grate we entered, and the sound of sirens begins to filter through from outside.

After what feels like minutes but was probably only seconds, Mina stops. “Exit’s above us,” she whispers.

I look up to see another grate, this one showing a slice of star-filled sky. She pushes it aside and pulls herself through, then reaches back to help me up. Her grip is stronger than I expected, and she hauls me out of the crawlspace with surprising ease.

We emerge behind the warehouse, in a narrow alley lined with industrial dumpsters and abandoned pallets. The main building looms behind us, smoke pouring from its windows while emergency lights paint the surrounding area in strobing reds and blues. In the distance, the sound of approaching sirens grows louder.

Mina wipes sweat from her face with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of soot that makes her look like a warrior returning from battle. She holds up the baggie with the flash drive.

“By the way,” she says, her voice carrying that same musical accent that made her earlier insults sting. “Try not to die before you get to use it.”

“What is it?”

“Everything you need to destroy the cartel.”

The comment hangs between us as a promise and a challenge. I’m covered in dust and concrete powder, my glasses are cracked, and my cheap suit will never recover from our crawl through the drainage system. But I’m alive, and so is she, and that feels like a victory worth celebrating. That said, I still don’t know if I can trust her.

Heat builds in my chest again, but this time it’s not guilt or anger. It’s something more complex—frustration mixed with admiration; irritation seasoned with genuine respect.

“This had better be worth it,” I growl.

“It is.” Her smile transforms her face completely, adding warmth to features that had seemed carved from ice. “Keep up, hacker boy.”

The sound of engines roars from the direction of the warehouse—big vehicles moving fast, probably cartel reinforcements responding to the chaos. Mina starts running into the desert, her movements fluid despite the rough terrain. I follow, my dress shoes sliding on loose gravel while her boots find purchase with each step.

Behind us, the warehouse burns against the star-filled sky, sending a column of

smoke toward the heavens like a signal fire. The sound of pursuit grows louder—vehicles, voices, the distant bark of search dogs. But ahead of us stretches the vast darkness of the desert, empty and welcoming.

“The drive,” I call after her as we run. “What’s really on it?”

“Everything,” she shouts back without slowing. “Names, locations, financial records. Enough to bring down their entire trafficking operation.”

“And you’re just going to give it to me?”

She stops so suddenly that I almost run into her. When she turns, her eyes catch the starlight, and I see something in them that might be hope.

“I’m going to help you use it,” she says. “That is, if you think your motorcycle club friends can handle a real fight.”

The sound of cartel trucks grows louder behind us, their engines growling like mechanical predators. If we don’t find transportation or a place to hide quickly, we won’t live long enough to do anything with that drive.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Please tell me you have a ride stashed somewhere?” I yell.

“See those rocks?” She points to an outcropping of giant boulders a hundred yards away. “Got a dirt bike stashed behind them.”

I’m not surprised at all. Something about the way she speaks and moves makes me think she’s been planning this for a while. But why tonight? Why now?

Glancing over my shoulder, I spot headlights careening toward us. They haven’t located us yet, but it’s going to be a close call.

After reaching the rocks, we circle behind them. The bike’s exactly where she said it would be, propped against a smaller boulder.

“I’m driving,” I snap, grabbing it up and straddling it. “Get on and hold on.”

She does, jumping behind me and pressing every inch of her slight body against mine. A rush of heat floods my core, but there’s no time to deal with that bullshit. I kick down the starter along with my surging desire and focus on getting the fuck out of here.

The engine rumbles to life. It’s not my Hog, not by a long shot, but it’s what I’ve got to work with. I’ll need to get mine back at some point, but I can’t think about that right now.

The bike lurches but Mina manages to hold on, gripping me even more tightly, pressing her breasts against my back. It’s distracting as fuck, but when a bullet

whizzes past my face, I snap out of the haze of desire.

The wind howls past my ears, dry and biting. My knuckles are white on the handlebars, throttle twisted hard as the dirt bike eats the cracked earth beneath us. Behind me, Mina clings tight, her arms locked around my ribs, her breath hot against the back of my neck.

I don't dare look back, but I don't have to. The roar of engines and the staccato pop of rifle fire echo across the desert. They're close. Too close.

"Hang on!" I shout, and veer hard left, kicking up a plume of dust and gravel. The rear tire skids then finds traction, and we tear off across an arroyo, bouncing over ridges like a rock skipping water.

The cartel trucks aren't built for this. Big tires and horsepower don't mean shit when the land turns mean. I spot a cut in the hills ahead—a dry wash snaking between two rises of jagged rock. The walls are tight enough to allow us to pass, but they'll cut off anyone pursuing us that isn't on a bike. That's our shot.

I gun it, engine screaming. Bullets chew up the ground behind us, one whining past my ear like a warning from death itself. I duck instinctively, heart slamming. Mina scrunches down behind me, trying to make herself a smaller target.

We hit the wash at full speed, the suspension rattling, my spine jolting with every bump. But the canyon walls rise like sanctuary, the sound of pursuit muffled as the trail winds tighter. There's no way they'll be able to follow us.

We're not out of danger. Not yet. But we've got distance now. I ease off the throttle just enough to breathe.

"Are we safe?" she asks, voice raw.

I glance over my shoulder. Empty trail.

“For now,” I say. “But they won’t stop. Do you know the area?”

“There’s a road on the other side of the canyon. If we can get to it, we’re only a few minutes away from the highway.”

“Straight ahead?”

“Yeah.”

We make it to the road and then to the highway without any more bullets flying. For now, we’ve escaped. But once the cartel realizes what she did, there’s going to be hell to pay. Unless...

Unless this entire situation was bullshit to begin with. I can’t risk trusting her until I know more about who she is and why she’s really working for the cartel. Unfortunately, that means there’s only one place I can take her—the Quiet Room—and believe me, there’s nothing quiet about it.

Chapter 3: Mina

Consciousness returns like a slap—sudden, unwelcome, and accompanied by a skull-splitting headache that makes my teeth ache. The darkness is absolute, so black, so complete it feels solid against my eyelids. I blink hard, then again, but nothing changes. The air tastes of stale concrete and something metallic that makes my tongue curl in disgust.

My body feels wrong, like someone folded me into a box too small for my limbs. Sweat has soaked through my clothes, the fabric clinging to my skin in ways that make me want to crawl out of it entirely. Every breath comes ragged and shallow, as

if the darkness itself is pressing against my chest.

I push myself up on trembling arms, my palms meeting rough concrete that scrapes like sandpaper. The floor beneath me is unforgiving, cold despite the oppressive heat that seems to radiate from every surface. My fingers explore outward, mapping the space around me in careful sweeps. Three feet. Four. Then my knuckles hit something solid and unyielding.

A wall.

I press my fingertips against it, feeling the texture of poured concrete, slightly damp with condensation. The surface is seamless, professional—not some hastily constructed prison but something built to last. Built to hold people like me.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

“Did he seriously lock me in his dungeon?” I growl, breaking the silence.

Using the wall as a guide, I work my way to standing, my legs shaking like a newborn colt. The movement sends fresh waves of nausea through me, but I grit my teeth and push through it. I need to understand this space. I need to find a way out.

The wall stretches above my head, beyond my reach even when I stand on my toes. I follow it with my palms, step by careful step, feeling for any variation in the surface. A crack. A loose section. Anything that might give me leverage or hope.

My circuit brings me to a corner, then another wall identical to the first. The space is small—maybe eight feet by ten—but in the absolute darkness, it feels both cramped and infinite. Each step echoes strangely, the sound swallowed almost immediately by the oppressive silence.

Then my searching hands find something different. Metal. Heavy and cold, with rivets that bite into my palm when I press against them. A door. But as my fingers race along its edges, mapping every inch, my heart sinks further into my stomach.

No handle on this side. No keyhole. No evident hinges.

I’m trapped.

The realization hits like ice water in my veins, but I force myself to keep searching. There has to be something. Some flaw in construction, some oversight by whoever built this place. My fingernails scrape against the seams where the door meets its frame, probing for weakness. The metal is thick, industrial—the kind of barrier

designed to keep people in, not out.

I drop to my knees, running my hands along the bottom edge of the door. A thin gap, maybe half an inch, allows the faintest breath of air to seep through. It carries scents that make my stomach clench: motor oil, leather, and something else. Something that smells like power and violence.

“Motherfucker,” I snarl, reaching into my hoodie.

Gun’s gone. Flash drive too. He definitely did this.

“Hey, asshole!” I slam my palm on the door. “I have to pee, and I need water. Open the fucking door.”

Based on the smells coming from the other side of the door, and the fact that the last thing I remember is Fang’s face, I must be at Underground Vengeance’s new compound. I heard all about how the cartel burnt their old clubhouse to the ground. Big mistake. That clubhouse was a piece of shit in the 9th Ward. This one is a fortress. I may have hacked the schematics and taken a little peek when I was poking around Fang’s network.

This isn’t good. I have no idea what happened between here and West Texas. He must have thrown me in the back of a car or something. There’s no way he draped me over the bike and rode nine hundred miles without someone noticing. But none of that really matters. I’m here now, and I’ve got to figure out my next steps.

He clearly doesn’t trust me, and why should he? I work for the enemy. He doesn’t know exactly why I had to make a deal with the cartel, but the less he finds out about me, the better. If he discovers what the cartel has, then what would stop Fang from using that knowledge as leverage against me? I’d be stuck in the exact same position as I am now. The only difference would be the name of the organization forcing me

to work for them.

I know all about UVMC—the club that operates in the shadows of New Orleans, claiming to fight human trafficking while using methods that made the police look like choirboys. Clearly that’s true. Why else would they have a dedicated torture room?

The heat is becoming unbearable. It radiates from the walls and floor, and even the air itself seems to pulse with it. My mouth feels like it’s been stuffed with cotton, my throat so dry that swallowing has become an exercise in futility. When did I last drink water? The memory is another casualty of whatever heused to knock me out. Nothing hurts, so I doubt he hit me. Must have drugged me. Jerk.

I stumble back to the door, pressing my ear against the metal. Nothing. No footsteps, no voices, no mechanical sounds that might give me a clue about where I am on the compound or how long I’ve been here. The silence is complete, oppressive in its totality.

Panic starts as a flutter in my chest, then grows with each shallow breath. The walls seem to be moving closer, the ceiling pressing down like the lid of a coffin. I know it’s impossible, know it’s just my mind playing tricks, but knowing doesn’t make it stop.

I force myself to move, to keep exploring. My hands search every inch of the walls again, more desperately now, looking for anything I might have missed. A hidden switch. A miracle.

But concrete doesn’t yield to desperation, and metal doesn’t bend to hope.

The reality of my situation settles over me like a burial shroud. I’m in an Underground Vengeance holding cell, probably in some basement where no one will

hear me scream. They took me for a reason, which means they want something more from me. They already have my gun and the flash drive packed with cartel information. What else could they possibly want?

I sink back against the wall. My clothes stick to me like a second skin, salt from dried sweat making everything itch. The darkness presses in from all sides, patient and implacable.

Somewhere beyond these walls, New Orleans continues its ancient dance of light and shadow, music and violence. But here, in this concrete tomb, there's only silence and the steady rhythm of my heart beating against my ribs like a caged bird.

I close my eyes, though it makes no difference in the absolute dark, and try to prepare myself for whatever comes next.

The first lock clicks with the precision of expensive machinery. Then another. And another. Each metallic snap echoes through my concrete tomb like a countdown to an execution. I scramble to press my back against the far wall, heart hammering against my ribs so hard I'm sure whoever's coming for me can hear it.

The door swings inward, and light explodes into my world like a physical blow. I throw my hands up to shield my eyes, but the brightness sears through my fingers anyway, sending lightning bolts of pain straight into my skull. After hours—days?—of absolute darkness, even dim illumination feels like staring into the sun.

Through the nuclear glare, a silhouette fills the doorway. Broad shoulders seem to span the entire frame. The suggestion of impressive height. But it's the stillness that unsettles me most—the way he stands there, patient as a predator, while I squint and blink like some cave-dwelling creature dragged into daylight.

My vision gradually adjusts, details emerging from the burning white like a photograph developing in slow motion. The first thing I notice is the contradiction—massive arms and chest that strain against a graphic tee featuring what looks like a vintage computer terminal. The graphic says, “My Code Works. (I Have No Idea Why)” The shirt is completely at odds with the intimidating physique beneath it, like finding a kitten wearing a wolf’s hide.

Then I see his face, and my breath catches in my throat.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

Thick, black-rimmed glasses frame eyes the color of emerald fire, intelligent and calculating in ways that make my skin even hotter. His features are sharp, almost severe, but there's something undeniably attractive about the contrast between his obvious physical power and the nerdy aesthetics. Clark Kent vibes for sure. It's like someone dressed an underwear model up as a computer programmer for Halloween.

He steps into the room, and I catch a glimpse of cargo shorts and black boots before my gaze is drawn back to those unsettling green eyes. Everything about him screams contradiction—the body of a fighter wearing the uniform of a tech geek, the careful control of his movements suggesting both martial arts training and countless hours hunched over keyboards.

In his hands, he carries a simple metal tray. The sight of it makes my stomach clench with desperate hunger, even as my mind recoils from the implications. Plain bread, crusty and torn into rough chunks. A plastic cup filled with what I hope is water, though the liquid looks suspiciously murky in the harsh light spilling through the doorway.

He sets the tray down just inside the door, the metal clanking against concrete with a sound that seems unnaturally loud in the cramped space. When he straightens, his eyes find mine through those thick lenses, and I feel pinned like an insect on a collector's board.

“I want to know everything about the cartel,” he says, his voice carrying the flat, emotionless cadence of someone reading lines of code. “Their operations, their security systems, their personnel.” Each word is delivered with mechanical precision, as if he's running through a checklist. “You're not leaving until you tell me

everything.”

I push myself up from the floor, my legs shaking, but holding my weight. The movement brings me closer to him, close enough to see the reflection of the harsh light in his glasses, close enough to smell motor oil and electronic components clinging to his clothes like a technological cologne.

“Go to hell,” I spit, my voice raw from thirst but steady with fury. “I already gave you the drive that, mind you, you didn’t even know about ahead of time. Wasn’t that enough?”

For a moment, something flickers behind those green eyes. Surprise, maybe. Or respect. It’s gone so quickly I might have imagined it, but the silence stretches between us like a wire pulled taut. He studies me with the same intensity I imagine he brings to debugging code or cracking encrypted files.

Then he nods, just once, as if I’ve confirmed something he already suspected.

“No,” he says, and there’s no anger in his voice, no frustration. Just the same mechanical acceptance, like I’m a variable in an equation he’s still working to solve. “You must know more than what’s on that drive.”

“What do you mean?”

“I only found a dozen files.”

“That’s impossible!”

“I scanned the drive. There’s nothing else on it.”

“What?” My stomach drops. “Let me see it. Bring me a laptop.”

“No. You lied. If you want to stay alive, tell us everything you know.”

“I already gave you—I mean—you took the data. Everything I had on them.”

“This will go a lot easier when you decide to cooperate.” He turns away, stepping back through the doorway with the same measured pace he used to enter. The tray remains behind, the bread and water sitting just close enough to torment me with their proximity, just far enough to require crawling to reach them.

The door swings shut with a finality that echoes through my bones. Lock after lock engages. Each click drives home the reality of my situation with surgical precision. The light vanishes, plunging me back into the absolute darkness that has become my world.

But something has changed. The darkness feels different now—not just an absence of light, but a presence unto itself. It presses against me with weight and substance, carrying whispers of doubt that my bravado can't quite silence.

What if he doesn't come back?

Or worse, what if he does and he refuses to believe me?

A flurry of questions surface from the depths of my mind like bubbles of poison gas, contaminating every breath I take. What if my defiance was the wrong choice? What if he decides I'm more trouble than I'm worth and simply... forgets about me?

And then it hits me.

If I disappear, or the cartel thinks I died in the explosion, then what would happen to Rory?

Suddenly, I can't breathe.

Gasping and trembling, I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the concrete, my knees drawn up to my chest. The smell of bread drifts through the darkness, making my empty stomach cramp with need. But reaching for it feels like a betrayal.

When I burned the warehouse to the ground, I fucked up. I may have inadvertently given the cartel a good reason to kill Rory. And if he dies, everything I've been through over the last ten years means nothing.

"Fang!" I scream, scrambling to my feet and running toward the door. "Come back!"

Chapter 4: Fang

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

Stepping back from the concrete box-style building, I engage the final lock on the Quiet Room door. My fingers linger on the steel for a moment, reluctance slowing my movements as the weight of what I've done—what I'm doing—settles on my shoulders. I don't kidnap women. I wouldn't even be doing this if she'd just been straight with me from the beginning. Although I get the sense she's not entirely lying, she's also not being completely truthful.

After we fled the warehouse, I took her to a motel where I had stashed an extra laptop as well as anything else I thought I might need after the auction. I asked her a bunch of questions about what just happened, but she refused to answer any of them. All I wanted to do was find out what was on the drive, but she tried to bolt, so I had to stop her. I ended up slipping her a roofie because she refused to cooperate. She was much more manageable once she was knocked out. I tossed her in the back of a car I stole and drove her back to the clubhouse.

My bike was still at the warehouse, but I called in a favor, and one of the guys from UVMC's San Antonio chapter went to try to get it. He called me up and said it was toast. Burnt up in the fire. I'm still pissed off about that. I loved my ride. Thank fuck I've got a new one being delivered later today.

I glare at the concrete box and mutter, "She'll start telling the truth after she's been in there for a few more hours."

The silence that follows seems to stretch and thin, becoming something alive and judging, wrapping around me like invisible chains. When I turn toward the clubhouse, my heart drops.

Vapor's standing in the shadow of a nearby cypress, his massive frame silhouetted by sunlight glistening off the swamp water behind him. His slicked-back black hair gleams like a raven's wing, while sweat beads on his forehead. Scowling, he gives me a disapproving shake of his head, as if I'm a child in need of scolding. And maybe I am. Even at this distance, I can feel the chill of his blue eyes cutting through me, dissecting my intentions with surgical precision.

"Shit," I mutter.

He doesn't move, doesn't speak, just watches me with the stillness of a predator that's already spotted its prey and is simply waiting for the right moment to strike. The club president doesn't need to raise his voice or make threats. His presence alone is enough to make my mouth go dry.

"Who's in there?" Vapor finally asks, his voice deceptively soft despite the hard edge beneath the words.

My mind races through possibilities like code executing in parallel threads. I could lie, say it's nothing—just testing the security of the room. I could deflect and change the subject to the upgrades I've been making to our surveillance system. I could even try to joke my way out of it, though humor has never been my strong suit.

But this is Vapor. The man who gave me a home when I had nothing but guilt and technical skills to offer. The man who understood my obsession with finding missing people without ever questioning why it mattered so much to me. The president who's trusted me with the club's digital security and, by extension, all our lives.

I can't lie to him. Not about this.

"Her name's Mina Bishop," I say, my voice steadier than I expected. "She's a hacker. Works for the cartel."

I watch his face for a reaction, but years of leading the MC have made Vapor a master at controlling his expressions. Only the slight tightening around his eyes betrays that my words have any impact at all.

“I know exactly who she is,” he says, each word dropping into the space between us like stones into still water. “What I want to know is why you’ve got her locked in our Quiet Room without telling me or the club.”

The acid in his tone burns through my surprise. He knows? How the hell does he know?

“She’s been probing our servers for weeks,” Vapor continues, stalking toward me with measured steps. “Trying to slip past the same security you assured me was impenetrable.”

“How do you—”

His scowl deepens.

My hands curl into fists at my sides. “It’s impenetrable to everyone but this chick.”

“And?”

“And that’s why she’s here.”

“Really?” Vapor growls, close enough now that I can see the veins standing out on his neck, the clenched muscles in his jaw. “You knew we had a cartel hacker sniffing around our digital doorstep and you didn’t think that was worth mentioning to the club?” He gestures sharply toward the locked door. “And now you’ve got her on our property? What the hell were you thinking, Fang?”

I've seen Vapor angry before—seen him beat men twice my size into bloody submission without breaking a sweat—but I've never been on the receiving end of that cold fury. My stomach twists with guilt.

“I have it under control,” I insist, hating how the words sound more like a plea than a statement.

Vapor's laugh is sharp and humorless. “Under control? You've brought a cartel operative into our home. Tell me exactly how that's ‘under control.’”

He moves past me toward the common area, his shoulders rigid with tension. I follow, knowing this conversation is far from over. When we reach the barbecue area, he drops into a chair at one of the picnic tables, his massive hands coming to rest in fists on the wooden planks.

“How did you get her?” he asks, his voice quieter now but no less intense.

I slide onto the bench across from him, rubbing a hand over my face. The events of the past twenty-four hours have left me running on caffeine and adrenaline, my brain crackling with the uncomfortable static of sleep deprivation.

“There was an auction,” I begin. “Black market tech. I went undercover, looking for intel on the cartel's digital infrastructure, but also, for her. Had a feeling she'd be there working tech security for them. I decided to go to the warehouse and see what I could learn.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

Vapor's eyes never leave my face, and his expression's stone cold.

"Things went sideways," I continue, trying to save my ass and justify what I did behind his back. "I accidentally triggered an explosive device. Burned the whole warehouse down. In the chaos, I managed to grab her—and a flash drive she was carrying. I locked her gun in my office. She claims the drive has everything we need to take down the cartel's digital operation."

"And does it?" Vapor asks, his knuckles whitening as his fists tighten.

I shake my head. "There are only twelve files on it. Nothing like what she promised. I've run every recovery program I have, checked for hidden partitions, steganography, encrypted containers—nothing."

"Could you have missed something?"

The question isn't accusatory, but it stings my professional pride nonetheless.

"No," I say firmly. "If there were more files hidden on that drive, I would have found them."

Vapor leans back, his chair creaking under his weight. The veins in his neck are still visible, pulsing with barely contained anger. "You realize she could be setting us up. This could be exactly what she wanted—to get inside our defenses. Trojan horse shit."

I had the exact same thought. After all, I'm paranoid by nature.

“She claims she’s not working for them by choice,” I say carefully.

“And you believe her?” Vapor’s eyebrow raises, skepticism etched into every line of his face.

“I don’t know what to believe,” I admit. “But if there’s even a chance she’s telling the truth—”

“Was she trafficked?” Vapor cuts in, his voice sharpening on the word. The cartel’s human trafficking operations are a particular trigger for him, for all of us in the club.

“I don’t know,” I repeat. “She hasn’t told me anything useful yet.”

Vapor’s massive hand comes down on the table with a thud, hard enough to make the wood vibrate beneath my forearms. “All we know for sure is that she works for them. If the cartel realizes she’s missing, they’ll tear this city apart looking for her. And if they trace her back to us—”

“They won’t,” I interrupt, certainty hardening my voice. “They don’t even know if she survived the warehouse blast.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Chatter on the dark web. The explosion killed at least a dozen people. They’re using dental records to identify the remains. It’s going to take time before they realize she’s not one of the bodies.”

Vapor studies me for a long moment, his blue eyes piercing enough to make me want to squirm in my chair like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Finally, he pushes himself to his feet with a sigh that seems to carry the weight of his entire presidency.

“You created this mess by bringing her here,” he says, each word precise and final. “It’s up to you to find out what she’s really about. If she’s with them, it’s your job to get rid of her. If she’s not, also your problem. Fix it.”

The conversation is over. I’ve been given my orders. As Vapor walks away, his shoulders still rigid with tension, I feel the weight of his expectations settling around me like a second skin.

What Vapor doesn’t understand—what I can’t bring myself to tell him—is that something about Mina’s story strikes a chord that resonates through the hollow spaces in my chest. Something about her defiance in the face of certain defeat feels hauntingly familiar.

Something about her reminds me of other trafficking victims we’ve rescued. Maybe she’s not lying. Maybe she’s just being trafficked for her technical skills instead of that smokin’ hot body.

Sitting here won’t help shit. I need to find out what I can about her. The best way to do that is get online.

Chapter 5: Fang

My office deep inside the clubhouse welcomes me with the familiar electronic hum that’s more soothing to my ears than any lullaby. The blue glow from six monitors bathes everything in a spectral light, turning my skin the color of a drowned man’s and making the stacks of circuit boards and hard drives along the walls glisten like wet stones. This is my sanctuary, my domain of absolute control—unlike the chaos I’ve created by bringing Mina onto our property.

I sink into my chair, the worn leather conforming to my body with the memory of countless all-night coding sessions. The conversation with Vapor sits heavy in my

chest, a weight pulling down my shoulders as I reach into my pocket and extract the flash drive.

It's unremarkable to look at—black plastic with a manufacturer's logo worn nearly smooth from being handled countless times. Nothing about its appearance suggests it could be worth dying for, yet Mina had clutched it like a lifeline even as the warehouse burned around us.

I plug it into my primary workstation, the one with custom hardware I've pieced together from components no legitimate retailer would sell to a civilian. The machine hums a bit louder, acknowledging the new connection, and my fingers dance across the keyboard.

“Alright,” I mutter to the empty room, “let's see if I can figure out if you're hiding anything. I've already checked, but one more shot...”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

The same twelve files appear on my screen, organized in a folder structure so basic it's almost insulting. Spreadsheets containing what appear to be shipping manifests. A few PDF documents with supplier information. Nothing that seems worth the elaborate security theater Mina orchestrated at the auction.

I run a deeper scan, pushing past the obvious file structure into the raw data. My eyes track the scrolling hexadecimal output, looking for patterns or anomalies that might indicate steganographic concealment—data hidden within other data, invisible to standard file systems.

Nothing.

I try a different approach, opening a terminal window and typing a series of commands to check for alternative data streams, hidden partitions, or encrypted volumes that might be nested within the visible filesystem.

Still nothing.

“Come on,” I growl, frustration building behind my eyes like storm pressure. “There has to be something here.”

I launch a suite of specialized forensic tools I've modified myself to detect the kinds of tricks only the most paranoid hackers would use. The programs chew through the flash drive's contents, analyzing every byte, comparing hash values, checking timestamps for inconsistencies.

The results roll in, one after another, each delivering the same maddening conclusion:

the drive contains exactly what it appears to contain. Twelve unremarkable files with no hidden data.

I lean back in my chair, running both hands through my hair until it stands up in chaotic spikes. This doesn't make sense. Why would Mina risk her life for this? Why would she claim it contained everything we need if it's just basic supply-chain documentation?

Unless... unless she lied. Unless this whole thing is exactly what Vapor fears—a trap designed to get her inside our defenses.

The thought sends a chill through me despite the warmth of the electronics-packed room. I've been so focused on the technical puzzle that I may have missed the human one.

I'm about to eject the drive and storm back to the Quiet Room to confront Mina when a notification pops up in the corner of my main monitor. A small red box with white text, innocuous enough that most people would dismiss it without a second thought.

But I'm not most people, and the message it contains makes my blood freeze in my veins.

INTRUSION DETECTED - LEVEL 3 FIREWALL BREACH

“What the hell?” I lean forward, fingers already flying across the keyboard to pull up the security dashboard. Level 3 is our outermost defensive perimeter, designed to keep casual snoopers and script kiddies at bay. Nothing that should cause serious concern—except another notification follows immediately, then another.

LEVEL 2 FIREWALL BREACH

ATTEMPTING TO ISOLATE INTRUSION VECTOR

My posture changes instantly, muscles tensing as I pull myself closer to the desk. This isn't a random attack or automated scan. This is something targeted and sophisticated, moving through our defenses with disturbing speed.

I pull up the traffic analyzer, watching in real-time as packets flood our network from multiple IP addresses. The pattern is too coordinated to be random, too elegant to be brute force. Someone is probing for weaknesses with the precision of a surgeon, testing each potential entry point with carefully crafted packets designed to exploit vulnerabilities that shouldn't even exist in my system.

“Oh, you want to play?” I mutter, fingers flying across the keyboard as I initiate countermeasures. “Let's play.”

I route the incoming traffic through a honeypot—a decoy system designed to look vulnerable while actually isolating the attacker from our real network. For a moment, the flood of intrusion attempts redirects, and I allow myself a small smile of satisfaction.

It lasts exactly three seconds before new warnings explode across my screens.

LEVEL 1 FIREWALL BREACH

ADMINISTRATIVE ACCESS COMPROMISED

DATABASE INTEGRITY FAILURE

“No, no, no!” The words escape through clenched teeth as I watch the attacker slice through my defenses like they don't exist. This shouldn't be possible. I built these systems myself, hardened them against exactly this kind of attack.

Red warning messages cascade across all six monitors now, a digital waterfall of failure that makes my stomach clench with a nauseating mix of fear and professional outrage. The club's secure databases—containing everything from member information to operational details to financial records—are being systematically accessed and copied.

My fingers blur across the keyboard, trying to isolate critical systems, change access credentials, anything to slow the bleeding of data. But the attacker is always one step ahead, anticipating my defensive moves with uncanny precision.

It's like they know the system. Like they know me.

A new message appears, centered on my main screen in blinking red letters that seem to pulse in time with my racing heartbeat:

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:33 pm

FULL SYSTEM COMPROMISE IMMINENT - 30 SECONDS TO COMPLETE DATA EXFILTRATION

There's only one option left, and it's the digital equivalent of a scorched earth policy. I reach beneath my desk for a red button protected by a clear plastic cover—my emergency kill switch, designed for exactly this kind of worst-case scenario.

I flip the cover open and slam my palm down on the button without hesitation.

The effect is immediate and dramatic. One by one, the servers along the walls power down, their status lights blinking from green to amber to nothing at all. The cooling fans that have been whirring at different pitches slow and stop, like mechanical hearts giving up the ghost. The monitors flicker and go dark, taking the warning messages with them.

The room falls into an eerie silence broken only by my ragged breathing and the soft ping of cooling metal as the servers contract in the suddenly still air.

In that ensuing silence, one thought pulses through my mind with absolute clarity: Mina knows more than she's telling me, and I'm going to find out what it is, one way or another.

I storm back to the Quiet Room with my Glock drawn and fury burning through my veins like liquid code—hot, precise, and dangerous. The attack on our systems wasn't random. It was too coordinated, too perfectly timed. The coincidence stretches beyond statistical probability, and there's only one variable in this equation that makes sense. The hacker sitting in our concrete box who claimed to have the keys to

the cartel's digital kingdom.

The locks yield to my fingers with mechanical obedience, each click echoing my mounting anger. I throw the door open, letting light blaze into the darkness. The sudden brightness illuminates her stunned expression, but I don't so much as blink. I don't want to miss a microsecond of her reaction.

Mina sits exactly where I left her, back against the far wall, knees drawn up to her chest. The harsh light catches the hollows beneath her cheekbones, the cracked surface of her lips. The glass of water I left is empty, but it wasn't enough. Twenty-four hours without water has left visible marks, yet her eyes remain as sharp as shattered glass, reflecting a defiance that even dehydration can't dull.

"Our network just got hit," I say, the words clipped and cold as I level the gun at her chest. "Sophisticated attack. Bypassed security protocols that were specifically designed to be impenetrable."

I watch her face for the telltale signs of guilt or satisfaction—a twitch at the corner of the mouth, a flicker of the eyelids, any of the hundred microexpressions that humans can't control. Most people don't realize how much their faces reveal in the milliseconds before conscious control kicks in.

Mina isn't most people.

Her expression shifts in a way I can't quite catalog—not guilt, not exactly satisfaction, but something more complex. Recognition, perhaps. Or the confirmation of a theory. It's gone before I can properly analyze it, replaced by the same cool assessment she's worn since I pulled her from the burning warehouse.

"Convenient timing," I continue, taking a step closer, the Glock steady in my hand. "Almost like someone knew exactly when to strike. Almost like someone had inside

information.”

She tilts her head slightly, a single strand of jet-black hair falling across her face. “If I had that kind of control over the cartel’s operations from in here,” she says, her voice raspy from thirst but steady, “do you really think I’d still be sitting in your concrete box?”

The logic isn’t flawless, but it’s solid enough to make me hesitate. She’s right—if she could communicate with the outsideworld, she’d have called for extraction, not a cyber-attack that would only increase my suspicion. Besides, there’s nothing in here but her and the clothes on her back, which I thoroughly searched before I left her in here.

“I can help you,” Mina says, breaking the silence. “I know their systems. I designed half of them. I can stop the attack, close the backdoors they’ve opened, make sure they never get in again.”

I narrow my eyes, suspicion a bitter taste at the back of my throat. “And why would you do that?”

“Because I want something in return.” Her eyes meet mine without flinching, intense enough that I can almost feel the heat of them across the small room. “My brother. I need your help to get him away from them.”

The word “brother” hits me like a sucker punch, unexpected and devastating. My grip on the Glock falters for just a moment, memories flooding in that I’ve spent years keeping compartmentalized—a basketball bouncing on asphalt, Tommy’s voice calling that he was going home, the empty years that followed filled with search parties and false leads and eventually nothing but silence.

“Your brother?” I repeat, hating how the question comes out softer than I intended.

Something in my tone must betray me because Mina's eyes narrow slightly, reassessing me like I'm code with an unexpected function. "Yes. My brother. He's why I work for them. He's sick—has been since he was a kid. Needs constant medical care. As long as I do what they want, they pay for his treatments. They own me."

The words are simple, matter-of-fact, stripped of emotional manipulation. That makes them more believable than any tearful plea could ever be. Still, I've been in this game long enough to know that the most effective lies are the ones that target your specific vulnerabilities. What if she knows about Tommy?

"And I'm supposed to just believe that?" I keep my voice flat, professional, even as something in my chest twists uncomfortably.

Mina shrugs, a small movement that seems to cost her more effort than it should. "Believe what you want. But your network is currently being stripped bare."

"I pulled the plug."

"But you can't turn it back on until you fix this. You're defenseless. Every second we waste in here is another second you don't have eyes around the perimeter of this compound. They can strike and you'll never see them coming. You need me. I need you. Seems like a simple equation to me."

My mind races through possibilities like a processor evaluating conditional branches. She could be lying. This could be an elaborate scheme to gain access to our remaining secure systems. But if she's telling the truth, she represents our best chance at securing our systems.

And if her brother really is being held as leverage...

I make my decision, lowering the gun slightly but keeping it visible. “If—and that’s a big if—you can stop their attack when I turn shit back on, I’ll consider helping you. But if you’re playing me, if this is some kind of trap, you won’t live long enough to regret it.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

For the first time since I've met her, something like hope flickers across Mina's face. It's gone almost instantly, but it was there—genuine enough that I find myself wanting to believe her story despite every instinct warning me against it.

“Come with me,” I say, gesturing toward the door with my free hand. “And don't try anything stupid.”

She rises slowly, unfolding from her seated position with the careful movements of someone whose muscles have stiffened from immobility. When she's upright, I notice again how petite she is, the top of her head barely reaching my shoulder. It's easy to forget the physical reality of her when faced with the sharp intelligence in those green eyes.

I press the gun against her back as she walks ahead of me, close enough that she can feel the pressure but not so hard that it would bruise.

“Try anything,” I warn, “and I won't hesitate.”

We move through the clubhouse yard, the air hot against my skin. Mina takes slow, deep breaths as we walk, savoring her first taste of freedom after confinement. I guide her through the back entrance of the main building, keeping her away from common areas where other club members might see her.

The hallway leading to my office is deserted. When we reach the door, I pause, suddenly aware of how vulnerable I'm making myself by bringing her into my technological sanctuary. If this is a trap, I'm walking right into it. But the alternative is watching our entire digital infrastructure crumble, and that's not an option I can

accept.

I push the door open, revealing my office transformed by the emergency shutdown. The usual blue glow of monitors has been replaced by the blood-red pulse of backup systems, casting everything in a crimson light that makes the familiar space feel alien and threatening. The servers stand like silent sentinels along the walls. Their status lights are dark for the first time since I built them.

Mina steps inside, her silhouette sharp against the red glow, and for a moment, she looks less like a prisoner and more like what she truly is—a digital weapon about to be unleashed.

Whether that weapon is pointed at our enemies or at our heart remains to be seen.

Chapter 6: Mina

The office swims into focus around me. Emergency lights paint everything the color of fresh blood. Six monitors line the desk before me, each black and lifeless. My vision blurs at the edges, my body a hollowed-out shell after hours, or maybe days, without proper food or water. I still don't know how long I was unconscious, but my mind remains razor-sharp, cataloging every detail of Fang's technological sanctuary as I step inside.

The room smells of electronics—that distinct scent of warm plastic and solder that always feels like home to people like me. Cables snake across the floor in organized chaos, connecting towers of custom-built hardware that would make most tech companies drool with envy. This is a hacker's paradise, built by someone who understands both power and paranoia.

I stride toward the workstation with purpose despite the weakness in my knees. Each step requires concentration, my body fighting the effects of dehydration and hunger

that gnaw at my insides like feral animals. The concrete floor seems to tilt beneath my feet, but I refuse to stumble. I won't give Fang the satisfaction of seeing me falter.

“Wait.” Fang pulls open a mini fridge tucked next to the desk. He pulls out an electrolyte drink and thrusts it at me. “Here.”

Grateful for the drink, I grab it. I suck it down, nearly choking on it in the process. I reach for a chair and grip its leather back, steadying myself.

“Everything's shut down,” he says behind me, his voice tight with controlled anger. “Emergency protocols. I had to kill the power to stop the data exfiltration.”

“Smart move,” I admit, “but we need to turn the computers back on to assess the damage.” Without waiting for permission, I drop into the seat, my fingers already reaching for the keyboard. “Boot sequence?”

A pause, heavy with suspicion, then: “Alt-F7, then the master password.”

I glance over my shoulder, one eyebrow raised. “Which you're not going to give me.”

His face remains impassive behind those thick-rimmed glasses, but I catch the slightest twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Move.”

I slide over as he reaches around me, his body uncomfortably close as he types a complex string of characters, shielding the keyboard with his massive forearm. The scent of him—clean sweat, coffee, and something faintly metallic—envelops me for a moment before he straightens and steps back, the Glock still visible in his cut.

The monitors flicker to life one by one, status reports flooding the screens in cascading windows of text. I scan them quickly, my fingers already moving across the keyboard in a familiar dance. The cartel's digital fingerprints are all over these

systems—I'd recognize their work anywhere, considering I designed half their attack protocols.

“They've breached your primary firewall and established multiple backdoors,” I mutter, opening terminal windows and launching diagnostic programs. “Classic distributed attack pattern—hit from multiple vectors simultaneously, overwhelm the defenses, then slip in through the chaos.”

Fang moves to stand beside me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body but far enough that he can monitor everything I type. “How bad?”

My fingers never pause as I answer, “Bad. They've got hooks in your database servers, your authentication systems, your communications protocols.” I isolate a particularly nasty piece of code and display it on the center monitor. “See this? It's a dormant wiper. Once activated, it would have deleted everything—backups included.”

I feel rather than see his posture stiffen. “Can you remove it?”

“I'm already on it.” My hands fly across the keyboard, lines of code scrolling past faster than most people could read. My body may be failing me, but my mind is in its element, processing information and executing commands with machine-like efficiency. This is where I live—in the space between intention and execution, where thought becomes electric impulse becomes action.

Sweat beads on my forehead despite the cool air. My fingers tremble slightly, not from fear, but from the physical toll of sustained concentration. I blink away the blurriness that threatens my vision, forcing myself to focus.

“They're using a modified Trojan I helped design,” I say tersely, a bitter smile twisting my lips. “Ironic that I'm now fighting my own code.” The admission costs

me nothing—it's obvious enough from how quickly I'm navigating through the attack infrastructure.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Fang says nothing, but his eyes never leave the screens, watching as I systematically identify and neutralize one malicious process after another. I can feel his assessment shifting, the weight of his gaze changing from suspicion to something closer to professional respect. He recognizes skill when he sees it, even if it belongs to someone he considers an enemy.

“There,” I mutter, hitting Enter. “Primary breach contained.” I wipe sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. “Now for the secondary payloads.”

The minutes blur together as I work, each successful countermeasure followed by two more challenges. It’s like dismantling a bomb with multiple failsafes, each one designed to trigger if the previous is disturbed. But I know this work intimately—know the minds that created it, know their habits and shortcuts, and know where to look for the hidden traps.

“Almost...” I whisper, more to myself than to Fang, as I track down the final piece of malicious code. My vision doubles momentarily, my body reminding me of its limitations, but I force the weakness away. “Got it.”

The last warning message disappears from the screens, replaced by a system status report showing all services restored and secure. Under normal circumstances, I’d allow myself a moment of satisfaction, maybe even a smile. But these aren’t normal circumstances, and time is running out.

Without pausing, I pivot from defense to offense, my fingers launching new commands before Fang can react.

“What are you doing?” Fang’s voice sharpens as he reaches for the Glock, shifting it into his hand.

“Getting what we both need,” I reply, not looking away from the screens as I navigate through the cartel’s internal-facing servers. Hospital databases appear on one monitor, shipping manifests on another. “You want intel on their operations. I want to find my brother. This is our chance for both.”

I feel Fang move closer, his shadow falling across the keyboard. “I didn’t authorize this.”

My fingers continue typing, racing against invisible clocks. “You didn’t have to.”

For a moment, I think he might pull me bodily from the chair, might decide I’m too dangerous to allow near his systems. But curiosity wins out over caution. The cartel’s data—their shipping routes, their personnel records, their financial transactions—scrolls across his screens in real-time, a treasure trove of intelligence.

And somewhere in that digital ocean of information swims my brother’s location. The cartel kept this information hidden from me so they could continue to use me. They let me visit him, but I was always blindfolded so I didn’t know where we were. I had never tried to search for him before because I had no way of rescuing him. Now I do. I just have to locate and rescue him before Fang decides I’ve outlived my usefulness. Or before the cartel realizes I’ve survived and sends someone to finish what the warehouse explosion couldn’t.

My hands hover over the keyboard, each finger trembling not with fear but with the raw determination that’s kept me alive all these years. The cartel’s databases spread before me on Fang’s monitors—a digital labyrinth I helped build, now potentially my brother’s salvation.

Two devastating facts hang in the air between keystrokes: the cartel is about to realize that I survived the explosion, and worse, they'll know I'm working with Underground Vengeance. The clock that's been counting down my brother's safety has just accelerated to a dangerous speed.

"You realize what you've done," Fang says, his voice low and steady beside me. Not a question—an accusation wrapped in observation.

"I know exactly what I've done," I respond, fingers already flying across the keyboard again. "I've bought us maybe five minutes before they lock me out completely. Less if they're smart about it."

I navigate through the hospital databases first, searching for my brother's unique identifier in their system. The cartel doesn't use real names for their leverage points—too easy to track. Instead, they assign codes: mine is Python-379. My brother's is Cobra-380. Finding him means finding that designation in their medical records.

The screen flickers as another firewall falls under my assault. Sweat trickles down my spine, my shirt sticking to my back despite the air conditioning that hums steadily in Fang's office. My mouth tastes like cotton. My tongue sticks to the roof of it with each swallow. The drink helped, but not enough. My dehydration is becoming dangerous. The edges of my vision occasionally darken, but I push through it.

"Here." Fang shoves another bottle of water in front of me.

"No time. Patient logs," I mumble, more to myself than to Fang. "Transfer records. Payment trails."

He shifts behind me, moving to where he can see both the screens and my face. His gaze presses on me like a physical weight—assessing, calculating, still suspicious,

even though I just saved his entire digital infrastructure from collapse.

“How do you know they haven’t moved him already?” he asks.

A fair question, one that’s been clawing at the back of my mind since I first sat down.

“They wouldn’t,” I say, trying to project more confidence than I feel. “Not yet. They’re efficient, but not that efficient. Moving a patient in critical condition takes planning, especially if they want to keep it quiet.”

“Critical condition?” Something shifts in his tone—a softening so subtle I almost miss it.

I don’t answer, can’t afford the distraction of explanation, not when every second counts. Instead, I pull up a map of hospital facilities with cartel connections, cross-referencing with payment records from their financial database. Twenty-three facilities blink red on the screen, each a potential prison for my brother.

“Too many,” I mutter, frustration bleeding into my voice. “Need to narrow it down.”

I create a new query, filtering for specialized equipment—the dialysis machines and monitoring systems my brother needs to survive. The map refreshes, red dots disappearing one by one until only eleven remain. Better, but still too many to check manually before the cartel realizes what I’m doing.

A new idea strikes, and I pivot to a different database—the cartel’s shipping records. If my brother is about to be moved, I need to get a look at their logistics. The cartel documents everything; their criminal enterprise runs with corporate efficiency. Every asset, every transaction, every movement is recorded somewhere.

Fang leans closer, his breath warm against my cheek as he watches the data flow

across the screens. “What are you looking for now?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Transportation records,” I explain, fingers never pausing. “Medical equipment transfers. Patient transport logs.” I pull up a timeline of shipments, eyes scanning for patterns. “If they lock me out before I find him or if they move him, we’ll have something to go on.”

“Wouldn’t they just kill him instead?”

“No. They’ll use him.” I hesitate before adding, “Against me.”

“He’s worth more alive,” Fang mutters with disgust.

“Exactly.”

The search narrows further—eight facilities, then five, then three. My heart pounds against my ribs like it’s trying to escape. So close. Three possible locations where my brother might be held, three chances to save the only person who matters to me in this world.

I dig deeper into the most recent files, searching for anything that might confirm his location. And then—

My fingers freeze over the keyboard. A single entry from two weeks ago: “Asset Cobra-380 stabilized. Transport to Facility 7 complete. Maintenance requirements updated.”

“I think I found him,” I whisper, my voice brittle and tight. The words catch in my dry throat, emerging as little more than a rasp. My fingers tremble more violently

now, hovering over the keys as I stare at the confirmation I've been searching for.

“Where?” Fang closes the distance between us, his massive frame casting a shadow over the keyboard as he leans in to study the screen. His presence should feel threatening—this man who's kept me prisoner, who still doesn't trust me—but in this moment, he's just another set of eyes confirming what I desperately want to believe.

A slew of emotions threatens to overwhelm me. Hope and fear tangle in my chest until I can barely breathe. After years of blind compliance, of coding and hacking whatever the cartel demanded while never knowing where my brother was, I finally have something concrete. A location. A facility code.

I never dared to try to find him before. They just sent me proof of life videos. And if I did something particularly good, they'd blindfold me and take me to see him. But it's been months since the last time that happened.

“Facility 7,” I manage to say, pointing to one of the three remaining red dots on the map. “It's a private clinic on the outskirts of New Orleans. Officially specializes in long-term care for coma patients. Unofficially...” I swallow hard. “It's where they keep their most valuable assets.”

Fang's eyes narrow behind his glasses, studying not just the information but my reaction to it. “How do you know this is real? Could be misinformation, a trap.”

“It matches,” I say, pulling up additional files that confirm the pattern. “Equipment transfers, specialist rotations, security details. All consistent with a high-value asset in long-term care.” I click through to another file. “Plus, there's this.”

A medication list appears on screen, and I highlight three specific entries. “These are his meds. Exact dosages, exact combinations. He has a rare kidney condition—these are custom-compounded for his specific needs. No one else would be on this exact

protocol.”

Something flickers across Fang’s face—recognition, perhaps, or memory—gone before I can properly identify it. His jaw tightens, a muscle pulsing just beneath the skin as he processes what I’ve shown him.

“If this is real,” he says slowly, “what’s your plan? You can’t just walk into a cartel-controlled facility and ask for your brother back.”

I turn to face him fully, meeting those emerald eyes behind their thick frames. “No,” I agree, “I can’t. But we can.”

The air between us vibrates with tension as the implication of my words settles in the space between us. I’ve found what I needed. Now comes the harder part—convincing this man, this stranger who has every reason to distrust me, that saving my brother is worth the risk to him and his club.

His expression gives nothing away, but I can almost see the calculations running behind those intense eyes. Risk versus reward. Trust versus caution. The potential value of having a cartel hacker in his debt against the danger of walking into what could very well be a trap.

“We’ll need proof,” he finally says, neither accepting nor rejecting my proposition. “And a better plan than just showing up with guns drawn.”

“So, you’ll help me?”

“Maybe.”

It’s not a yes. But it’s not a no either. And right now, with my brother’s location glowing on the screen before us, that’s enough to keep hope alive for one more

moment.

Chapter 7: Mina

I rub my temples with shaking fingers, exhaustion and dehydration making the simple movement feel monumental. My mind's becoming sluggish and all I want to do is sleep, but now isn't the time. If I don't convince Fang to help me, then I have zero chance at finding and rescuing my brother. Fang's on the fence about it, but maybe once he hears my story, he'll understand why I ended up enslaved to the cartel. Hopefully it will be enough to convince Fang to help me.

“Water,” I croak, my throat so parched the word barely sounds human. “Please.”

Fang studies me for a long moment, his expression unreadable behind those thick-rimmed glasses. He reaches into the mini fridge and produces a sealed bottle, then twists the cap off before handing it to me—a small kindness that catches me off guard.

I take the bottle with both hands and drink carefully, fighting the urge to gulp it all down at once. The cool liquid feels like salvation sliding down my throat, bringing me back to life one sip at a time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

When I've had enough, I set the bottle down and meet his gaze. The truth sits heavy on my tongue. It's a story I've never told anyone. Part of me wants to keep it locked away, but secrets won't save my brother. Getting Fang to trust me is my only hope, and trust requires vulnerability.

"My mother remarried when I was sixteen," I begin, the words emerging slow and deliberate. "Her new husband made it clear he didn't want another man's children in his house. I came home from school one day to find my things packed in garbage bags in the living room. The rest of the house was empty. Everything was gone."

Fang doesn't react visibly, but his stillness takes on a different quality—the attentiveness of someone who recognizes the weight of what's being shared.

"My brother, Rory, was twelve," I continue. "He was at baseball practice when it happened. Mom didn't even wait to say goodbye to him. Just left a note with his coach saying he should go home with me." My laugh comes out bitter and hollow. "As if I had a home to take him to."

I take another sip of water, using the moment to gather my thoughts. The bottle is cool against my palms, a physical anchor in a sea of painful recollections.

"Some of my friends would let me sneak into their houses at night so we'd have a place to sleep. It worked for a while, but eventually their parents started asking too many questions. I dropped out of school and got two jobs to try to make ends meet. Found a crappy one-bedroom apartment in a roach-infested building that should have been condemned, but it was better than being homeless." Memories flash by in quick succession—late nights counting tips from waitressing, early mornings at a

convenience store, helping Rory with homework between shifts. “We were making it work. It wasn’t great, but we were surviving. Then Rory got sick.”

My voice catches on the last word. I clear my throat, hating how pathetic I sound. The cartel hates anyone who appears weak, so I had to keep that aspect of myself hidden for years. When you fake being strong for long enough, you start to believe it. But really, I’m still the same scared teenager I was when our mother abandoned us. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing then, and look at where that got me. At least now I’m smart enough to know that I’ll never be able to escape the cartel without someone’s help. And that someone is Fang. He remains silent, giving me space to continue at my own pace, his eyes never leaving my face.

This is the first time I’ve ever told anyone the whole story about how my life went from average to complete shit. I’m only doing it out of sheer desperation. Also, there’s something about Fang that makes me feel like he might actually care if he knew the whole truth. As much as I wish I didn’t have to tell him everything, my gut’s telling me that lying to him won’t work. He’s too smart for that. So instead of giving him half-truths, I’m going to tell him as much as I can. It’s my only shot at getting Rory out of the cartel.

“It started with fatigue, then nosebleeds that wouldn’t stop. The diagnosis was like something from a medical drama. Primary Hyperoxaluria Type 1 is a rare kidney disorder that requires specialized treatment. I was drowning in medical bills within months.” I trace the condensation on the water bottle with my fingertip, watching droplets race down the plastic. “That’s when I met Carlos.”

The name tastes like ash in my mouth, but I force myself to continue. “He was charming, successful. Said he worked in ‘international logistics.’ Took an interest in my coding projects, said I had real talent. When he found out about my brother’s condition, he seemed genuinely concerned. Offered to help with a ‘temporary loan’ for medical expenses.”

Fang shifts slightly, the first real movement he's made since I started speaking. His posture suggests he already knows where this is going.

“By the time I realized who Carlos really worked for, we were in too deep. The ‘loan’ had mysterious interest that kept growing. My brother’s condition worsened, requiring more specialized care.” I meet Fang’s eyes directly, letting him see the raw truth. “I didn’t have a choice,” I admit with a bitter laugh. “It was work for them or watch my brother die.”

I push myself out of the chair and stand, needing to move, to do something with the restless energy that always accompanies these memories. The small office feels suddenly claustrophobic and I wish he’d take me into another room, preferably one with windows.

“What kind of work did you do for the cartel?” he asks.

“At first, it was just small things—security upgrades for their ‘business’ systems, encryption protocols for their communications. Things I could convince myself weren’t explicitly criminal.” My fingers trace the edge of his desk, following the smooth curve of expensive wood. “Then the requests got more specific. Hack into a competitor’s database. Create backdoors into police servers. Design ransomware targeting specific businesses.”

I turn back to face him, arms crossed over my chest. “Each time I considered refusing, my brother would mysteriously need a new treatment, a different specialist. The message was clear—I work, he lives.”

Fang’s eyes narrow, but he’s watching me intently. I can almost see the calculations running behind those intelligent green eyes, separating fact from possible fiction, looking for inconsistencies or manipulations in my story.

“This went on for almost ten years,” I continue. “I’d build their digital infrastructure during the day and search for a way out of this mess at night. During all that time, I’d only get to see my brother a few times a year.” I point to the flash drive sitting on Fang’s desk. “That was supposed to be my leverage—every operation, every name, every dirty secret they had. Enough to ensure they’d never come after us if we disappeared.”

“But the drive is practically empty,” Fang states, his voice neutral.

“It’s not empty. Those are decoy files.” I press my palms against my eyes, fighting the headache that throbs behind them. “The real data was supposed to upload to a secure server when I entered a specific command sequence. Something went wrong during the transfer. Then the explosion happened, and...” I gesture vaguely.

The silence that falls between us feels charged with unspoken questions and tentative reassessments. Fang watches me with that same unsettling intensity, as if he’s parsing not just my words but also any subtle tells that might reveal deception.

“If what you’re saying is true,” he says slowly, “the cartel will move Rory as soon as they realize you’ve gone rogue.”

“I know.” The knowledge sits like lead in my stomach. “That’s why we need to move fast. Tonight, if possible.”

Fang raises an eyebrow. “We?”

“Yes, we.” I hold his gaze, refusing to flinch. “I need your help to get him out. You need my help to access the cartel’s systems and operations. Neither of us gets what we want without the other.”

The practical reality of our situation hangs in the air between us, undeniable despite

the distrust that still simmers beneath the surface. We're strangers forced into alliance by circumstance—a hacker with nowhere else to turn and a man with resources but insufficient information.

“Trust isn't my strong suit,” Fang says after a long moment, his voice carrying the weight of experiences I can only guess at.

“Mine either,” I admit. “But sometimes survival requires uncomfortable partnerships.”

He studies me for what feels like an eternity. Whatever he's looking for, he seems to find enough of it to continue.

“The club will need to vote,” he says finally. “I can't make this decision alone.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

It's not a yes, but it's not a rejection either.

“Fair enough,” I say, trying to keep the desperate hope from my voice. “But remember—every minute we wait is another minute the cartel has to realize what's happening and move him. Getting to him before they figure stuff out is a huge advantage.”

Fang nods once, a sharp, precise movement that acknowledges the urgency without committing to immediate action. “I'll talk to the president. Make your case to the club. Based on your brother's condition, can they really move him within a few hours?”

“I'm not sure. He needs special transportation and that's not always readily available. We could have a day at most, but it could happen tonight.”

“That's assuming they know you found his location,” Fang says.

“Right. We don't know how long it will take for them to put it all together.”

“Let's get you cleaned up and rested while I go talk to Vapor.”

“Okay.” I flash a quick smile. “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet,” he warns.

I follow Fang through the labyrinth of the clubhouse, mapping each turn in my mind like I'm tracing circuit boards. His broad shoulders block most of my view, but I

catalog what I can see: exit points, security cameras, the faces of men who watch us pass with curious, predatory eyes. My skin prickles with awareness. In this den of leather and testosterone, I'm both an asset and a liability—a hacker with secrets they need and secrets they don't know I have.

“Keep close,” Fang says, his voice barely audible over the heavy metal blasting from somewhere deeper in the building. “Most of the guys will assume you're with me, but they're always looking for some action.”

I quicken my pace, nearly stepping on his heels. “That's not the kind of action I'm interested in right now.”

He doesn't laugh, just throws me a look over his shoulder that might be amusement or annoyance.

We pass a room where three men hunched over a pool table straighten like hunting dogs catching a scent when I walk by. One of them, a barrel-chested guy with a beard that could house a bird's nest gives Fang a questioning look.

“She's with me,” Fang says simply. It's enough to make the man nod and return to his game, though his eyes linger on me a beat too long. A shiver runs down my spine. As long as I'm in their territory, I'd better stay close to Fang. It feels like he's the only thing keeping the dogs at bay.

We climb a set of stairs. At the top, the hallway stretches in both directions with doors lining each side like a hotel corridor. Unlike a hotel, though, there are no numbers, just small insignias burned into the wood—personalized markers for each member, I realize.

Fang stops at a door with an etching that looks like computer code wrapped around a dagger. Without ceremony, he pushes it open and gestures me inside.

“Home sweet home,” he says, though there’s nothing sweet about it.

The room is as sparse as a monk’s cell, though one dedicated to the worship of technology rather than God. A king sized bed with military corners occupies one wall. A wooden desk supports three monitors connected to a tower humming quietly to the side. No photos. No art. Just a corkboard pinned with what look like network diagrams.

Motorcycle gear hangs from hooks on the wall—a leather jacket with the club’s insignia, gloves worn thin at the knuckles, a helmet with a scratch across the visor. The room smells of motor oil and something faintly chemical—cleaning solution, maybe, or the residue of electronic components.

“Cozy,” I say, the sarcasm automatic.

Fang crosses his arms, the movement pulling his t-shirt tight across muscles that seem excessive for someone who spends his days at a keyboard. “You’re staying here until I can talk to Vapor.”

My stomach tightens. “I should go with you. He might have questions only I can answer.”

“Vapor doesn’t trust you. I’m your babysitter until the club decides what to do with you.” His green eyes hold mine steadily behind those thick-framed glasses.

“But I—”

“Or I could take you back to the Quiet Room.”

“That hellhole out by the bayou? No thanks.” I cross my arms under my breasts, not missing the way his gaze drops to watch the movement.

Fang points to a door beside the desk. “Bathroom’s through there. Get cleaned up.”

The bathroom is surprisingly large with a shower big enough to hold four people, a separate toilet with its own door, and dual sinks. A small window above the toilet is painted shut, the glass frosted for privacy but also eliminating it as an escape route. I file away the observation automatically, a habit formed from years of calculating exits.

“Towels are on the shelf,” Fang says, leaning against the doorframe. “I’ll be right outside.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“How generous of you to not watch me shower.”

He shrugs. “I’m a gentleman.”

“You’re a jailer,” I counter, but there’s no heat in it. At least he’s letting me wash all the sweat and dirt off. I’m sure I stink too.

I wait until he closes the door before turning on the water, letting it run to warm up while I assess the tiny space. The mirror above the sink reflects a face I barely recognize anymore—hollow-cheeked, dark circles under eyes that have seen too much, my black hair a tangled mess, and there’s a smudge of something dark on my jawline.

I strip efficiently, placing my clothes in a neat pile where I can grab them quickly if needed. Even naked and vulnerable, I position myself so my back is to the wall, never to the door. A habit I developed living the cartel life. The shower is brief but glorious, hot water sluicing away grime and tension in equal measure. I find pine-scented soap and shampoo and use them judiciously, aware that I’m replacing my scent with his.

I dry off with a surprisingly soft towel, then realize I have nothing clean to change into. Wrapping the towel around myself, I crack the door open.

“Problem?” Fang asks, looking up from his phone.

“I need clothes.”

His eyes flick down to assess my body. His gaze is clinical rather than lecherous. “T-

shirts are in the top drawer of the dresser. Bottom drawer has sweatpants with a drawstring. They'll be big, but they'll work until we can get you something else. Vapor said we should eat then he's calling Church later."

"That's what you call your meetings, right?"

"Yeah. You study up on MCs or something?" His attention is back on his phone as it pings with a new message.

"Or something," I say, walking past him to get clothes.

Clutching the towel to my chest with one hand, I grab the first t-shirt I can find along with a pair of sweat pants. Fang turns his back without being asked, facing the door like a sentinel. I retreat to the bathroom, changing quickly into a black t-shirt that hangs to mid-thigh and sweatpants I have to roll at the waist four times.

I glance at the mirror and can't help but grin at my reflection. His shirt has text on it that reads, "I'm not procrastinating, I'm doing side quests." The 8-bit style symbols at the bottom of the text are kinda cute. There's a red diamond, a gray and black sword, a golden trophy cup, and a blue diamond.

When I emerge, Fang is typing something on his phone. He looks up, assesses my borrowed outfit, and nods once. "Better. Now let's get you fed."

Chapter 8: Mina

The clubhouse kitchen is a large space filled with state-of-the-art industrial appliances. Framed photographs of motorcycles and men wearing the club's colors hang on the wall. The savory aroma of sizzling meat mixes with a cloying wave of cotton-candy scented perfume. I'm sure the second scent is coming from the woman standing at the stove. She's sporting a head of poofy platinum blonde hair that looks

as if it's been teased half to death. She stands with one hip cocked, her denim shorts so tiny they're practically dental floss. She turns when we enter, her smile for Fang wide and practiced, while her glance at me is dismissive.

"Fang, baby," she coos, voice pitched to a frequency designed to make men stupid. "I was just about to send Mikey to find you. Dinner's almost ready."

"Thanks, Trixie," Fang says, and I file away the name, though I doubt it's the one on her birth certificate. "This is Mina. She's staying with us for a while."

Trixie's smile dims a few watts as she gives me a more thorough once-over, taking in my borrowed clothes and damp hair. I see the calculations running behind her heavily mascara'd eyes: not a threat, not competition, not worth the effort.

"Well, aren't you just swimming in Fang's clothes," she says with a saccharine laugh. "Hope you like chili. It's my specialty."

From the casual way she tosses ingredients into the pot—a handful of this, a splash of that—I doubt anything is her specialty except the art of strategic cleavage display. Her tank top is stretched so tight across her chest that the club's logo is distorted into unrecognizability.

"Smells good," I say, moving deeper into the kitchen to observe my surroundings.

The space is well-used, with knife marks scoring the wooden cutting boards and burn patterns on the industrial stove. A massive refrigerator hums in the corner, its surface a collage of magnets—motorcycles, beer brands, and pin-up girls in various poses. The wooden table dominating the center of the room could seat twelve easily.

Fang leans against a counter, watching Trixie with an expression of patient tolerance. "How many are eating tonight?"

“Just us three,” Trixie says, giving her hips a little wiggle as she stirs. “Most of the boys are out on a run with Vapor. Won’t be back till late.” She looks at me again, eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re that computer girl, right? The one who’s supposed to help with the cartel thing?”

I offer a noncommittal hum, neither confirming nor denying. Information is currency, and I’m not spending any of mine on her.

Fang intervenes smoothly. “Mina’s helping us with some tech work. That’s all you need to know, babe.”

She pouts, lower lip glossed to a shine that catches the overhead lights. “I was just making conversation. No need to get all secret-agent on me.”

Trixie turns back to her cooking, adding a generous splash of beer to the pot—half for the chili, half for herself as she takes a swig from the bottle. She moves with the languid confidence of someone who is used to being watched, every action choreographed for maximum effect. I wonder briefly how long she’s been here, and what her story is. Everyone has one. No one ends up in a biker clubhouse by accident.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Grab a seat,” Fang says to me, nodding toward the table. He walks over to Trixie and murmurs something only she can hear. She giggles before reaching up, exposing her taut belly and the underside of her braless tits as she grabs two bowls. To his credit, he doesn’t ogle her boobs, but I’m still annoyed. This all feels like a giant waste of time.

“When’s Vapor coming back?” I ask.

“Couple of hours.”

I sigh. There’s no point in trying to hurry anything along. I’m stuck on the club’s timeline now. I just hope the cartel isn’t moving Rory while I’m sitting around waiting for help.

Trixie ladles chili into each bowl with a flourish, spilling drops onto the counter without bothering to wipe them up. She distributes the bowls at the table, placing Fang’s with a lingering touch to his arm, and mine with barely a glance.

We settle at one end of the long table, Trixie positioning herself directly across from Fang, her elbows propped on the wooden surface in a way that maximizes her cleavage display. I sit to Fang’s right, maintaining a clear view of the kitchen entrance.

The chili is aggressively spiced, more flavor than heat, but I’m hungry enough not to care. I eat methodically, watching as Trixie performs her mating ritual—laughing too loudly at anything Fang says, touching her hair, leaning forward to give him the full benefit of her enhanced assets. She eats with her mouth partially open, talking

through bites, a piece of meat caught briefly on her lower lip before she licks it away with a pointed glance at Fang.

“So how long have you known our Fang?” she asks me, the question casual but her eyes sharp.

“Long enough,” I say, keeping my voice neutral. I have no interest in feeding the gossip machine. If there are more like her lurking around this place, I’d better be careful about what I say.

Trixie’s sugary-sweet perfume wafts across the table each time she moves. It makes my nose itch, but I resist the urge to sneeze. My mother used to say you could tell a lot about a person by their perfume. When I was fifteen, I tried a fruity body spray for the first time. All the girls at school were wearing scented lotions. I just wanted to fit in, so I picked up a cheap body mist from the drugstore. Mom said I smelled like a cheap dessert, easy to consume, and easy to forget.

“Fang’s our resident genius,” she continues, oblivious to my disinterest. “Aren’t you, baby? The things he can do with a computer.” She giggles, as if technology is somehow innately hilarious. “It’s like magic to me. I can barely work my phone.”

I doubt that’s true. Women like Trixie are usually far more capable than they let on. Playing dumb is a survival strategy. I understand that, even though I’ve never used it. My employers would have killed me if they thought I was stupid.

Fang eats steadily, acknowledging Trixie’s chatter with occasional grunts that she somehow interprets as encouragement. He’s mastered the art of seeming to pay attention while his mind is clearly elsewhere. I do the same thing.

Trixie dabs at her mouth with a napkin, leaving a crimson smudge of lipstick. “You should’ve seen what Fang did last month when some asshole tried to hack our

security system. He tracked them back to their house and sent them a little surprise.” She laughs again, a sound like breaking glass. “I wish I could have seen the looks on their faces when those pigs showed up to bust them for drug running!”

This actually earns a small smile from Fang, the first genuine expression I’ve seen from him. “It wasn’t that complicated.”

“Don’t be modest,” Trixie says, reaching across to squeeze his forearm. “You’re a fucking genius.”

Her nails are acrylic talons painted neon pink, tapping against his skin like impatient insects. I find myself staring at them, calculating how quickly they would break if she had to defend herself or type on a keyboard. Impractical. Like so much about her.

I finish my chili and push the bowl away slightly, the ceramic scraping against wood. Trixie’s bowl is still half-full, forgotten as she continues her one-woman show for Fang’s benefit. She twirls a strand of her platinum hair around her finger, head tilted at an angle designed to display the column of her throat.

“The chili was good,” I say, more to interrupt the performance than out of genuine compliment. “Thank you.”

Trixie looks momentarily surprised, as if she’d forgotten I could speak. “Oh. You’re welcome.” She turns immediately back to Fang. “I was thinking maybe after dinner we could watch that movie you mentioned last week? The one with the hackers? I bought some microwave popcorn...”

Fang’s eyes flick to me, then back to Trixie. “Not tonight. I’ve got work to do.”

The rejection is gentle but firm. Trixie’s smile falters for just a second before she reconstructs it, brighter than before to compensate for the crack in her façade.

“Maybe tomorrow then,” she says, voice slightly too high. She stands, collecting the bowls with a clatter. “You two probably have boring computer stuff to talk about anyway.”

As she carries the dishes to the sink, I catch Fang watching her with what might be pity. It’s the most human expression I’ve seen cross his face, and it makes me reassess him slightly. There’s a story there too, beneath his stoic exterior. Everyone in this clubhouse is playing a role, wearing a mask. Even me. Especially me.

The kitchen feels different the moment Trixie leaves—quieter, clearer, as if someone turned down the saturation on a too-bright screen. Fang’s shoulders drop a fraction of an inch, his posture softening now that he’s no longer being watched like a prize bull at auction. I find myself mirroring him, tension easing from my spine as I lean back in my chair. We sit in silence for a beat, two people accustomed to keeping our thoughts to ourselves, until Fang clears his throat and shifts his weight, a prelude to words I can tell will matter.

“So,” he says, eyes fixing on mine with an intensity that makes me straighten again. “About your brother. Let’s go back to my room and talk about a few things before I meet with Vapor.”

I nod and follow him, paying close attention to every turn to reinforce the mental map in my head. Although I feel safer inside the clubhouse than I did in the Quiet Room, it doesn’t hurt to know all the ways out in case I have to make a run for it.

Once we’re back inside the room, Fang sits in the desk chair. There’s nowhere else to sit but the bed, so I perch on the edge of it.

“I know Vapor’s going to ask certain questions, so it’s better if I go into this meeting with all the info he’ll need to make his decision.”

“Isn’t it the club’s decision? Aren’t you kinda democratic?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Sort of. Vapor’s got the final say. I can only make recommendations to him. That said, I trust his gut, and he trusts me. But he’s going to want to know exactly what we’d be getting into if we agreed to help you.”

“What do you need to know?” I ask softly.

“How simple will it be to move him once we have him? Can we do it without a bunch of medical equipment?”

“I’m not sure. He might be able to be disconnected from stuff for an hour or two, but not much longer than that.”

“So we’d need to round up any medical personnel we’d need before the move?”

“Ideally, yes. But in a pinch, I’m pretty sure we could unhook him from everything for a couple of hours. As long as he gets to a new facility quickly, he should be okay. I think.”

“Risky.” Fang waits, his eyes never leaving my face. He has the stillness of someone who understands the value of silence, how it compels others to fill it. It’s a tactic I know well, but knowing doesn’t make me immune.

“You’re right. My brother isn’t like a package you can just grab and go,” I say, my voice taking on an edge of desperation I hate hearing. There’s no point in downplaying the risks involved, but I can’t leave him at the mercy of the cartel either. “He needs constant medical support and specialized care. There’s monitoring, and medication, and equipment. He can’t breathe properly without assistance at night. His

heart has to be checked regularly. He gets infections easily because his immune system is compromised.”

Fang nods slowly, processing. His fingers begin to drum against the table—not impatience, I realize, but a thinking mechanism, like a computer processing data. Tap-tap-tap-tap. Pause. Tap-tap. “What specific equipment does he need longer term?”

“A BiPAP machine for sleep. An automated medication dispenser programmed with his dosage schedule. A hospital bed that can be adjusted to help with his breathing. Pulse oximeter. Heart monitor.” I tick them off on my fingers. “And that’s just the hardware. He needs trained people who know what to do if he has a respiratory crisis.”

Fang’s eyes narrow slightly as he considers this. “Can any of it be sourced privately?”

“Some of it, maybe. The machines, yes. But you’d need someone who knows how to calibrate them specifically for him.” I hesitate, then add, “And you’d need his medical records to know exactly what medications and dosages he needs.”

“Medical records can be accessed.” Fang says this with the casual confidence of someone who regularly breaches secure systems.

“But carefully,” I insist. “One mistake and—” I don’t finish the sentence. I don’t need to.

Fang studies me for a long moment, his expression unreadable behind those black-framed glasses. I wonder what he sees—a desperate sister? A valuable asset? A liability? All three, probably.

“I’ll talk to Vapor,” he finally says. “After everything you’ve told me, I’m going to stick my neck out and trust you on this. I think you could help us take down the cartel, but I can also tell you won’t be able to think straight until your brother’s safe.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Relief loosens a knot in my chest. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Fang cautions. “Vapor makes the final call. But he’s a good man. Better than most in this life.”

I want to ask what that means, how someone rises to leadership in a world of outlaws and still qualifies as “good,” but I hold my tongue. I’m in no position to judge the moral relativism of motorcycle clubs when I’ve spent the last decade working for a cartel.

“If we do this,” Fang continues, “we’ll need a secure location. Medical staff we can trust. Supplies. It won’t be cheap or easy.”

“Nothing worth doing ever is,” I reply, the platitude slipping out before I can stop it.

A ghost of a smile touches Fang’s lips. “True enough.” He stands, pushing his chair back with a scrape against the concrete floor. “Get some rest. I’m going to talk to Vapor now. We’ll figure this out.”

I nod, suddenly exhausted. The day has stretched my nerves to the breaking point—the tension of being stuck in the Quiet Room, the stress of stopping the cyberattack, the bargain I’ve struck, the uncertainty about Rory’s future. It all crashes down at once, a DDoS attack on my emotional firewalls.

“Thank you,” I say again, because I don’t know what else to say.

Fang pauses at the doorway, looking back at me. “For what it’s worth, I get it.

Family's everything. It's worth any risk." Something flickers in his eyes—pain, maybe, or memory—before he shuts it down. "I'll be back soon. If you leave this room, all bets are off."

Then he's gone.

Returning to the bed, I glance at the perfectly made blanket and don't bother to untuck it. I lay across the bed, letting my exhausted muscles rest. I'm too tired to move, yet too wired to relax completely.

The cartel has held Rory hostage through his medical needs for years. Now I'm betting his life on a motorcycle club's honor and a hacker's word. It's a desperate play, but desperation has been my constant companion for so long I hardly recognize it anymore. It's just the background noise of my existence, like the hum of a computer that never powers down.

I close my eyes, allowing myself one moment of weakness while no one is watching. Rory's face floats in my mind—not as he is now, thin and pale in a hospital bed, but as he was before, laughing as I pushed him on a swing, his small hands reaching for the sky. I hold that image close, a talisman against doubt.

Then I open my eyes, straighten my shoulders, and begin mentally coding the next steps of this dangerous program I've initiated. Fang will return with good news or bad, but either way, I need to be ready. Rory is counting on me. He always has been.

And I've never let him down yet.

Chapter 9: Fang

My footsteps echo against the concrete floor as I make my way to Vapor's office, laptop tucked under my arm like a shield. The familiar weight of it grounds me, anchors me to what I know best—codes, systems, the elegant logic of technology. People are messier, more unpredictable. Like Mina. The thought of her sitting alone in my room, wearing my too-big clothes, trusting me with her brother's life, sends an uncomfortable heat through my chest, something that feels dangerously close to responsibility.

I pause outside Vapor's door, knuckles raised. This is the moment I could turn back and just tell Mina there's nothing I can do. But the image of her face when she spoke about her brother flashes in my mind. It's the same desperation I've experienced since Tommy disappeared.

I knock, three sharp raps.

“Enter,” comes Vapor's voice, low and authoritative.

I push into the room, the familiar scent of leather, bourbon, and gun oil wrapping around me. Vapor's office is a study in controlled chaos. A worn oak desk dominates the center, its surface covered with tactical maps of New Orleans, the territories marked with different colored pins—red for cartel, blue for us, yellow for neutral ground. The walls are adorned with club insignia, vintage motorcycle parts mounted liketrophies, and framed photographs of brothers both living and dead.

Vapor sits behind the desk, a glass of amber liquid at his elbow, untouched. His slicked-back hair gleams black as a raven's wing under the low light of his desk lamp. Those sharp blue eyes miss nothing as they track my entrance, cataloging my body language and the laptop under my arm.

The muscles in my neck tense. I can't quite put my finger on what's up with Vapor, but his mood seems off. Normally he's much friendlier and open to talking, but today, shit feels different. Maybe it's because I didn't tell him I was going to Texas. Or because I brought Mina here without clearing it through him first. He's probably questioning my judgement. Considering what I'm about to ask him, his distrust isn't going to help me make my case.

"I need to talk to you about Mina," I begin.

"Thought we were going to discuss the woman during Church."

"I could wait, but I figured it might be easier to explain if it was just the two of us."

"If it's going to be hard to explain, then that's even more reason to talk about it during Church." Vapor leans back in his chair, the leather creaking beneath his weight.

"It can't wait."

"Fine. Go ahead." He nods.

"We've been talking shit over and she might be able to help us with the cartel."

"You vouching for her already? That was quick." He smirks.

"It's not like that. I'm vouching for her skills," I clarify, opening the laptop and

typing in my password. “She stopped the cartel’s latest attack without breaking a sweat. She’s damn good at what she does.”

Vapor raises a brow and drops the sarcasm. “Show me.”

I turn the screen toward him, navigating through files with practiced efficiency. “They tried to hit us with a polymorphic worm embedded in what looked like a routine traffic camera feed. Smart approach—they know we tap into those feeds to monitor shipments.”

Lines of code fill the screen, a language as familiar to me as English. I point to specific sections, highlighting them with my cursor. “Here’s where their code starts to unpack itself. Nasty piece of work. Would have established a backdoor into our entire network, given them access to everything—member details, operations, finances.”

Vapor leans forward, eyes narrowed. Though he doesn’t understand the technical details, he grasps the implications immediately. “And Mina caught this?”

I shake my head. “No, but she redirected it. Look here.” I pull up another window showing a different segment of code. “She created a fake system that looks like our real one. Diverted the attack there, then traced it back to its source.”

“The cartel’s servers?”

“Better.” I can’t help the small smile that tugs at my lips. Technical elegance always pleases me, even when it comes from unexpected sources. “She traced it back to the specific laptop that created it. Got the guy’s name, location, even grabbed screenshots through his webcam.”

I show Vapor the images—a scowling man with a patchy beard typing furiously, cartel tattoos visible on his forearms. “Juan Vasquez’s pet hacker. Guy named

Rodrigo who runs their cyber operations out of a warehouse near the port.”

Vapor’s fingers drum against the desk while he processes the information.

“Impressive,” he admits. “But it doesn’t mean she’s not playing both sides.”

“I thought you might say that.” I close the hacker documentation and open a different folder. “So, I did some digging on Mina before I came to talk to you.”

Vapor’s eyes sharpen. “Without authorization?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“With due diligence,” I counter, meeting his gaze directly. “You wanted me to vet her. I’m being thorough.”

“What did you find?”

“She has a brother. Name’s Rory Bishop.” I pull up his medical records. “Diagnosed with Primary Hyperoxaluria Type 1, a rare kidney condition, when he was about twelve years old. Currently in intensive care. Mina thinks she located him. If she’s right, then he’s in one of the cartel’s small hospitals in NOLA. His condition requires specialized equipment and constant monitoring.” I scroll through billing statements. “The cartel’s been covering his medical expenses through a shell corporation called Bayou Health Services. Over five million dollars in the past decade.”

“And why would they do that?” he asks. His expression doesn’t change, but I see the slight tightening around his eyes. He has a soft spot for family loyalty, for siblings looking out for each other. It’s one of the reasons we connected when I first joined the club.

“They’re keeping her brother alive in exchange for her technical skills. It’s a long story, but—”

“Spill it.”

I tell him everything Mina told me, starting with her mother leaving and ending with her joining the cartel. I even tell him about her cartel boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. That matters. If she was still hooked up with one of them romantically, then I’d never consider helping her. Her loyalty could easily be split. However, I checked and there

hasn't been any communication between Mina and Carlos in well over a year.

Vapor's silent for a few seconds. The fact that he hasn't shut me down yet means I've got a shot at getting him to help us.

"There's more," I say, pulling up a new window. "I found these in a cloud storage account linked to Mina's email. This is one of the main pieces of evidence that makes me believe her."

The screen fills with screenshots of text messages, each more threatening than the last.

Remember your brother needs continuous dialysis to stay alive. Shame if there was a power outage.

Getting harder to source his meds. Better make this job count.

Your brother asked about you today. Told him you were too busy to visit. Should I tell him the truth instead?

Vapor reads them silently, his jaw tightening. "These could be manufactured," he says finally. "Set up to gain our sympathy."

"They could be," I acknowledge. "But I cross-referenced the phone numbers. They match known cartel burners. And the timing aligns with jobs she's confirmed to have done for them." I close the laptop, meeting Vapor's eyes. "I believe her. She's been a prisoner as much as a collaborator."

"And you want to do what, exactly?"

"Rescue her brother. In exchange, she's got more info on the cartel than what we've

got. She's been in their systems for years. Her knowledge is invaluable."

"Are you sure you're not letting your personal history cloud your judgment?" he asks softly.

The words hit like a physical blow. He's referencing Tommy without saying his name—my missing brother, and the guilt I've carried for sixteen years. The reason I understand Mina's desperation. But this isn't about Tommy. It's about doing the right thing, which is what we do. Vapor should understand this.

"I'm not clouded," I say, keeping my voice steady. "I'm clear-eyed. She's an asset we can use against the cartel, and she has legitimate reasons to help us. She wants to destroy them as much as we do."

Vapor picks up one of the red pins from his map and rolls it between his fingers, considering. "The evidence is compelling, but not conclusive. This could still be an elaborate ploy to infiltrate us. After what happened at the old clubhouse..."

He doesn't need to finish. We both remember the bodies, the blood, the club girls who never had a chance to run. The cartel has proven there's no line they won't cross.

"I hear you," I say. "But I also know what I'm seeing in this data. And in her."

Vapor replaces the pin on the map, his movements deliberate. "Show me something more. Something definitive," he says. "Something that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that she's cut ties with the cartel. Then we'll talk about extracting her brother. We can't risk walking into a trap. Not now. Not after everything."

I shift in my chair, frustrated. "It's not a trap."

"You don't know that." He turns from the map, blue eyes glacial in the dim light.

“This could all be an elaborate setup. The cartel’s been gunning for us for years. They blew up the old clubhouse, killing our brothers in the process. They’ve got to be even more pissed off since we shot Juan Vasquez. This girl could be a trojan horse.”

The memory of the old clubhouse hits me like a physical blow—the acrid smell of smoke and blood, the sound of timber cracking as flames consumed what had been our home. We lost a bunch of good men that night, and a few club girls who’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Every few months, I’ll have a nightmare about it.

“I was there too,” I remind him, my voice tighter than I intend. “I pulled Miranda’s body from the wreckage.”

Vapor’s jaw clenches at the name. Miranda had been one of his favorites—not for sex, but for her sharp mind and sharper tongue. She’d been studying computer science at Tulane, moonlighting at the club for tuition money. I’d been teaching her basic network security the week before the bombing. Losing her was huge. She was such a great asset to the club.

“Then you should understand why I can’t just take this girl at her word,” Vapor says. He picks up his untouched bourbon, considers it, then sets it down again without drinking. “The stakes are too high.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

My fingers curl into fists beneath the desk. The logical part of my brain acknowledges his caution—it's what's kept him alive, kept the club intact through wars and betrayals. But logic feels distant now, overshadowed by the desperate look in Mina's eyes when she spoke of her brother. A look I recognize from my own mirror on the anniversaries of Tommy's disappearance.

"I ran every possible check on her," I say, fighting to keep my voice steady. "Her story holds up. The cartel's been using her brother as leverage for years."

Vapor's gaze doesn't waver. "And what if they still are? What if they know she's reached out to us, and they're using her to infiltrate what's left of our operation? One woman with a sad story is a small price to pay for getting inside our defenses."

My chair scrapes against the hardwood floor as I stand abruptly. The sound is harsh in the quiet room, a physical manifestation of my fraying patience.

"You think I haven't considered that?" The words come out sharper than intended. "I'm not some prospect still wet behind the ears. I've been doing this long enough to know when someone's playing me."

Vapor watches me, his expression unchanged by my outburst. That controlled calm only fuels my frustration. My hands clench and unclench at my sides as I struggle to reassemble my usual composure. I don't know what crawled up Vapor's ass today, but he's being unreasonable.

"What's up with you?" I demand. "Normally you wouldn't question my data."

“It could be fake.”

“But it’s not. You’re giving me the third degree, like I’m some fucking prospect. Do you still trust me or what?” The question hangs in the air between us.

For a long moment, Vapor says nothing. The silence stretches until I feel like an overloaded circuit, ready to spark and burn. When he finally speaks, his voice has softened almost imperceptibly. “I trust you, brother. I don’t trust the cartel. And right now, Mina works for them.”

“Not by choice. That’s the whole point.” I exhale slowly, forcing my shoulders to relax. Typically, I never get this worked up, but nothing about this situation is normal.

Vapor stands and rounds the desk, closing the distance between us. He’s a full four inches taller than my six-foot-one frame, forcing me to look up to meet his eyes. When we first met, that physical advantage was intimidating. Now it’s just Vapor—the man who gave me a home when I had none, who saw value in a tech geek with martial arts training and a missing brother-shaped hole in his life. I’m relying on that connection to garner his support.

He places a heavy hand on my shoulder, the weight of it both reassuring and constraining. “Find me something definitive,” he says. “Something that proves beyond a doubt she’s broken ties with the cartel. Something they can’t fake or force. Do that, and the club will back your play on extracting her brother.”

“I will,” I promise, reaching for my laptop. He’s not going to help us. There’s no point in continuing to beg. At least I tried to get through to him. “See you at Church.”

“Hey, Fang?” he calls as I walk toward the door. I pause to glance at him. “Watch your back. If she is as good as you claim, then the cartel won’t let her go easily. And

if she isn't..." He doesn't finish the thought. He doesn't need to. Also, it doesn't matter. I've already made up my mind about what to do next.

"I'll keep my eyes open." I reach for the door.

"One more thing. Don't tell her about Tommy."

I freeze, hand on the doorknob. "Why would I?"

"Because you see yourself in her." His words hit with the precision of a sniper. "Your judgment's compromised when it comes to missing or endangered siblings. We both know that."

The observation stings precisely because it's accurate. I know what Vapor's trying to tell me. He's warning me not to lose sight of what's at stake, but the weight of two missing siblings—Tommy and Rory—seems to press against my chest as I walk. One lost to circumstances I couldn't control, one still within reach. I can't change what happened to Tommy, but maybe, just maybe, I can help save Rory. And in doing so, perhaps save Mina from a life tied to men who use her talents while threatening what she loves most.

I just nod once in acknowledgment before stepping into the hallway and closing the door behind me. The corridor stretches before me, empty and quiet except for the distant sound of pool balls clicking against each other in the rec room. Back in my room, Mina's waiting for news, hoping I've secured her brother's salvation. I'm not giving up yet. I've got a few other ideas up my sleeve and I don't need the club's help to implement them.

I detour to my office and lock myself inside. After setting the laptop on the desk, I jump online to research Rory's condition. Details are important. If I'm going to do this without Vapor and the club, then I need to know exactly what I'm getting into.

Fucking this up isn't an option. The only way Vapor's going to forgive me after the fact is if I'm right about everything and I execute a precise plan flawlessly. Anything else could get me kicked out of the club.

After making a few calls, I leave the office. Balancing club loyalty against this new mission is a dangerous game. But as I make my way back to my room, I feel a clarity I haven't experienced in years. For once, the path forward isn't buried in code or hidden behind firewalls. It's right in front of me, challenging but clear. Vapor's going to be pissed once he finds out what I did, but hopefully I'll have Rory safely tucked away before that happens.

Chapter 10: Fang

The walk back to my room feels longer than usual, each step weighted with the knowledge that I'm about to defy Vapor. I don't feel good about it, but I also don't see any other option. The evidence I showed him should have been enough to convince him that she's for real, but it wasn't. Sucks, but it is what it is. I'm on my own. Well, I guess I've got her too. She's smart. Her intelligence will come in handy.

As I approach my bedroom door, I straighten my shoulders. Going against Vapor isn't something I do lightly, but the look on Mina's face when she spoke about her brother burns in my mind. He could be right and this could all be an elaborate trap, but I don't think it is. I'm also good at what I do, and I would have found something if she wasn't legit.

She's right where I left her, perched on the edge of my bed. She looks up and frowns. "What happened?"

"I talked to Vapor."

"And?" she asks, voice steady despite the anxiety radiating from her posture.

I punch in the code to lock the door behind me. The soft click of the mechanism feels oddly final tonight, sealing us into a shared conspiracy.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Vapor’s not willing to commit club resources to extracting your brother.” My stomach clenches when our eyes meet, so I drop my gaze. “Not yet, anyway.”

Mina’s eyes narrow slightly as she processes the implications. “But you asked him.”

“I presented everything I found. Your brother’s condition, the cartel’s threats, the financial trail.”

“And he didn’t believe you?” There’s a dangerous edge to her voice now.

“He believes that you work for the cartel,” I clarify, leaning against my desk. “What he doesn’t believe is your motivation.”

Mina stands abruptly, pacing the floor between my bed and the bathroom door. In my oversized clothes, she should look diminished, but somehow, she fills the space with a controlled energy that reminds me of a CPU running at full capacity—powerful, but at risk of overheating.

“Why not?” she demands, stopping to face me. “What more does he need?”

I meet her intensity with blunt honesty. “I don’t know what it will take to convince him.”

A bitter laugh escapes her. “Nobody trusts anybody in this world.” She resumes pacing, arms wrapped tightly around herself.

“Can you blame him?” I ask. “The cartel bombed our previous clubhouse. They

killed a bunch of our members, some prospects, and a few club girls too. As long as we're at war, no one's safe. We don't trust anyone, and for good reason. Baiting us with a woman sounds exactly like something they'd do."

Mina nods, her eyes distant. "They like to keep their methods varied. Makes patterns harder to track."

There's something in the way she says it—clinical, detached—that makes me study her more carefully. She's seen and done things that have required her to compartmentalize. It's a skill I recognize because I've developed it myself.

"But you believe me, don't you?" she asks.

"I do. Everything you've told me checks out. I'm good at sorting through information. If there was any kind of red flag, I would have found it. But... Why try to get out now? Why not last week or last month or last year?"

Her pacing stops so abruptly it's as if I've hit her pause button. Her back is to me, shoulders suddenly rigid beneath the borrowed t-shirt. When she turns, there's something different in her eyes—a crack in her defenses that reveals something raw and wounded beneath.

"Two weeks ago, I was running system maintenance on their main server," she begins, her voice controlled but tight. "I found a folder that wasn't supposed to be there. It was labeled 'insurance'."

She moves to the edge of the bed, sitting down heavily. Her hands rest on her knees, and I notice a slight tremor in her fingers.

"I thought it might be blackmail material they had on politicians or cops," she continues. "Something I could use as leverage someday. So, I opened it."

The tremor in her hands intensifies, and she curls her fingers into fists to hide it. I remain silent, giving her space to tell the story at her own pace.

“It wasn’t blackmail,” she says, her voice dropping to a whisper. “It was documentation. Photos and videos of what happens to people who cross the cartel. Not just rivals or enemies—families. Children.”

She looks up at me, her face pale beneath the overhead light. “I’ve always known what they were capable of. You don’t work for men like that without understanding the consequences. But seeing it...” Her voice falters. “There was a little girl who couldn’t have been more than six. They made her parents watch while they...”

She doesn’t finish the sentence; doesn’t need to. Her shoulders curve inward as if trying to protect her vital organs from a beating.

“After that, I knew I couldn’t keep making excuses. Every system I built for them, every security protocol I implemented,” she shakes her head, “it all enables these monsters. I’m complicit.”

My chest tightens with an uncomfortable fusion of empathy and guilt. I understand the weight of complicity, the way it hollows you out from the inside. For years after Tommy disappeared, I wondered if my refusal to walk home with him had made me responsible for whatever happened to him. That question still haunts me, still drives me to search for missing people in my spare time.

“After I saw that video, I started planning,” Mina continues. “I needed a way out that wouldn’t leave Rory vulnerable. When I heard rumors that your club was moving against the cartel, I saw an opportunity. A mutual enemy could become a temporary ally.”

“That’s why you were poking around in my system,” I say.

“I needed to know if you were good men, or if you were just as bad as the cartel. You were clean, as was everyone else connected to your club.” She looks at me directly, her green eyes clear and challenging. “That’s the truth. Believe it or don’t.”

“I’m going to help you,” I say simply. “Without the club’s official backing.”

Surprise flickers across her face, quickly followed by suspicion. “Won’t they kick you out? Why would you risk that?”

I could give her the technical answer—that her skills could help us dismantle the cartel’s entire operation, that the strategic value outweighs the risk. But what comes out instead is something closer to the truth.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Because I know what it’s like to lose a brother,” I say, the words feeling strange in my mouth. I never talk about Tommy, especially not with strangers. But Mina isn’t quite a stranger anymore. I know Vapor told me to keep Tommy to myself, but I’m not telling her everything. I lost him. That’s all she needs to know.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, placing her hand on my forearm. “What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I lie smoothly. “It was a long time ago.” At least that part is true.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asks, as if she’s treading carefully.

At least she understands what it’s like to lose someone. That bonds her to me more than anything else ever could. I get her plight. Even though the cartel didn’t kill her brother—not yet, at least—they basically took him from her. That’s wrong, and I want to make things right.

In that moment, something shifts, and we become conspirators against both the cartel and my club. The guilt I should feel is oddly absent, replaced by certainty. This is the correct thing to do, even if it’s against the rules. Some codes are meant to be broken.

“We need to go now,” she says, already on her feet and moving toward the door. Her borrowed sweatpants drag on the floor despite being rolled at the waist, but she moves with a determined efficiency that suggests she’s ready to walk out of the clubhouse in whatever she’s wearing.

“Wait.” I step between her and the door, a symbolic move at best. Even if she wanted to get out, she couldn’t. Our eyes meet, and something electric passes between

us—not attraction, but the friction of two strong wills colliding.

“Move,” she says, the word clipped and sharp.

“No,” I reply, keeping my voice deliberately calm. “We’re not going tonight.”

Her jaw tightens, a muscle flickering beneath the skin. “Every minute we waste is another minute the cartel could realize I’ve defected. If they suspect anything, they’ll move Rory or cut off his care completely.”

“I understand the urgency,” I say, not budging from my position. “But rushing in without proper preparation will get us killed, your brother included.”

She steps back, crossing the room in a series of agitated strides before spinning to face me again. “You don’t understand. They have people at the hospital—orderlies, nurses they’ve paid off. They’ve created a pocket of control around Rory’s room. If we wait, they might tighten that control.”

“I know more than you think,” I counter, moving away from the door now that she’s retreated. I sit at my desk and open my laptop, fingers flying across the keyboard. “While you were waiting, I wasn’t just talking to Vapor. I was setting things in motion.”

She approaches cautiously, looking over my shoulder as I pull up a secure messaging thread. “What is this?”

“Communication with our Dallas chapter.” I scroll through the encrypted conversation. “They have a member—codenamed Scalpel—who was a kidney surgeon before he patched in. He’s agreed to help with your brother’s care after the extraction.”

Mina leans closer, her breath warm against my neck as she studies the screen. “A kidney surgeon? In a motorcycle club?”

“You’d be surprised who ends up in this life,” I say, thinking of my own unlikely journey from IT support to patched member. “Scalpel lost his medical license after punching an abusive husband who was visiting his wife in the hospital. The club took him in, keeps him on retainer for medical emergencies. He’s good—better than good. He’s performed four successful kidney transplants since he patched in. Members from all over the country. With the help of a few rival clubs—shall we say—‘donors’?”

“And he’s willing to help Rory?” she asks, ignoring the implications of what I just said.

“For a price, yes.” I close the messaging app and open a digital blueprint. “I double checked those locations you gave me and I’m sure he’s at Mercy Memorial. Here’s the floor plan. I’ve marked the service entrances, security camera placements, and guard rotations. We’ll need at least twelve hours to finalize the extraction plan.”

Mina steps back, running a hand through her jet-black hair. “Twelve hours could be too late. The cartel doesn’t mess around, Fang. When they decide someone’s a liability, they move fast and hard.”

“Yeah, but if we jump the gun, Rory could end up dead. Us too. I know we don’t have much time, but we’ve got to do this right the first time.”

Mina resumes pacing, her movements sharp and controlled like a predator. “How can you be sure that waiting will help Rory?”

“I read up on Primary Hyperoxaluria Type 1,” I say, the medical term feeling strange on my tongue. “It’s a rare kidney disease that causes oxalate to build up. Forms crystals that damage the kidneys. Nasty shit. And eventually, the other organs fail

too. He requires specialized dialysis, medication management, and constant monitoring. That's why we've got to wait."

Mina stops abruptly, staring at me with undisguised surprise. "You really did do your homework."

"Always do," I say simply, skipping over the part where I called Scalpel to make sure I understand the complexities of the condition. "And this is exactly why we can't just rush into the hospital tonight. If we disconnect his equipment improperly or administer the wrong medications during transport, we could kill him."

Her expression wavers, the fierceness giving way to something more vulnerable. "I can't lose him," she whispers. "He's all I have left."

"Which is why we need to be smart about this." I stand, approaching her with the cautious respect one shows a capable opponent. "Scalpel is driving through the night to reach us. He'll bring the portable dialysis unit, medication supplies, and everything else Rory will need during the transition. Meanwhile, I'm setting up a secure location where we can take your brother until it's safe to move him to a more permanent facility."

"What kind of location?" Her question is sharp, testing the solidity of my plan.

"A safe house the club maintains off the grid. It has generator backup, satellite internet that can't be traced, and enough isolation that no one will hear or see us coming and going." I don't tell her it's actually my personal property, a cabin I bought with Bitcoin earnings from a security system I designed years ago. "It's not hospital-grade, but with Scalpel's equipment, it will keep Rory stable until we can arrange something better."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Mina's fists clench and unclench at her sides, her internal struggle playing out in the taut lines of her posture. I can almost see the competing algorithms running behind her eyes—the urgent need to act versus the logical recognition that waiting for proper support gives her brother better odds.

“Dialysis isn't something you can improvise. You know it's true.”

She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes briefly. When she opens them, some of the frantic energy has dissipated, replaced by a reluctant pragmatism. “How sure are you about this Scalpel person?”

“He's patched,” I say simply. In our world, that means something, a level of trust and brotherhood that transcends normal relationships. “And he owes me a favor from a situation in Galveston last year.”

“What kind of situation?” she asks, her natural suspicion reasserting itself.

“The kind that involved wiping security footage and forging a new identity for his sister after her ex-husband tried to kill her.” I meet her gaze steadily. “We take family protection seriously, especially when it comes to siblings.”

Something shifts in her posture—a subtle relaxation of her shoulders, an easing of the tight line of her jaw. She's still coiled with tension, but it's no longer directed at me.

“When will Scalpel arrive?” she asks.

“By noon tomorrow,” I reply. “We'll make our move tomorrow night, during shift

change at the hospital. The confusion provides better cover, and we'll have darkness on our side."

Mina nods slowly, her arms wrapping around herself in a gesture that seems unconscious. The weight of her brother's life rests heavy on her shoulders.

"If anything happens to my brother because we waited," she says quietly, "I will hold you personally responsible."

"I'd expect nothing less." I return to my laptop, already pulling up hospital staff schedules. "Now come here and tell me which of these names you recognize as cartel plants. We need to know exactly who we're avoiding tomorrow night."

She moves to stand beside me, her shoulder nearly touching mine as she leans in to study the screen. Her posture is still tense, but there's a grudging acceptance in the way she focuses on the task at hand. We're not friends, not yet allies in any true sense, but we've reached an understanding, a temporary truce built on mutual need and the shared knowledge that failing isn't an option. For now, that's enough to work with.

The blue light of my monitor casts Mina's face in an ethereal glow as she leans over my shoulder, pointing out cartel associates on the hospital staff roster. Her focus is absolute, the same intensity I bring to cracking a particularly stubborn firewall. We work in tandem, her insider knowledge complementing my technical skills, until my eyes burn from screen fatigue and the numbers on my digital clock read 2:17 AM. Only then does the unavoidable question of sleeping arrangements materialize between us.

Mina straightens, pressing her palms against her lower back and stretching with a soft groan. "Is there any coffee left in the kitchen?" she asks, her voice rough.

“Nope. Drained the last of it an hour ago.” I stand, my joints protesting the sudden movement after being hunched over the keyboard.

Mina blinks slowly, fatigue etching shadows beneath her eyes. Despite her obvious exhaustion, there’s still that alertness in her gaze, the look of someone who’s trained themselves never to fully let their guard down.

“We should get some sleep,” I say, closing the laptop with a soft click. “Tomorrow’s going to require full processing capacity from both of us.”

She nods, then glances around the room with sudden awkwardness, her gaze landing on the floor beside my desk. “I’ll take the floor,” she offers, already moving to grab one of the pillows from my bed.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, gesturing toward my king-size bed. “It’s big enough for both of us.”

Mina freezes, pillow in hand, her eyes narrowing as they move from the bed to me. The assessment in her gaze is both calculating and wary.

“I’m not sharing a bed with you,” she says flatly.

“It’s a memory foam mattress. You won’t even know I’m there.” I shrug off my hoodie and drape it over my chair.

She sets the pillow back with deliberate slowness, her movements precise as she turns to face me. Then, to my surprise, she approaches with measured steps, stopping just inches away. She’s shorter than me by at least eight inches, but she tilts her chin up with such authority that the height difference seems irrelevant.

“If you try anything,” she says, her voice dropping to a low, dangerous purr, “I’ll cut

off your balls and feed them to you.”

The threat should be menacing, but there’s something in the absurd specificity of it, combined with our mutual exhaustion and the surreal situation we’ve found ourselves in, that strikes a chord of unexpected humor. I grin, my eyes crinkling at the corners as I meet her deadly serious gaze.

“I have no doubt you’d do it,” I reply, the tension between us shifting into something less hostile but equally charged. “And I prefer my anatomy intact, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Fine,” she says. “But I’m sleeping with this.” She pulls a small switchblade from the pocket of my borrowed sweatpants, flicking it open with practiced ease.

I raise an eyebrow as I recognize it. “Where did you get that?”

“Your sock drawer,” she admits without a trace of apology. “While you were talking to Vapor.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Resourceful,” I comment, while making a mental note to get it away from her as soon as possible. “Just try not to stab me if I snore.”

A ghost of a smile touches her lips before vanishing. “No promises.”

The preparation for bed becomes an awkward dance of careful movements and maintained distance. I grab a clean t-shirt from my drawer and toss it to her. “If you want something fresh to sleep in.”

She catches it one-handed, then glances toward the bathroom. “I’ll change in there.”

While she’s gone, I quickly change into a pair of basketball shorts and a tank top. Normally, I sleep naked, but this will have to do. I’m more worried about keeping my balls than about my clothes. A smirk spreads across my lips. She’s feisty. I’ll give her that.

I hear the water running in the sink, then the sound of teeth being brushed. These mundane activities feel strangely intimate in the context of our high-stakes alliance.

When Mina emerges, she’s wearing my t-shirt like a nightgown, the hem hanging to mid-thigh. Her hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail, her face scrubbed clean of the day’s tension, though the wariness remains in her eyes. She looks younger without the hard shell she’s worn since I met her, more vulnerable, though I suspect she’d hate hearing that observation.

“Left side or right?” I ask, gesturing to the bed.

“Left,” she says immediately.

I nod and move to the right side, pulling back the covers and sliding in. She gets in on her side, keeping as close to the edge as possible without actually falling off. The switchblade glints in the dim light from my computer’s standby mode as she places it on the nightstand, within easy reach. I could take it now, but I’d rather wait until she’s asleep. She’ll feel better if she thinks she has some measure of protection against me. Not that I’m going to try anything. She’s cute and all, but this is a job. Nothing else.

“I’m turning off the light,” I warn, not wanting to startle her. I reach over and click off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness broken only by the soft blue glow of my computer’s power indicator.

In the near-darkness, I’m acutely aware of her presence, of the controlled rhythm of her breathing, the subtle scent of my soap on her skin, and of the careful way she holds herself rigid to avoid any accidental contact. We lie like two repelling magnets, the invisible force of mutual caution keeping us firmly separated.

“Thank you,” she says after a long silence. “For helping me.”

The simple gratitude catches me off guard. “Don’t thank me yet,” I reply. “We haven’t gotten him out.”

“Still,” she insists. “Not many people would go against their club for a stranger.”

I consider mentioning Tommy again, explaining how the ghost of my missing brother drives me to help others in similar situations. But the words stick in my throat, too personal to share with someone I barely know, regardless of our temporary alliance.

“Get some sleep, Mina,” I say instead. “Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

She makes a soft sound of agreement, and I feel her finally relax slightly into the mattress. The switchblade remains on the nightstand, her hand resting near it even as her breathing gradually slows and deepens.

I stare at the ceiling, listening to the subtle changes in her respiration that signal her drift toward sleep. The threat of bodily harm hangs between us like an unusual lullaby, oddly comforting in its straightforward honesty. In a world where loyalties shift like encrypted data and trust is as rare as unhackable software, there's something refreshing about someone who tells you exactly where you stand.

Even if where you stand is one wrong move away from being unmanned.

My lips curve into a smile in the darkness. Whatever happens tomorrow, at least I'll know I followed the most important code—the one that says family should be protected, no matter the cost.

Chapter 11: Mina

Fang's motorcycle rumbles beneath me, a mechanical beast carrying us deeper into the bayou, where the city's grid fades into wilderness. My arms encircle his waist—necessary for balance as we navigate the rutted path. The humid air slaps against my face, carrying the primal scent of moss and decay. Each breath also brings a whiff of something else, his piney scent. Masculine and rugged—not something I'd typically associate with a hacker.

The juxtaposition of hacker and biker is something I'm still getting used to. The assumptions I had about him are crumbling faster than I expected. I thought it would be harder to convince him to help me, but he mentioned having a brother. Based on what he said and his tone, I'm sure his brother died. In the moment, I wanted to ask about him, but I held back. The last thing I want to do is press my luck and push him away by bringing up bad memories. Still, I'm curious.

We're on our way to meet Scalpel. Fang seems to have confidence in the man, so I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and trust him too, at least until I see a reason not to.

Fang leans into a curve, and I mirror his movement automatically, my body anticipating the shift. Spanish moss hangs like tattered curtains that occasionally brush against my shoulders, forming a gray-green tunnel. Sunlight filters through in broken patterns, flashing across my visor.

"Almost there," Fang calls back, his voice nearly lost in the rush of air and engine noise.

I nod against his back. My thoughts circle back to Rory, trapped in his hospital bed surrounded by cartel thugs. My brother never asked to be a pawn in this deadly game, but I did what I had to do to save him. For ten years, I've been the wall between him and the monsters who'd let him die if I stopped being useful. Today, that changes. Today, I rewrite our story.

The bike slows as we approach a clearing where a squat building hunkers beneath cypress trees. A weathered sign barely legible reads: Gator's Rest. The parking lot is gravel and dirt, home to three pickup trucks, a rusted sedan, and—most importantly—an ambulance whose red and white paint has faded to the color of old blood and dirty bandages.

Fang cuts the engine. He dismounts first, offering a hand. A jolt of electricity passes between us when our hands touch, something I've been trying to ignore since we first met. I don't want to start thinking about him as anything more than a means to an end, but my body's got other thoughts about this man. Dark, sinfully delicious ideas that I'd best ignore.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I swing my leg over and find my footing on the uneven ground. My legs vibrate with phantom motion, adjusting to stillness after the long ride.

“Scalpel’s here,” Fang says, nodding toward the ambulance. “Let’s go inside.”

Inside, the diner is a study in strategic neglect. It’s rundown enough to discourage casual visitors, but not so dilapidated that it attracts attention from authorities. The linoleum floor is cracked but clean, the vinyl booths patched with silver duct tape. A ceiling fan spins lazily overhead, stirring air that smells of coffee and grease. Three local men hunch over plates at the counter, while a waitress with faded tattoos and hard eyes refills their cups without conversation.

In the farthest booth, a man sits with his back to the wall, face partially obscured by a newspaper. As we approach, he folds it precisely and sets it aside, revealing features that seem too refined for his surroundings—high cheekbones, a straight nose, and eyes that assess us with clinical detachment. His hands are unmistakably a surgeon’s—long fingers, clean nails, and a calm precision that hints at thousands of careful incisions.

“Scalpel,” Fang greets him, sliding into the booth opposite him.

I take the spot beside Fang.

“You must be Mina,” Scalpel says, his voice carrying the faint trace of an education he’s tried to bury beneath rougher cadences. He doesn’t offer his hand, doesn’t smile. Just studies me with those assessing eyes. “Your brother has an interesting case.”

“My brother is not a case,” I correct him, keeping my voice low. “He’s a person who needs help.”

Something shifts in Scalpel’s expression—not quite approval, but a subtle recalibration. “Fair enough. I’ve brought everything we’ll need for the first seventy-two hours. After that, we’ll need to source additional supplies.”

Fang leans forward, elbows on the table. “Show us what you’ve got.”

“Food’s about to come. Burger and fries, like Fang asked.”

“Thank you. When Fang asked me earlier, I wasn’t hungry. But he insisted.” My stomach grumbles. “He was right.”

Fang had tried to get me to eat earlier, but my belly churned enough that I wasn’t sure I’d keep the meal down. Now, I’m ravenous.

When the food comes, we dig in. Scalpel and Fang clean their plates while I manage to finish over half of mine. That will be enough to get me through the next few hours.

After Fang pays the waitress, we follow Scalpel outside to the ambulance, the heat hitting us like a physical barrier as we exit the diner’s air conditioning. He unlocks the back doors and swings them open to reveal an interior that looks nothing like you’d expect from the vehicle’s exterior. Where I expected outdated equipment and makeshift solutions, I find a miniature hospital room—portable dialysis machine, ventilator, monitoring systems, and neatly labeled medications organized in specialized coolers.

“Jesus,” Fang mutters, clearly impressed. “You didn’t cut any corners.”

“I never do,” Scalpel replies, running his fingers along the edge of a metal case. “Not

with patients.” He turns to me. “I’ve worked on other cases similar to your brother’s. His condition is serious but manageable with the right equipment. This setup will keep him stable during transport and for the initial recovery period.”

The weight I’ve been carrying eases slightly. “Thank you,” I say, the words inadequate for what this means to me.

Scalpel acknowledges my gratitude with a slight nod. “Let’s get in so we can finish planning. I don’t like being exposed.”

We climb into the back of the ambulance and close the doors. Fang unfolds a map of Mercy Memorial Hospital on the stretcher then glances at me. “Show him what you know about the setup.”

“I’m pretty sure that Rory’s room is on the third floor,” I say, pointing to the room I think he’s in.

“What’s ‘pretty sure’ mean?” Scalpel asks.

“They blindfolded me, but I always paid attention to details. The elevator would ding three times before the doors opened, so that would mean the third floor.”

“Maybe,” Scalpel says. “But we can’t count on it.”

“No. We can’t,” Fang agrees.

“The cartel has at least two guards disguised as orderlies on rotation, plus a nurse they’ve paid off to monitor his care,” I say. “They could be in my brother’s room, or in the hall. Really, they could be anywhere in the building, so we need to be watching for them.”

“Hopefully they’ll stick out enough that we can identify them before they realize why we’re there. We’ll enter here, using the staff elevator to avoid the main lobby cameras.” Fang’s finger traces a path from the service entrance. “Scalpel will park the ambulance at the emergency bay, wearing paramedic gear so he blends in.”

“I’ll change right before we take off. Didn’t want to earlier because I didn’t want the waitress asking a bunch of questions.”

“Did she say anything about the ambulance?” Fang asks.

“No. She saw it for sure, but didn’t comment. People around here don’t seem to be the type to get into other people’s business.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Seriously?” I arch a brow. “That’s exactly the kind of people who live in Louisiana bayous. We’re outsiders. Everyone living within ten miles of here will know about the ambulance before we leave the parking lot. You should have parked it somewhere else.”

“Can’t do much about that now. Let’s get back to the plan. Any security cameras?” Scalpel asks, his focus entirely on the technical aspects of the operation.

“I’ll take care of those,” Fang answers. “They’ll be on a twenty-minute loop of yesterday’s footage. Should give us enough time to get in and out.”

I lean closer, studying the map. “We should split up once we’re inside. I’ll head directly to Rory’s room while you create a diversion on the second floor. Something to draw security away from the third.”

Fang nods. “I’ve got some ideas for that. Nothing dangerous, but enough to keep them busy.”

“Once you have your brother,” Scalpel continues, “bring him down through this service elevator.” He traces the route with a precise finger. “It bypasses the main corridors where you’d be more likely to encounter staff. I’ll be waiting, engine running.”

“We meet back at the ambulance twenty minutes after entry,” Fang concludes. “Any longer than that, and we risk being discovered.”

The plan is clean and efficient, but when real-world variables intervene, even the best

plans can fail.

“What if Rory isn’t in his room or I’m wrong about which floor he’s on?” I ask, voicing my deepest fear.

“Then text me on the burner. We’ll abort and regroup,” Fang answers immediately. “No heroics, no improvising. We get out, reassess, and try again later.”

Scalpel gathers the map, folding it with precision. “It’s time. The shift change starts in forty minutes. We need to be in position before then.”

Fang and I exit the ambulance and hop on his bike. As we pull away from the diner and onto the main road, I close my eyes briefly, allowing myself one moment of vulnerability no one can see. Then I open them, focusing on the road ahead and on my brother. After today, he’ll be free.

Mercy Memorial Hospital looms before us, a concrete monolith with windows like tired eyes gazing out over a cracked parking lot. After parking near the edge of the lot, Fang and I hurry across it. We enter through the service entrance as planned.

The antiseptic smell hits me immediately—that particular blend that all hospitals share, regardless of their budget or location. I check my watch. The clock is ticking.

“Remember,” Fang murmurs, his voice barely audible over the distant hum of machinery, “twenty minutes. Any longer and the camera loop becomes a liability.”

I nod. “Create your diversion in five minutes. That should give me enough time to reach him and get him into a wheelchair.”

Fang’s expression is unreadable behind his glasses, but there’s a tension in his shoulders that betrays his concern. “If anything feels wrong—”

“I know. Abort and regroup.” My hand flexes at my side. I quell the impulse to reach for him. A hug would be amazing right now, but we’re not in a relationship. It would be weird if I tried to touch him. Still, I want to.

A ghost of a smile touches his lips, as if he can read my body language. “Good luck.”

We separate inside the stairwell. Fang heads out into the second floor while I climb to the third. I exit into a dimly lit corridor. My shoes make no sound against the linoleum floor. Working with the cartel taught me a few things, including how to move like a ghost and leave no trace.

The hallways are a mess of hospital staff swapping stations. Shift change means chaos, exactly as we planned.

I scan each face I pass, comparing them against my mental database of known cartel associates. So far, no matches.

Something feels off. The atmosphere’s too casual. Security’s too lax. The cartel is many things, but careless isn’t one of them. They should have this place locked down tighter, especially given Rory’s value as leverage.

A cold knot forms in my stomach, a warning signal I’ve learned never to ignore. Something’s wrong.

I’m about to head for the nearest stairwell when a hand clamps around my upper arm, yanking me sideways. My body reacts before my mind can process what’s happened. But then recognition hits, stopping me mid-motion.

The woman who’s pulled me into an empty patient room is familiar. Her dark hair’s pulled into a severe bun and her eyes are lined with exhaustion. She’s wearing scrubs that hang from her thin frame like clothes on a wire hanger. Nurse Chen. Rory’s

primary nurse for the past three years.

She closes the door behind us with trembling hands, then turns to face me. “What are you doing here?” she whispers.

“Where’s my brother?” I counter, not bothering with pretense.

Fear flashes across her face, quickly suppressed, but unmistakable. “You shouldn’t be here, Mina. It’s not safe.”

“Where is Rory?” I repeat, each word precise and hard-edged.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Her eyes dart to the door, then back to me. “They moved him,” she admits. “Three hours ago.”

The information hits me like a system crash, momentarily freezing all processes. “Three hours?” I manage to ask, my voice sounding distant to my own ears. “Where?”

Nurse Chen glances at the door again, her entire body radiating nervous energy. “I’m not supposed to know, but I overheard them talking. They mentioned Mexico City.”

Mexico City. Cartel headquarters. Home to the most heavily fortified locations in their entire network. My carefully constructed extraction plan shatters.

“Show me his transfer records,” I demand, my mind already recalibrating, searching for alternatives.

She hesitates, then nods sharply. There’s a small laptop attached to a table near the empty bed. Her login gives her access to patient records, her fingers flying across the keyboard with practiced efficiency.

“Here,” she says, turning the screen slightly so I can see.

The transfer form is sparse, lacking the detailed documentation that should accompany a patient with Rory’s complex needs. Destination: Private Facility, Mexico City. Authorizing Physician: Dr. J. Vasquez.

Not a doctor. Juan Vasquez. The missing and possibly dead cartel leader whose

organization I'm betraying by working with the MC.

"They brought specialized equipment." Nurse Chen's gaze darts to the door. "And a medical team. It wasn't a rushed job. They were prepared."

A cold realization dawns on me. "They know. They know I've defected."

Nurse Chen doesn't confirm or deny, but the fear in her eyes speaks volumes. "You need to leave," she urges, closing the patient record. "Now."

"Did he say anything?" I ask, desperation overriding caution. "Before they took him?"

Her expression softens momentarily. "He asked for you. Said to tell you he'd be fine, that you shouldn't worry." She swallows hard. "He's so brave."

The simple statement pierces me like a knife between ribs—precise and devastating. I've failed him. All these years of servitude to the cartel, all the compromises and crimes committed in his name, and I've still failed to protect him.

"Thank you," I say to Nurse Chen, the words inadequate for the risk she's taking. "If they contact you about him—"

"They won't," she says, heading for the door. "Now go. Please."

I follow her, already calculating my next move. The extraction plan is obsolete, but perhaps Scalpel still has value—medical knowledge that could help me plan a new operation in Mexico City. Fang's hacking skills could provide intelligence on the facility where they're keeping Rory. It's not over. Just recalibrated.

As I step into the hallway, movement at the far end catches my eye. A man in orderly

scrubs stands with his back to me, but his broad shoulders are unmistakable. It's Emilio, one of Vasquez's personal security details. He turns slightly, reaching for something at the nurses' station. I duck my head immediately, using a passing group of staff as cover.

My heart pounds against my ribs, adrenaline flooding my system. I resist the urge to run, forcing myself to walk at a normal pace toward the nearest exit. Each step feels like an eternity. Each passing face, a potential threat.

I push through the exit door into the humid night air, immediately veering away toward the ambulance bay. The vehicle waits exactly where planned, its engine idling softly. I approach from the side, staying in the shadows until I'm certain no one has followed me.

I rap my knuckles three times, the signal for Scalpel to open the rear doors. He does. I slip in.

"Text Fang. Tell him we need to go. Now!"

Scalpel types a quick message and hits send. "No brother?"

"He's gone."

Scalpel's phone pings. "He'll grab his bike and meet us down the road."

I climb into the front and take the passenger seat while Scalpel pulls out of the bay. A few minutes later, we're parked behind a dilapidated gas station. Fang rolls up as I get out of the ambulance. The moment his eyes reach mine, his expression shifts from expectation to concern.

"They moved him," I say. "Three hours ago. To Mexico City."

Scalpel joins us. “They took him to cartel headquarters?”

I nod once, my fingers curling into fists so tight my nails bite into my palms. “They know I’ve defected.”

“Probably,” Fang says.

“You sure Vapor’s not willing to back you on this?” Scalpel asks. “If the cartel thinks she’s valuable enough to drag her brother all the way to Mexico City, then maybe she’s exactly what you need to finally do these fuckers in.”

“He won’t budge,” Fang growls. “Doesn’t trust her.”

“Because I worked for the cartel,” I mutter.

“Sounds like a shit show.” Scalpel rubs his beard. “Look, I’m happy to offer my services to another brother in need, but if you’re going to Mexico City, you have to tell Vapor. I can’t cross into Mexico without his blessing. He’s not my pres., but I’m not going to go behind his back for that. This was different.”

“How so?” I demand.

“Thought this would be a fast extraction without a bunch of shit going down. Mexico City’s a whole nother can o’ worms,” he says, letting his Texas drawl through for the first time. Guess he does that when he gets agitated. “If you get Rory back, call me. Otherwise, I can’t help you without your pres. blessin’.”

“Thanks for coming out,” Fang says, slapping Scalpel on the back. “I’ll be in touch.”

“So long.” Scalpel gets into the ambulance and drives away.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Vapor’s not going to agree to Mexico City.”

“Then we go without him.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Yeah.” His gaze slides off into the distance. After a few seconds, he shakes his head. “We’ll stay the night at a safe house where we can pick up supplies, then leave in the morning. Don’t want to go back to the clubhouse and risk running into Vapor. The less he knows, the better. As long as we get Rory back, Vapor won’t kick my ass.”

“We’re going to Mexico?” I perk up, dropping my arms to my sides.

“¡Viva México!” He gives me a wry smile, and I can’t help but return it. I’ve lost this round, but the game isn’t over. The cartel has taken the only person I care about. Now, with nothing left to lose, I’m more dangerous than they can possibly imagine. They’d better start watching their backs in Mexico because I’m coming, and I’m going to rain hellfire down on them until I can bring my brother home.

Chapter 12: Fang

We arrive at a small house on the outskirts of New Orleans. It’s nondescript, the kind of place that fades into the background. Perfect for our needs.

“Is this one of the club’s safe houses?” I ask as Fang uses a keypad to unlock the door.

“It’s mine,” he answers simply. “Off the books.”

The interior is spartan but functional. Multiple computer monitors dominate the living room. Beyond it there’s a kitchenette with minimal supplies. As I walk past an open door, I glance in. It’s a bedroom. With one bed. Great. Hopefully the couch is

comfortable.

Fang moves immediately to his computer setup. “We need new identities, flights, accommodations—all untraceable to either of us.”

I stand behind him, watching as he navigates through dark web marketplaces and encrypted forums with casual ease. Many of the sites are familiar. The cartel uses them too. “How long will it take?”

“For basic travel documents? Four hours. For good ones that’ll stand up to airport security? Six.”

I sigh and don’t bother asking if there’s a way to speed things up. Getting into Mexico undetected will be worth the wait. I hate that we’re in this position, but there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Check the closet in the bedroom for clothes. There should be some women’s clothes in there. Pack whatever you think you’ll need,” Fang says, still typing.

“Did your ex-girlfriend leave them behind?” I ask, curious.

“No. She never lived with me, and that was a long time ago.”

The dismissive tone in his voice makes it seem like that relationship is old news, so I don’t press the issue. Instead, I ask the next obvious question, “Did all your one night stands leave without their clothes?” I try to keep my tone playful, but there’s an edge to it.

“If you want to know why I have women’s clothing, it’s simple. Sometimes I help people on the side, mostly women because that’s who I seem to attract. The club helps as many people as possible, but some women’s stories don’t quite add up. They

don't want to risk getting involved, but it doesn't stop me. The perfect victim doesn't exist." He shrugs. "So, I help the ones that have sketchy stories."

"Oh." I glance toward the bedroom, wishing I'd kept my suspicious thoughts to myself.

“Anything else?” he asks impatiently.

“Nope.”

I head into the bedroom, find a backpack in the closet and fill it with the bare essentials—clothes that hang loose on my frame but will serve their purpose. In an adjoining bathroom, I find basic toiletries and add those too. Just soap, a new toothbrush, and toothpaste.

Fang pokes his head in and tosses a burner phone at me. “Catch!”

“Want me to pack a bag for you too?”

“I already have one ready. Always do.” His smile makes my belly flip. Those eyes. God, why does he have to be so handsome? This would all be a lot easier if my mind didn’t drift into places it shouldn’t go.

Rejoining him in the living room, I pace while he works his digital magic. Every few minutes I glance over his shoulder to see what he’s up to. Each time I get close, a strange current passes between us—something I ruthlessly suppress. There’s no room for distractions, not with Rory’s life at stake.

“Done,” Fang announces finally. “We’ll pick them up in an hour at a local chop shop.”

The time passes slowly, but eventually we ride to get the black market passports. Fang checks them over before paying the mysterious man who brought them. Back at

the safe house, we lock ourselves inside and sit on the couch. Fang hands me one of the passports. I open it and gaze at the photo he took of me earlier.

“Meet Sarah Jensen and Michael Reeves, married business consultants traveling to Mexico City for a conference,” he says.

“Married?” Heat floods into my cheeks.

“Couples draw less attention, and it gives us a reason to stay close.” His eyes meet mine briefly before darting away. “Our flight leaves in three hours.”

That’s good. We won’t have to stay here tonight, so the question of who’s sleeping where won’t be an issue. I breathe a sigh of relief. “Sounds good.”

The journey to the airport feels surreal. I’ve never been out of the country before, but that’s about to change. As Fang drives, I mentally prepare myself to become Sarah Jensen, a woman with no brother to rescue and no cartel hunting her.

Getting into character isn’t easy, but by the time we arrive in long-term parking, I’ve half-convinced myself I really am Sarah Jensen, businesswoman. It’s actually kind of fun pretending to be someone else for once. Sarah Jensen doesn’t have anything to be worried about. She’s nothing like me. Happy and carefree. I can fake that.

Security is a gauntlet of potential exposure. Each checkpoint is a moment where our fabricated identities could unravel. Fang walks slightly ahead of me, his posture relaxed. When the TSA agent studies my passport with narrowed eyes, Fang’s hand finds the small of my back—a gesture that reads as intimate to observers but serves to ground me in our cover.

“Relax,” he murmurs as we move away from the checkpoint. “You look like you’re marching to an execution.”

“Maybe we are.” The words slip out before I can stop them.

Something shifts in his expression—concern, maybe, or understanding. “They don’t know we’re coming. They won’t expect it. Nobody saw us at the hospital yesterday. If that nurse was going to rat you out, she’d have called security while we were there.”

On the plane, our assigned seats place us in intimate proximity, our shoulders and thighs pressed together in the cramped economy row. The casual touch should be insignificant compared to the night we shared a bed, yet somehow it feels more intimate, more meaningful.

“Tell me more about your brother,” Fang says after takeoff, his voice low enough that only I can hear.

The request catches me off guard. “Why?”

“Because knowing more about him helps me understand what we’re up against—what matters to him, how he might respond in different situations.” He hesitates. “And because you look like you might vibrate out of your skin if you don’t talk about something other than getting caught by the cartel.”

I almost smile despite myself. Almost.

“He’s smart,” I say after a moment. “Too smart for his own good sometimes. Even though he’s very sick, he’s always reading or playing strategy games on his tablet. He dreams of designing video games someday.”

“I’m surprised the cartel lets him connect to the internet.”

“They don’t. Someone downloads the games to the tablet. They give him books to

read to keep him occupied and happy. It's easier to control a content person than a bored one."

"Very true. So, video games?"

"Oh yeah..."

Fang listens with genuine interest as I talk about Rory's fascination with world-building, and about his talent for creating complex characters despite his limited exposure to the world outside his hospital room. I find myself sharing details I've never voiced to anyone. Until now, I didn't realize how lonely I was. It's nice to have someone to talk to.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

In turn, Fang tells me about the motorcycle club's structure, the brotherhood that forms the backbone of his world. He explains their code, their hierarchy, and the complex relationships between chapters. His passion for technology emerges in tangents about security systems and network architecture.

Our conversation shifts between strategic planning and these personal revelations, creating a rhythm that feels almost normal. I catch him watching me once when I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His gaze lingers a moment too long. When our eyes meet, neither of us looks away immediately.

We make our connecting flight without any issues. A few hours later, the seatbelt sign illuminates as we begin our descent into Mexico City. Fang's hand brushes against mine on the armrest—accidentally, perhaps, though he doesn't move away.

“We're going to get him back,” he says, his voice steady with conviction.

I don't respond, but I don't pull my hand away either. The weight of his presence beside me feels unexpectedly like an anchor in a storm I've been weathering alone for too long.

After we pick up a rental car, we head to the motel Fang located before we left the U.S. It sits in a neighborhood where shadows gather thick at street corners and eyes follow us from darkened doorways. The building leans slightly, as if centuries of Mexico City's soft soil have slowly conspired to pull it groundward. Paint peels from its façade in long strips like sunburned skin, and the neon sign above the entrance flickers with the erratic pulse of a dying firefly. It's perfect—exactly the kind of place the cartel wouldn't bother monitoring, too insignificant for their notice.

Fang's hand rests lightly at the small of my back as we approach, a gesture that maintains our cover as a married couple while subtly guiding me toward the entrance. I allow it, though the pressure of his fingers sends unwelcome heat up my spine. Although I hope there will be two beds in the room, I've got a feeling there's only going to be one. After all, we're 'married.'

The lobby smells of cigarettes and cheap cleaning solution, the kind that masks odors rather than eliminating them. A ceiling fan whirs overhead, stirring the stagnant air without cooling it. Behind a scratched plexiglass barrier, the desk clerk watches a telenovela on a small television, his attention lifting to us with obvious reluctance.

"Necesitamos una habitación," Fang says, his Spanish carrying just enough of an American accent to match our cover as tourists. "Para mi esposa y yo."

My wife and I. The words echo strangely in my ears as I force a tired smile, leaning against Fang's side in a pantomime of affection. His arm slips around my shoulders, the weight of it simultaneously foreign and oddly comforting.

The clerk slides a registration card through the gap in the plexiglass, watching with disinterest as Fang fills it out with our false names. Money changes hands—cash only, no digital trail—and a key attached to a plastic fob is pushed toward us.

"Cuarto diecisiete," the clerk says, already turning back to his program. "Segundo piso."

The stairs creak beneath our weight as we climb to the second floor, the worn carpet releasing puffs of dust with each step. Room seventeen is at the end of a narrow hallway, its door swollen with humidity so that Fang has to lean his shoulder against it to force it open.

The room beyond is small enough that we both hesitate in the doorway, silently

calculating the logistics of sharing such confined quarters. A double bed with a concave mattress dominates the space, flanked by mismatched nightstands. A desk with a wobbly-looking chair sits beneath a window covered by thin curtains that do little to block the neon glow from the street below. The bathroom door hangs slightly ajar, revealing chipped tiles and a shower stall with rust-stained grout.

“Home sweet home,” Fang mutters, stepping inside and placing his bag on the bed.

I follow, closing the door behind us and engaging both the deadbolt and the flimsy chain lock. “It’ll work. No one will look for us here.”

Fang nods, already unpacking his laptop and setting it on the desk. “We’ll need to split the power load,” he says, plugging devices into a surge protector he’s brought. “This building’s wiring probably hasn’t been updated since the 60s.”

I move to the window, peering through a gap in the curtains at the street below. Vendors pack up their carts for the night, locals hurry toward metro stations, and the occasional tourist wanders by, looking rather lost. Nothing that registers as a threat, but now we’re deep in cartel territory and danger doesn’t always announce itself.

I move to stand behind him. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to access the cartel’s medical database.” His voice carries the distant quality of someone whose mind is half in another world—the digital landscape where he operates with such confidence. “If I can find Rory’s patient records, we might be able to narrow down which facility they’ve taken him to.”

“This place has wi-fi?”

“Nope, but the mercado de carne across the street didn’t secure theirs.”

“Nice.”

“And I highly doubt the cartel’s patched in and watching the meat market’s online traffic.”

“Unless they’re getting kickbacks, there’s no reason for them to care.”

I lean closer, studying the screen. Lines of code scroll past, too fast to read. Eventually, various maps of Mexico appear, along with a list of all the cartel-run hospitals. It’s impressive, watching him work. I’m starting to wonder if I have a competency porn fetish because every time his hands slide across the keyboard, I wonder what those able fingers would feel like against my skin.

“There,” he murmurs, interrupting my thoughts. “See that? That’s their network signature. Same one they used for the system that managed your brother’s hospital bills.”

I nod, acutely aware of how close we’re standing, my chest nearly touching his back as I lean over him. I straighten abruptly, moving to sit on the edge of the bed.

“How long will it take to find his new location?” I ask, focusing on the mission, not the man.

Fang’s brow furrows as his screen flashes red text. “Longer than I thought. They’ve upgraded their security since the last time I probed their network.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Because I defected.”

“Probably. But let me try a few more things.”

Hours pass in tense silence broken only by the click of keys and occasional muttered curses from Fang. I alternate between watching the street below and studying his progress, my anxiety mounting with each failed attempt.

He pulls off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose where they’ve left red marks.

“I need water. There’s a vending machine at the end of the hall.”

“I’ll go,” I say, grateful for something to do besides wait.

When I return with two bottles, Fang has moved from the desk to stretch his legs. The room seems to shrink with both of us standing, forcing an awareness of proximity that’s impossible to ignore. As I hand him a bottle, our fingers brush, the contact brief but electric. His eyes meet mine for a moment too long before he looks away, twisting the cap off with more force than necessary.

“Any progress?” I ask, my voice sounding strange to my own ears.

Fang shakes his head, returning to the desk. “They’ve implemented some serious countermeasures. Multiple authentication layers, rotating encryption keys, active trace protocols.” He takes a long drink of water, his throat working. “Someone’s learned from my past breaches.”

I move to look at the screens again, careful to maintain more distance this time. “Can

you get past it?"

"Given enough time, yes." He sets the bottle down with a plastic crinkle. "But we don't have that luxury. Every minute we spend trying to brute force our way in increases the chance they'll detect the intrusion."

"Want me to give it a shot?" I ask.

"Have at it."

I give it my all for the next hour, but I'm no closer to getting in than he was. A sinking feeling settles in my stomach. "Now what?"

Fang turns to face me, his expression grim. "We'll have to infiltrate one of their facilities and connect directly to their internal network."

"A cartel hospital," I say, the implications immediately clear.

He nods. "There's a private clinic in the Polanco district that's known to be cartel-controlled. Serves as a treatment center for their higher-ranking members."

"How do we get in?"

"The oldest trick in the book." His lips curve in a humorless smile. "We walk right in. Say we're IT support, there to upgrade their systems."

"That's... convenient," I say, suspicion immediately flaring.

"It's logical," Fang counters. "Medical facilities are constantly updating their technology. And with the cartel moving your brother, they're probably enhancing security across all their operations."

He's right, and the plan has a certain elegant simplicity. "So we pose as IT contractors?"

"I pose as the contractor. You pose as my assistant." Fang returns to his keyboard, pulling up the clinic's floor plans. "We get in, access a terminal, download what we need, and get out."

"Simple," I say, not bothering to hide my skepticism.

Fang glances back at me, his eyes serious behind his glasses. "No, but it's our best shot at finding Rory."

The mention of my brother's name cuts through my doubt. I'd walk into the heart of the cartel's headquarters if it meant bringing him home safely. A clinic is, at least comparatively, lower risk.

"When?" I ask, already calculating what we'll need.

"Now," Fang says, turning back to his screens. "They do system maintenance after hours. Less staff, less people asking questions, less chance of someone recognizing you."

I nod, feeling a strange mix of dread and determination. "Let's go."

Outside, Mexico City pulses with nightlife, oblivious to our presence or purpose. Somewhere in this sprawling metropolis, Rory waits, perhaps wondering if I've abandoned him. The thought sends a spike of pain through my chest.

I won't fail him again. No matter what it takes, I'm bringing him home.

Chapter 13: Mina

Night settles over Mexico City like a velvet shroud, the darkness providing cover as Fang and I approach the clinic. The building rises six stories of gleaming glass and steel—a physical manifestation of the cartel’s wealth and influence. Security cameras track the perimeter with mechanical precision, their red lights blinking like artificial stars.

I adjust the fake ID badge hanging around my neck, the plastic cool against my fingertips. This was just one of the many ‘supplies’ Fang had in his go bag. The photo isn’t me, but it’s female and generic-looking enough that it could be me.

Beside me, Fang walks with the confident stride of someone who belongs, his own disguise transforming him from biker to corporate IT specialist with nothing more than slacks, a button-down shirt, and slicked-back hair. We steamed our shirts in the shower so they wouldn’t be wrinkled before we left the motel room. Looking like you fit in is the key to this type of subterfuge.

“Remember,” he murmurs as we approach the main entrance, “you’re Teresa Alvarez, my junior technician. You don’t speak unless spoken to directly. Most of these people are trained to look through support staff.”

I nod slightly, slipping into the role by hanging back a step.

The lobby gleams with polished marble and soft, recessed lighting—more luxury hotel than medical facility. A security guard stands beside a metal detector, his posture deceptively casual, the bulge of a holstered weapon visible beneath his uniform

jacket. Behind a curved reception desk, a woman with immaculate makeup and sharp eyes watches our approach.

Fang steps forward, producing a tablet and work order with practiced ease. “Buenas noches. Miguel Suarez and Teresa Alvarez, from NetCare Systems. We’re scheduled for the server maintenance tonight.”

The receptionist examines the documentation, then our IDs, her expression revealing nothing. My pulse quickens, but I keep my face neutral, eyes downcast like a subordinate. After what feels like eternity, she nods and makes a call, speaking too softly for us to hear.

“Quinto piso,” she finally says, handing back our credentials. “Sala de servidores. César will meet you upstairs.”

We place the laptop and networking cables in a plastic bin then pass through the metal detector without incident. After retrieving our equipment, we head to the elevators. As the doors close behind us, I release a breath.

“That was almost too easy,” I whisper as we ascend.

Fang’s expression remains neutral, aware of the camera in the elevator’s corner. “The hard part’s coming. We need to lose César before we can access the patient database.”

The fifth floor opens to a sterile corridor lit by fluorescent panels that cast everything in a clinical glow. A man waits by the elevator banks—César, presumably—with a clipboard and suspicious eyes. He leads us down the hallway, past rooms with specialized equipment visible through glass panels. I catalogue each turn, each security checkpoint, building a mental map for our escape.

“The servers are in here,” César says, stopping before a heavy door with a keypad. He punches in a code—I memorize the sequence automatically—and pushes it open to reveal a climate-controlled room humming with technology. “What exactly are you upgrading?”

Fang launches into a technical explanation about bandwidth optimization and backup protocols, his delivery so convincing that César’s eyes begin to glaze over. I move slightly away, pretending to examine a network panel while actually scanning for surveillance cameras. Two in the server room itself, one in the corridor outside. If they’re being monitored by anyone offsite, then we’re going to have to move fast.

“I need coffee,” César finally says, interrupting Fang’s monologue. “You know what you’re doing?”

“Completely,” Fang assures him. “We’ll be at least an hour. The system needs to recompile after the update.”

César hesitates, clearly torn between his responsibility to monitor us and his desire to escape the technical jargon. “Don’t touch anything outside the approved workstation,” he warns before leaving, the door clicking shut behind him.

As soon as he’s gone, Fang turns to me. “We have to move fast. The patient database won’t be accessible from here. We need an administrative terminal.”

“Administrative offices would be on a higher floor,” I say, recalling the building plans we studied. “Executive level, sixth floor.”

Fang nods, already moving to the door. “If anyone stops us—”

“We’re looking for a better network connection point,” I finish. “Lead terminal was showing latency issues.”

We slip into the corridor and find the closest stairwell up. Since the office is closed for the night, the floor is darker. Only security lights illuminate the hallway, casting long shadows across the polished floor. We move silently, checking doors until we find one unlocked—a corner office with the name “Dr. Alejandro Vega, Director” etched on a brass plate.

Inside, Fang heads straight for the computer while I take position by the door, listening for approaching footsteps. The office screams of wealth and privilege—leather furniture, original artwork, a view of the city lights that would cost millions anywhere else.

“Password protected,” Fang mutters, fingers already dancing across the keyboard. “Give me three minutes.”

“You might only get one.”

He grunts in acknowledgement.

I keep my eyes on the frosted glass panel beside the door, alert for shadows moving in the hallway.

“I’m in,” Fang says. “Accessing patient transfer records now.”

“Hurry.”

Fang doesn't look up, his focus absolute as he navigates through the system. “Need thirty more seconds.”

An eternity later, he types a final command, yanks a flash drive from the computer, and follows me to the door. I peek out to make sure it's clear. As we walk toward the stairwell, the sound of a door slamming in the stairwell freezes us both. Heavy footsteps pound up the stairs, heading toward our floor. Security.

“Someone's coming.” I scan the hallway desperately, spotting a supply closet across from the office. “In here!” Grabbing Fang's wrist, I yank him toward it, twisting the handle and shoving us both inside just as a security guard pulls open the stairwell door. I shut the closet door as quietly as possible.

The closet is tiny, crammed with shelves of medical supplies that leave barely enough room for two people. Fang's body presses against mine in the darkness, his breath warm against my neck. I can feel his heart hammering—or maybe it's mine. Our chests rise and fall in silent tandem as footsteps pause outside our hiding place.

The guard's radio crackles, voices speaking rapid Spanish. He responds, then continues past the closet, his footsteps fading down the corridor.

Neither of us moves immediately. Fang's arms bracket me against the shelves, his body a solid wall of warmth in the cool darkness. I'm acutely aware of every point of contact between us—his chest against mine, his thigh pressed between my legs, his breath stirring the hair near my temple. The closeness ignites something dangerous in

my blood, something I can't afford to acknowledge.

"Think he's gone?" Fang whispers, his voice low and rough beside my ear.

I suppress a shiver. "Give it another minute."

We stand frozen in our intimate tableau, time stretching like heated glass. I try to focus on the danger, on Rory, on anything but the way the feel of Fang's muscles makes my skin prickle with awareness. His fingers brush mine in the darkness—accidentally, perhaps—and we both inhale sharply at the contact.

When I finally ease the door open, the hallway is empty. We move swiftly to the stairwell, descending to the fifth floor where César might still expect to find us in the server room. Back in the corridor, we adjust our clothing and expressions, resuming our professional façades.

"Did you get it?" I ask as we approach the server room.

Fang pats his pocket where the flash drive rests. "Everything they have on patient transfers in the last week. We'll need to decrypt it back at the hotel."

César returns just as we're finishing our pretend maintenance, a coffee cup in his hand, suspicion in his eyes. "Any problems?"

"Minor network fluctuations," Fang says smoothly, packing up his equipment. "Nothing we couldn't handle. The system should run more efficiently now."

He watches us, following us downstairs and watches us leave. I don't allow myself to breathe normally until we're three blocks away, hidden in the shadow of a closed market stall.

“We need to get back to the hotel,” Fang says, his voice tight with urgency. “If they realize someone accessed the director’s computer—”

“They won’t,” I finish. “Not immediately. Probably not until tomorrow. But yes, let’s move.”

We take a circuitous route back to our hotel, changing direction multiple times to ensure we’re not followed. In our room, Fang immediately connects the flash drive to his laptop, his fingers flying across the keys as he breaks through the encryption.

I pace the small space, adrenaline still coursing through my system—from the mission, from the near-discovery, from those moments in the dark closet with Fang’s body pressed against mine. I push the memory aside, focusing on what matters—finding Rory.

“I’ve got something,” Fang says suddenly, his voice cutting through my thoughts. “Your brother was moved to a private clinic in Puerto Escondido. It’s on the west coast, west of Oaxaca. It’s about an hour and fifteen minute flight or a ten hour drive.”

“When’s the next flight?”

“Shit! We just missed one. Next one’s... tomorrow.”

“Shit.”

“We could drive but...”

“We’d get there at about the same time. And we’d be tired,” I add.

“Better to stay here tonight and rest.”

“Does it say anything about his condition?” I lean over his shoulder to see the screen. There it is—Rory’s patient ID number, transfer details, even his current status: “Stable, under observation.”

Relief crashes through me like a wave, so powerful it weakens my knees. Without thinking, I throw my arms around Fang’s shoulders, hugging him tightly.

“He’s alive,” I whisper, voice breaking. “They’re keeping him alive.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Fang stiffens in surprise, then he turns and his arms come around me, returning the embrace. We stay like that for a heartbeat too long, the contact shifting from gratitude to something else—something that makes me pull back abruptly, my cheeks warm.

“Puerto Escondido.” I clear my throat and step away. “You said that’s on the coast, right?”

Fang nods, his eyes lingering on my face before returning to the screen. “Remote enough to be secure, but accessible by good roads and an airport.”

“Why move him there?” I wonder aloud.

“According to these notes, the facility specializes in long-term care for chronic conditions,” Fang says, scrolling through the file. “It’s smaller than this clinic, more private. Easier to secure. We’ll need transportation, supplies, and a better plan than tonight’s,” Fang says.

“Can you call Scalpel again?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He glances at me, then away. “You should get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

The mention of sleep brings an uncomfortable awareness of the single bed, of how we’ll need to share it again, this time with the memory of his muscular body pressed against mine in that supply room.

“What about you?” I ask, but it comes out all breathy and soft. Not what I intended at

all.

“I’ll join you as soon as I have a plan for tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Later, I’m woken when the bed shifts under his weight. The mattress groans, and I try not to groan with it. He can’t help but press against me. There’s nowhere else to go.

“Did I wake you?” he asks softly.

“Yeah, but it’s okay.”

“I still value my balls, so there’s nothing to worry about,” he murmurs against my ear.

A whole body shiver shimmies through me. I’m sure he felt every inch of me quiver. Pressing my lips together, I manage to keep myself from saying anything stupid.

When his breath eventually slows and becomes a rhythmic caress across my neck, I relax slightly. I’m still wet and thick with desire, but what my body wants and what I want aren’t the same thing. Getting into another relationship with a member of a motorcycle gang, no matter how altruistic they might appear, isn’t a good idea. Men like Fang live for danger. I’ve spent enough time around dangerous men to last a lifetime. It’s not something I want to keep doing. Ultimately, that’s the only reason I’m keeping my hands to myself.

Silently grumbling, I try to put at least a breath of space between us, but he’s still right there. Hot, dirty, and... Ugh!

“You keep wiggling against my dick and we’re going to have a problem,” he growls.

“Are we?” I blurt, turning to face him.

“Mina,” he whispers, reaching a finger up to trace my cheek. “You should roll over and go to sleep before you say anything else.”

“What if I don’t want to say another word?” My gaze drops to his lips—plump and so damn kissable. I can’t think. I can’t breathe. All I can do is wait to see what he’ll do.

As he slides his fingers into my hair and pulls my mouth toward his, my soft whimper fills the room. This is so stupid and crazy, but I can’t bring myself to stop him. Not when he brushes the first feathery kiss across my lips. Not when he deepens the kiss, swiping his tongue across mine, begging for more. Not even when he consumes my mouth with his.

I’m lost.

And stopping him is the last thing on my mind.

Chapter 14: Fang

I drag her closer, one hand sliding under the oversized t-shirt she wore to bed, the other gripping her thigh hard enough to leave marks. She bites my lower lip, the sharp pain shooting straight to my groin. I groan, a sound I barely recognize as my own. After keeping my hands to myself the last few days, this is absolute bliss.

Without breaking the kiss, her fingers tear at my clothes with frantic urgency. She shucks my shirt and reaches for my boxers. I stop her by wrestling her t-shirt over her head. Tossing it blindly behind me, I turn to find her nearly naked. Her tiny breasts rise and fall with her breath, and all I want to do is suck on them. So, I do.

Pulling one plump nipple into my mouth, I lap at the little bud. She tosses her head

back, moaning and clutching my shoulders. As she presses against my mouth, my cock pokes at the fabric of my boxers. I should have let her take them off earlier.

The underwear must go. Mine first. Then hers. And now, we're completely exposed, hot and wanting, staring at each other like we've never seen another naked body before, but I'm sure that's not true. She doesn't strike me as a virgin, which is good. Who wants to deal with that drama? Not me.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I scan her body like I'm memorizing code—the constellation of freckles across her collarbone, the curve of her waist, the small scar below her left breast. She's beautiful in a way that defies nature, all dangerous curves and hidden valleys. The one between her soft thighs draws my attention, but I don't shoot straight for her molten center. No, this shouldn't even be happening, but it is, so I'm going to make the most of it.

To keep from losing control too soon, I drag my mouth down her neck, tasting salt and heat, my teeth grazing her collarbone. She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders, scoring my skin. The pain is exquisite, a counterpoint to the pleasure building in my cock. I've always prided myself on control—methodical, measured, precise—but she burns through me, consuming every ounce of self-control I possess.

I pin her wrists to the pillow with one hand, sliding down her body with the other, my stubble scraping against the inside of her thigh as I taste her. She's wet and hot against my tongue, and I hold her hips steady as she writhes beneath me. Her body's a live circuit, ready to spark at a moment's notice.

Licking and tasting and sucking, I find all the secret spots. Driving her wild, I coax her to the brink before slowing to lap up her sweetness.

“Stop teasing me,” she begs.

I grin against her wetness and delve back in, giving it to her until her toes curl. When she comes, she muffles her cry with the heel of her hand, her entire body arching off the bed.

Before she can recover, I flip her onto her back, positioning myself between her

thighs. My back stings where her nails have left their mark, a physical record of her pleasure, one I'll wear like a badge of honor.

I enter her in one smooth thrust, the sensation so intense I nearly lose myself immediately. The bed frame groans beneath us, keeping erratic time with our movements, every thrust sending the cheap headboard slamming against the wall. The yellow lamp flickers with the impact, casting strange shadows across her skin, turning sweat into liquid gold.

I watch her face as I move inside her, cataloging every reaction, every hitched breath and bitten lip. Her hands slide up my chest to grab my face. She force my mouth back to hers, and we devour each other—no tenderness, just raw need and heat. I say her name between gasps, the syllables broken and desperate. She claws at my ass, urging me deeper, harder, and I comply, losing the last threads of my carefully maintained restraint.

“Fuck, Mina,” I pant against her neck, feeling the pressure building at the base of my spine. “You feel so good.”

Her only response is to wrap her legs tighter around my waist, changing the angle in a way that makes stars explode behind my eyes. The intensity builds beyond anything I've experienced, beyond what I thought physically possible, and when I finally come, it's with a force that shakes me to my core, pleasure radiating through every nerve ending. She follows immediately, her body clenching around me, her nails digging half-moons into my shoulders as she cries out.

We collapse together, a tangle of sweaty limbs and ragged breathing. My mind, usually a constant stream of calculations and contingencies, is blissfully, terrifyingly blank. I hold her against me, feeling her heartbeat gradually slow to match mine, her hair stuck to the sweat on her forehead. The yellow glow of the lamp makes her skin look like amber, something precious, and I find myself tracing patterns across her

back, coding a message I don't have words for.

“Fuck,” I manage finally, my voice hoarse and strange to my own ears. “If I'd known it would be like that...”

She turns her head toward me, a gorgeous smile on her face. “Yeah.”

We lie there, cooling in the inadequate air conditioning, her body fitted against mine like a missing component. For a few minutes, I allow myself this—just this. Not thinking about tomorrow, about Puerto Escondido, about going AWOL from the club and Vapor, about everything at stake. Just Mina in my arms, her breath against my skin, her heartbeat syncing with mine in perfect, temporary harmony.

I kiss her again, gentler this time, memorizing the softness of her lips, the taste of her mouth. Tomorrow we'll return to our assigned roles—the hacker and the enforcer, focused on the mission. But tonight, just for these few stolen hours, we're allowed to be something else. Something simpler. Just a man and a woman in erotic harmony. I pull her closer, feeling her relax against me, and for once, I don't analyze, don't calculate, don't plan. I just feel.

As silence stretches between us, I stare at the water stains on the ceiling, mapping constellations in their irregular patterns. My breathing gradually slows. Next to me, Mina is a study in stillness, her body no longer pressed against mine but still close enough that I feel her warmth. Sweat cools on my skin, and with it comes the gradual return of rational thought, of consequences, of tomorrow's mission parameters. The heat of desire gives way to something more complicated—an uncomfortable warmth in my chest that feels dangerously like attachment.

Outside, Mexico City continues its nocturnal pulse. A siren wails in the distance, cars honk, music thumps from some distant club. Inside our shabby room, only the irregular drip of the faucet marks time passing. The sheets beneath us are damp with

sweat. The cheap mattress sags in the middle, making it hard to maintain the small distance we've created. I'm acutely aware of every place our skin almost touches—the near-brush of shoulders, the proximity of her thigh to mine, the occasional drift of her hair against my arm when she breathes.

My glasses sit on the nightstand, the world slightly blurred without them, but Mina remains in perfect focus—the curve of her hip beneath the rumpled sheet, the marks my mouth left on her neck, the rise and fall of her chest. I've spent my life recognizing patterns, identifying vulnerabilities in systems, but nothing has prepared me for the complexity of what just happened between us. What it means. What it can't mean.

The silence becomes unbearable.

“This was...” I begin, then stop, uncertain. My voice sounds strange, stripped of its usual confidence. I flex my fingers against my stomach, a nervous gesture designed to release some of the building tension.

Mina turns her head to look at me. Her eyes search mine, but I have no idea what she's looking for. I want to reach for her, to pull her back against me, to forget about tomorrow and its demands. The desire surprises me with its intensity.

“A one-time thing,” she finishes for me, her voice steady despite the flush still visible on her skin. “It was stress and adrenaline and proximity. Nothing more.”

Something collapses in my chest. I nod once. “Right. Of course.”

But my body betrays me—pupils dilating, pulse accelerating, skin warming where she looks at me. It's a physiological response I can't override. The conflict must show in my eyes because she looks away quickly, as if she's seen too much.

She sits up abruptly, pulling the tangled sheet around her body. The barrier is physical but signifies something deeper. The distance she creates is deliberate and necessary. She's not wrong to pull back this way. I just wish I felt the same.

"We have more important things to focus on," she says, scanning the floor for her scattered clothes. "Puerto Escondido. Rory. The extraction plan."

I watch as she locates her underwear near the foot of the bed. My rational mind processes her words, acknowledging their accuracy. She's right. We should keep our focus on getting Rory out of the cartel's grasp. After all, that's our number one priority.

Yet another part of me—a part I've spent years repressing—rejects this assessment. That part wants to tell her that nothing about what just happened felt irrelevant. What just happened between us was something else entirely. I feel as if I've finally found a missing piece of code that suddenly makes the program I call "life" run more efficiently. I've never wanted a relationship with any one woman before, but I've never met anyone like her either.

But, instead of blathering on like a lovesick fool, I close the door to these unwelcome feelings. My voice returns to its normal controlled cadence. "The plane leaves in a couple of hours," I say, watching her gather her clothes. "We should get going."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

She nods, clutching the borrowed clothes to her chest. “I’ll shower first,” she says, already moving toward the bathroom.

As the bathroom door closes behind her, I exhale slowly, allowing myself a moment of unfiltered reaction. The shower sputters to life, water pipes complaining in the walls. I reach for my glasses, sliding them onto my face, and the world coming back into sharp focus. The room looks different now—details becoming clear. The stain on the carpet. The crack in the lampshade. The rumpled evidence of what we just did scattered across the bed. Reality returns with a vengeance.

I sit up, running a hand through my hair, feeling the scratch of Mina’s nails still burning across my shoulders. The marks will fade in a day or two, leaving no trace of this night. It’s for the best. Attachments are vulnerabilities in our line of work—entry points for enemies to exploit. That’s part of why I’ve never tried to be in any kind of romantic relationship. I can get sex without strings, but this was nothing like those meaningless romps. Still, I can’t get distracted right now, so I’m going to have to pretend it didn’t mean anything.

By the time Mina emerges from the bathroom wrapped in a threadbare towel, I’ve reassembled most of my defenses. Her skin is rosy from the shower. Wet hair clings to her neck in tendrils. For a moment, I allow myself to memorize this image—Mina with her guard temporarily lowered, beautiful in an ethereal way.

“Your turn,” she says, gesturing toward the bathroom.

I nod and rise, careful to maintain distance as I pass her. The bathroom door clicks shut behind me. I lean against it for a moment, eyes closed.

Eventually, I get into the shower. Its lukewarm spray washes away the physical evidence of what happened between us, but not the memory of what it felt like to be inside her hot, sensual body. Shaking my head, I scrub methodically, cleansing myself while trying to ignore the war going on in my head.

When I emerge, she's fully dressed in clean clothes from her pack, sitting at the small desk where I left my laptop. I join her, careful not to brush against her.

“We'll need transportation when we arrive.” I power on my computer and navigate to a rental car company. “Something inconspicuous that can handle the coastal roads.”

She nods, focusing on the screen instead of meeting my eyes. “Get the most generic car you can find.”

“On it.”

We fall into planning mode, the familiar rhythm creating a buffer zone between us. It's almost possible to pretend nothing has changed, that we're still just reluctant allies bound by a common goal. Almost, but not quite—because beneath the seemingly casual conversation, awareness pulses. Even after we leave the motel, my body still humming with the memory of her touch.

Outside, the city glows with the watery light of early dawn, casting long shadows across cracked pavement and smog-streaked windows. We load our gear in silence, the weight of our mission a convenient shield against everything left unsaid. When our eyes meet across the roof of the car, something flickers—recognition, regret, maybe even longing—but it vanishes before I can grasp it. We nod, almost in sync, then slide into the car and drive toward the airport, toward danger, toward whatever comes next.

Neither of us speaks. There's nothing safe left to say. The hum of the tires on asphalt

fills the space between us. I focus on the road, not on the girl in the passenger seat who tastes like molten honey. We're partners on a mission, forged together for a purpose. But somewhere along the way, we broke protocol.

I don't know what this is between us—if it will survive the mission, or if it even should—but for now, it's a phantom echo in my chest, impossible to ignore, yet that's exactly what I need to do. Breaking focus could get us killed. I can't allow that to happen.

Chapter 15: Mina

The humid air of Puerto Escondido hits me like a physical wall as we exit the airport, sweat instantly beading on my skin. I scan the parking lot, cataloging potential threats while adjusting the thin cotton shirt clinging to my back. Every face is a potential cartel soldier, every vehicle a possible trap. My brother is less than ten miles from where I stand, but the distance feels infinite.

“Car rental's this way,” Fang says, his hand briefly touching the small of my back before dropping away. The casual contact sends electricity through my spine, an unwelcome reminder of last night. We're back to being colleagues now—professionals with a mission—not whatever we became in that shabby motel room. I can't think about it without remembering the way he made me come. Again and again.

I clench my fists and fight the rising heat in my belly. One night of passion is all we'll ever have. Once our deal is over, I must walk away. Fang isn't living the kind of life I want to live. We're incompatible because of that fact. As much as I wish that wasn't the truth, it is.

The rental agency is little more than a concrete shack with a faded sign and a bored-looking attendant scrolling through his phone. Inside, a desk fan pushes hot air

around the room. I stand near the window so I can keep tabs on anyone approaching. We used the same passports as before, but that doesn't guarantee our safety.

Fang gives the attendant our reservation number in Spanish. The attendant barely looks up as he processes a credit card Fang produces from a hidden pocket. Earlier, he told me the plan. The card isn't connected to the club and it's impossible to trace. It's one of dozens he keeps for emergencies, each tied to an identity as thoroughly constructed as the one on his fake passport.

"Keys are in it," the attendant says in heavily accented English, gesturing toward a silver compact car that's seen better days. "Bring back with full tank."

The car smells of artificial pine and cigarettes, the upholstery worn smooth by countless tourists. Fang takes the driver's seat. I slide into the passenger seat, unfolding a map I purchased from an airport kiosk.

"Take the coastal highway north," I instruct, tracing the route with my finger. "Then east on Route 200. The clinic is isolated, about two kilometers from the main road."

Fang navigates through narrow streets lined with pastel-colored buildings, their vibrancy at odds with our grim purpose. Puerto Escondido unfolds around us—a tourist paradise of beaches and palm trees, surf shops and open-air restaurants. Couples walk hand in hand, concerned only with which beach to visit or where to find the best margarita. I envy their oblivion, their freedom from knowing what lurks beneath paradise's surface.

"You're quiet," Fang observes as we merge onto the coastal highway. The ocean stretches to our left, impossibly blue against the sandy beaches.

"Just focusing," I reply, but the truth is more complicated. Last night replays in fragments—his hands on my skin, my name on his lips, the brief escape into

something that felt like freedom. Now we're back in the real world, where such indulgences get people killed.

The road curves along the coastline, palm trees swaying in the breeze, their fronds casting dappled shadows across the windshield. Tourists in rented Jeeps pass us, surfboards strapped to their roofs. A roadside stand selling fresh coconuts and mangoes creates a momentary traffic slowdown. It's beautiful in a way that makes the ugliness of our mission more stark—this paradise built atop cartel violence, funded by addiction and maintained through bloodshed and fear.

“Clinic's around the next bend,” I say, squinting at the map. “We'll need to—”

Fang's eyes flash to the rearview mirror. “We've got company.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I twist in my seat to see a black SUV with tinted windows gaining rapidly. The vehicle's aggressive approach sends an immediate warning signal through my system—this isn't a tourist late for a surfing lesson.

“How did they find us so quickly?” I ask, but it's a rhetorical question. The cartel has eyes everywhere, especially in coastal towns where shipments come in.

“Hold on,” Fang says, his voice dropping into that controlled calm that means we're in serious trouble.

He accelerates, putting distance between us and the SUV, but the more powerful vehicle closes the gap within seconds. I clutch the map in suddenly damp hands, the paper crinkling as my fingers tighten.

“Get down!” Fang shouts just as the SUV rams us from behind.

The impact throws me forward against my seatbelt, the map flying from my grasp. Our rental lurches sickeningly, tires squealing as Fang fights to maintain control. The SUV hits us again, harder this time, metal screaming against metal.

A window rolls down in the vehicle behind us. I catch a glimpse of a tattooed arm extending a semi-automatic weapon.

“DOWN!” Fang roars, one hand pushing my head below the dashboard as gunfire erupts.

The back window explodes inward, a rain of safety glass pelting the backseat. Bullets

thud into the trunk, the sound impossibly loud in the confined space. I curl into myself, making my body as small a target as possible.

Fang drives like he was born for this—one hand on the wheel, the other periodically pushing me lower whenever he anticipates another volley. He weaves through traffic, using other vehicles as shields. The engine of our rental protests as he pushes it beyond its modest capabilities.

“Fuck,” he hisses as more bullets strike the car, punching more holes through the rear passenger door. “We can’t outrun them in this piece of shit.”

I risk a glance up to see his face locked in fierce concentration, eyes constantly shifting between the road ahead and the rearview mirror. A bead of sweat traces the line of his jaw, but his hands remain steady on the wheel, his reactions precisely calibrated to keep us alive.

The SUV gains on us again, now close enough that I can see the driver’s sunglasses through the windshield. Fang makes a split-second decision, cranking the wheel hard to the right. Our car skids around a corner, tires screaming in protest, entering a crowded market street not meant for vehicles.

Pedestrians scatter, cursing in Spanish as we thread between food stalls and souvenir shops. The rental car’s driver’s side mirror tears off against a wooden cart, sending mangoes tumbling across our hood. Behind us, the SUV attempts to follow but struggles with the narrow passage.

Fang spots an alleyway barely wider than our car and makes another hard turn. The passenger side scrapes along the stucco wall, paint and metal peeling away with a sound like fingernails on a chalkboard. The mirror outside my window snaps off.

“Lost them,” Fang says as we emerge onto a quiet residential street, the SUV

nowhere in sight. He immediately turns down another side street, then another.

I slowly uncurl from my protective position, glass fragments tinkling from my clothing. My hands shake as I brush them away, adrenaline making every movement jerky and uncoordinated.

“We can’t go to the hospital,” Fang says, voicing the obvious conclusion. “They’re waiting for us.”

I nod, despair threatening to overwhelm me. So close to Rory, yet still impossibly far. “They knew we were coming. They’ve been tracking us since Mexico City.”

“We need somewhere to regroup,” Fang says, his eyes constantly checking the rearview mirror, scanning for threats. “Somewhere we can figure out our next move.”

I look out at the unfamiliar streets, the beautiful tropical setting now feeling like one of Dante’s levels of Hell.

Fang reaches across the console and briefly squeezes my hand—a gesture so unexpected it momentarily short-circuits my fear. “We’re not done,” he says, eyes meeting mine for a fraction of a second. “Not even close.”

I turn my hand to grip his, the contact grounding me despite the chaos. He’s right. This isn’t over. As long as I’m breathing, I’ll find a way to Rory.

We head towards Playa Zicatela, a town just south of Puerto Escondido, and stop at a motel. Playa Vista Motel has seen better days—probably sometime during the Carter administration. It’s painted a garish pink, and the vacancy sign half-hangs from its post. It’s perfect. The kind of place that accepts cash without questions, where the front desk clerk barely glances at our fake IDs because he’s too engrossed in looking at social media influencers on his phone.

“Room twelve,” the clerk mutters, sliding an old key across the counter. “Water pressure’s shit before nine AM.”

Water pressure is the least of our concerns.

I scan the empty parking lot as Fang completes the transaction. We abandoned the bullet-riddled rental car a few miles back, replacing it with an ancient pickup truck Fang “borrowed.”

Room twelve sits at the far end of the single-story structure, away from the office and the only other occupied room. The room that greets us is a study in neglect—wallpaper curling at the seams, a tile floor chipped in so many places I doubt I’ll remove my shoes. The single queen bed caves in on itself, as if it’s seen too much, too many bodies tangled in sordid affairs.

“Home sweet home,” I mutter, dropping my backpack on a chair that wobbles dangerously.

Fang doesn’t respond, already unloading his equipment onto the rickety desk beneath a window with yellowed blinds. His hands move with certainty, like this is a drill he’s performed a thousand times.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

The air conditioner in the window rattles to life when I flip the switch, but it produces more noise than cool air. Sweat trickles down my spine as I pace the small room, four steps from door to bathroom, six steps from window to bed. My nerves jangle like live wires, the adrenaline crash from our escape leaving me jittery and unfocused.

“What are you doing?” I ask, pausing to peer through a gap in the blinds. The parking lot remains empty except for the stolen truck and a stray dog sniffing around a overflowing trash can.

“Cartel’s network security is better than last time, but I’m almost in,” Fang replies, eyes never leaving the screen as his fingers fly across the keyboard.

I resume pacing, unable to keep still. My thoughts keep circling back to Rory, lying in a hospital bed, presumably surrounded by cartel guards. Does he know I’m coming? Is he scared?

“Stop,” Fang says suddenly. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, forcing myself to sit on the edge of the bed. The springs creak in protest, another noise added to the symphony of the rattling air conditioner and Fang’s relentless typing.

Silence settles between us, broken only by occasional muttered curses from Fang as he navigates digital barricades. I study him covertly—the furrow between his brows as he concentrates, the way his glasses slide down his nose when he leans forward, the tension in his shoulders betraying his concern despite his composed expression. Last night feels like a fever dream, something that happened to different people in a

different lifetime.

“I’m in,” he announces after twenty minutes that feel like twenty hours. “Intercepting their communications now.”

I move to stand behind him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body but careful not to touch. The screen displays a cascade of text messages, emails, and internal communications, all in Spanish. Fang translates in real-time, scrolling through the data with increasing grimness.

“They know,” he says finally, pointing to a message from someone identified only as Jefe. “They know we’re in Puerto Escondido.”

My stomach drops as I read the translated text: *American woman and man arrived via AeroMexico flight 2217. Believed to be Mina Bishop and unidentified accomplice. All units on alert. Shoot to kill the man. The woman is wanted alive.*

“How did they know which flight?” I whisper, fear crawling up my spine like ice water.

“They have people everywhere,” Fang replies, scrolling to another message. “Airport security, customs, rental agencies. We never stood a chance at staying under the radar.”

My legs suddenly feel unable to support my weight. I sink onto the bed, hands trembling slightly as the reality of our situation crystallizes. The cartel’s reach is even more extensive than I’d feared—a web of eyes and ears covering every inch of this small coastal town.

“There’s more,” Fang says, his voice tight. He turns the laptop so I can better see the screen. “You’re on their most wanted list now. Top five.”

My face stares back at me from an internal bulletin—a recent photo they took without my knowledge. Beneath it, there’s a substantial bounty figure that makes my blood run cold. Fang’s face appears as well, grainy and captured from security footage, marked as a “Underground Vengeance MC member.”

“They’ve doubled security at the clinic,” Fang continues, scrolling through more intercepted communications. “Added armed guards at all entrances, restricted all visitor access, implemented additional identity verification protocols.”

My face feels bloodless, hands cold despite the room’s oppressive heat. “They’re expecting us.”

“They’re counting on it,” Fang corrects, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “They want you to try. They’re using Rory as bait.”

The words hit me like physical blows. I’ve walked into traps before, diffused them, turned them back on my enemies. But this—this is different. The stakes aren’t just my life anymore; they’re Rory’s too.

“I can’t leave him there,” I say, voice cracking despite my efforts to keep it steady.

“No one’s suggesting that,” Fang replies, turning to face me fully. His expression softens slightly when he sees my face. “But we need to be smart about this. We can’t do it alone, Mina. Not anymore.”

I know what’s coming before he says it. The logical next step is to try to get his club on board.

“We need the club,” Fang states, leaving no room for argument. “We need manpower, resources, tactical support. We need Vapor.”

“How?” I ask automatically. “He doesn’t trust me, and he certainly doesn’t believe in me.”

“He’ll believe me once I send him copies of the cartel’s communications,” Fang counters.

My mind races, looking for alternatives that don’t exist. “The more people involved, the more variables, the more potential failure points.”

“And the more guns on our side,” Fang says firmly. “Look at this.” He gestures to the screen, to the messages detailing the cartel’s preparations. “This isn’t just a few guards anymore. This is a full tactical response. They’re treating this like a war.”

“Because it is,” I whisper, the truth of it settling into my bones.

He stands and crosses to where I’m standing. Gently grasping my shoulders, he gazes into my eyes. “I’m going to get him to help us. Vapor can get the team here within twelve hours. With the club’s resources, we have a fighting chance. Without them...” He doesn’t finish the sentence. He doesn’t need to.

“Fine.” I sigh. “Call Vapor.”

Fang nods once, releases my shoulders, and moves back to the desk. He pulls a secure phone out of his go bag—not the burner we’ve been using, but something more sophisticated, designed specifically for communication with the club.

“He’s not going to like this,” Fang warns as he punches in a number. “But he’ll come.”

I watch him press the phone to his ear, anxiety coiling in my stomach like a venomous snake. So much rides on this call—Rory’s life, our lives, whatever fragile thing has been building between Fang and me since that first night at the clubhouse. If Vapor doesn’t come through, I don’t know what we’ll do.

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the heat. In all my years working for the cartel, I never imagined I’d be standing in a shabby motel room, praying for a motorcycle club president to save my brother’s life. Yet here I am, watching Fang’s face as he begins explaining our situation, knowing that whatever comes next will either save us or destroy us completely.

And there’s nothing I can do but wait.

Chapter 16: Fang

The phone call connects with a click.

“What kind of trouble are you in?” Vapor asks without preamble.

I glance at Mina, her eyes wide and questioning, hope and fear battling across her face. My throat constricts as I realize how much rides on this conversation—not just Rory’s life, but Mina’s too, and whatever future we might salvage from this mess. I take a breath, forcing my voice to stay steady. “The kind that needs a face-to-face video call. Can you get to your laptop? Protocol seven,” I say, giving him the code for the most secure channel we use.

Vapor pauses, then says, “Call back in five minutes.”

The line goes dead.

Mina leans forward, her fingers digging into the cheap motel bedspread. “What’s going on? Why didn’t you just talk to him?”

“I encrypt the shit out of our communications, but with something like this, I want him on the most secure line. If the cartel is somehow listening, we’re screwed. So, this has to be done at the highest encryption level,” I explain, already retrieving my laptop from the desk. “Also, if Vapor’s looking me in the eye, he’s less likely to dismiss this as another ploy devised by the cartel to gain the club’s trust. I believe you. One hundred percent. Now it’s time to get Vapor on board too.”

“But... he’s going to help us, right?”

“Hopefully.”

My fingers tremble slightly as I navigate through encryption protocols. I’ve never been this far up shit creek before, never dragged the club into a foreign operation without authorization. The shakes aren’t just from the rush of adrenaline. They’re also from the knowledge that I’m one wrong word away from losing everything—my place in the club, Vapor’s trust, maybe even my life.

Mina notices my struggle but says nothing. Her silence is somehow worse than any criticism she might offer. I hope she has as much faith in me as I do in her.

After a minute, she moves to sit closer to me on the bed, close enough that I can feel her warmth but we're not quite touching. The mattress dips under our combined weight, springs protesting with a metallic groan. The air conditioner sputters and rattles, pushing humid air around the room without cooling it.

The laptop screen flickers, establishing a connection across thousands of miles. Vapor's face appears harsh in the blue light of whatever room he's using. It looks like one of the smaller tech rooms, but I can't be sure since he's taking up most of the screen. His sharp, blue eyes dart from me to Mina and back.

"Talk," he says, the single word loaded with presidential authority.

I launch into the explanation without preamble, laying out the facts in the ordered, precise way I know he respects. What he won't respect is the fact that I went behind his back. "We tried to get Rory out of the hospital stateside, but the cartel had already moved him to Mexico City. At least, that's where we thought he was. Turns out, he's in Puerto Escondido."

"You're in Mexico?" Vapor's expression doesn't change, but his eyes narrow slightly.

"Yes. We were traveling under fake identities, but when we arrived in Puerto Escondido, the cartel was waiting. They ambushed us on the coastal highway—professional hit team, automatic weapons, tactical driving. They must have figured out our flight number and rental car details because they were right on our asses."

I continue, the words coming faster now.

“We managed to escape, but the cartel’s issued shoot-on-sight orders for me. They want Mina alive.” I gesture to the laptop screen where I’ve pulled up the intercepted communications. “Her brother’s in a heavily guarded private clinic just outside town.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to maintain eye contact with Vapor through the screen. “They’re using Rory as bait. They want Mina back.”

Vapor remains silent, his gaze shifting briefly to Mina, then back to me. The silence stretches until I can’t bear it anymore.

“I wouldn’t ask for help if there was any other way,” I say, my voice dropping lower. “But they’re hunting us now. The two of us against an entire cartel—those aren’t odds I’d bet on, not even with my skills and her inside knowledge.”

“So, what exactly are you asking for?” Vapor’s tone is controlled despite his obvious irritation.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Backup,” I reply simply. “Three or four brothers with tactical experience. Weapons. Transportation. Enough force to get her brother and get out.”

Vapor leans back, the leather of his chair creaking through the speakers. “You realize what you’re asking,” he says finally. “Bringing club members into cartel territory, on foreign soil, for a woman we barely know.”

“I know,” I acknowledge. “I’m putting my reputation on the line. My patch, if it comes to that.”

Mina stiffens beside me, but I press on.

“She’s telling the truth, Vapor. About everything. Her brother, the cartel’s hold on her, all of it. I’ve seen the medical records, intercepted their communications. This isn’t a con or a trap—at least not from her side.”

Vapor’s expression shifts, almost imperceptibly. “You trust her that much?”

The question carries layers of meaning beyond the obvious. It’s not just about Mina’s honesty; it’s about my judgment, my loyalty, my value to the club. I don’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

Something in Vapor’s face changes, hardness giving way to resolve. He leans forward, filling more of the screen. “We’ll be there,” he says, the words sending a wave of relief through my body so powerful I almost sway. “But it’s going to take a hell of a lot more than three or four men, and I have conditions.”

“Name them,” I say immediately.

“We need a day to mobilize a team. That’s going to take time. Twenty-four hours until we can get boots on the ground in Puerto Escondido.” His eyes flick between Mina and me. “Keep your head down until then. No reconnaissance, no planning meetings, nothing that puts you on their radar. Where are you now?”

“A motel in a town just south of there.”

“Good. Stay put.”

I nod, already calculating how to use those twenty-four hours, what preparations we can make from the safety of this motel room.

“Send me your coordinates and we’ll be there tomorrow afternoon,” Vapor continues. “A group of brothers, plus me. Full tactical gear. Once we get there, we’ll plan. Then we execute and get her brother back.”

“Thanks, Pres,” I say humbly.

Vapor holds my gaze for a moment longer, then sighs. “I should’ve listened to you earlier about this,” he admits, the closest thing to an apology I’ve ever heard from him. “Don’t make me regret listening now.”

The video call ends, the screen going dark except for the secure connection notification blinking green in the corner. I shut the laptop down and set it aside, exhaling a breath. The weight of the club’s backing settles over me—not removing the danger but transforming our mission from certain death to a calculated risk. For the first time since bullets shattered our rental car window, I feel something like hope.

“They’re coming,” I tell Mina, turning to face her fully. “All of them. Tomorrow.”

“I heard.” Her shoulders visibly relax, tension draining from her body for the first time since we escaped the gunfire on the coastal highway. I watch the change sweep across her face—fear giving way to relief, then gratitude.

“We’re not alone in this anymore,” I say, my voice softer than I intend.

Mina doesn’t speak. Instead, she leans forward and wraps her arms around me, her face pressing into my shoulder. The unexpected gesture catches me off-guard. I hesitate for only a heartbeat before my arms encircle her, drawing her against my chest. She fits there perfectly, her smaller frame aligning with mine as if designed for this exact configuration.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my neck, her breath warm on my skin. “For everything. For believing me when no one else would.”

I tighten my hold, one hand sliding up to cradle the back of her head. Her hair is soft beneath my fingers, a stark contrast to the hardness she presents to the world.

“We’re going to get him out,” I promise, my lips brushing against her temple. “Your brother is coming home with us.”

She pulls back slightly, just enough to look up at me. The vulnerability in her eyes steals my breath. In this moment, all her defenses are down—the skilled hacker, the cartel survivor, the fierce protector, all stripped away to reveal just Mina, a woman fighting for the only family she has left.

“Fang,” she says, my name on her lips sounding like something precious. Her hand comes up to touch my face, fingers tracing the line of my jaw with unexpected tenderness.

I don’t know which of us moves first. Maybe we both do. Our lips meet softly at

first—tentative, questioning—so different from the desperate hunger of our first time. This isn't about adrenaline or escape or momentary comfort. This is about connection, about choosing each other despite every logical reason not to.

The kiss deepens gradually, her lips parting beneath mine, inviting me in. I taste her slowly, savoring the heat of her mouth, the small sound she makes when my tongue slides against hers. Her hands move to my shoulders, then my chest, fingers splaying against the cotton of my t-shirt as if mapping the muscles beneath.

“I want you,” she whispers against my lips.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

As I groan in response, she pulls my shirt over my head. Her hands immediately return to trace the contours of my chest, my shoulders, and that sensitive spot where my neck meets my collarbone. Her touch is both curious and confident as she explores my body.

I reach for the hem of her borrowed t-shirt, drawing it upward with deliberate slowness. Unlike our frantic undressing in Mexico City, this time I want to savor each newly revealed inch of her skin. She raises her arms, allowing me to pull the fabric over her head, leaving her in just a simple black bra. The sight of her—slightly flushed, eyes dark with desire, trust written in every line of her body—makes my breath catch.

“You’re stunning,” I whisper.

“So are you.” A delicate, feminine smile spreads across her lips.

We undress each other slowly, with reverence rather than urgency. I learn her body with my hands and mouth—the sensitive spot behind her ear that makes her gasp, the curve of her hip that fits perfectly in my palm, the small birthmark on her right shoulder blade shaped like a comma. She explores me with equal attention—fingers tracing the scar on my ribs from a motorcycle accident years ago, mouth discovering how my breath hitches when she kisses the inside of my wrist.

The cheap motel bed creaks beneath us as we stretch out together, skin against skin with nothing between us now. The yellow lamplight paints her body in gold and shadow, highlighting the dip of her waist, the fullness of her breasts, the strong lines of her thighs. I trace these contours with my fingertips, then my lips, then my tongue,

drawing soft sounds from her that I memorize.

When I settle between her legs, tasting her most intimate places, her fingers tangle in my hair, guiding me where she needs me most. I follow her lead, learning the rhythm and pressure that makes her thighs tremble, that pulls my name from her lips in a broken whisper. Her body tenses as she comes for me, melting beneath my mouth.

She pulls me up afterward, kissing me deeply, tasting herself on my lips without hesitation. “I need you,” she murmurs, her hand sliding between us to guide me home.

I enter her slowly, watching her face as our bodies join. Her eyes stay open, locked on mine, allowing me to see every flicker of pleasure, every unguarded reaction. It’s the most intimate thing I’ve ever experienced—this silent communication, this mutual vulnerability, this perfect synchronization of bodies and breath.

We move together, finding a rhythm that builds steadily rather than frantically. The bed protests beneath us, its squeaking springs keeping time with our movements, but I barely notice. My world has narrowed to Mina—the soft sounds she makes when I hit just the right spot, the way her nails dig into my shoulders when I deepen my thrusts, the flutter of her eyelids when pleasure threatens to overwhelm her.

“Stay with me,” I whisper, needing to see her, to maintain this connection that feels more significant than mere physical pleasure.

Her eyes open, green and luminous in the dim light.

“I’m here,” she promises, the words carrying weight beyond their simple meaning.

When release approaches, it builds like a wave rather than a lightning strike—inevitable, powerful, all-consuming. She comes first, her body tightening

around mine, her breath catching on my name. The sight of her pleasure, unguarded and real, sends me over the edge after her. For a moment that stretches into infinity, there is nothing but this—our bodies joined, our breaths mingled, our hearts beating in temporary synchrony.

Afterward, we lie tangled together, sweaty and satisfied. Her head rests on my chest, while my arm wraps around her shoulders, keeping her close. The cheap digital clock on the nightstand blinks 2:17 AM in red numbers, a reminder that time continues to pass despite this bubble we've created.

“We have hours to go,” Mina murmurs, her finger tracing idle patterns on my chest. “What do we do until then?”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair. “We rest. When Vapor gets here, it will be time to strategize. But for now, it's just us.” My hand strokes along her spine, feeling each vertebra, each shift of muscle beneath her soft skin. “And we remember what we're fighting for.”

She lifts her head to look at me, her expression serious despite our intimacy. “Rory,” she says.

“Yes,” I agree, then add softly, “And this. Whatever this is.”

She doesn't respond with words, just settles her head back on my chest, her arm tightening around my waist. I don't push for definitions or promises. In our world, tomorrow is never guaranteed. This moment—her warmth against me, her trust given freely, her breath steady against my skin—is enough.

Outside, the night deepens toward dawn. Somewhere in this coastal town, cartel soldiers patrol in search of us. Tomorrow, we'll face whatever comes with the full might of the club behind us. But for now, in this temporary sanctuary, we can allow

ourselves this stolen peace. I don't know what to call this thing between us, but it doesn't matter. Labeling it won't make it any more real. It's already undeniable.

Chapter 17: Mina

Three sharp knocks on the motel door send my heart racing. I glance at Fang, who nods once, his hand sliding to the gun at his waist before approaching the door. He checks the peephole, then steps back, shoulders relaxing a fraction.

This is it.

The club has arrived.

The door swings open, and Vapor strides in first, his presence immediately filling our shabby motel room like a storm front rolling in. Behind him, leather cuts creak and boots thud against worn carpet as the rest of the brothers file in, each face set with grim determination.

I straighten my spine, conscious of how I must look to them—the cartel hacker they barely know, asking them to risk their lives on foreign soil. Vapor's piercing blue eyes find mine immediately, his gaze calculating and intense. He gives me a slight nod, not quite approval, but acknowledgment at least.

Ice enters next, his platinum hair catching the cheap motel lighting, making him look even more otherworldly than usual. He carries a small projector under one arm, which he hands to Fang without a word. Behind him comes Bones, massive and imposing, his dark skin gleaming with sweat from the tropical heat. Diablo follows, his eyes scanning every corner of the room with professional suspicion. Tank is the last through the door, younger than the others but no less dangerous, his linebacker build making the already small room feel claustrophobic.

I peek past them and see a dozen more men hanging out near a couple of vans in the parking lot. They obviously couldn't rent bikes, because that would have been a huge red flag for the cartel. Riding down would have taken too long.

"Lock it," Vapor orders, cutting off my view.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Tank secures the door behind them, standing guard beside it like a sentinel.

The air in the room changes, charged with purpose and testosterone and the distinct smell of leather and gun oil. These men have brought war with them, and I'm suddenly, intensely grateful they're on my side.

“Let's get started,” Vapor says, his voice slicing through the tension. He doesn't raise it, doesn't need to. When he speaks, everyone listens. “Fang, show us what we're dealing with.”

Fang connects his laptop to the projector Ice brought, the blue light washing over his focused face as he types. A moment later, the hospital's blueprints blooms across the dingy motel wall.

“This is the clinic,” Fang explains, standing beside the projection. “Three floors, private security, owned through a shell company that ties back to the cartel. Main entrance here—” his finger traces the front of the building “—with two secondary exits here and here. Expect security checkpoints at every entrance, as well as armed guards inside and out.”

I watch the brothers lean forward, studying the layout intensely. There's nothing casual about their focus. These men are violent professionals.

“Rory's most likely here,” I add, stepping forward to point at the second floor. “Based on the communications we intercepted a few hours ago, they've got him in the long-termcare wing, probably a private room near the nurses' station for maximum supervision.”

Bones crosses his massive arms over his chest. “Guards inside the room?”

“My guess is there’s at least one at all times,” Fang answers. “Rotating shifts, heavily armed.”

Ice studies the blueprints, his silver-blue eyes narrowing. “Security cameras?”

“Everywhere,” I say. “But the system runs on an isolated network. I can hack in once we’re inside and loop the feed in critical areas.”

“If we go in hot, how many men are we talking?” Diablo asks, his gravelly voice matching his menacing appearance.

Fang switches to another image—the clinic’s security rotation schedule I helped him steal from their servers. “Minimum of twelve armed guards on night shift. Plus whoever they’ve added specifically for Rory.”

“So fifteen, maybe twenty,” Vapor concludes, his face revealing nothing. “I’ve faced worse.”

“I’ve got something that might help make transporting Rory easier,” Ice interjects. “Borrowed a Mexican ambulance on the way from the airport. It’s stashed in a vacant garage three blocks from here. Scalpel’s watching it.”

“He’s here?” I gasp.

“Yeah,” Vapor says, skewering Fang with a look. “We’ll chat about that later. But he’s here to help.”

A ripple of approval moves through the room. An ambulance means legitimate access, reduced suspicion, and faster extraction. Having an actual doctor on board is

ideal. This is great news overall, but I don't miss Vapor's anger. He must have found out about Scalpel trying to help us in NOLA. Fang's going to have to explain that later.

"What about weapons?" Tank asks from his position by the door.

Vapor nods to Diablo, who unzips a duffel bag I hadn't noticed before. "Nothing that can't be concealed. Handguns with suppressors, combat knives, two compact submachine guns. We're not looking for a war; we're looking for a surgical extraction."

"How'd you get all that through airport security?" I ask.

"Flew private and paid off a few people along the way," Vapor says.

"What if they tip off the cartel anyway?" Fang asks.

"They know we're coming. That's a given at this point. If someone rats us out, so be it. Either way, we're getting her brother out of there," Bones says.

"Communications?" Tank asks.

"Encrypted earpieces," Fang replies, opening the small case Bones carried in. "Short-range, but secure. No chance of the cartel intercepting our chatter."

Vapor steps closer to the projected blueprints, studying them with the focus of a general planning a critical campaign. "Here's how we play it," he says, and the room falls completely silent. "Ice and Bones take point in the ambulance—paramedics responding to a call. Tank and Diablo secure the perimeter, take out external cameras, create a diversion if needed."

This sounds very familiar. Fang and I tried the exact same thing with Scalpel in New Orleans. It would have worked if Rory had been there. I just hope he's still in this hospital. Chasing him around the world isn't going to work. This has to end now.

Vapor turns to me. "You and Fang go in with the first team. You'll need to access their system, identify exactly where your brother is, and disable security measures. Fang, you stay with her, keep her covered."

Fang nods, his expression solemn. "And you?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“I’ll be your extraction insurance,” Vapor says with dangerous calm. “If things go sideways, I’ll make sure we all have a way out.”

For the next hour, we refine the plan, dissecting each step with meticulous precision. Bones and Ice ask questions about Rory’s medical condition, including how to transport him safely. Scalpel already knows the details, but they want to have the knowledge too in case something happens to the doctor. Ice and Fang discuss the clinic’s electronic security, mapping out how to bypass it. Diablo and Tank calculate timing for each phase of the operation, how long until cartel reinforcements might arrive if alerted.

Throughout it all, I watch these men work with a cohesion that can only come from absolute trust. They finish each other’s sentences, anticipate questions before they’re asked, respectfully challenge assumptions when necessary. I realize with startling clarity that this is what Fang has found in the club—not just brotherhood, but purpose. A place where his particular skills are valued, where his obsessive attention to detail saves lives rather than marking him as an outsider.

“We move at ten,” Vapor finally announces, checking his watch. “That gives us three hours to prep. Any questions?” His eyes sweep the room, landing on each brother in turn before settling on me.

I shake my head, throat suddenly tight with emotion. These men are risking everything for my brother—a stranger to them—based solely on Fang’s word and perhaps some kind of club code I don’t fully understand.

“Then we’re set,” Vapor says with finality. “Meet at the garage at 2200 hours. Fully

equipped, fully committed.” He looks directly at me. “We’re bringing your brother home tonight, Mina. That’s a promise.”

The club brothers file out with determined nods, boots heavy on the thin carpet. Vapor is last, pausing at the door to exchange a meaningful look with Fang.

“Thanks, Pres.,” Fang says before Vapor leaves.

The motel room feels hollow after the bikers leave, like a theater after the final curtain, too quiet, too empty, yet somehow still vibrating with the energy of what just happened. I listen to their boots retreating down the walkway. A few seconds later, the vans’ engines start up but then fade as they pull out of the parking lot. We decided not to stay together in case the cartel somehow located us. It would be better not to draw too much attention to the motel. Besides, after the long flight, the other guys could use some rest.

The blueprints still glow on the wall, a ghostly reminder of what we’re about to attempt. Fang moves to the bed, unzipping a small black case to reveal several handguns nestled in foam cutouts. His movements are precise, mechanical—checking chambers, testing actions, counting ammunition. I pace the narrow strip between the bed and bathroom door, my nerves too raw to allow stillness.

“You’re going to wear a hole in that carpet,” Fang says without looking up, his voice gentle despite the teasing words.

I ignore him, continuing my circuit. Four steps, turn, four steps back. My mind races through variables, contingencies, failure points in the plan. What if Rory isn’t where we think? What if the cartel moved him again? What if one of us gets captured or killed? The scenarios multiply like viruses in a compromised system, each more catastrophic than the last.

“Mina,” Fang says, finally looking up from his weapons. “Come sit down before you vibrate out of your skin.”

I stop mid-stride, suddenly aware of how manic I must appear. With deliberate calm, I perch on the edge of the desk chair instead of joining him on the bed—still needing some distance, some boundary between us despite everything we’ve shared. I can’t begin to think about anything else until Rory’s safe. Once that happens, I can figure out what to do about this thing between me and Fang.

“Why did you join the motorcycle club?” I blurt. “What made you choose that life?”

Fang’s hands go still, a bullet held between his fingers. The silence stretches long enough that I think he might not answer, then he sets the bullet down in the case.

“It’s because... because of my brother,” he says finally, his voice tight. “Tommy.”

I wait, giving him space to continue or not. His glasses catch the light from the blueprints, turning his eyes into unreadable blue pools.

“He disappeared when we were kids,” Fang continues. “I was ten. He was eight. We were playing basketball at the park near our house.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Tommy wanted to go home. I wanted to play one more game. I told him to ride his bike back without me.”

The pain in his voice is raw, immediate—not the dull ache of an old wound but something still bleeding beneath the surface. I recognize it instantly; it’s the same pain I carry for Rory.

“He never made it home,” Fang says, staring at his hands. “No body, no evidence, no witnesses. Just... gone. Like he evaporated between the park and our house. Three blocks.”

“Fang, I’m—”

“I should have gone with him,” he cuts me off, the words sharp-edged. “I was his big brother. I was supposed to protect him. If I’d just left when he wanted to, if I’d just walked him home—”

He stops abruptly, pushing his glasses up to pinch the bridge of his nose. When he continues, his voice is steadier, more analytical, as if he’s discussing someone else’s tragedy.

“Intellectually, I know it wasn’t my fault. I was a kid myself. Whoever took Tommy—they’re the ones responsible. Not me.” His mouth twists in a bitter smile. “But knowing something intellectually doesn’t fix how you feel about it.”

I understand this dichotomy too well—the gap between what your brain knows and what your heart believes. My entire life with the cartel was built on that divide.

“The club gave me resources,” Fang continues. “Connections, skills, purpose. We have a network across the country—brothers looking for missing kids, tracking trafficking rings, sharing information outside official channels.” His fingers resume their methodical check of the weapons, finding comfort in the routine. “Every child we find, every family we rescue—it doesn’t bring Tommy back, but it matters. It has to matter.”

The pieces click together—why Fang believed me about Rory when others didn’t, why he’s risking everything to help me. It’s not just about me; it’s about the brother he couldn’t save.

I stand and cross to the bed, sitting beside him close enough that our shoulders touch. The mattress dips beneath our combined weight, bringing us slightly closer. I place my hand over his, stilling his movements with the weapons.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I tell him firmly, the words inadequate but necessary. “You’re right. Whoever took your brother is the only one to blame.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

His eyes meet mine, and for once, I see past his carefully constructed defenses—past the genius hacker, past the calculating biker—to the ten-year-old boy still looking for his little brother.

“You’re a hero, Fang,” I say softly. “Maybe not the kind they write comic books about, but the real kind. The kind who saves people even when no one’s watching. The kind who uses his pain to prevent others from suffering the same way.”

Something shifts in his expression—not quite a smile, but a softening around the edges. I lean forward and kiss him gently, a brief press of lips that carries more meaning than our most passionate embraces. When I pull back, his eyes remain closed for a moment, as if holding onto the sensation.

“You’re going to rescue my brother,” I tell him with absolute certainty. “I believe that. Not just because you’re good at what you do, but because you understand what he means to me. You understand in a way no one else could.”

Fang opens his eyes, meeting my gaze with an intensity that steals my breath. “I promise you, Mina,” he says, his voice low and fervent. “I will do everything in my power to bring Rory home tonight.”

We sit together in the charged silence, the weight of his promise hanging between us. On the nightstand, the digital clock blinks its red numbers—7:23 PM—counting down to the mission with merciless precision. Less than three hours until we attempt the impossible. Less than three hours until I potentially see my brother again—or lose everything trying.

Fang's hand turns beneath mine, our fingers interlacing in silent understanding. We don't speak of what happens after—whether there is an after for us, whether this connection survives beyond the mission. Such considerations are luxuries we can't afford right now.

But his hand in mine feels like a different kind of promise—unspoken, undefined, but real nonetheless. And for this moment, that's enough.

Chapter 18: Fang

The van slides through the night like a shark through dark water, headlights off, as we approach the hospital. Through the windshield, I can make out the modern three-story building rising against the inky sky, its windows glowing with clinical light. My fingers tap a nervous rhythm against my thigh as I mentally review the blueprints for the hundredth time. I can see a thousand ways this could go wrong, but we've prepared as much as we could. From now on, all we can do is execute the plan.

A few minutes ago, Vapor drove us past the hospital. Four armed guards were patrolling the main entrance, their silhouettes sharp against the illuminated glass doors. More cartel soldiers circled the perimeter, automatic weapons slung across their chests. We expected a lot of firepower, but the cartel's not messing around.

I've faced bad odds before but tonight feels different. There's more than just my life at stake. My club brothers and Mina are counting on me to make all the right moves once we're inside. Rory, a completely innocent pawn in this war, doesn't even know what's coming. His life's at risk too. I can't fuck this up.

"Two minutes," Vapor's voice comes through my earpiece, calm and measured despite what we're about to do. "Final check, everyone."

Around me, the van transforms into a war room. Diablo checks the action on his

Glock, the metallic click unnervingly loud in the confined space. Beside him, Tank adjusts his tactical vest, massive hands moving with surprising delicacy as he secures extra magazines. Scalpel, Ice and Bones follow us in the ambulance, a legitimate vehicle for an illegitimate extraction.

Mina sits opposite me, her face half-hidden in shadow. Her fingers move methodically over her weapon, checking the magazine, the action, the safety. The motions are practiced, efficient—cartel training showing through. She catches me watching and holds my gaze, her eyes reflecting the dim light from the dashboard. Neither of us speaks; there's nothing left to say that matters more than what we're about to do.

The van slows as we reach our staging position, half a block from the hospital's service entrance. Through the tinted windows, I watch another guard make his rounds through the parking lot, flashlight beam sweeping across the pavement.

“Comms check,” Vapor orders. “Sound off.”

“Diablo, clear.”

“Tank, clear.”

“Fang, clear.”

“Mina, clear,” she says, her voice steady despite everything.

A chorus of other MC men sound off from the second van. Scalpel, Ice, and Bones confirm they're good from inside the ambulance, which is trailing behind the other vehicles. We stop in the staging location.

Vapor nods, satisfied. “Listen up. One last time.” He turns in his seat to face us, his

blue eyes intense under the slicked-back raven hair. “Main team creates a diversion at the front entrance—big, loud, unmistakable. Tank, Diablo, and I lead that charge. Ice and Bones secure our exit path and the ambulance. Fang, Mina, you slip in through the service entrance during the chaos and find Rory. Radio Scalpel and let him know which room he’s in.”

My throat tightens as I realize what he’s not saying—that he’s putting himself at the point of highest danger, drawing fire so Mina and I have a cleaner shot at Rory. It’s what a club president does, what I’ve seen Vapor do countless times, but it still hits me in the chest. Everyone is putting their life on the line for this. It has to work.

“Hospital security will lock down immediately,” Vapor continues, “but they’ll focus on the main threat first. That gives you”—he looks directly at Mina and me—“a narrow window. Ten minutes, max. Any longer, and reinforcements arrive. Any longer, and we’re all dead.”

Mina’s jaw tightens, a small muscle jumping beneath her skin. I reach across the space between us and take her hand. Her fingers are cold despite the warm night, but they grip mine with startling strength.

“We’ll get him,” I tell her quietly as Vapor continues outlining tactical positions to the others. “In and out.”

“I know,” she whispers, but her eyes betray her fear—not for herself, but for Rory, for me, and for everyone risking their lives tonight. She squeezes my hand once more before releasing it. Clutching her weapon, she sits on the edge of her seat.

“We’re dealing with three main obstacles,” I say, focusing her attention on the practical. “Service entrance guard, potential roaming security, and whoever’s directly guarding Rory. We handle them quietly if possible, loudly if necessary.”

She nods, her expression hardening into the focused mask I've come to recognize—Mina the survivor, the fighter. She's pushing aside her role as Rory's sister until the job's done. It's the same compartmentalization I use when a mission requires absolute focus.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

Vapor finishes his briefing and checks his watch. “Questions?”

Silence fills the van. There are always last minute questions before a mission this dangerous—uncertainties, variables, potential failure points—but asking them now wouldn’t change anything. We’ve planned as much as we can. The rest is execution and luck.

“Then we move on my mark.” Vapor pulls on a black tactical glove, then reaches back to clasp Tank’s massive forearm in the club’s traditional gesture of brotherhood. The gesture passes around the van before it gets to me. When I reach for Mina, she hesitates only briefly before completing the circle, her small hand gripping Vapor’s forearm.

“For family,” Vapor says. “Both blood and chosen.”

“For family,” we echo, and I watch Mina’s throat work as she repeats the words.

In the sudden silence, I can hear my own heartbeat, rapid but controlled. Adrenaline sharpens my senses—I can smell gun oil and leather, see every detail of Mina’s face as she takes a deep, steadying breath. The weight of my weapon presses against my side. I have extra clips in my pockets. Hopefully it’s enough firepower to blast a path to Rory.

“Go time,” Vapor says quietly into his comm.

We move like shadows, slipping from the van in practiced formation. In ten minutes, Scalpel, Ice, and Bones will meet us at the loading dock. If all goes well, we’ll have a

new patient for Scalpel.

Vapor, Tank, and Diablo break toward the main entrance, moving with casual confidence, like men who belong exactly where they are. They've got their guns hidden, so the guards don't immediately react.

Mina and I run toward the service entrance. A single guard stands beside the door, smoking a cigarette, his rifle held loosely in one hand. Above us, stars glitter in the velvet sky, indifferent to what's about to happen.

Vapor's voice comes through my earpiece. "Get in, get the kid, get out." A pause, then: "Stay alive, brother."

Before I can respond, the night erupts. Gunfire cracks from the direction of the main entrance, followed immediately by shouts and the wail of alarms. Lights flare to life around the hospital perimeter, emergency protocols engaging as Vapor's team creates exactly the kind of chaos we need.

The guard at the service entrance straightens, dropping his cigarette and bringing his rifle up as he speaks rapidly into a radio. His attention is fully focused on the commotion at the front of the building. Mina's eyes meet mine. I nod once. Together, we move toward the door.

The cartel man turns just as we approach, his eyes widening in recognition or alarm—I don't wait to find out which. He brings his rifle up, but I'm already moving, driving my shoulder into his midsection. The impact forces air from his lungs in a surprised whoosh. He staggers back but manages to squeeze off a shot that cracks past my ear like a whip. My ears ring with the proximity of the bullet as I draw my weapon and fire twice in rapid succession. Both rounds find their mark in his chest. He crumples to the ground, eyes already vacant, radio crackling with unanswered questions. I grab Mina's hand and pull her through the door before anyone responds

to our gunshots.

Inside, fluorescent lights buzz overhead, casting the sterile corridor a harsh white. The blueprint I've memorized unfolds in my mind like a digital overlay—service corridor connects to main east-west hallway, then up the stairwell to second floor where long-term care patients are housed. We move quickly, our footsteps echoing on the polished linoleum despite our attempts at stealth.

“This way,” I whisper, tugging Mina toward a junction where the service corridor meets the main hallway. The distant sounds of Vapor's diversion filter through the building—gunfire, shouting, the persistent wail of alarms that sets my teeth on edge. The hospital's emergency system cycles through automated announcements in Spanish, instructing staff to follow lockdown protocols.

We pause at the corner, and I risk a quick glance down the main corridor. Empty for now, but that won't last. The diversion is drawing most of the security to the front, but some will remain to protect high-value areas—like where they're keeping Rory.

“Critical patients are on the second floor, north wing,” I remind Mina as we break from cover and sprint toward the stairwell. “Room numbers starting with 2C.”

The stairwell door swings open just as we reach it. A security guard appears, his hand already reaching for his sidearm when he spots us. Mina reacts with cobra-like speed, her body a blur of precise movement. One hand strikes his wrist, deflecting the weapon while her other delivers a vicious chop to his throat. The guard gags, stumbling forward. Mina follows through with a knee to his solar plexus, then an elbow to the back of his head as he doubles over. He collapses without a sound, unconscious before he hits the floor.

“Cartel trained you well,” I observe as we drag his body behind a nearby supply cart.

“For all the wrong things,” she replies, retrieving the guard’s access card from his belt. “But useful now.”

We take the stairs two at a time, the sounds of chaos growing more distant as we ascend. My earpiece crackles with sporadic updates from the team at the front—Vapor directing suppressing fire, Tank calling out enemy positions. They’re buying us time with more bullets and chaos.

The second-floor corridor stretches before us, doors lining both sides. Most rooms are dark or empty. The nurse’s station sits abandoned, monitors still glowing with patient vitals, chairs pushed back in haste. They must have fled when the first shots rang out.

I check one of the rooms—empty bed, machines powered down. The second contains an elderly man who stares at us with frightened eyes. I close the door quickly. Third room, a woman sleeping despite the alarms, medication keeping her oblivious to the danger.

Not Rory.

“We need to narrow this down,” Mina hisses, frustration edging her voice as we check a fourth empty room. “We can’t search every room before security regroups.”

She’s right. I scan the corridor and spot a computer terminal at the nurse’s station, still logged in and active. “Cover me,” I tell her, sliding into the chair while she takes position at the junction of corridors, weapon ready.

My fingers fly across the keyboard, navigating through the hospital’s patient management system. It’s basic stuff—no sophisticated security, just a standard database of patient information and room assignments. I pull up the current patient roster for the north wing, scanning for anything that might indicate Rory—recent transfers or unusual treatment protocols.

“Anything?” Mina asks, eyes never leaving the corridor.

“Working on it,” I mutter, diving deeper into the system. “They wouldn’t list him under his real name, and he’ll have extra guards.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I switch tactics, searching for rooms with additional security protocols. A pattern emerges—Room 2C-14 has been flagged for restricted access, requires special clearance, and houses a male patient on regular dialysis. The patient named is “Miguel Vargas,” but the admission date matches when Rory was transferred here.

“Got him,” I announce, already rising from the chair. “Room 2C-14, end of the hall.”

My hand goes to my earpiece. “Scalpel, we’ve located the target. Room 2C-14, second floor, north wing. Meet us there.”

“Copy,” comes the terse reply. “Three minutes out. Encountering resistance.”

As if to emphasize his point, a fresh volley of gunfire erupts from the floor below, followed by Vapor’s voice cutting through the chaos: “Six minutes left. Clock’s ticking.”

Mina and I move quickly down the corridor, checking room numbers as we pass. 2C-8, 2C-10, 2C-12... The hallway curves slightly, and as we round the bend, I spot them—two cartel soldiers stationed outside Room 2C-14, both armed with submachine guns, their postures alert due to the chaos elsewhere in the building.

They see us at the same moment, bringing their weapons up with deadly efficiency. I shove Mina toward the minimal cover of a linen cart as bullets tear into the wall behind us, spitting plaster and tile into the air.

Returning fire from my crouched position, I manage to hit one guard in the shoulder, spinning him halfway around. Mina rolls from behind the cart, her weapon barking

twice. The wounded guard drops, but the second adjusts his aim toward her new position.

Time slows to a crawl as I process the angles, the distances, the milliseconds we have before he squeezes the trigger. I launch myself into a sliding tackle that would make a professional soccer player proud, colliding with the guard's legs as Mina's bullet grazes his arm instead of finding center mass. His weapon discharges into the ceiling as he falls, plaster dust raining down on us.

I'm on him before he can recover, driving my knee into his stomach while pinning his gun arm to the floor. He's strong—cartel enforcers usually are—and bucks beneath me, nearly throwing me off. I slam the butt of my pistol into his temple once, twice. He goes limp.

“Clear,” I pant, rising to my feet as Mina secures the other guard's weapon.

We approach Room 2C-14, both of us breathing hard, adrenaline making my hands tremble slightly as I reach for the door. Mina's eyes meet mine, a universe of emotion compressed into that single glance—fear, hope, determination. I nod once, and she pushes the door open.

The room is dimly lit. Various types of medical equipment cast eerie shadows on the walls. A dialysis machine hums steadily beside the bed, tubes snaking from its mechanical kidney to the thin figure lying motionless beneath sterile white sheets. For a terrible moment, I think we're too late—the figure is so still, so pale.

Then he turns his head, eyes widening as they fix on Mina. His face is gaunt, cheeks hollowed by illness, skin nearly translucent against the pillowcase. But his eyes—his eyes are alive, alert, and so similar to Mina's that the family resemblance is unmistakable despite his weakened state.

“Mina?” Rory whispers, his voice barely audible over the machinery. Confusion, disbelief, and the faintest flicker of hope cross his features in rapid succession. “What’s happening?”

Mina steps forward, her weapon lowering, her façade of strength crumbling as she looks at her brother for the first time in months. Her voice, when she speaks, contains all the emotion she’s been holding back since this mission began. “We’re taking you home, Rory.”

I position myself in the doorway, dividing my attention between the corridor and the reunion happening behind me. Mina rushes to her brother’s side, her movements suddenly gentle as she reaches for his hand. The juxtaposition is jarring—the same hands that efficiently incapacitated a guard moments ago now tremble as they touch Rory’s pale fingers. I keep my weapon ready, ears straining for approaching footsteps above the persistent wail of alarms. We found him, but we’re still deep in enemy territory with a fragile package to extract and a ticking clock counting down our chance of survival.

“Is this real?” Rory asks. “Are you really here?”

“I’m here,” she confirms, leaning down to carefully hug him. Her voice catches as she adds, “I’m so sorry it took so long.”

Rory’s thin arms wrap around her shoulders, his face burying against her neck in a gesture so vulnerable it makes my chest ache.

“They said you weren’t coming,” Rory whispers. “That you’d abandoned me.”

“Never,” she says fiercely, pulling back to look him in the eyes. “I will always come for you, Rory. Always.”

I check my watch—seven minutes have elapsed since we entered the building. The distant sound of gunfire has intensified, suggesting Vapor’s team is facing significant resistance.

“Mina,” I say softly, hating to interrupt but aware of our narrowing window. “We need to move.”

She nods, instantly shifting back into operational mode, though her hand remains on Rory’s arm. “We’re getting you out of here,” she explains. “Right now. These people are helping us.”

Confusion flickers across Rory’s gaunt face. “But my treatment—the machines—”

Movement in the hall catches my attention. I spin, weapon raised, only to lower it immediately as Scalpel jogs toward me. Blood spatters his tactical vest, though he appears uninjured. His clinical gaze sweeps over Rory, assessing his condition with professional detachment.

“Patient status?” he asks, already moving to examine the dialysis equipment.

“Conscious, oriented, but weakened,” I report. “Can we move him?”

Scalpel nods, his movements precise as he begins disconnecting tubes and wires in a specific sequence. “Hemodialysis in progress but nearly complete. He’s stable enough for transport if we’re careful.” He glances at Rory. “I’m a doctor. I’ll make sure you’re okay during the move.”

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“A doctor with a gun,” Rory observes weakly, eyeing the weapon holstered at Scalpel’s side.

“Welcome to Mexico,” Scalpel replies dryly, continuing his work. “I need two minutes to disconnect him properly. Rushing risks clotting or hemorrhage.”

I nod, checking the corridor again before pressing my earpiece. “Vapor, status?”

Static crackles, then his voice comes through, punctuated by gunfire. “Pinned down in the main lobby. Cartel brought reinforcements earlier than expected. Heavy resistance. Get the kid out through the service exit. We’ll hold them here.”

I exchange glances with Mina, both of us understanding what Vapor isn’t saying—that the diversion has become a full-scale battle, that our brothers are fighting for their lives to give us this chance. Her jaw tightens with resolve.

“Almost done,” Scalpel announces. “He’ll need dialysis again within twenty-four hours, but he’s stable for now.”

He grabs the wheelchair parked in the corner of the room and rolls it over. Together, we carefully transfer Rory from the bed. He’s lighter than he should be, his body frail beneath the hospital gown. Mina wraps a blanket around his shoulders, then steps behind the wheelchair.

“Service corridors,” I instruct, checking the hallway before gesturing them forward. “Main routes are compromised.”

We move as quickly as Rory's condition allows, Mina pushing the wheelchair while Scalpel monitors his patient. I lead the way, weapon ready. The hospital's layout unfolds in my mind once more—left at the junction, through the supply room, down the service elevator reserved for staff.

My earpiece crackles with constant updates from the front—Diablo reporting he's running low on ammo, Ice confirming the ambulance is still secure, Vapor coordinating covering fire as they try to create an exit path. We're way beyond any ticking clock. Time's up. We have to get the hell out of here.

The service elevator opens into a basement corridor lined with pipes and electrical panels. The emergency lights cast everything in an eerie red glow, transforming Rory's already pale face into something ghostly. His breathing has quickened, the exertion of the move taxing his weakened system.

"How are you holding up?" I ask him as we navigate around a stack of supply crates.

"Been better," he manages, offering a weak smile that reminds me so much of Mina it's startling. "But I've also been worse."

Mina squeezes his shoulder, her eyes meeting mine over his head—a silent thank you that makes my chest tighten. She shouldn't be thanking me yet. Not until we're back in the States.

We follow the corridor to a loading dock where deliveries are received. The metal door leading outside is our final barrier. Beyond it, if everything has gone according to plan, the ambulance waits.

"Approaching exit," I report into my comm. "Status of the ambulance?"

"Still secure," comes Ice's immediate reply. "But hurry. We're hearing vehicles

approaching from the north—likely more cartel reinforcements.”

I crack the door open, scanning the loading area beyond. The ambulance sits twenty yards away, its white bulk gleaming under security lights. Ice and Bones stand guard beside it, weapons raised and scanning the perimeter. No immediate threats visible, but the night hums with tension.

“Now,” I say, pushing the door fully open. “Move fast, straight to the ambulance.”

We emerge from the building in tight formation, Mina pushing Rory’s wheelchair as quickly as possible while Scalpel and I provide cover on either side. The night air hits us like a physical force after the climate-controlled hospital—warm, humid, carrying the distinct scent of gun smoke from the front of the building.

Ice spots us immediately, jogging forward to help with the wheelchair while Bones continues scanning for threats, his massive frame silhouetted against the ambulance lights.

“Vapor’s team is taking heavy fire,” Ice reports as we reach the vehicle. “Cartel’s brought in at least twenty more men. They’re trapped in the lobby.”

The rear doors of the ambulance stand open, revealing a fully equipped medical transport interior. Bones and Ice help lift Rory inside, his frail body seeming to disappear among the equipment. Scalpel climbs in after him, immediately beginning to hook him up to portable monitors and an IV bag.

“They need backup,” Bones says, his deep voice tight with concern for his brothers.

My comm unit crackles to life, Vapor’s voice strained but commanding: “Fang, confirm package secure?”

“Package secure,” I reply. “Preparing for transport.”

“Good.” A burst of gunfire nearly drowns out his next words. “Ice, Bones—we need you at the front. Now.”

Ice and Bones exchange glances, then look to me.

“Go,” I tell them, making a split-second decision. “I’ll drive the ambulance. Get our brothers out.”

They nod in unison, that seamless communication that comes from years of riding together.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Keep the package safe,” Ice says, already moving toward the front of the building, Bones following like a shadow.

“Can you handle this?” Mina asks as we climb into the front of the ambulance, her in the passenger seat, me behind the wheel.

“I’ve driven worse,” I assure her, starting the engine with a rumble. Through the side mirror, I watch Ice and Bones disappear around the corner of the building, running toward the gunfire instead of away from it. My throat knots—they’re going back into hell for their brothers, for the club.

I put the ambulance in drive and pull away from the hospital, lights off to avoid drawing attention. In the back, Scalpel works with focused intensity, murmuring reassurances to Rory as he stabilizes him for the journey. Mina turns in her seat, maintaining contact with her brother through the partition, as if afraid he might disappear again if she looks away.

Through my earpiece, I hear Vapor’s voice rise above the chaos: “Fall back to the vans! Move, move, move!”

In the rearview mirror, I catch a final glimpse of the hospital—flashes of gunfire illuminating the night, dark figures sprinting toward the waiting vans, bullets pinging off metal and concrete. Vapor brings up the rear, covering his brothers’ retreat, diving into the lead van as it lurches into motion under sustained fire.

Then we turn a corner, and the hospital disappears from view. In the back of the ambulance, Rory’s vital signs beepsteadily on Scalpel’s portable monitors. Beside

me, Mina exhales slowly, a decade of tension releasing in that single breath.

“We did it,” she whispers, half to herself. “We actually did it.”

I reach across the console and take her hand, squeezing once before returning my focus to the road ahead, to the uncertain future that awaits us all once the adrenaline fades and the real work of keeping Rory safe begins.

“I’m getting in the back,” she says, climbing over the seat so she can sit next to her brother. I glance in the rearview mirror and smile. She’s so happy she’s crying.

Returning my attention to the highway, I flinch as two black SUVs fly past us. They keep going. For now. I just hope they don’t make a U-turn.

Chapter 19: Mina

I squeeze past the partition separating the front cab from the patient area, my heart racing faster than the ambulance’s engine. Rory lies on the gurney, thin and pale under the harsh interior lights, tubes and wires connecting him to a jungle of medical equipment. His eyes track my movement, clearer than I expected but still clouded with confusion.

He’s here. He’s really here.

After days of struggling to get to him, my brother is within arm’s reach. Relief hits me like a physical wave, threatening to wash away all the strength I’ve carefully maintained.

“Mina?” His voice is a dry whisper, barely audible above the rumble of tires on asphalt and the steady beep of monitors. “Are you really taking me away from them?”

I collapse onto the small fold-down seat beside his gurney, grabbing his hand between both of mine. His skin feels too cool, too thin, like tissue paper stretched over bird bones. I can see every blue vein, every tendon. He's lost weight he couldn't afford to lose.

"Yes," I manage, my throat constricting around the words. "I'm here. You're safe now."

Scalpel works methodically on Rory's other side, adjusting IV drips and checking readings on a portable monitor. His movements are precise, clinical, but there's a gentleness to them, not something I expected from a man who rides with a motorcycle club. But he was a doctor first, and I guess he'll never really lose his bedside manner.

"How is he?" I ask Scalpel, not taking my eyes off Rory's face, afraid he might disappear if I look away for even a second.

Scalpel glances up. "Stable, for now. Kidney function is poor but manageable. He's dehydrated, malnourished, but his vitals are stronger than I anticipated." He checks something on one of the machines. "They were treating him well. Just enough to keep him alive."

"Because he was bait," I say, the words bitter on my tongue.

"Because you would have burned their world to the ground if they'd let him die," Scalpel corrects, the ghost of a smile touching his lips. "They knew what you're capable of."

The ambulance swerves slightly, and Rory winces as the movement jostles him. I tighten my grip on his hand, as if I could somehow absorb the pain for him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. "I'm so sorry, Rory."

I never should have left you alone. I should have found a way to get to you sooner.”

“Hey, hey,” Rory murmurs, his free hand shakily reaching up to touch my face. His fingers brush a tear from my cheek. “You came. That’s all that matters. I knew I could count on you.”

The tears flow freely now, tracking hot paths down my cheeks. I’ve held myself together through gunfights and car chases, through infiltrating cartel strongholds and facing down killers, but here—with my brother alive and speaking to me—I finally break. Sobs wrack my body, my shoulders shaking with the force of them.

“I was so scared,” I confess, words spilling out between gasps for breath. “When they took you from the hospital, when I couldn’t find you... I thought—”

“I knew you’d find me,” Rory interrupts, his voice weak but steady. “Remember when I got lost at the state fair when I was five? You found me then too.”

A choked laugh escapes me. “That was different. You were just hiding in the livestock pavilion because you wanted to pet the rabbits.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Still counts,” he insists, the corner of his mouth lifting in that crooked smile I’ve missed so desperately. “You’ve always been my protector.”

Scalpel tactfully busies himself with equipment on the far side of the ambulance, giving us as much privacy as possible in the cramped space. The vehicle rocks as Fang takes a curve, the centrifugal force pressing me against the metal wall.

“We’re getting away from them for good,” I promise, wiping tears from my face with my sleeve. “I’m taking you somewhere safe, somewhere they can never find us again.”

Rory’s eyes search mine, looking for the truth. “What about your deal with them? They said if you didn’t work for them, they’d stop paying for my treatments.”

“Fuck their deal,” I say fiercely. “I’ve got new friends now. People who can help us. People who have helped us already.” I glance toward the front of the ambulance where Fang is driving. “I’m never going back to the cartel, Rory. Never.”

His face relaxes slightly, some of the tension easing from his features. “Good,” he whispers. “I’ve hated what they made you do. All these years, knowing you were—” He breaks off, coughing, and Scalpel immediately moves in to check his oxygen levels.

“Don’t talk too much,” Scalpel advises, adjusting something on one of the machines. “Your body’s been through a lot. Rest now.”

Rory nods weakly, but his eyes stay fixed on me. “These new friends of yours,” he

says after a moment, his voice barely audible. “They seem intense.”

“They are,” I admit with a small smile. “But they’re the good kind of intense.”

“And the driver?” Rory asks, a hint of his old mischief sparking in his eyes despite his condition. “Who’s he?”

I feel heat rise to my cheeks, wondering what Rory has picked up on. Before I can respond, the ambulance suddenly lurches, swerving violently to the right. Scalpel braces himself against the wall while I grab Rory’s stretcher, stabilizing it instinctively.

“Hold on!” Fang shouts from the driver’s seat.

An instant later, the night erupts with the sharp crack of gunfire. The metallic ping of bullets striking the ambulance’s exterior makes my belly drop. The window on the right rear side spiders with cracks but doesn’t shatter. Scalpel ducks down, pulling a weapon from his holster in one fluid motion.

“They found us,” I hiss, looking into Rory’s suddenly terrified eyes. “But they’re not taking you again. I promise.”

The ambulance swerves again, Fang pushing it to its limits as he tries to evade our pursuers. I look at Scalpel, who jerks his head toward the front seat.

“Go,” he says, positioning himself protectively beside Rory. “I’ve got him. Do what you need to do.”

I press a quick kiss to Rory’s forehead, then turn toward the front of the ambulance. After lunging through the partition into the front cab, I brace myself against the dashboard. Fang swerves the ambulance hard to the left. The vehicle groans in

protest. It was never designed for evasive maneuvers at this speed.

Through the windshield, I see what he's trying to avoid—two black SUVs closing in fast, their sleek bodies gleaming like predatory beasts under the intermittent streetlights. Men lean from the windows, the metallic glint of their weapons catching the light before disappearing back into shadow.

“Is Rory okay?” Fang asks without taking his eyes off the road, his knuckles white against the steering wheel.

“Scalpel's with him,” I reply, throwing myself into the passenger seat. “He's stable for now.”

Another burst of gunfire peppers the side of the ambulance. I flinch instinctively, though I know the bullets can't penetrate the reinforced sides—at least not yet. If they start using something heavier than handguns, we're in trouble.

The dashboard is a Christmas tree of warning lights—engine temperature climbing into the red, transmission sending urgent signals of distress. Fang is pushing this medical tank beyond what it was ever meant to endure, and it's crying out in mechanical protest.

“They must have had a backup team waiting,” Fang mutters, yanking the wheel hard to avoid an oncoming car. Horns blare behind us as the ambulance cuts across two lanes of traffic. “Clever bastards.”

The lead SUV accelerates, pulling alongside us on the left. A man with a tattooed face leans out the window, aiming what looks like an automatic pistol at our tires. Fang sees him too and jerks the wheel, sideswiping the SUV hard enough to send the gunman tumbling back inside his vehicle.

“We can’t outrun them,” Fang says, voice tight but controlled. “Not in this thing.”

I pull my weapon out of my waistband and check to see how many bullets I have left. “Keep it steady for three seconds,” I tell him, already rolling down my window. Air rushes in, thick with humidity and the metallic tang of recent gunfire.

“Three seconds in three... two...” Fang counts down, his eyes flicking between the road ahead and the rearview mirror.

I lean out the window, bracing my left arm against the door frame to steady myself. The wind whips my hair across my face, but I ignore it, narrowing my focus to the lead SUV now gaining on our right side. Time seems to slow as my cartel training kicks in—the calculations of speed, distance, and trajectory happening automatically in my brain.

“One!” Fang shouts, momentarily straightening our course.

I squeeze the trigger twice in rapid succession. The first bullet shatters the SUV’s driver-side window, finding its mark in the driver’s shoulder. The second hits the front tire with a satisfying pop. The effect is immediate and catastrophic—the SUV lurches violently, the driver losing control as the vehicle veers sharply to the right. It hits the curb, flipping once, twice, then a third time before coming to rest on its roof, glass and metal debris spraying across the empty sidewalk.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“One down!” I shout, already swinging around to target the second SUV. But it’s hanging back now, the driver more cautious after witnessing his companion’s fate. I fire three more shots, but the distance is too great, the angle too poor.

“I need a better shot!” I yell over the wind.

Fang nods, understanding immediately. He slams on the brakes, the ambulance protesting with a screech of abused tires. The sudden deceleration sends me forward against the dashboard, but I’m ready for it, maintaining my grip on the weapon. The pursuing SUV, caught by surprise, closes the gap too quickly.

Perfect.

I take aim at the driver, now clearly visible through the windshield—a man with a shaved head and a scar bisecting his left eyebrow. I recognize him with a jolt. Mako, one of the cartel’s best hunters. He recognizes me too, his eyes widening a fraction before I squeeze the trigger.

The bullet never reaches him. The slide locks back—empty.

“Give me your gun!” I yell to Fang, ducking back inside as Mako raises his own weapon.

Without hesitation, Fang pulls a second pistol from an ankle holster and tosses it to me. I catch it with practiced ease, my fingers finding the grip naturally. In one fluid motion, I lean back out the window and fire twice. The first shot misses, but the second finds the SUV’s front tire, blowing it out with a loud bang.

Mako fights to maintain control, but physics works against him. The SUV skids sideways, leaving black streaks of rubber on the asphalt before slamming into a brick wall with bone-crushing force. The front end crumples like an accordion, steam hissing from the ruined engine block.

“Go!” I shout, pulling myself back into the ambulance.

Fang doesn’t need to be told twice. He floors the accelerator, and the ambulance lurches forward, the engine screaming in protest but responding. We speed past the wreckage, leaving the cartel vehicles behind us. In the side mirror, I see figures moving around the second SUV—survivors, but in no condition to continue the pursuit.

“You okay back there?” Fang calls through the partition.

“We’re good,” Scalpel’s voice responds, sounding surprisingly calm. “Patient’s stable. Nice driving.”

“Nice shooting,” Fang counters, glancing at me with something like awe in his expression. A grin spreads across his face—the wild, adrenaline-fueled smile of someone who’s just cheated death. “Who taught you to shoot like that?”

I return his smile, feeling the same rush of survival euphoria. “At least the cartel was good for something,” I reply, ejecting the magazine and checking the chamber. Only one bullet left. Hopefully I won’t need it.

“Remind me never to piss you off,” he says, his eyes returning to the road as he navigates toward the outskirts of the city.

I laugh, the sound surprising me with its genuine warmth. “Too late for that. You pissed me off the moment we met.”

“And yet here we are,” he says softly, the smile still playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Here we are,” I agree, glancing back through the partition where I can just make out Rory’s form on the gurney, Scalpel hovering protectively nearby.

We’ve rescued Rory, survived the cartel’s immediate pursuit, and found people willing to risk everything to help us. The road ahead is still uncertain, filled with threats I can barely imagine, but right now, in this moment, we’re alive. We’re together. And for now, that’s enough.

I reach over and briefly squeeze Fang’s arm, the touch conveying what I’m not ready to say aloud. He nods, understanding without words.

“Let’s get your brother out of Mexico,” he says, pressing the accelerator harder as we leave the city lights behind and race toward the private airport.

“I can’t wait to go home,” I say, turning to look out the window.

Home.

What a strange concept. I haven’t felt at home in over a decade. What would home even look like for me and Rory? Until now, I haven’t given it any consideration, but I need to figure it out. Rory still needs medical care, but Scalpel’s going to help us with that. I’ll have to avoid being seen until the cartel finds someone else to focus on. Beyond that, I’m free to start a new life.

Sliding a glance at Fang, I wonder how he’ll fit into this equation. I’m not sure about the details, but I do know one thing—I’m not ready to walk away from Fang... and suspect he feels the same way.

Chapter 20: Fang

The wheels of the van crunch over the gravel as I pull into the clubhouse lot, the familiar silhouette of the UVMC NOLA building rising against the twilight sky. Home. After the chaos of Mexico, the gunfire and the constant rush of adrenaline, it's good to be home.

I glance in the rearview mirror at Mina cradling her brother's head in her lap, his eyes closed but chest rising steadily. We made it. Against impossible odds, we extracted Rory from the cartel's clutches and brought him back alive. But we had to haul ass out of Mexico, so we had no choice but to leave all the medical equipment behind. We need to get him hooked up ASAP.

After I kill the engine, Vapor's van pulls in behind us. The deep-throated roar of motorcycles follows—a group of patched members met us at the airport to escort us the rest of the way. Despite the exhaustion etched into every muscle, my senses remain hyperalert, scanning the street for any threats.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“We’re here,” I announce.

“Let’s get Rory out of the van,” Scalpel says from the back.

Mina’s fingers gently brush Rory’s hair from his forehead. “Hear that? We made it.” Her voice carries a tenderness I’ve rarely heard from her. She loves her brother more than anyone. He’s very lucky she’s his sister.

Rory’s eyes flutter open, disorientation clouding them momentarily before recognition sets in. “The motorcycle club?” he asks softly.

“Your new sanctuary,” I confirm, opening my door and stepping out into the humid New Orleans evening. The air smells of rain-washed asphalt. An earlier storm blew through to clean the air, as if preparing NOLA for our return.

The clubhouse door swings open, spilling golden light across the gravel. One of the patched members pokes his head out. “Welcome back!”

Tank, Ice, Diablo, Bones, and Vapor emerge from the second van, scanning the area with practiced efficiency before nodding to me. Vapor says, “Let’s get him inside.”

Ice retrieves the wheelchair from the back of the van while Vapor pulls the door on the side open. Bones climbs halfway inside to help me and Scalpel ease Rory from the vehicle.

“Easy,” Scalpel murmurs as Rory winces, his frail body still adjusting to the extra movement. “No need to rush anything now.”

Mina hovers nearby, her hand never leaving her brother's shoulder as we transfer him to the wheelchair. Despite his weakened state, Rory's eyes are alert, taking in the clubhouse, the men in leather cuts, the motorcycles lined up with military precision along one wall. It's a whole new world to him.

I take position behind the wheelchair, hands gripping the handles with a sense of responsibility that surprises me.

“Welcome to Underground Vengeance.” I grip the handles on the wheelchair and push him toward the entrance. “Hope you don't mind a little noise.”

Rory's head turns slightly, his profile catching the light. “After that hospital? I'm immune to noise.”

The transition from outside to inside is abrupt—from the muted twilight to the controlled chaos that defines our clubhouse. The familiar scent hits me first: leather and motor oil, overlaid with a faint hint of cigarette smoke and the musk of bodies. Home in all its imperfect glory.

Vapor leads the way, carving a path through the main room where brothers not involved in the Mexico operation have gathered. They nod respectfully as we pass, eyes curious but asking no questions. They know better. The operation wasn't secret, but it wasn't common knowledge either. Although it was sanctioned by Vapor, it wasn't officially club business. The less most of them know, the better.

We pass the bar, where bottles gleam like amber treasure behind a polished wooden counter. The air here is thick with the smoky sweetness of expensive whiskey. Two prospects—club members in training—snap to attention as Vapor passes, their expressions a mix of reverence and fear. Smart kids.

As we turn down the corridor that leads to the private bedrooms, movement from the

pool table room catches my eye. The door stands partially open. Inside, a scene of raw hedonism unfolds—two patched members, still in their cuts, engaged in raunchy sex with one of the club girls. Her moans punctuate the air, uninhibited and genuine as she straddles one brother while the other takes her from behind.

Rory's eyes widen, his neck craning for a better view as we pass. A startled "Oh!" escapes him, followed immediately by a grin that transforms his gaunt face into something younger, more alive. Beside me, Mina scowls and shakes her head.

I can't help the smirk that tugs at my lips. "You're in a whole new world now," I tell Rory, not bothering to shield him from the view. After what he's been through, a little adult entertainment seems like necessary medicine. Mina's not thrilled about the club girls, but she's got nothing to worry about. After I talk to them, they'll stay away from her.

"I like this new world," Rory responds enthusiastically, color flooding his pale cheeks for the first time since we rescued him.

Mina rolls her eyes, but I catch the slight upturn of her mouth. "Eyes forward, little brother. Plenty of time for sightseeing when you're stronger."

We continue down the hallway, passing doors marked with brothers' road names—some closed, others open to reveal glimpses of private lives. A guitar riff escapes from one room, while the smell of incense wafts from another. Each space is a reflection of its occupant, each contributing to the patchwork of personalities that forms our club.

"We've set up a room for you," I explain to Rory as we approach the end of the corridor. "Medical equipment, privacy, everything you need."

"Anything you need is yours," Vapor adds from ahead of us. "Just talk to Scalpel or

Fang.”

The weight of what we’ve done—stealing a patient from a cartel hospital and bringing him into our sanctuary—settles over me with renewed intensity. They’re going to retaliate. It’s not a matter of if, it’s a matter of when. But I can’t think about that right now.

The room at the end of the hallway bears little resemblance to its former life as a brother’s crash pad. The walls have been repainted a soft blue-gray, the floor scrubbed clean and covered with hospital-grade linoleum that gleams under new recessed lighting. A hospital bed—not a second-hand relic but a proper medical-grade piece with electronic controls—dominates the center of the space. Beside it, a symphony of machines hum.

Someone has gone to extraordinary lengths to transform this space into a sanctuary of healing. I don’t know how Vapor managed to get this done while we were gone, but he did. I guess it pays to have a bunch of construction guys patched in.

As I wheel Rory through the doorway, a woman rises from where she’s been adjusting something on the dialysis machine. She’s small but looks strong, with chestnut hair pulled back in a practical braid and gentle brown eyes that immediately assess Rory with professional interest. She wears simple scrubs, navy blue with no pattern, and moves with the confidence of someone completely comfortable in a medical setting.

“You must be Rory,” she says, her voice warm but not saccharine. “I’m Alice.”

Scalpel steps around us, moving to stand beside her with a familiarity that speaks of long association. “She’s the best nurse I’ve ever worked with,” he says, the simple statement carrying weight. “She helped set all this up.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I notice the way Alice’s eyes linger on Scalpel for a fraction longer than necessary, the subtle softening around her mouth when he speaks. Interesting. I file this observation away, continuing to push Rory toward the bed.

“Alice will be your full-time nurse,” Scalpel explains. “She’s worked with me for several years in Dallas and knows how to deal with your condition.”

“Among other things,” Alice adds with a smile that reaches her eyes. “I hear you’ve had quite a journey.”

Rory returns her smile, some of the tension visibly leaving his shoulders. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Alice takes over and positions the wheelchair beside the bed while Scalpel moves to the other side, already reaching for a tray of IV equipment. The choreography of their movements suggests a long-established partnership—Scalpel gathering a few more supplies while Alice gets ready to insert a wicked-looking needle, neither needing to ask the other for assistance.

The room contains equipment I recognize from our research into Rory’s condition—a state-of-the-art dialysis machine dominating one corner, its tubes and filters meticulously arranged. Beside it stands an array of monitors for tracking vital signs. IV stands, medication pumps, and emergency equipment line one wall, while another holds cabinets stocked with supplies. A small refrigerator hums quietly, likely containing temperature-sensitive medications.

“Big poke,” Alice says to Rory, her tone professional but kind. She finishes up and

smiles at her patient. “Good job! We’ll can start your treatment immediately. Based on your last dialysis session timing, you’re well overdue for another round.”

“Thanks,” Rory says, smiling at the pretty nurse.

As Alice and Scalpel check Rory’s vitals, I catch another glance between them—her hand lingering on Scalpel’s forearm, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that transcends their professional interaction. So that’s how it is. I wonder if he’s already claimed her.

“The dialysis machine is a newer model than the one in Mexico,” Scalpel explains as he begins connecting sensors to Rory’s chest. “More efficient filtration, less strain on your system.”

“And we’ve got backup power,” I add, gesturing to the specialized circuits visible along one wall. “Generator kicks in automatically if there’s an outage. Nothing’s shutting down your treatment.”

Mina stands at the foot of the bed, her posture rigid with residual tension. Her eyes track every movement Alice makes, assessing, evaluating. I understand her trepidation—after years of trusting no one, surrendering her brother’s care to strangers must be stressful.

Alice seems to sense this, looking up to meet Mina’s gaze directly. “I know this is hard,” she says simply. “But I promise you, I’m good at what I do. And I care about doing it right.”

The straightforward statement, devoid of platitudes or false reassurance, visibly relaxes Mina’s shoulders. She nods once, a gesture of provisional trust.

Alice turns her attention to Rory. “Any pain or discomfort from the journey? Be

honest. It helps us treat you properly.”

“My left side hurts,” Rory admits. “And I’m dizzy when I sit up too fast.”

Scalpel nods, making notes on his tablet. “Expected, given the circumstances. We’ll adjust your medications accordingly.” His clinical detachment is somehow reassuring rather than cold—the certainty of expertise.

I watch as they work in tandem, Alice preparing the medication while Scalpel checks Rory’s blood pressure. Alice’s movements are precise and gentle. Mina continues to relax as she observes Alice’s work.

“You’re good at this,” Mina tells her.

“Lots of practice,” Alice responds with a small smile. “And motivation to minimize discomfort. I had a good mentor.” She glances at Scalpel again, that same flicker of something more than professional respect evident in her expression.

As the dialysis machine begins its quiet work, its digital display showing the flow of Rory’s blood through the filtration system, I notice Mina’s expression slowly transforming. The hard edges of fear and vigilance soften into something approaching relief as she watches her brother receive proper medical care, perhaps for the first time in years. Sure, the cartel kept him alive, but we don’t know anything about what they were doing. It could have been subpar care.

“Thank you,” Mina says quietly, the words directed at no one in particular and everyone at once.

Alice adjusts the flow rate on the machine, her attention never wavering from her task. “We’ll run this cycle for about four hours,” she explains. “Then you’ll need to rest. Tomorrow we’ll establish a regular schedule, depending on your labs.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Mina says immediately.

“It would be better if he could sleep,” Alice says.

“You need to get some shut-eye too,” I say, wrapping an arm around Mina’s waist.

“You’re probably right,” she says.

“Let him rest. We can check on him in the morning. Alice and Scalpel will take good care of you,” I tell Rory, who already looks more comfortable against the clean sheets than he did when we found him in that cartel hospital.

As I turn to leave, I catch Scalpel’s eye. A silent understanding passes between us—the job isn’t finished. We’ve still got to find a way to help Rory. He can’t spend his life in a hospital bed. Scalpel knows this, so he’s going to research cutting edge clinical trials to see what options we have. I hope he finds something.

My hand finds the small of Mina’s back as I guide her down the hallway toward my bedroom. My fingers register the tension in her muscles. The adrenaline crash is coming. I can feel it in my own limbs, the heaviness that follows survival, the strange emptiness when threat recedes. I unlock my door before stepping aside to let her enter.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

The door clicks shut behind us, and the sound seems to break something loose in Mina. She stands motionless for three heartbeats, then turns and throws her arms around me with unexpected force. Her body trembles against mine, face pressed into my chest, fingers digging into my back hard enough to leave marks through my shirt. I hold her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other spread across her shoulder blades, feeling each shuddering breath she takes.

“I can’t believe we’re safe,” she whispers, voice cracking on the final word. “I can’t believe he’s here.”

I stroke her hair, feeling the grit of Mexico still clinging to the strands. “You did it,” I tell her, lips against her temple. “You never gave up on him.”

She pulls back just enough to look up at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “We did it,” she corrects. “I wouldn’t have found him without you. We couldn’t have saved him without the club.”

The gratitude in her gaze makes something shift uncomfortably in my chest. I’m not used to being looked at like that—like I’m someone’s salvation rather than just the tech guy. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it. Saving people is what I do.

“I’m glad we got Rory away from the cartel,” I say. “But they’re going to be furious. What we did—stealing a high-value asset, killing their men, infiltrating their systems—they won’t let it go.”

Her hands slide up to frame my face, thumbs brushing over the stubble on my jaw. “I know,” she says with surprising calm. “I’ve been looking over my shoulder for years.

At least now I'm facing them head-on. And I have you by my side."

"You do." I smile before adding, "You should get some rest. I'm going to need your skills to help me look for ways to infiltrate their networks. We need to know their movements, their plans. We need to—"

She silences me by gently pressing her finger to my lips. "Later," she says. Her hand drops from my face to find mine, fingers intertwining with unexpected gentleness. Without a word, she tugs me toward the bathroom door, her intent clear in the curve of her smile.

"Mina," I begin, not sure what I'm going to say, only that we should talk about what comes next, about security protocols and data mining and—

"Shhh," she interrupts, walking backwards, leading me like I'm tethered to her. "For once in your life, stop thinking, Fang."

She reaches the bathroom door and pushes it open, never breaking eye contact. Releasing my hand, she reaches for the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her head in one fluid motion. The black sports bra beneath follows, leaving her torso bare, skin golden in the soft bathroom light.

My breath catches at the sight of her—the curve of her breasts, the constellation of freckles across her collarbone, the lean muscle of her abdomen. She's beautiful. And she's mine.

"Your turn," she says, hands moving to the button of her jeans.

I've never undressed so quickly in my life, fingers fumbling with buttons and zippers in a way that would be embarrassing if I had any capacity for embarrassment left. By the time I'm down to my boxers, she's completely naked, reaching into the shower to

turn on the water. Steam begins to rise almost immediately, fogging the mirror and transforming the bathroom into a cloudy chamber of possibility.

Mina steps into the shower, water sluicing over her body in rivulets that trace paths I want to follow with my fingertips, with my lips. She extends her hand to me—an invitation to ecstasy. I shed my last piece of clothing and join her under the spray.

The water is hot, almost scalding, but perfect against my skin, washing away the chill of an adrenaline crash. She tilts her head back, letting the stream wet her hair, transforming the dark strands into a liquid cape down her back. Droplets cling to her eyelashes, her lips, the curves of her breasts. I'm transfixed, frozen in appreciation until she reaches for me, pulling our bodies flush against each other.

“We're alive,” she whispers against my mouth before kissing me with an intensity that sends electricity straight down my spine.

Her lips are soft but insistent, her tongue seeking entrance that I gladly grant. My hands find her waist, skin slippery with water, pulling her closer until there's not a molecule of space between us. She makes a sound against my mouth—part sigh, part moan—that ignites something primal in my chest. I walk her backward until her shoulders meet the tile wall. She inhales sharply when her back touches the relatively cold tile.

My hands explore her body with the same methodical thoroughness I bring to code-breaking, cataloging each response, each shiver, each gasp. Her fingers tangle in my wet hair, tugging with just enough pressure to send sparks of pleasure-pain across my scalp. When I find a particularly sensitive spot at the junction of her neck and shoulder, she rewards me with a sound that reverberates through my entire body.

Steam rises around us, creating a private universe of heat and water and desire. I trace the curve of her breast with my tongue, tasting water and salt and something uniquely

Mina. Her back arches, pressing her more firmly against my mouth, her hands guiding me where she wants me. I follow her lead willingly, reverently, losing myself in the exploration of her body.

“Fang,” she gasps as my hand slides between her thighs, finding her slick and ready. “I need you.”

The raw honesty in her voice undoes me. I straighten, lifting her against the tile wall, her legs wrapping around my waist with surprising strength. Our eyes lock as I position myself, then push forward slowly into her molten heat. My eyes roll back, but I don’t start moving. Instead, I give her time to adjust to me. The sensation is overwhelming—heat and pressure and connection so intense my vision blurs at the edges.

“Yes,” she breathes, arms tightening around my shoulders, pulling me even closer.

We move together, finding a rhythm as natural as breathing. Water pounds against my back, steam swirls around our joined bodies, and the world beyond this ceases to exist. There is only this—Mina’s eyes holding mine, her body yielding and demanding in equal measure. And the sound of my name spilling from her lips.

I feel her body tightening around mine, her breath coming in shorter gasps, her nails digging crescent moons into my shoulders. I adjust my angle slightly, driving deeper, watching her face as pleasure overwhelms her. The sight of her coming apart in my arms pushes me over the edge, dissolving my thoughts and leaving only sensation in its wake.

For long moments afterward, we remain joined, foreheads pressed together, breath mingling in the steam-thickened air. The water begins to cool, but neither of us moves to adjust it. We’re too wrapped up in the afterglow of connection.

“That was...” she begins, then laughs softly, apparently unable to find a word adequate to the experience.

“Yeah,” I agree, equally eloquent in the aftermath.

I carefully lower her legs, making sure she’s steady before releasing her completely. My hands linger on her waist, unwilling to break contact entirely. In the slight chill of the cooling water, her skin pebbles with goosebumps. I reach behind her to shut off the shower.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

We dry each other with surprising tenderness, the towels soft against skin sensitized by pleasure. No words pass between us—none are needed. Later, there will be time for strategy and planning, for facing the cartel’s inevitable retaliation. For now, there is only us, and this deep, passionate connection.

Chapter 21: Mina

It’s been a week since we brought Rory to the clubhouse. Although I’m still not used to the mostly naked women running around, it’s starting to feel more and more like home. As I walk toward his room, I nod at some of the patched guys. They’ve all been extremely helpful and friendly since we returned from Mexico. Fang must have said something to them. Even the club girls go out of their way to hang out in Rory’s room to keep him company. At first, I was worried about them having ulterior motives, but Babet said she’d take care of it. She’s like the grandmother of the club, and all the girls follow her rules. From what I can tell, she has the authority to boot out any of the girls who try to cause problems. Babet doesn’t put up with anybody’s bullshit. She’s awesome. I hope I can be half as cool as her when I’m her age.

I pause in the doorway to Rory’s room. My breath catches at the sight of my brother sitting up in bed. Each day, his color improves a bit more. For the first time since our rescue mission, he looks almost like himself again—thin, yes, but now he’s got a spark in his eyes. A half-eaten bowl of oatmeal sits on the tray beside him. Getting his appetite back is another good sign.

I rap my knuckles against the doorframe. “Can I come in?”

“Look who finally decided to visit,” Rory teases as he glances at the wall clock. “It’s

been a whole three hours since you were last here.”

“Be nice or I’ll smother you with a pillow.” I grin, crossing to sit in the chair beside his bed. The leather creaks beneath me, still new and stiff. “You were half-asleep earlier.”

“I can only watch so much TV,” he grumbles.

I take his hand in mine, noting how the IV tape looks brand new, as if it was changed recently. Alice’s work, no doubt. Her nursing skills are as impressive as her ability to blend seamlessly into club life. “How are you feeling? And don’t lie to me.”

Rory shifts, the sheets rustling around his thin frame. “Better. Not great, but better.” His fingers tighten around mine. “Scalpel says my numbers are improving. Whatever that means.”

“It means your kidney function is less terrible than it was,” I clarify, allowing myself a small smile. “That’s a win.”

“Sure,” he says, then sighs dramatically. “But I’m going crazy in this bed. I’ve counted the pressed tin ceiling tiles sixteen times. There are forty-eight, in case you’re wondering.” He gestures toward the window. “I can hear motorcycles out there. People laughing. Living. Meanwhile, I’m stuck here watching reruns of shows I didn’t even like the first time around.”

I squeeze his hand. “It’s only been a few days. Your body went through hell in that cartel hospital. You need to—”

The door swings open, cutting off my lecture. Scalpel enters, his usual clinical expression replaced by something I’ve never seen on his face before—excitement. He’s holding a tablet, fingers tapping rapidly against its surface as he approaches the

bed.

“Good, you’re both here,” he says, glancing up briefly before returning to whatever has captured his attention on the screen. “I’ve been reviewing some recent medical journal publications. There’s an experimental treatment protocol that shows remarkable promise for Primary Hyperoxaluria Type 1,” he continues, turning the tablet toward us.

The screen displays a variety of medical charts—graphs with upward trajectories, molecular diagrams, statistical tables with highlighted sections. Scalpel’s finger traces a particular line of data, his nail following the path with exact precision.

“This is a gene therapy approach combined with enzyme replacement,” he explains, zooming in on a complex diagram. “Instead of managing symptoms through dialysis indefinitely, this targets the underlying genetic defect in the AGXT gene that causes your body to overproduce oxalate.”

Rory sits up straighter, his attention completely captured. “You mean it could fix me? Not just keep me alive, but actually repair what’s wrong?”

Scalpel’s expression remains measured, but something like genuine hope flickers in his eyes. “The preliminary data from the phase two trials is extraordinary. Seventy-eight percent of participants showed a dramatic reduction in urinary oxalate levels within three months. Sixty-five percent maintained normal kidney function without dialysis after six months.”

I stare at him, afraid to believe what he’s saying. “Are you telling us there’s a cure?”

“Not a guaranteed cure,” Scalpel cautions, his doctor’s restraint reasserting itself. “But potentially the most promising treatment advance for this condition in decades.”

A shadow in the doorway draws my attention. Fang leans against the frame, arms crossed over his chest, his expression alert with interest. I wonder how long he's been there, listening.

“What are the success rates in patients with advanced disease?” Fang asks, pushing off from the doorway to step inside. “Rory's been symptomatic for years.”

Leave it to Fang to ask the practical questions my hope-stunned mind hasn't formulated yet. His gaze meets mine briefly, a silent promise of support that makes my chest tighten.

Scalpel swipes to another chart. “That's what makes this particularly relevant. The trial deliberately included advanced cases.” His finger traces another line of data. “Even with significant kidney damage, forty-seven percent of patients showed partial regeneration of kidney tissue after twelve months. Not complete healing, but significant improvement.”

“What's the cost?” The question bursts from my lips. The most advanced treatment in the world won't matter if I can't afford it.

Fang moves to stand beside me, his hand coming to rest on my shoulder. The warmth of his palm seeps through my shirt, steadying me.

“Don't worry about it,” he says, his voice quiet but firm. “The club will cover the entire cost of the treatment. I'll make sure you get all the money you need.”

“I can't let you—”

“You've earned every penny of whatever his treatment costs,” Fang cuts me off, his grip on my shoulder tightening slightly. His eyes hold mine, unwavering. “Your help the last few days has been invaluable.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

He's referring to the hours I've spent hunched over keyboards with him, leveraging my cartel knowledge to strengthen the club's cybersecurity, tracking money movements that might lead to Juan Vasquez, identifying potential weak points in the cartel's communication networks. It's been a crash course in club operations, in how they protect their people.

Still, this is different. This is Rory's life.

"The club takes care of its own," Fang says simply, as if that settles everything.

And maybe it does. Maybe, after all these years of fighting alone, we're not alone anymore. The realization hits me like a physical force.

Before I can think better of it, I'm on my feet, throwing my arms around Fang's solid frame. His body tenses for a fraction of a second—surprise, not rejection—before his arms wrap around me, pulling me close. His heartbeat thuds steady and strong against my cheek, and I realize with startling clarity that I trust this man more than I've trusted anyone in years.

"Wow, get a room, you two," Rory pipes up from the bed, his voice carrying a teasing lilt. "Or at least warn a guy before you start with the PDA. I'm in a weakened state here."

Heat rushes to my face as I remember we have an audience. I start to pull away, but Fang's arms remain firm around me, one hand sliding to the small of my back in a gesture that feels both protective and possessive.

“Sorry,” I mutter, not actually sorry at all. A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep in my chest—rusty and unfamiliar after so many years of having nothing to laugh about. It feels good, this moment of lightness after so much darkness.

“Don’t apologize on my account,” Rory says, grinning. His eyes dart between Fang and me with obvious approval. “It’s about time you found someone who isn’t a complete disaster.”

“See, I’m only a partial train wreck,” Fang jokes, using his thumb to trace small circles against my back.

“You obviously like her, super gross, but at least she’s happy,” Rory says.

“You’re right,” Fang says, his deep voice vibrating through his chest where I’m still pressed against him. “I care about your sister a lot.”

The simple directness of his words steals my breath. No games, no hidden meanings, just honest acknowledgment of what’s been growing between us since we met. There’s so much I want to say, but before I can respond, Alice enters carrying a tray of fresh medical supplies.

“Time for a dressing change,” she announces cheerfully, then pauses as she takes in the scene—Fang and I still partially embraced, Rory grinning from his bed, Scalpel with his tablet of medical miracles.

Something shifts in Scalpel’s demeanor the moment Alice walks in. It’s subtle—a straightening of his already excellent posture, a slight lift of his chin, his eyes tracking her movements with an intensity that seems to transcend his usual clinical observation. His fingers tighten almost imperceptibly around the tablet he holds, knuckles whitening just enough for me to notice.

Alice's eyes meet his briefly as she sets down her tray. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture that seems casual but carries weight when Scalpel's gaze follows the movement with laser focus.

I watch this wordless exchange with fascination. Are they together? There's certainly something there—a current of awareness that makes the air between them seem charged with kinetic energy. But there's restraint too, as if they're holding themselves carefully in check. I make a mental note to ask Alice about it later, when we're alone. She's been friendly to me since we first met last week, offering quiet support while we waited for Rory to stabilize.

“Back to what we were discussing earlier,” Fang steps slightly away from me but keeps one hand at the small of my back, “the club will foot the bill on the treatment, but it's ultimately Rory's decision to undertake it.”

Rory's expression sobers as he processes Fang's words. “What are the risks?” he asks, looking at Scalpel. “I'm guessing experimental treatments come with a few.”

Scalpel nods, his focus returning fully to the medical discussion. “The main risks are immune rejection of the gene therapy vector and potential liver stress from the enzyme components. There's also the standard risks of any medical procedure—infection, adverse drug reactions.” He pauses, then adds, “But the benefit-to-risk ratio is exceptional for a condition with so few treatment options.”

Alice moves to Rory's side, beginning to check his IV site with gentle efficiency. “From what I've read of the protocol, the monitoring is intensive,” she adds. “Any adverse reactions would be caught early and addressed.”

Rory watches her hands as she works, then looks up at me. His eyes—so like mine—hold a determination I recognize from our childhood, from all the times he faced painful procedures with so much courage it humbled me.

“How long have I been sick?” he asks rhetorically. “Ten years? Almost eleven? I’ve spent most of my existence hooked up to machines, watching life pass me by.” He shifts, sitting up straighter against his pillows. “I’m sick of being stuck in a hospital bed. I want to try the treatment.”

The certainty in his voice sends a wave of both pride and fear through me. This is my little brother, facing the unknown with more bravery than I could ever muster.

“Are you sure?” I ask, needing to hear it again.

His jaw sets in that stubborn way I know too well. “I’m sure. If there’s even a chance I could get off dialysis, live something close to a normal life—” he glances around the room, at the machines that has defined his existence for too long, “—then it’s worth the risk.”

I look to Fang, who nods slightly, his expression telling me he understands both my hope and my fear. Then to Scalpel, whose clinical gaze holds rare warmth as he regards my brother’s conviction. Finally to Alice, whose gentle smile offers reassurance born of medical knowledge.

For the first time in years, I allow myself to imagine a future where Rory isn’t defined by his illness—where both of us are free from the chains that have bound us for so long.

“Well, that settles it.” Scalpel nods and tucks the tablet under his arm. “I’ll make the arrangements. The treatment protocol is administered at a specialized research facility in Baltimore. They’ve been pioneering this approach for the past three years.” His fingers tap against the tablet’s edge, the only outward sign of his barely contained excitement.

“Baltimore?” I repeat, mentally calculating the distance. “That’s what, a thousand

miles from here?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Just under,” Scalpel confirms. “But it’s only a two and a half hour flight. This hospital is partnering with the biotech company that developed the therapy. They have the specialized equipment and expertise necessary for this particular protocol.” He glances at Rory. “I’ve already reached out to a colleague there. Given your case history and current status, I believe they’ll accept you into the program immediately.”

The thought of Rory being so far away sends a spike of anxiety through me. After weeks of not knowing where he was, of fighting to get him back, the idea of separation—even for legitimate medical reasons—makes my stomach clench.

“Can I go with him?” I ask, trying to keep the desperation from my voice. “I could stay nearby, be there for his treatments.”

Scalpel’s expression softens slightly, the doctor momentarily giving way to the man. “You can certainly visit,” he says carefully. “But the treatment process is intensive. The initial gene therapy administration requires isolation protocols to prevent infection while his immune system is compromised. After that, there’s a series of enzyme treatments, physiotherapy, and constant monitoring.” He glances between Rory and me. “He’ll need a lot of time to heal and recover.”

I hear what he’s not saying—that hovering anxiously at my brother’s bedside won’t help either of us.

Rory reaches for my hand, his fingers wrapping around mine with surprising strength. “Don’t worry,” he says, his eyes holding mine steadily. “I’m ready for whatever the doctors want to do to me.” A soft smile spreads across his face. “Besides, isn’t this what we’ve been hoping for? A real chance at being normal?”

I swallow hard against the tightness in my throat. “When did you get so brave?” I ask, my voice wavering despite my efforts to keep it steady. “My little brother, facing experimental gene therapy like it’s just another day.”

“It’s not bravery when you don’t have other options,” he counters, but the squeeze of his hand contradicts his dismissal. “You’re the one who broke me out of a cartel hospital in Mexico. That’s brave.”

My eyes burn with unexpected tears. After everything—the years of sacrifice, the deals with devils, the desperate rescue mission—here we are, finally facing a future with actual hope in it. The enormity of it hits me all at once, threatening to crack the careful control I’ve maintained. Tears well in my eyes, threatening to spill. I blink rapidly to try to stop them.

“It’s in our blood,” Rory continues, his voice gentle. “You’re just as brave as I am. Always have been. Taking care of me since we were kids, standing up to the cartel, finding these people who actually give a damn about us.” His gaze flickers to Fang, then back to me. “We Bishops don’t break easily.”

The tears spill over before I can stop them. I lean forward, carefully wrapping my arms around my brother, mindful of the IV lines and monitoring equipment connected to him. His body feels frail against mine, but his embrace is surprisingly strong.

“I’m going to get better,” he whispers against my hair. “And then we’re both going to figure out what normal people do with their lives. No cartels, no dialysis machines.” He pulls back slightly to look at me, his smile crooked but genuine. “Maybe I’ll learn to ride a motorcycle.”

I laugh through my tears, the sound watery but real. “One miracle at a time, okay?” I brush his hair back from his forehead, an old gesture from our childhood. “You rest.

Scalpel, Alice, Fang, and I will take care of the arrangements.”

Rory settles back against his pillows, fatigue evident in the slight droop of his eyelids. “Go,” he says, making a shooping motion with his hand. “Plot my miraculous recovery. I’ll be here, counting ceiling tiles.”

I stand, wiping away the last of my tears with the back of my hand. Fang moves to my side, his presence solid and reassuring. Alice is already adjusting Rory’s IV, while Scalpel makes notes on his tablet, probably already coordinating with his Baltimore colleagues.

The ping of an alert cuts through the air. Fang pulls his phone from his pocket, glancing at the screen. His entire demeanor transforms in an instant—shoulders squaring, jaw tightening, eyes sharpening with sudden focus.

“We got a hit on Juan Vasquez,” he says, voice low and urgent as he looks at me.

The name sends electricity through my system, pushing aside the overflow of emotion moments before. Juan Vasquez—the New Orleans cartel leader who disappeared after Ice shot him. He’s responsible for countless deaths, and he’s the shadow that’s been hanging over the club since he disappeared a few months ago.

“I’ll see you later,” I promise Rory, already moving toward the door. He nods, understanding in his eyes—he knows better than anyone what the cartel has taken from us, what finishing this fight means.

I follow Fang into the hallway, our footsteps quickening with purpose as we head toward his office. The transition is jarring—from the tender hope of medical miracles to the dangerous pursuit of cartel justice—but it’s a duality I’m learning to navigate. Two missions, equally important: Rory’s healing and the cartel’s downfall.

As we walk, Fang's hand brushes mine, a brief point of contact that grounds me in this new reality. Whatever comes next, I'm not facing it alone. Fang and I are a team now, a small subset of a larger group, all working together to end the cartel's violent reign of terror in New Orleans. If Juan Vasquez is still alive, it's our job to feed him to the gators. I hope I get to help toss him into the swamp.

Chapter 22: Fang

My office isn't my office anymore. It's ours. Mina's presence has transformed the once-spartan space into something different—still functional, still centered around technology, but now bearing subtle traces of her. Her desk is right next to mine, but unlike mine, hers is cluttered with trinkets: A coffee mug with chipped enamel that she refuses to replace, a small potted succulent that somehow survives despite the lack of natural light, and a bunch of silly plastic dolls that look half-demonic. I'm still not entirely convinced those things don't come alive at night. Bones assures me they're not voodoo dolls, but there's all kinds of weird shit in this world.

Monitors cover the rest of her desk, along with her laptop, which is sleeker and more elegant than my clunky custom build. At some point I need to do another upgrade to my system. Not gonna lie, I'm envious of her setup. She asked Vapor if she could order some tech stuff. He gave her a credit card and told her to get whatever she needed. And boy, did she.

We sit in synchronized silence. The only sounds are our keyboards clicking and the low hum of cooling fans as we hunt through digital landscapes for the man who nearly destroyed both our lives.

“Too bad that alert turned out to be another dead end earlier,” Mina mutters, pushing back from her desk with a frustrated sigh. Her fingers rake through her hair, leaving it charmingly disheveled. “Juan's financial trails are still cold. Nothing's moved through his known accounts since he went missing.”

I nod, eyes still fixed on my center monitor where lines of code scroll past, each one a digital tripwire I've set across the dark web. "If he's alive, he's gone old-school. Cash only, probably. Smart move, but limiting. Eventually he'll pop back up, or we'll find proof he's dead. The fact that no one has taken over the NOLA cartel makes me think he's alive and in hiding."

"Agreed," she says.

After rescuing Rory, we've spent every spare moment building a digital net to catch Juan Vasquez. My algorithms crawl through surveillance footage from traffic cameras, ATMs, and security systems across three states. My data scrapers monitor every mention of his name or known aliases on messaging platforms. Mina's intimate knowledge of cartel communication patterns has helped me refine the searches, narrowing parameters to filter out false positives.

My phone pings with a distinctive tone—not a text or call, but an alert from one of my most sophisticated detection systems. Both of us freeze, then our eyes meet. That particular sound means something big.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Which one?” Mina asks, already moving to look over my shoulder.

“Facial recognition,” I reply, fingers flying across the keyboard to pull up the alert.

“Houston grid, southeast quadrant.”

The algorithm I designed searches through publicly accessible security cameras, analyzing faces against a database of known cartel members. It’s a processor-intensive operation that often yields nothing but ghosts and shadows. But this time—this is different.

“Got you,” I whisper as the images populate my screen.

The match is unmistakable—Juan Vasquez, captured on a gas station security camera three days ago. He looks different than his file photos—thinner, with a beard and glasses—but the recognition software assigns a 97.8% probability match based on facial structure. More importantly, it’s tracked his vehicle to a compound thirty miles outside Houston city limits.

“That’s not just a sighting,” Mina says, her voice tight with restrained excitement.

“That’s a location.”

I’m already pulling up satellite imagery, the resolution grainy but sufficient to reveal a sprawling property surrounded by a high wall. Multiple buildings, a few vehicles. Isolated enough to be defensible, close enough to civilization for convenience.

“That’s not all,” I tell her, switching to another screen where a different algorithm has been quietly compiling data. “Look at the power usage patterns for that address.”

“I know that place. I’ve been there. Call Vapor,” Mina says, her hand squeezing my shoulder. “This is it.”

I reach for my secure phone and punch in Vapor’s number. He answers on the second ring.

“This better be good,” he growls, the background noise suggesting he’s at the main bar inside the clubhouse.

“It’s better than good,” I reply. “We found him.”

Four minutes later, Vapor pushes through the office door, his presence instantly filling the small room. His eyes are sharp and alert, despite the late hour and the faint smell of whiskey that accompanies him.

“Show me,” he says without preamble.

I gesture to the largest monitor where I’ve assembled the evidence: the facial recognition match, the satellite imagery now enhanced and time-stamped, the suspicious power and communication patterns.

“He’s at a compound outside Houston,” I explain, unable to keep the excitement from my voice. “Heavily secured, but isolated. Mina’s been there. I’ve identified guard rotation patterns from thermal imaging. Apparently, we’re not the only ones interested in this place. Got satellite data from the Feds. They’ve been watching the place for months.” I pull up another window showing heat signatures moving in predictable patterns around the perimeter. “We ran through the last few weeks. Looks like eight-hour shifts, four guards per rotation. Mina says it’s standard cartel protocol.”

“It is,” she confirms.

Vapor leans closer, his expression intensifying as he absorbs the information. “Security systems?”

“Top of the line,” I reply, bringing up schematics I’ve pieced together from various sources. “Motion sensors, infrared cameras. But—” I allow myself a small smile, “—they’re all networked. Networked means hackable.”

“You’ve been there?” Vapor asks, turning his attention to Mina.

She nods, her eyes never leaving the screen. “Three years ago. It’s one of the cartel’s secure locations, used for high-level meetings and housing valuable assets.” Her finger circles a building at the compound’s center. “This is the main house. Juan would be here, probably in the master suite on the second floor, northwest corner. Best vantage point of the grounds.”

I watch her face as she studies the image, noting the slight tightening around her eyes—whatever memories this place holds aren’t pleasant ones.

“Security blind spots?” Vapor asks.

Mina’s finger moves to the eastern wall. “Here. The terrain creates a shadow zone for the motion sensors. And there’s an access road for deliveries on the south side—less monitored than the main entrance.”

I’m already adding her insights to my notes, updating the digital model of the compound that’s taking shape on my screens. “If I can access their network, I can create temporary blind spots in the camera coverage, maybe even trigger false alarms to direct attention away from our entry point.”

Vapor straightens, his decision already made. “How soon can you have a complete tactical assessment?”

“Two hours,” I say confidently. “I’ve got programs running to compile detailed schematics of their security setup, and I’m pulling architectural records for the buildings.”

“Take three. Get as many details as you can,” Vapor replies, checking his watch. “I’m calling Church. Main conference room.” He looks between Mina and me, his expression grave. “If this pans out, we move tomorrow night. No more waiting. No more hunting shadows.”

Mina’s hand finds mine under the desk, her fingers intertwining with mine in a grip that’s almost painful in its intensity. This is what we’ve been working toward since our return from Mexico. We’ve come so close to capturing or killing him before. Now we’ve got another shot at it.

“Three hours,” I confirm, already turning back to my screens, my mind racing through protocols and programs, plotting digital pathways into Juan Vasquez’s sanctuary.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

As Vapor leaves to assemble the team, Mina leans close, her breath warm against my ear. “We’re going to get him,” she whispers, her voice a blend of vengeance and vindication.

I nod, fingers already flying across the keyboard. Juan Vasquez has been a ghost for months, but ghosts leave traces. Digital breadcrumbs. And I’ve been collecting them, patiently, methodically, building toward this moment. The hunt is over, now it’s time to get him.

The clubhouse conference room has undergone a metamorphosis since the last time Vapor called Church. Gone are the casual trappings of brotherhood meetings—the ashtrays, the scattered beer bottles, the relaxed atmosphere. In their place, a ruthless efficiency has emerged. Maps I printed a few minutes ago cover the massive oak table, weighted down by tactical gear and weapons. Three laptops connect to a projector system, throwing high-definition images of the Houston compound across the wall. The air tastes different too—charged with purpose and the metallic tang of gun oil as brothers check and clean their weapons with practiced hands.

Vapor stands at the head of the table, his presence commanding attention without effort. Ice flanks him on the right, his silver-blue eyes cataloging every detail of the projected schematics. Bones occupies the space to Vapor’s left, his massive frame hunched forward as he studies the compound layout, muttering calculations under his breath. Diablo and Tank arrive together, their expressions shifting from casual to focused as they cross the threshold and sense the room’s energy.

“Sit,” Vapor says, gesturing to the empty chairs. “Fang’s got something.”

I step forward, connecting my tablet to the main display. The satellite imagery of the compound blooms across the wall, now annotated with security details and access points.

“Juan Vasquez,” I begin, enlarging a grainy but unmistakable image of our target.

“No shit?” Tank asks.

“No shit. He’s currently holed up at a cartel safe house thirty miles outside Houston. Compound is approximately six acres, surrounded by an eight-foot wall with motion sensors and infrared cameras.” My fingers swipe through images, zooming in on key features. “Main house here, two guard stations here and here, vehicle depot on the north side.”

Ice leans forward, eyes narrowing. “Entry points?”

“Three,” I reply, highlighting them on the schematic. “Main gate is heavily monitored. Service entrance on the south side always has lighter security but still has two guards. There’s also a maintenance access point for the electrical systems here—” I tap the southeast corner. “Potential blind spot if we time it right.”

Mina steps up beside me, her presence sending a current of awareness through my body. She points to specific areas of the compound with the confidence of someone who’s walked those grounds.

“Guard rotations happen every eight hours,” she explains, her voice steady. “Three shifts—6 am, 2 pm, 10 pm. The fifteen minutes during shift change is when they’re most vulnerable.” Her finger traces the perimeter fence. “They have four external guards plus two on the main house at all times. They’re armed with H&K submachine guns and sidearms. They’re trained to shoot first, no questions.”

Diablo cracks his knuckles, the sound unnervingly loud in the focused quiet. “How many total we looking at?”

“Based on thermal signatures and vehicle count,” I answer, pulling up another screen, “between twelve and sixteen cartel members on-site plus Vasquez and a small contingent of personal security and support staff.”

“Extraction routes?” Bones asks, already tracing potential paths with his thick index finger.

I toggle to a different view showing the surrounding area. “Two viable options. Main road here, but it’s the most obvious. There’s a service road that connects to a county highway here, less traveled, so a better option overall.”

The planning continues. Tank offers an option while Ice questions response times from nearby cartel affiliates. Eventually, Diablo outlines weapon requirements. Throughout, Mina contributes crucial details that only someone with insiderknowledge could provide, including the likely location of panic buttons.

“We need to try to take Vasquez alive,” Vapor states, his voice cutting through a debate about explosive charges. “I want that clear to everyone. He’s worth more to us with a pulse.”

Ice raises an eyebrow. “That’s not our usual approach. That’s my old lady’s brother. I don’t know how she’ll feel about this.”

“I realize it’s more personal for you, but he has information we need,” Vapor explains, his gaze sweeping the room. “Details about their Mexico to US trafficking operations, about their supply chains, about the higher-ups still in Mexico. We need what’s in his head more than we need him dead. Ultimately, he’s the highest target we’ve gone after so far, and so he will have access to information other people in the

cartel won't have. We don't just want to end the local operation; we want to go after the head of the cartel in Mexico."

I nod, understanding the strategic value. "I've analyzed the compound's electronic security. It's sophisticated but has vulnerabilities—particularly in how their camera system interfaces with their alarm protocols." I bring up a schematic of the security system.

"Can you bring down all the cameras at once?"

"No. There's a security measure that prevents me from doing that. But I can create sequential blind spots, disabling cameras and alarms at precisely timed intervals. It won't give us long—maybe two-minute windows before their fail-safes kick in. It's enough if we coordinate correctly."

"We'll need two teams," Vapor decides, looking around the table. "Fang leads the technical assault—disabling security, providing real-time intelligence. Diablo and Tank can watch your back. I'll head the tactical team with Ice and Bones."

Mina's head snaps up. "What about me? Where do I fit in the plan?"

A moment of silence falls over the room. I've been dreading this moment since we discovered Vasquez's location. I take a breath, meeting her eyes directly.

"You stay here," I say, keeping my voice even despite knowing the storm that's coming. "With Rory."

Her expression shifts from confusion to disbelief to anger in the span of three seconds. "That's not happening," she says flatly. "I know that compound. I've been inside. You need me."

“Which is why you’ve been crucial to the planning,” I counter, trying to sound reasonable rather than protective. “But Rory needs you here. He’s flying to Maryland in two days. Do you really want to miss that?”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“No, but we’re talking about Juan Vasquez,” she argues, her voice rising slightly. “The man who kept my brother from me. The man who put us on the cartel’s top ten hit list. He’s hunting both of us. I deserve to be there when you take him down.”

I step closer to her, lowering my voice. “That’s exactly why you can’t come. He wants you, Mina. This could be another trap. I’m not risking you walking right into his hands.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” she says, eyes flashing dangerously.

“It’s mine,” Vapor interjects, his tone brooking no argument. “And Fang’s right. Rory needs you here. More importantly, we need a fallback. If something goes wrong, if we don’t come back, someone needs to finish what we started.”

Her shoulders slump almost imperceptibly as the fight drains from her.

“Fine,” she concedes, though her eyes still burn with frustration. “But you better bring that bastard back alive so I can look him in the eyes before you throw his lifeless body into the swamp.”

“Good idea,” Diablo says, grinning. “Gator chow.”

“Make sure he’s dead this time,” Tank says.

“Triple tap him,” Ice agrees.

Vapor nods once. “Wheels up in an hour. It’s going to take us at least five hours to

get there and we need time to regroup once we arrive.” He dismisses the team, each brother moving with purpose toward their preparations.

As the room empties, Mina grabs my wrist. Her grip is tight enough to leave marks.

“You come back to me,” she says fiercely. “You understand? I didn’t find you just to lose you to Juan Vasquez.”

The raw emotion in her voice catches me off guard. We haven’t put labels on what’s growing between us—haven’t had time amid the chaos of Rory’s recovery and the hunt for Juan. But her words make my chest tighten with something that feels dangerously like love. I’ve never felt anything like this before, but somehow, I know. I’ve fallen for this woman. There’s no doubt about it.

I touch her face, thumb tracing the curve of her cheekbone. “I’ll come back,” I promise. “With Juan in cuffs and every piece of intel we need to burn his organization to the ground.”

She kisses me then, hard and desperate, her fingers tangling in my hair. I moan against her lips, wishing I had the time to take her to bed again so I could show her how much I love her. It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I hold back. Until Vasquez is in the Quiet Room, we’ve got too much to lose. If I tell her now and something happens to me, it will be harder for her to move on. It’s better if I wait.

When we separate, her eyes are glistening with unshed tears. “I’ll be monitoring everything from our office. Don’t you dare go dark on me.”

I nod, already mentally shifting into operational mode, compartmentalizing emotions to focus on the task ahead. My head needs to be in the game one hundred percent. I can’t be thinking about her or Rory or about what we could lose. Focusing on getting Vasquez is the only thing I can care about right now.

Chapter 23: Fang

The night presses close around us as we approach the compound. Stars are smothered by heavy cloud cover, and a new moon offers no illumination—perfect conditions for our operation. I’m wedged in the back of our tactical van, surrounded by screens casting an eerie blue glow across my face, the only light for miles besides the distant yellow squares of the compound windows.

My laptop hums with purpose, establishing connections to the compound’s security network through vulnerabilities I identified earlier. It’s delicate work, requiring concentration that’s hard to maintain as the van jostles over uneven terrain, but I’ve operated under worse conditions. My fingers fly across the keyboard, each keystroke bringing us closer to capturing Vasquez.

“Two minutes to position,” Vapor murmurs through our encrypted comm system. His voice sounds different through the earpiece—stripped of its natural resonance.

I nod though no one’s watching me, focused on breaching the compound’s firewall. Their security is good, but not impenetrable. I’ve been probing their system for hours, mapping architecture, identifying weaknesses. Now I’m exploiting a vulnerability in their remote access protocols, sliding into their network through a maintenance backdoor they never properly secured.

“I’m in,” I report, satisfaction warming my voice as the security dashboard populates my main screen. Camera feeds from around the compound appear in a grid, showing guards moving in predictable patterns. “Accessing camera controls now. East perimeter will go dark in thirty seconds.”

Due to an unexpected network isolation protocol, I need to physically access the network to bypass it—meaning I need to be inside. Not ideal, but adaptable. The portable kit strapped to my chest contains everything I need: specialized tools, a

tablet with a dedicated connection with my main system in the van, and enough processing power to override local security measures once I reach the central hub.

The van slows to a stop a quarter-mile from the compound's east wall—close enough for strong signal transmission, far enough to remain undetected. Ice kills the engine, plunging us into silence broken only by the soft whirring of my laptop's cooling fans.

“East cameras disabled,” I announce, watching the feed go black on my screen. “You have a two-minute window before their failsafe protocols kick in.”

Vapor's voice is calm, measured: “Move out.”

We exit the van in practiced formation—Vapor leading, followed by Ice and Bones, with Tank and Diablo taking up rear positions. I'm sandwiched in the middle, protected on all sides. Night vision goggles transform the darkness into shades of green, giving the landscape an alien quality.

We move in silence across open ground, then through a stand of scrub pine that provides additional cover. The compound wall looms ahead, eight feet of concrete topped with security sensors that I've temporarily blinded. Bones cups his hands to boost Ice up. Ice reaches the top, confirms the all-clear, then extends a hand to help pull the rest of us up in sequence. Despite his size, Bones scales the wall with surprising grace.

Once inside the perimeter, we split as planned. Tank and Diablo peel off to secure our exit route and eliminate perimeter guards. Vapor, Ice, Bones, and I continue toward the main house where Vasquez should be sleeping, unaware that his sanctuary has been compromised.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Central control system is in the security office,” I whisper, pointing to a small building adjacent to the main house. “I need five minutes there to take full control of their security grid.”

Vapor nods, signaling Ice to take point. We advance in a tight diamond formation, using shadows for cover. My heart pounds against my ribs, adrenaline heightening every sense. This isn't my usual role—I'm typically behind screens, not boots on the ground—but there's a visceral thrill to field operations that's impossible to replicate in the digital realm.

A guard appears around a corner, his rifle silhouetted against a security light. Before he can react, Ice is on him—a swift, silent takedown that ends with the guard unconscious, gagged, and zip-tied. We continue without breaking stride, approaching the security office from its blind side.

The door requires keycard access, but I've prepared for this. My tablet interfaces with the electronic lock, running through encryption sequences until the light blinks green. Inside, a single guard whirls toward us. Bones handles him, tackling him to the ground before wrapping one massive arm around his throat, cutting off blood flow until consciousness fades. No alarm, no gunfire, just the soft thud of a body being lowered to the floor.

“Security hub,” I announce, moving immediately to the central control station. My fingers dance across the keyboard, bypassing local security to access the compound's core systems. “Sixty seconds.”

The others secure the room, checking sight lines and establishing defensive positions.

I barely notice, lost in the intricacy of dismantling security protocols one by one. Cameras freeze for a split second before looping old footage, the door locks disengage, and alarm systems enter maintenance mode—all without triggering alerts that would warn the remaining guards.

“Full system access achieved,” I report, allowing myself a brief smile of satisfaction. “All internal cameras disabled. Electronic locks throughout the compound are under our control.”

Vapor claps my shoulder once, a gesture of approval. “Main house next. Lead us in.”

With the security system compromised, we move more boldly across the compound, no longer constrained by camera coverage. Two more guards fall to silent takedowns before we reach the main house’s rear entrance. I confirm the lock is disengaged before pulling the heavy door open to reveal a darkened kitchen.

Inside, the house is quiet—too quiet. The silence triggers a warning in my mind, a subtle wrongness that doesn’t align with our intelligence. There should be movement, signs of habitation. Instead, there’s a stillness that feels intentional.

“Second floor, northwest corner,” I remind the team, pushing the unease aside. “Vasquez’s quarters should be there.”

We ascend the stairs, checking corners and doorways as we go. The hallway stretches before us, doors on either side leading to darkened rooms. At the end, a heavy wooden door marks what should be the master suite—Juan Vasquez’s personal quarters.

Vapor takes position beside the door with Ice on the other side. Bones and I hang back, providing coverage. A nod from Vapor, and Ice tests the handle. As expected, it’s unlocked. Another nod, and they burst through the door in perfect coordination,

weapons raised.

There's no one in the room. One wall hosts a bed with rumpled sheets. On another wall, there's a dresser with drawers partially open and a desk with nothing on its surface. The scene has the unmistakable feel of a hasty departure—or a setup.

And then I hear it. A faint, rhythmic beeping coming from the dresser. So subtle it's almost lost beneath the sound of our breathing, but unmistakable to ears trained to recognize electronic signatures.

“Hold,” I say, raising a hand as Ice moves to check the closet. “Something's wrong.”

I approach the dresser cautiously, the beeping growing slightly louder. With careful movements, I pull the top drawer open wider.

My blood turns to ice. Nestled among discarded clothing is a matte black box. No logos. No wires. Just a smooth little box, maybe the size of an old-school router. But I've been in enough shady backchannels and darknet forums to know what this is.

It continues ticking, but I doubt it's on a timer since they had no way of knowing when we'd arrive. Still, I grab a static strap from my rig before I touch the latch. Just in case. Then I pry the casing open.

Inside, it's beautiful—and horrifying. The internal layout is surgical. Two thin-layered slabs of white PETN and RDX sandwiched between copper discs, probably etched to shape the blast. The core's shaped like a cone, narrow and deadly. Whoever built this didn't just want a boom—they wanted direction, collapse, fire. The whole house will explode. No timer, but it has an antenna—this one's old-school. Someone local will have to detonate it.

“It's a trap,” I breathe, the realization blooming into full-blown alarm as I process

what I'm seeing. "The whole place is rigged to blow!"

"Pull back! Get out now!" Vapor yells into the comms.

Chaos erupts as we scramble toward the exit. Vapor is shouting into his comm, ordering Tank and Diablo to fall back to the extraction point. Ice and Bones are already at the stairs, taking them three at a time. I'm right behind them, focused solely on reaching the exit.

I'm almost at the open door, right on Vapor and Ice's heels when the world turns white. A wave of heat and pressure lifts me off my feet and hurls me through the door like a rag doll. For one sharp, impossible second, I'm airborne, thrown forward by the blast wave. My last conscious thought is of Mina waiting at the clubhouse, of the promise I made to return to her.

Then darkness swallows everything.

Chapter 24: Mina

The early evening air hangs heavy around me as I pace the gravel driveway, my boots kicking up small clouds of dust with each turn. Every few seconds, my eyes dart to the road leading to the clubhouse, searching for headlights, for any sign of the van bringing Fang and the others back from Texas.

My stomach twists itself into knots that tighten with each passing minute. It's been twenty-four hours since I received Vapor's cryptic message: "Mission compromised. Team extracting. Will update when secure." Hours of imagining worst-case scenarios, of picturing Fang bleeding out on Texas soil, of wondering if I'll ever see him alive again.

The sun bleeds orange and purple across the horizon, casting long shadows across the

clubhouse yard. Cicadas begin their nightly chorus, the sound normally soothing but now just white noise beneath the roar of anxiety in my head. I check my phone for the hundredth time—no new messages, no missed calls. Just the wallpaper of Rory smiling from his hospital bed, blissfully unaware in Baltimore that the man who helped save him might be—

I can't finish the thought.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“They’ll be back soon, cher.” Babet’s voice startles me from behind. She approaches in a swirl of bright fabric, her muumuu a riot of tropical flowers against the gathering darkness. Despite the late hour, her white hair still stands in perfectly gelled spikes, defying gravity and age alike. “You’re gonna wear a trench in the driveway if you keep pacing.”

“I can’t just sit inside and wait,” I confess, hands fidgeting at my sides. “Rory called from Baltimore earlier. He’s settling in fine, his doctors are optimistic, but all I could think was ‘What if I have to tell him Fang didn’t make it?’”

Babet steps closer, her weathered hand finding my shoulder with surprising strength. “That boy’s gonna make it back to you. They all will.” Her voice carries the weight of someone who’s seen bikers leave and return countless times, who understands the rhythm of club life in a way I’m still learning. “Underground Vengeance takes care of their own, no matter what. You and your brother are part of that now. Even if something happened, you’re still a part of our family.”

“Oh, Babet...” My throat tightens. “Even after all the trouble I’ve caused? The cartel coming after us, Rory needing so much help...”

“Especially because of that,” Babet says firmly. She guides me to a bench near the clubhouse entrance, settling beside me with a soft grunt. “This club was built on helping people who need it. That’s what makes them different from most MCs.” Her eyes sharp. “You’re good for Fang, you know. Never seen that boy light up the way he does around you.”

I look down at my hands, suddenly unable to meet her gaze. “I didn’t tell him,” I

whisper, the admission painful in my chest. “Before he left, I didn’t tell him how I feel. And now if something happened—”

“Nothing happened that those boys can’t handle,” Babet interrupts, patting my knee. “Vapor wouldn’t let it.”

“How can you be so sure? All we know is they’re alive. Vapor wouldn’t tell me anything else over the phone.” The frustration spills out in my voice. “Just that they were coming back and to keep Rory’s security tight during his flight to Baltimore. Vapor didn’t say anything about how badly they’re hurt, or about what happened with Juan, nothing.”

Babet nods sagely. “Smart man. Phones can be tapped, messages intercepted. The less said, the less the cartel knows about what went down after their bomb.”

My head snaps up. “You know about the bomb?”

“Tank called Vicki, his woman, last night. Told her enough to keep her from freaking out. Apparently, the place was rigged to explode. They got out, but not without some damage.” Her face remains neutral, giving nothing away about the extent of their injuries.

I process this, trying to keep my imagination from conjuring images of Fang caught in the blast. “Why wouldn’t Vapor just tell me that?”

“Club protocol. Protection through ignorance. Sometimes it’s for the best.” She gives my hand a squeeze.

We lapse into silence as darkness fully claims the sky. Moths flutter around the security lights that illuminate the yard, casting bizarre, dancing shadows across the gravel. In the distance, a lone motorcycle engine growls then fades, just another night

sound in a world that keeps turning despite my personal purgatory.

“When did you know?” I ask suddenly. “With your husband, I mean. When did you know it was real?”

A distant rumble breaks the moment—the unmistakable sound of an engine approaching. I’m on my feet before I realize I’ve moved, my entire body alert. Babet rises more slowly, her hand finding my arm.

“See? Told you they’d be back,” she says.

Headlights pull up to the gate. One of the brothers checks it then opens the gate. I force myself to breathe, to remain still as the van pulls into the yard, gravel crunching beneath its tires. The engine cuts off, plunging the compound into relative silence.

The driver’s door opens first. Vapor emerges, his movements stiff but determined. Even in the dim light, I can see the bruises darkening his face, and the way he favors his left side. His eyes find mine immediately. He gives me a quick nod of acknowledgement.

Then the side door slides open, and my heart stops.

Fang sits just inside, his face illuminated by the interior light. Purple-black bruises mottle his left cheek and eye, a nasty gash runs along his hairline, and his lip’s swollen. His right arm is held protectively against his ribs, and when he attempts to stand, he winces visibly.

But he’s alive.

My feet move of their own accord, carrying me across the gravel at a run. I reach him just as he manages to stand, throwing my arms around him with enough force to

make him stagger back against the van. He groans in pain, but his left arm wraps around me immediately, pulling me close despite his injuries.

“Easy,” he murmurs into my hair, his breath warm against my ear. “I’m still in one piece, but barely.”

I pull back just enough to examine his face, my fingers hovering over his injuries, afraid to touch and cause more pain. “What happened? How bad is it?”

He attempts a smile, though it clearly hurts. “I’m okay. I just look and feel like shit, but I’ll recover in a few days.” His eyes hold mine, conveying what words can’t—that despite everything, he’s genuinely alright, that we’ve been granted more time together.

Behind us, Babet claps her hands, her voice carrying across the yard. “Welcome home, boys! I’ve got a feast waiting in the kitchen—gumbo, cornbread, everything to put some strength back in you.”

The other men emerge from the van, each bearing their own collection of cuts and bruises. Ice with a bandage around his forearm, Tank limping slightly, Diablo with his right hand wrapped in gauze. Scalpel gets out last, carrying a first aid kit. They nod in Babet’s direction, gratitude evident in their tired faces.

“Thank you, Babet,” Fang says, his voice rough with fatigue. “But I think I need to lie down before I can appreciate your cooking properly.”

“No. I want everyone to report to the medical room to get X-rays before you lay down,” Scalpel says sternly.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Everyone check-in with Scalpel, then you can rest,” Vapor barks.

A couple of guys grumble about being hungry.

Babet waves a hand. “Food’ll keep. You boys get X-rayed, then get some rest.” Her sharp eyes assess his condition, maternal concern evident in her furrowed brow. “Need help getting him inside, Mina?”

I tighten my arm around Fang’s waist, careful to avoid pressing against any unseen injuries. “I’ve got him.”

Fang leans into me, more than I expected, suggesting his injuries are worse than he’s letting on. As the others head inside, we follow more slowly, his weight heavy against my side, his breathing carefully controlled.

“Did you get Vasquez?” I ask quietly.

“No,” he murmurs. “But we will. I promise you that.”

His weight grows heavier as we go inside and walk down the hallway toward the medical room inside the clubhouse. Fang told me about it before he left for Houston. Apparently Vapor decided to get a few machines they might need, like an X-ray machine, so he wouldn’t have to send any of the men to a local hospital. Too risky. The doctors and nurses ask too many questions, so for something simple like an X-ray, Vapor wanted to have one in-house.

Fang tries to hide his grimace as we navigate past brothers who nod respectfully,

giving us space while clearly curious about what went down in Texas. The familiar scent of leather and whiskey that permeates the clubhouse mingles with something more metallic—the faint copper tang of dried blood on Fang’s skin and clothes. When he stumbles slightly, my arm tightens around his waist, careful to avoid putting pressure on his injuries.

“Almost there,” I murmur, guiding him toward the door.

After Scalpel takes a quick X-ray, we find out his ribs are bruised as hell but not broken. Scalpel tells him that rest is the best medicine for him, before sending him out to get the next guy in line outside the door.

We amble back to his bedroom—our bedroom, really, though neither of us has named it that yet. I punch in the code Fang gave me to unlock it.

My free hand fumbles with the knob, pushing it open to reveal the space that’s become my safe haven in recent weeks. The room is exactly as we left it: his bank of computers resting quietly in sleep mode, my laptop closed on the nightstand, our clothes mingled in the half-open dresser drawers.

Fang sinks onto the edge of the bed with a barely suppressed groan, his good arm cradling his ribs. “Not exactly how I planned to come home to you,” he says, attempting a smile that turns into a wince.

“Stay put,” I order, though he clearly has no intention of moving. “Let me get you into some fresh clothes.”

After grabbing a clean T-shirt and boxers, I help him remove his cut. He lifts his arms with a hiss of pain, allowing me to pull his T-shirt over his head.

The sight of his bare chest makes my breath catch. I didn’t see it earlier because

Scalpel had me leave the room for a minute while they did the X-ray. Purple bruises bloom across his right side, spreading from sternum to back in a violent watercolor. Cuts of various sizes mark his arms and shoulders, some superficial, others deep. A particularly angry gash runs across his left bicep.

I strip his jeans and boxers before replacing the latter.

“What happened out there?” I ask, glancing at a cut above his eyebrow.

His eyes close briefly. “Vasquez was gone. The whole place was a trap. We made it out just before the main charge detonated, but the blast wave caught us. I got thrown about twenty feet into a drainage ditch. Knocked me out cold. Don’t worry. Scalpel checked to make sure I didn’t have a concussion.”

My heart squeezes as the reality of how close I came to losing him hits me. “And Vasquez, where’s he?”

“Vapor thinks he’s fled to Mexico.” Fang’s eyes open, finding mine. “He can run, but we’ll get him. I know we will.”

“And I’ll help.”

“Of course.”

“How are the others? I saw them get out of the van on their own, but I also know how stubborn you guys can be.”

“Banged up but intact. Ice took some shrapnel to the arm. Tank sprained his ankle. Nothing time won’t heal.” He groans as he tries to lay down.

“Here, let me help.” With careful movements, I prop him against the pillows,

arranging them to support his injured side. Only when he's settled do I sit beside him on the edge of the bed, taking his hand in both of mine.

"I need to get you a sexy nurse outfit. Alice might have an extra."

"Don't you dare ask her for one." I grin. "Also, I doubt Scalpel will want her to share any of her sexy outfits."

"Did she tell you something about what's up with them?" he asks.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“No. But something’s going on.”

“Or not, and that’s the problem.”

“You saw it too?”

“How could anyone miss it? If they’re not banging already, they should be. There’s enough tension in the room when they’re together to ignite a fire.”

“Maybe so, but they’ve got nothing on us, babe.” I lean to kiss him softly.

When I pull back to catch my breath, he sighs. “Even though I wasn’t gone that long, I missed you so much.”

“Me too. I can’t believe I almost lost you,” I whisper, my voice catching on the words. I lift his hand to my cheek, holding it there as if to reassure myself that he’s alive.

“Told you I’d come back,” he reminds me, his thumb tracing my cheekbone.

I turn my face to press a kiss against his palm. “I’ve spent so many years alone,” I say, the words tumbling out. “Just me and Rory against the world. Never trusting anyone, never letting anyone close enough to see the real me.” My eyes find his, holding his gaze steadily despite the vulnerability of what I’m about to say. “And then there was you.”

His expression softens, the pain in his eyes momentarily eclipsed by something

warmer, more intense.

“I love you, Fang.” Once spoken, the words seem to hang in the air between us, perfect and true. “I love your brilliant mind and how you see patterns no one else can see. I love how you protect people, not just with your body but with your skills. How you helped me find Rory when no one else wanted to step up. How you never once judged me for the things I did to survive.”

My voice trembles but I push on, needing him to hear everything. “I love how you make me feel safe for the first time in years. Not because you’re strong, though you are, but because you’re steady. Because when you say something will happen, it does. Because you keep your promises.”

A smile spreads across his battered face, transforming it despite the bruises and cuts. “I love you too, Mina.” His voice is rough with emotion. “The minute I saw the elegance of your code, I was a goner. The woman behind all that perfection just made me fall harder.”

I laugh through sudden tears, the tension of the past day breaking like a fever. “Only you would fall in love with someone because of their programming skills.”

“What can I say? Beautiful syntax is my weakness.” He tugs gently on my hand, pulling me down beside him on the bed. “Come here.”

I carefully arrange myself against his good side, my head nestled in the crook of his shoulder, my palm resting lightly over his heart. Its steady beat beneath my fingers is the most reassuring thing I’ve felt in days.

“I was so afraid,” I confess against his skin. “When Vapor said there had been an explosion, that you were injured... I thought of all the things I hadn’t told you.”

His lips press against my forehead, lingering there. “I’m harder to get rid of than that,” he murmurs. “Especially now that I have something—someone—to come back to.”

I lift my face to his, our lips meeting in a kiss that’s gentle out of necessity but no less intense. His hand cradles the back of my neck, holding me close as if I might disappear if he lets go. When we part, his eyes are dark with a mix of pain and desire.

“I’ve never believed in fate,” I whisper, tracing the uninjured side of his face with my fingertips. “But finding you in the middle of all this chaos... makes me wonder.”

He captures my wandering hand, bringing it back to his lips for another kiss. “Not fate,” he says. “Choice. Every day, I choose you. Even before I met you, I was choosing paths that led to you.”

The simple truth of it steals my breath. In a world where choice has so often been an illusion, where survival dictated my every move, the idea of choosing love—of being chosen—feels revolutionary.

I settle back against him, careful not to jostle his injuries, and listen to the steady rhythm of his breathing as it gradually slows toward sleep. The outside world—the cartel, the danger, even Rory’s treatment—all seems distant compared to this moment of quiet connection, of wounds tended and truths spoken.

Night deepens outside the window, the dim glow of security lights filtering through the blinds to cast striped shadows across Fang’s bed. We lie in comfortable silence, his fingers trailing lazy patterns through my hair, my head resting in the hollow of his uninjured shoulder. The rhythm of his breathing has slowed but not to sleep. I trace the edge of a bandage on his chest, marveling at how quickly this man has become essential to me, how the thought of his absence now feels like contemplating the loss of a limb.

“You know,” Fang says finally, his voice a soft rumble against my ear, “club life isn’t for everyone.”

I tilt my head to look at his face, finding his eyes serious in the half-light. “What do you mean?”

His fingers continue their gentle journey through my hair, but his expression remains solemn. “After Rory’s treatment is complete, you have a choice.” He pauses, picking his words carefully. “You can stay with me, or you can go into hiding with your brother. Start fresh somewhere the cartel can’t find you.”

The suggestion catches me off guard. After everything we’ve been through—the rescue mission in Mexico, the hunt for Vasquez, these past weeks of building something between us—he’s offering me an exit strategy. An honorable discharge from the war we’ve been fighting.

“You want me to leave?” My voice emerges smaller than intended.

“God, no.” His arm tightens around me, his certainty immediate and reassuring. “That’s the last thing I want. But I need you to know that you have options.” He shifts slightly, wincing as the movement jostles his ribs, but his eyes never leave mine. “The cartel won’t forget what we’ve done. Dismantling their operation will take time. There will be danger, retaliation.”

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

I prop myself up on one elbow, studying his face in the shadows. “What about Rory? Would he have to leave too?”

Fang shakes his head, his hand finding mine in the darkness. “Rory’s welcome to stay as long as he wants. Once his treatment is complete, he’ll have options too. College, maybe. A normal life.” His thumb traces circles on my palm. “The club protects its own, and that includes both of you now.”

I consider his words, the future they present. A choice—something I haven’t truly had in years. Since the cartel first pulled me into their world, my decisions have always been made under duress, with Rory’s life hanging in the balance. Now, with that pressure potentially lifting, what would I choose freely?

“I’ve spent my entire adult life living in the shadows,” I say slowly, the realization crystallizing as I speak. “I’m done living that way.”

Fang watches me intently, waiting for me to continue.

“I choose you,” I say simply. “I choose this life, complicated as it is. I choose to stay and fight rather than run and hide. The cartel took enough years from me. I won’t let them take this too.”

Something shifts in his expression—relief mingled with joy, tempered by the gravity of what I’m choosing. His hand comes up to cradle my face, eyes searching mine in the dim light.

“Are you sure? This won’t be easy.”

“Nothing worth having ever is,” I reply, the certainty in my chest expanding with each breath. “Besides, you’ve seen my code. You know I don’t back down from a challenge.”

His lips quirk into the lopsided smile I’ve grown to love. “Your code is exceptional,” he agrees, his voice dropping lower. “Almost as exceptional as the woman who writes it.”

Our eyes lock in silent understanding—a contract more binding than any words could create. I’ve chosen him, chosen us, chosen this life with all its complications and dangers. Not out of necessity or fear, but out of love and the desire for a future free from the cartel.

I lean down, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly deepens, heat building between us despite his injuries. His hand slides to the nape of my neck, holding me to him as his mouth moves against mine with increasing urgency. I taste the faintest metallic hint of blood from his split lip, but I don’t pull away. Instead, I carefully shift my weight, straddling his hips without putting pressure on his torso.

“Are you sure?” I breathe against his mouth, suddenly aware of how fragile he still is. “Your ribs—”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” he replies, his hands finding the hem of my t-shirt and sliding beneath, palms warm against my skin. “Just... maybe you do most of the work this time.”

A laugh bubbles from my throat, breaking the tension as I sit up to pull my shirt over my head. The cool air raises goosebumps across my bare skin, quickly replaced by heat as Fang’s gaze travels over me with unconcealed appreciation.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmurs, hands skimming up my sides to cup my

breasts, thumbs brushing across sensitive peaks in a way that makes my breath catch.

I lean down to kiss him again, more carefully this time, mindful of his split lip. His hands continue their exploration, relearning the contours of my body as I carefully work the drawstring of his sweatpants loose. There's something different about this time—a deliberateness, a certainty that wasn't there before. Each touch feels like a promise, each kiss like sealing a vow.

We take our time undressing each other, movements slowed both by his injuries and by our desire to savor each moment. When I finally sink down onto him, taking him inside me with a soft gasp, his hands grip my hips with an intensity that borders on desperation. I set a gentle rhythm, rolling against him in a way that minimizes strain on his ribs while maximizing our pleasure.

“I love you,” he whispers against my collarbone, the words vibrating through my skin and settling somewhere deep in my chest. “I love you, Mina.”

The sound of my name on his lips, rough with emotion and desire, pushes me closer to the edge. I move faster, my body seeking completion even as my mind catalogs every sensation—the the hardness of his body against my softness, the catch in his breath when I change angles, the heat building between us like a gathering storm. His hands grip my waist, guiding my movements as I rise and fall above him, careful to keep my weight off his injured ribs even as desire threatens to overwhelm caution.

“Mina,” he gasps, my name a prayer on his lips as his fingers dig into my hips. His eyes hold mine, refusing to close even as his pleasure surges, as if he needs to witness every moment of our connection.

I lean down to capture his mouth with mine, swallowing his groans as our bodies move together in perfect synchronicity. The tension coils tighter in my core, a gathering wave of sensation that crests suddenly, breaking through me with such

intensity that I cry out against his lips. He follows moments later, his body tensing beneath mine, his good arm pulling me tight against his chest as if afraid I might still slip away.

For long moments afterward, we remain joined, my forehead pressed to his, our breathing gradually slowing in tandem. His hand traces up and down my spine, sending pleasant aftershocks through my sensitized skin.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, suddenly aware of his injuries again now that the haze of desire is fading. “Did I hurt you?”

He smiles, the expression transforming his battered face. “Worth every twinge,” he assures me, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear with unexpected tenderness.

I carefully shift to lay beside him, nestling into the crook of his uninjured arm, my hand coming to rest over his heart. Its steady rhythm beneath my palm grounds me in this moment, in this choice I’ve made to stay.

“It’s different now,” I say softly, tracing the outline of a bandage on his chest.

“What is?”

“This. Us.” I struggle to articulate the shift I feel. “Before, it felt like borrowed time. Like I was just waiting for everything to fall apart, for the cartel to find us, for Rory to get worse...” I tilt my head to meet his eyes. “But now it feels like we’re building something. Like we have a future.”

His fingers trail down my arm, raising goosebumps in their wake. “We do have a future,” he confirms, his voice low and certain. “Whatever you want it to look like.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Tell me,” I urge, pressing a kiss to his collarbone. “What does our future look like in your head?”

Fang’s hand stills on my shoulder, his expression turning thoughtful. “Rory completes his treatment successfully. The experimental protocol works, maybe not perfectly, but enough that he doesn’t need dialysis anymore.” His thumb traces my shoulder blade with precise, gentle strokes. “He stays here while he recovers, then maybe goes to college if he wants. I’ve got connections at MIT who owe me favors.”

I smile against his skin, warming to this vision. “Rory would love that. He always wanted to study engineering before he got sick.”

“Meanwhile, we work together to systematically dismantle the cartel’s operations.” His voice grows more animated, the tech genius emerging through the injuries.

“And us?” I prompt, wanting to hear the part that matters most.

His arms tighten around me fractionally. “During the day, we work together. Your coding skills and cartel knowledge, my systems expertise. We become the club’s digital enforcement arm. And at night, we come home to each other. Maybe eventually to a bigger place than this room, but still close to the club. Still protected.”

“Your secret safe house?” I ask.

“No. I’d like to keep that in case we need to stash anyone else there. You deserve something better than that place. It’s too small for us.”

The image settles into my mind like a photograph developing—a future I never dared imagine during my years with the cartel. A life built on choices rather than coercion.

“I’m scared,” I admit, the confession easier in the darkness, in the safety of his arms. “Not of staying, but of hoping. Every time I’ve hoped for something better, the universe has found new ways to punish me for it.”

“Hope isn’t a punishable offense,” Fang says, his lips brushing my forehead. “And you’re not alone anymore. Whatever comes, we face it together. The club, you, me. Even Rory, when he’s stronger.”

I prop myself up on my elbow, studying his face in the dim light filtering through the blinds. The bruises stand out in stark relief, reminders of how dangerous our path remains.

“I’m ready to fight them,” I tell him, voicing the realization that’s been forming since I made my choice. “They controlled my past, and I’ll never get that time back. But they won’t get a single second of my future.”

Fang’s hand comes up to cup my cheek, his touch reverent. “The future is ours. We’ll use it to dismantle the cartel, one server, one account, one corrupt official at a time.”

“Until there’s nothing left of them,” I agree, turning to press a kiss into his palm.

“I may never find out what happened to Tommy, but I’m starting to find peace. Helping Rory and talking to you...it healed something inside me.” His voice cracks.

“You saved my brother. That means everything to me. I know you’ll always have a little piece of your heart missing because of Tommy, but Rory loves you like a brother. He’ll never replace Tommy, but he doesn’t want to. He just wants to be a part of a family again.”

“He is,” Fang says softly. “He’s part of ours now and he always will be. We may not be blood brothers, but we’re brothers for life now. I’ll always have his back, and he’ll have mine. It’s what family does for each other.”

“It is now.” I smile and kiss him gently.

As I snuggle against him, we fall into comfortable silence. Outside, a motorcycle engine roars to life in the compound, the sound fading as the rider heads out into the night. Somewhere in Baltimore, Rory sleeps in a hospital bed, his body beginning the long process of recovery. And here, in this room that smells of antiseptic and sex and possibilities, I’ve found something I thought forever beyond my reach.

Home.

Fang’s breathing deepens, sleep finally claiming him as exhaustion and painkillers win out over adrenaline. I remain awake a little longer, watching the rise and fall of his chest, memorizing the peaceful lines of his face in repose. When I finally close my eyes, it’s with the certainty that when I open them again, he’ll still be there.

Chapter 25: Mina

6 Months Later...

The scent of hairspray and perfume hangs in the air inside Babet’s bedroom, mixing with the flutter of excitement in my stomach. I sit perfectly still as Babet’s weathered fingers weave magic through my hair, pinning and spraying each section with the precision of someone who’s done this countless times before. The mirror reflects a version of me I barely recognize—eyes bright with anticipation rather than vigilance, cheeks flushed with joy instead of fear, lips curved in a smile that comes easier these days.

“Stop fidgeting, cher,” Babet scolds gently, tucking another sparkling pin into my updo. “You’ll make me mess up this masterpiece.”

“Sorry,” I murmur, forcing my hands to lie flat against the silky material of the robe draped over my lap. “I’ve dismantled security systems with steadier hands than this.”

Babet chuckles, the sound warm and maternal in a way that still catches me off guard sometimes. “Wedding jitters are a different beast, sugar. Trust me on that.”

Two years ago, I would have laughed at anyone who suggested I’d be sitting here on my wedding day, surrounded by makeup brushes and hair tools instead of computer equipment and weapons. Back then, survival was the only future I could imagine—keeping Rory alive, staying one step ahead of the cartel. Now, here I am, preparing to walk down the aisle to a man who saw past all my defenses, who helped save my brother, who showed me that family can be chosen rather than just born into.

A soft knock interrupts my thoughts, and the door opens to reveal Rory, his face split by a wide grin. My breath catches at the sight of him—tall and straight, his shoulders filling out the crisp lines of his suit jacket, his face flushed with healthy color. The hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes that haunted me for years have been replaced by the vibrant young man I always knew was trapped inside that failing body.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

“Look at you,” he says, stepping into the room and giving a low whistle. “I can’t believe my big sister is getting married.”

“I can’t believe you’re effectively cured,” I counter, my voice thick with emotion as I drink in the sight of him. The experimental treatment in Baltimore was the miracle we’ve been waiting for. It worked better than any of us dared hope. Rory’s almost as good as new and still getting better each day.

Rory shrugs, but I can see the pride in his posture—the way he stands without fatigue, the easy way he moves. “I still need monitoring for a couple years,” he reminds me, “but the doctors say the gene therapy took. No more dialysis, no more medication cocktails that make me sicker than the disease.” He walks over, perching on the edge of Babet’s vanity, careful not to disturb the organized chaos of beauty products. “And it’s all thanks to Fang and Underground Vengeance. Without them...” he trails off, shaking his head in wonder.

“Without them, we’d still be slaves to the cartel,” I finish for him. “Or worse.”

“Now I can actually have a life instead of just watching everyone else live theirs,” Rory says, his voice dropping to a tone of amazement that makes my heart swell. He reaches out, squeezing my hand. “College applications are in. MIT and Caltech, just like we always talked about before I got sick.”

“I’m so excited to hear what they say,” I tell him, tears welling in my eyes despite my best efforts to hold them back. After years of making impossible choices, of sacrificing everything for Rory’s survival, seeing him thriving feels like a miracle.

“Hey, watch it with the waterworks,” Rory teases, his own eyes suspiciously bright. “You’ll mess up all of Babet’s hard work.”

Babet tuts, reaching for a tissue to dab carefully under my eyes. “That’s what waterproof makeup is for, sweetie. I’ve been doing this long enough to plan for a few sisterly tears.”

We’re laughing when the door bursts open again, and Vicki the Hickey sweeps in with all the subtlety of a hurricane, her blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders. Despite her unfortunate nickname, she’s really sweet. We’ve spent quite a bit of time together, and she’s becoming a good friend. In her hand, she holds a strip of blue lace that’s unmistakably a garter.

“Something blue!” she announces with a triumphant giggle, holding it out to me like a trophy. “And I promise it’s not borrowed. Brand new and sexy as hell, just like your soon-to-be husband.”

I feel my cheeks flush as I accept the lacy scrap, Rory making exaggerated gagging noises beside me.

“That’s my cue to give you ladies some privacy,” he says, standing and heading for the door. “See you in ten, sis.”

Babet waits until the door closes behind him before gesturing to my hair. “And I’ve got the borrowed part covered,” she says, pointing to the vintage crystal hairpins twinkling among the dark strands of my updo. “They belonged to my grandmother. She passed them on to me. Now they’re yours for the ceremony.”

“And my dress is definitely something new,” I add, glancing toward the garment bag hanging on Babet’s closet door. It contains a princess-style gown with a fitted bodice that hugs my curves before exploding into layers of tulle and lace. The intricate

beadwork across the bodice made me gasp when I first tried it on—tiny crystals catching the light with every breath, transforming me into someone who belongs in a fairy tale rather than a crime saga.

Vicki claps her hands together, excitement radiating from her like a physical force. “I’ll let Bones know we’re almost ready! Five minutes!” She dashes out of the room in a cloud of fruity perfume.

Babet turns me gently toward the mirror, her hands resting on my shoulders as we both stare at my reflection. The woman looking back at me wears serenity like a second skin, her eyes clear and purposeful, her lips curved in quiet confidence.

“You ready to get married, cher?” Babet asks softly, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

I think about the journey that led me here—from desperate deals with the cartel to save Rory, to finding unexpected allies in an outlaw motorcycle club, to falling in love with a man whose brilliant mind matches my own. I think about the fear I lived with for so long, and the peace I’ve found in its absence. I think about family—the one I protected and the one I’m building now.

“Yes,” I answer, my voice steady and sure. “I’m ready.”

Babet and Vicki give me one last hug before leading to join the wedding guests. The door clicks shut behind them, leaving a pocket of stillness in their wake. Rory returns a minute later. We stand facing each other in the silence, the enormity of the moment settling between us. He looks at me with eyes that shine with joy. I realize with a start that this might be the first time in our adult lives we’ve both been truly happy at the same time.

“I never thought I’d be able to walk you down the aisle,” Rory says, his voice

catching slightly as he runs his fingers over the sleeve of his suit jacket—the first he’s ever worn. “When I was stuck on dialysis, I used to think about all the things I might miss. Your wedding was always at the top of that list.”

The lump in my throat threatens to dissolve into tears, but I swallow hard against it. “Don’t get sentimental on me now, little brother. You have more important things to think about, like not tripping over this giant dress. I’ll never forgive you if you face-plant in front of the entire club.”

Rory laughs. “It is huge, but very pretty.”

“I’m glad you like it. Hopefully Fang likes it too.”

“He will.”

My hands smooth nervously over the voluminous fabric of my wedding gown, the layers of tulle and lace catching the light as they rustle beneath my fingers. The dress is nothing like I would have imagined for myself—too princess-like, too fairy tale—but the moment I tried it on, I knew it was perfect. After years of utility clothing chosen for ease of movement and the ability to conceal weapons, this impractical, beautiful creation feels like the ultimate declaration of safety.

“Ready,” Rory asks, standing taller than I’ve seen him in years.

“I think so.”

“You know, with all those layers, no one would even notice if I did stumble.”

I grin and reach for his hand, squeezing it tightly in mine. “You’re the best brother I could have asked for, you know that? Through everything—the cartel, your illness, all of it—you kept me going. Kept me human when it would have been easier to

become something else entirely.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:34 pm

His fingers wrap around mine, strong and warm. “Right back at you, sis. Now let’s go get you married before Fang thinks you’ve changed your mind and sends a search party.”

We make our way out of Babet’s room and through the clubhouse, which is unusually quiet with most of the members already gathered outside. As we approach the back door, I catch glimpses of the transformation beyond—the usually rugged back yard now draped in white fabric and twinkling lights, turned into something magical by hands more accustomed to maintaining motorcycles than arranging wedding decorations.

Rory offers his arm, and I take it, grateful for the support as we step outside into the late afternoon sunshine. The breath catches in my throat as I take in the full scene—white chairs arranged in neat rows, flowers adorning every available surface, string lights crisscrossing overhead like stars waiting for darkness to reveal their glow. The motorcycle club’s typically rough-edged environment has been softened for the day, though not entirely tamed—leather cuts still are visible on most of the men, their bikes lined up in formation at the far edge of the yard like silent sentinels guarding our celebration.

The guests rise as we appear. I scan the crowd, taking in the faces of people who’ve become family in ways I never expected. Vapor stands near the front, his imposing presence somewhat softened by Blue at his side, her coppery red hair catching fire in the sunlight. The way they lean toward each other speaks of a connection that surprised everyone—the club president and the jazz singer finding common ground despite their different worlds.

Ice is there too, his platinum hair pulled back neatly, silver-blue eyes watchful even in celebration. Beside him stands Isabella, elegant in a soft pink form-fitting dress that accentuates her curves, her head held high with the confidence of a woman who's stepped out of the cartel's shadow to forge her own path. Their unlikely alliance blossomed into something more thanks in part to her duplicitous brother, another unexpected gift from our shared battles.

The music changes—a cue I almost miss until Rory gives my arm a gentle squeeze. We begin our walk down the flower-strewn aisle, and suddenly I can see nothing but Fang waiting at the makeshift altar. He stands tall and proud in his MC vest worn over a crisp white shirt, the club's colors displayed prominently across his back. His face—that beautiful face I've memorized in laughter and concentration, in sleep and in passion—breaks into a smile so bright it nearly stops my heart.

He still bears a thin scar above his eyebrow from the explosion at Vasquez's Houston compound, a permanent reminder of how close we came to losing everything before we'd truly found it. But his eyes are clear and focused entirely on me, tracking my progress down the aisle with an intensity that makes the rest of the world fade to background noise.

I barely register the other members standing nearby—Bones with his broad shoulders and gentle smile, Tank looking unusually polished in a button-down shirt with Vicki by his side, Diablo with his perpetual air of contained danger. Scalpel and Alice stand side by side, not quite touching, but I get the sense they want to. Then my entire world narrows to Fang and the few remaining steps between us.

When we reach the altar, Rory and Fang shake hands—a simple gesture loaded with meaning. My brother entrusting me to this man, acknowledging all that Fang has done for both of us. Then Rory places my hand in Fang's, and the warmth of his fingers closing around mine feels like coming home.

Bones steps forward to conduct the ceremony, his deep voice carrying easily across

the yard. The words themselves blur together in my memory—promises of loyalty and love. What remains crystal clear is Fang’s face as he says “I do,” the certainty in his voice matching the steadiness in his eyes.

When Bones pronounces us husband and wife, the cheer that erupts from the assembled club members is deafening—whistles and hollers and the revving of motorcycle engines creating a symphony that’s uniquely UVMC. Fang pulls me close. His kiss is pure passion, and I lose myself in it completely.

The celebration that follows is exactly what you’d expect from an outlaw motorcycle club—wild and loud and fueled by more alcohol than seems advisable. But beneath the raucous exterior lies something precious—a sense of belonging that both Rory and I have craved our entire lives.

As night falls and the string lights overhead transform into stars against the darkening sky, I find myself watching my brother laugh with a group of prospects, his face animated and carefree in a way I’d forgotten was possible. He’s made so many friends since he came back from treatment. Brothers for life.

Fang’s arm slips around my waist, pulling me against his side. “Happy?” he asks, his lips close to my ear to be heard above the music.

I look around at our unlikely family—the bikers and their women, the reformed cartel princess dancing with the club’s ice-cold enforcer, my healthy brother surrounded by people who would die to protect him—and feel the final pieces of my guard dissolve into contentment.

“More than I ever thought possible,” I answer, leaning into the solid warmth of my husband, my partner, my home.
