



Not With the Eyes

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Description: Oberon's story is the same as all the other Anti-Heroes: people important to her were killed by the G.O.D., and she wants them stopped. More than anything, Oberon wants herself. Himself. Themselves. She's taken on so many forms since her life was destroyed that she can't remember the face she was born with, and the G.O.D. long ago erased all evidence she ever existed in the first place.

If a picture exists anywhere, it's deep within G.O.D. headquarters. Getting to it is another matter entirely, but with the G.O.D. in shambles after the Anti-Heroes' latest attacks, her moment has finally arrived.

She expected it to be a solo mission, though, not a joint venture with the most aggravating person on the planet. Oberon has policies about how close she gets to anyone. The Anti-Heroes are colleagues, not friends. She has no family. And she wants absolutely nothing to do with the infuriating Scones.

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"Good morning, love."

"Go fuck yourself," Oberon said, striding right past a smirking Scones to the fridge to get cream for his coffee. Surely being forced to put up with Scones this early in the day counted as some sort of crime.

Weeks had passed since they'd saved Ariana and the children. Since Scones had shown up out of nowhere to help them. Since they'd learned Scones was Algernon Lachapelle, son of Margaux Lachapelle. The woman, the person, that Oberon hated most in the world.

He'd find it amusing that Margaux's precious son was a backstabbing little traitor to the G.O.D. except he simply hated her, all of them, too damn much. She'd taken everything from him—a loving husband, his children, his home...

Even the husband he might have gotten over, might have learned to grit his teeth, live with the sadness, and move on. Not his children, though. For that he would hate the bitch forever, and soon he'd have his day.

First, however, he had other priorities. With the G.O.D. in utter shambles, now might be his only chance. Unfortunately, he couldn't just sneak away to do it. At the very least, Byron would have to know. Likely Dixie. As much Oberon preferred to be a one-person show, that just wasn't possible when going head-to-head with the G.O.D.

He glanced at Scones, who'd gone back to watching the news that always seemed to be on in at least one room of the house.

Scones was not someone he would ever describe as handsome. He wasn't bland or ugly either, though. Simply a mish-mash of features that were remarkable and others that weren't, resulting in some strange patchwork doll that was, if not pretty, at least interesting.

The pasty white skin, the vibrant red hair, the freckles... all of that could be shelved under 'typical British with a dash of Irish stereotypes'. But the hard, lean build, the way he stood and moved and carried himself—that screamed military. His heterochromia eyes were beautiful, but they were also filled with shadows that saidmurderer.

Hardly a surprising skill for the son of Margaux Lachapelle to possess. On the other hand, Oberon wasn't fit to cast that stone. Once upon time, he'd been the kind of person who abhorred violence. Who insisted that violence, that murder, was never the solution.

Now all he did was bide his time until the day he could commit one very particular murder, and he didn't care if he had to leave a trail of bodies behind him to do it.

He sat down at the table, as far from Scones as he could get, and half-heartedly watched the news as he went over his plans for the day.

Speak with Byron. Probably Dixie would be dragged into it too. Hopefully that was all. The fewer people he dragged into this, the better. Unlike the rest of the Anti-Heroes, he wasn't looking for some precious found family to replace the one that had been murdered. Screw that.

Depending on how that conversation went, he'd be doing reconnaissance with assistance or without. Lachapelle and all her cohorts were going to be in the States for three days as part of an enormous meeting regarding the absolute havoc the Anti-Heroes were wreaking. It was rare they met anywhere outside of the impenetrable

fortress that was the Paris headquarters.

Three days where all the important people and their auxiliaries were going to be in one place—and far away from their usual haunts, which would give an unprecedented chance to get into the G.O.D. archives. Usually the place was too locked up for anyone to break into, even a 7-level shifter of his acumen.

"Are you ever in a good mood?"

Oberon looked up with a scowl. "Not when you're around."

Scones sighed. "I understand why you hate my family, I do. But I wish you'd give me a fair chance, instead of just assuming I'm my mother's clone. She used to beat me, you know. She was really fond of switches across my back. On good days, I was bruised. Bad days, bleeding, and she called me out sick until I recovered enough to go back to school."

"I don't care." Oberon rose, drained his coffee, and went to go get dressed.

Safely in his room, he closed the door and leaned against it for several minutes.

He didn't care.

Who in the world beat their own child? He would never understand it. Even when he wanted to shake his children until they stopped saying 'mom' every thirty seconds, even when he wanted to scream because they'd all decided to be enormous brats on the same day, when he just wanted thirty minutes of quiet...

He had loved his children. Loved them more than anything else in the world. They'd been his world.

Reaching up, Oberon curled his fingers around the pendant he always kept on his person, no matter what he was doing or who he was pretending to be. It was the only thing he had left of the days when he'd been someone else entirely. When her birth name was Liu Wanshan, and she'd become Wanshan Glass against her parents' wishes. Defying them was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but she'd loved Evan with her whole heart. The only thing they'd loved more than each other was their children.

What a little group they'd been, the French-Chinese woman, the British man who'd loved Paris too much to ever leave, and their children who grew up speaking more languages than most people would ever learn.

Addie, the oldest. Then Heath. Then Marie, not even two years old when—

Oberon snarled and pushed away from the door, shifting as she discarded the clothes she'd thrown on to go downstairs and went to pick out something suitable for a meeting with their noble leader, who was probably cuddling with Leland on the roof, drowning in sugary-sweetness like they always were.

Since there was nobody to be impressed by her breasts, she settled on a long-sleeved t-shirt in a deep blue, embroidered with delicate flowers at the collar and sleeve hems. Next, she added white skinny jeans and strappy heels to match. She'd done her nails last night, a soft, soft pink that was more or less neutral, and did her makeup to match. Lowkey for her, but there really wasn't much need for flashy at the moment.

She'd opted for short hair, a reverse bob that went well with her sharp cheekbones and drew the focus to her gray eyes. That gray was the one feature she recalled. Her face, her body... she had vague recollections, things that felt right. But how she'd once actually looked, in the golden ages before her husband and children had been reduced to ashes and bits of bone, she couldn't remember.

There's been too many shifts. Too many weeks and months spent living lies to get information she or someone else in the noble rebellion needed. Despite what all the flashy hero stories said, shifters did not have some internal reset button that took them back to their 'true' form. The shifting was her true form. His. Their. Appearance was as static as gender in Oberon's world, which was to say it was entirely fluid.

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Ready for battle, she headed back downstairs, through to the rear of the house where their operations, such as they were, was located.

There were screens up everywhere, Dixie's little programs constantly scanning for anything remotely important, shuffling information around to whichever party needed to look at it to figure out whether it really was. In one corner was the equipment needed to maintain the systems that kept Dixie functioning and Leland from getting his dumb ass killed being entirely too altruistic.

Byron, thankfully, was already there, sparing Oberon having to stand around waiting for him. "How is your darling today? Did you two get adequate cuddles?"

"Shut up, Oberon, or I'll put you and Scones in one of those get-along shirts I'm always seeing in home videos and bad sitcoms."

"How do you have time for either of those things?"

"More like impossible to avoid when the twins are on the premises," Byron replied with a smile. "What did you want to talk to me about? Does it have something to do with the fact Lachapelle and a great many other key figures are going to be here in the States soon?"

"Of course it does. Don't tell me you already have a party planned?"

Byron gave him a look. "You're not the only one here who sees an advantage in need of taking."

"One can hope," Oberon said with a sigh. "What are you plotting? I'd like to be prepared for how you're ruining my hopes and aspirations."

Before he could answer, the door opened, and Scones stepped inside, somehow managing to make the room seem smaller with his sheer presence. Biting back several choice words, Oberon moved as far away as she could, arms at her side, ready to act. The slightest excuse, and she'd drive her pointy heel into his nutsack.

"It's funny how obvious it is when you're thinking about maiming or killing me."

"It's funny you think I'd ever waste a single second of my time thinking about you."

Scones rolled his eyes.

"Enough," Bryon said. "Both of you sit down so we can get this done."

"I'll stand, thanks," Scones replied.

Oberon didn't move.

Byron rolled his eyes that time, and then swept an arm out, banishing most of the screens around the room and bringing up one large one instead, right in the middle, so they could all see it clearly. The door opened, admitting Dixie and Leland, who took seats as the door closed and locked behind them.

"All right," Byron said. "In two weeks, the vast majority of the G.O.D. is going to be gathered here in the US, at their military headquarters in New Denmark. While I would love to be able to wipe them all off the map then and there, that sort of thing is only going to work in our fantasies."

"I could still get a few of them," Scones said.

"You also wouldn't get out alive," Byron said. "Stupid waste of an asset, and also, I don't like getting my friends killed if I can avoid it."

Scones stared, clearly taken aback, but only gave a bare nod.

Byron twitched his fingers, making the map move, zoom in on a particular state, city, building. "This is the International Records and Archives Hall of the G.O.D."

Scones whistled. "You lot really do like to play with fire."

"Think we're playing with a good deal more than fire, hoss," Dixie said.

Oberon stared at the blue-print image of the building, anticipation burning in her chest. So close. Finally, after so many years of waiting and wondering, she was so close. "So what do the Anti-Heroes need in the archives? Surely our precious sentient computer here can already access anything and everything we could ever need to know."

"Sentient computer," Dixie said, rolling his eyes. "I ain't a bunch of chips that can think. And no, I can't access everything. The archives run on an isolated system, completely separate from everything else, accessible only by way of terminals within the building. Place is locked down tighter than whatever has you staring at the schematics like a hungry cat watching a fish tank."

Oberon tore her eyes away, leveling her gaze on Dixie. "Shut up."

Dixie grinned.

"You still haven't answered my question," Oberon said. "What do the Anti-Heroes need there?"

"Destruction," Bryon said. "Copies of certain files for our own use, and otherwise complete and utter destruction. The G.O.D. is already crippled thanks to the destruction of the Mason System and the recent deaths incurred. They're taking serious hits politically and publicly. If we destroy the archives, that is one more pillar toppled, destabilizing them further." He shifted the screen to zoom in on schematics on the inside of the building. "This is going to be a small job; just the three of you. Oberon and Scones will get inside the archives and establish a connection that Dixie can use to access the archives, download what we need, and then destroy the whole mess from the inside out while the two of you ensure the whole building comes down as well."

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"I see," Oberon said. Fuck. She would have to figure out where her picture was fast. Surely that wouldn't be so hard, though. Could just ask Byron and Dixie for help, the back of her mind whispered. No. Hell no. She would be damned if anyone knew she had no idea what she really looked like anymore. If anyone knew that the only appearance in the world she couldn't take on was her own. "That should be entertaining. How are we doing it?"

Byron flicked her a look. "You're going to be arrested—as Taser."

Oberon inhaled sharply through her nostrils. "Damn, Byron."

Scones's brow furrowed. "Taser. The 5-level lightning bug? Won't he have something to say about this?"

"I doubt it," Oberon said. "Taser died by suicide three years ago. Byron has made certain the Dogs don't know that, for his own cold-blooded purposes that I guess are finally coming up."

Scones flinched. "I see. That really sucks. No one should ever go out that way."

Oberon hated the way her chest ached then. She didn't give a single flying fuck about Scones and whatever precious friend or lover had clearly offed themselves. Putting her attention back on Byron, she said, "Do you have the stuff I need? Only knew Taser in passing. Going to need time to perfect his German; it isn't a dialect I've done before."

"I mean, you'll be a prisoner, so I doubt you'll be inclined to do much speaking,"

Byron said with a smile, "but yes, the packet has already been sent."

"What about Taser's family or friends?" Scones asked. "Surely it's going to be a nasty shock to them to see their loved one is suddenly alive again."

Oberon rolled her shoulders, stretched her neck from side to side, mind already turning to everything she knew, little though it was, about Taser. "He didn't have anyone; that was part of the problem. The Dogs cracked down hard one day, wiped out his whole apartment building, killed his pet birds. The Anti-Heroes got him out of there, but... well, he didn't wake up the next day. I guess we all reach that point of 'enough' eventually. Myself, I hope to retire, but who knows how I'll feel tomorrow."

Scones leveled her with a look that Oberon didn't like remotely, too somber and knowing for her taste. Fuck him. What could Scones, of all people, fucking know or understand about her. So mommy had beaten him. Mommy hadn't murdered his husband and children and burned his life to the ground, laughing the whole fucking time.

Looking away, she asked, "So when does all this go down?"

"The archives will be vulnerable for three days. We act on the second. You're getting arrested the week before, so that you'll arrive in time without it all being so sudden and convenient we draw attention."

"Why in the world would they take me to the archives, of all places? They don't even have holding facilities there. It's a glorified library and storage locker," Oberon replied.

"Me," Scones said. "You'll be going because I'll be taking you there. I see how this is playing. Byron, you're a crafty little fuck."

"There's a reason I call him a dark faerie," Dixie said in his molasses drawl.

Oberon wanted to smack all of them. "So tell me this plan everyone else seems to know."

"Sorry," Byron said. "Not being evasive or mysterious on purpose. The plan is this: Scones, as himself, will 'capture' Taser after chancing upon him while out and about. The Dogs will naturally find it suspicious that a long-missing traitor crops up now after all this time. The rest of their facilities are in shambles and vulnerable to attack. They'll have Scones take you to the archives for identity verification and holding until their meeting is over and they can secure a better facility. The archive does, in fact, have holding cells in the basement. As of today, there are two other figures in holding, but I don't know who because that information hasn't been uploaded anywhere I can access. Your secondary mission will be to assess those prisoners and, if warranted and possible, free them. Your primary objective is to install and activate an access point for Dixie and place the explosives that will bring the building down."

Scones frowned as he looked over all the information flashing on the screen. "Sounds like there's going to be a whole lot of collateral damage in terms of people."

"Hopefully not," Byron said. "The archives are almost entirely digital, and a minimal staff to maintain the system and the physical records. Nearly everything is automated. There's a full staff of fifty, but rarely more than twenty on site, and the first wave of detonations should provide time for emergency exits. That being said, no plan is perfect, so people will probably die. I wish it was otherwise, but let's not be coy: we're at war now. Casualties can't be avoided, though certainly we'll do our best."

"Wasn't a criticism, just an observation. Only one person in this room has made a career out of murder, after all," Scones replied. "I'm so good at killing, they gave me medals. Six of them." He looked about to say something else, but in the end, stayed silent, mouth flat and eyes dark.

Ruthlessly squashing all the emotions and questions that tried to rise up, because she absolutely did not care about Scones, Oberon turned away from the screen and headed for the door as she heard it unlock. "Guess I'd better start studying."

Back in her room, she called up the files Byron had sent her. Taser's face stared back at her, somber and sad. Oberon tapped the image, and it separated into several files: young Taser, Taser before the explosion and subsequent fire, Taser immediately afterward, and detailed projections for how he'd likely look now, scars and all.

Oberon didn't generally waste time on things like being sad. What the hell was the point? But she couldn't deny the sorrow at such a pointlessly wasted life. Like so many other felled Anti-Heroes, all of whom would have worn that title with pride, Taser had deserved better. Deserved so much more than he'd ever get now. Even if there was a legacy of him someday... so what? That didn't make him less dead. It didn't make any of them less dead.

Sighing, Oberon stripped off her clothes, put them away, and cast the images across the room, enlarging the most crucial ones to nearly life-size, arranging all the angles to ensure she captured every little detail, every mole and scar and smatter of freckles. It took a bit of effort to get the scars exactly right, and she incorporated some changes of her own to the digital recreations of a Taser who would never exist, but after a couple of hours of fussing, she was satisfied with the results.

Now to stay like this for a bit in order to get accustomed to the look, be able to shift into quickly and correctly. Contrary to what most people thought in all their breathless gossip about what shifting must be like, there was in fact a great deal of work involved—at least when first copying someone. When he was simply making up a look, a good deal less effort was required.

Pulling out new clothes, simple jeans and a different long-sleeved t-shirt in heather gray, Oberon sat down to pull on sturdy boots that were more in Taser's style, then

brushed his hair and headed back out.

In the hallway, Greg did a double take. "Leaving aside you're a security nightmare, imitating people who've been dead for years now is a new low."

"You want to take issue with my new assignment, talk to Byron. What does it matter if they're recent dead or long dead?"

"Guess it doesn't." Greg shrugged. "Still kinda creepy. You really pinned it down, though. Not that I've ever known you to fail, of course, but... whatever. I'm going now."

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Oberon laughed despite himself. "Thanks, kitty cat."

"Ugh, all of you and the cat jokes." Greg playfully shoved him as he passed by, and Oberon continued snickering, the sound fading only as he reached the main hallway and headed back to the kitchen for more caffeine. Now that he had homework, it was going to be a long day and night.

Naturally, his new partner in crime was already there again. "Do you ever leave the kitchen?"

"Not really," Scones said. "Always been my favorite room in the house. My mother never went to any room she felt was beneath her, and the only thing lower in her mind than the kitchen was the laundry room. All the years I hid from her as a kid, she never checked for me in the dryer." Scones sipped at what was presumably tea, since he was fairly certain not drinking tea at all hours was illegal in the Kingdom of Britain, at least since a lucrative trade arrangement between East China, India, and Britain that had formed in the mid-1700s.

Oberon set about fixing a fresh pot of coffee. "Sounds like you had a charming childhood."

"I've told you before it was an utter delight." Scones finished his tea and poured a fresh cup, then sat at the table instead of leaning against the counter as he had been. He gestured to the empty seats. "If we're going to be working together, it will go far more smoothly if you don't completely hate me. Is there any way I can get you down to like, fifty percent? I promise you, no one hates my mother more than me. Did you know I had a little sister?"

That statement succeeded in getting Oberon's full attention. He turned, folding his arms across his chest. "What are you talking about? I've seen more files on that bitch than most people, and nowhere at all does it mention a second child."

"She was born prematurely, weak and sickly, and the doctors said she'd probably always be that way. The next day, she was mysteriously dead in her little protective box, right there in the hospital. Day after that, I was, and had always been, an only child. I was four, so don't remember it, but I found the information later. Probably for the best. There's no telling how much crueler my mother would have been to a frail daughter."

Damn it. Oberon had one weakness and one weakness only: children. "She's even more disgusting than I thought, and my opinion of her was already in the toilet."

Scones laughed. "Psh. Go deeper. All the way into the sewer lines."

Oberon refused to be amused by anything Scones said. Whatever he said, whatever stories he told, he was still the son of Margaux Lachapelle, and that meant he was dangerous, untrustworthy. Who knew how good he'd become at spinning lies?

He ignored the nagging voice that tried to point out that if Scones was a traitor, he'd have turned them all in long ago, not waited with them for weeks here doing essentially nothing, waiting for their next chance to strike. "She must have been disappointed you were only a 3-level."

"She was, but I proved myself a good little killing machine. 3-level might not have much on all you fancy higher levels, but being a breezer isn't nothing." Scones smiled sourly, looking far older than age, which was... thirty-something. Thirty-five? Whatever. "Military. Special forces. Elite sniper. Black Ops. I just got better and better at it. 511 confirmed kills."

Jesus. He wasn't a killer. He was a mass-murderer. "Algernon. Scones. Pray tell, what was your call sign in the military?"

The horrid smile collapsed entirely, a blank look falling over Scones's face like a drop cloth. He rose as he scooped up his teacup and said, "Painkiller." Depositing the cup in the sink, he strode out of the kitchen.

Well, that hit a nerve. Oberon didn't feel nearly as satisfied as he would have liked.

He sighed and fixed his coffee, then reclaimed his seat. The bastard was right about one thing, much as he loathed admitting it: they would have to get along if this mission was going to work, and so far, Oberon was the only one being hostile. So he'd have to suck it up and play nice. Fine. Whatever it took to get himself back. Once he had that, he could go wherever he wanted, stop playing at this stupid Anti-Hero nonsense.

Laughing bitterly, Oberon took his turn at rising dramatically and striding tragically from the kitchen. Stop playing at Anti-Hero. Ha. What else was he going to do with his life? His long, long, not ending anytime soon life, a delightful side effect of his shifting.

Settle down? Start a new family? Ha. He wasn't stupid enough to try that again. Losing one family was enough. Anyway, that required either a one hundred percent scientific approach, adoption, or the old-fashioned method, and none of them appealed or was really viable. The first two required far too much of a paper trail, even with Byron being the most devious bastard on the planet, and the last one...

Oberon couldn't even stand himself most days, as bitter and broken as he was. Who the hell else would? He'd already found the person of his dreams once, had three beautiful children...

A miracle like that didn't happen twice.

All he wanted—and could have—now was to get himself back, and then go off to live in peace and quiet. No more sneaking, no more playing pretend, no more killing and waiting to be killed.

The first step was to make nice with Algernon Lachapelle. If there was a god, or gods, boy did they have a hate on for him.

Tired of looking like Taser, he shifted to one of his many made up bodies, of a biracial man with predominantly Chinese features, a composite of models and popstars he'd created and tweaked over the years. Scrubbing at his hair, thick and soft and nothing like Taser's stiffer strands, he went in search of Scones to begin Project Make Nice with the Mortal Enemy.

Because whatever his doubts or suspicions, Scones had put a bullet right in the T-zone of several of the most dangerous Dogs in the world. That alone was a death sentence, but that he was also a traitor?

If he was related to literally anyone else in the G.O.D. Oberon might almost admire the bastard.

When Scones turned up nowhere in the house, even his own room, where he'd left the door wide open like some sort of dumbass, Oberon gritted his teeth and ventured into the great outdoors. It was warm, but not overbearing, and thankfully the humidity was minimal around here, unlike the last time he'd had to go all the way up into the mountains. Humidity was stupid, and he hated it.

He followed the footpath that led from the backyard into the woods surrounding the house, mentally cursing Scones for venturing outside, where there were bugs and sunburn and bears and a thousand other annoyances he didn't have to suffer in the

city.

"If I get eaten by a mountain lion or a bear, my ghost is going to lure everyone into the woods to suffer the same fate," Oberon muttered as he walked. Give him the worst G.O.D. goons available, he'd take all of them over being stalked by a cougar or surprised by a grizzly.

Thankfully, he found Scones before wildlife found him, sulking by the lakeshore skipping stones. "Really? You flounce off in a snit and come to skip rocks like the world's most ridiculous teenage stereotype?"

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Scones startled, his latest stone hitting the water and sinking. He turned to glower. "One would think you'd be happy to see me go off alone into mountain lion territory."

"A mountain lion would have to be really desperate to go after your scrawny ass," Oberon replied.

"Like you have room to talk at present. What do you want?"

"Well, I might hate your Lachapelle guts on principle, but I didn't mean to strike that much of a nerve. And though I'd rather go surrender myself to a mountain lion than cooperate with you, you're right in that since we do have to cooperate, we should get along. The mission won't succeed if I'm more interested in hating you than getting the job done, and I definitely want to get this job done."

Scones's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why is this one mission so vitally important?"

"Because mind your own business."

"Fine." Scones lifted his hands in surrender. "You really don't have anything to worry about with me. I'll tell you sob stories until you believe me, whatever it takes."

"What the hell do you even care?"

"Because mind your own business."

Oberon laughed, immediately hating himself for it, but undeniably amused all the same. "Your mother hasn't been missing you all this time?"

"My mother doesn't give a damn about me, not since I insisted on quitting. If I can't be her good little killer, then I'm best out of sight and mind. My handler takes care of it and sends me packets every week or so about everything I need to keep up on. Otherwise, bots handle communications with her."

That was possibly the most depressing string of words Oberon had ever heard. Margaux Lachapelle was so fucking self-absorbed she didn't notice her communications with her own son were actually with a bot. Astounding. The bitch had been given a gift and treated it like a burden. How dare she—

Oberon forced himself to think about something else before he exploded from the rage. "If you're done sulking, I would like to go back inside."

Scones laughed. "I've seen the cases you've been involved in, all the people you've taken down. What in the world do you have to fear from the great outdoors?"

"It's outdoors, isn't that enough? Let's go." He didn't wait for an answer, simply turned and strode off, leaving Scones to follow or not.

A moment later, Scones caught up to him, easily keeping pace with Oberon's long, swift strides. The truth was probably that Scones had to slow down to keep pace. He was tall and gangly and pasty at first glance, one face in a thousand, but that body moved the way only a veteran soldier's could, and his mismatched eyes held the shadows of a killer.

Back when they'd rescued Ariadne and the children, Scones had appeared out of nowhere to help, and there'd been a minute display of his skills as he'd put a bullet right between the eyes of the Magnificent Sunrise, as though he were a toy rather than one of the most dangerous superheroes in the world.

They'd nearly reached the house when the back door banged open, and a frantic

looking Greg nearly toppled down the steps in his rushing as he spotted them. "Get inside now!"

"What's wrong?" Scones ask, that too-serious demeanor of his, the calm of a sniper, falling over him. They hurried into the house and followed Greg to Byron's control center—where every screen was filled with various photos of Scones.

"...Lachapelle, son of World Council Representative Margaux Lachapelle. He has been given the G.O.D. Classification Zero, and is considered armed and extremely dangerous. Anyone who sees him should get to a safe location and call the authorities immediately. Do not interact with him. I repeat, he is armed and extremely dangerous." A new picture flashed on the screen, one of his sniper photos, along with a list of stats that included his confirmed kill count.

Oberon whistled. "Wow, you were a busy boy."

"Yeah," Scones said, voice cold, but with an undercurrent of misery even Oberon couldn't miss, and he was trying desperately to ignore everything that might cause him to like the bastard. "Mostly other soldiers, rebels, but once I was moved to G.O.D. Black Ops... Well, there's a reason they won't make those numbers official. The count is actually 781, if you include all the Dogs I've put down."

Greg stared wide-eyed. "How do you..."

Scones laughed bitterly. "The first one is the hardest. After that, they just start turning into numbers. That's why I got out the moment I could, when even my mother couldn't find a way to make me stay in anymore. I'll take every last of those bastards out if that's what it takes to make up for all the murders I've committed." He sighed. "How did they finally figure me out?"

"Still working on that," Dixie said, "but I'm guessing from the way the news been

talking, ain't too many folks in the world coulda made the shots you did."

"Well, I always knew this day would come. Wish I'd had more time to get a few things from my apartment. So it goes. Can you get in touch with my handler, make sure she's okay? I'm worried she hasn't tried to contact me about this."

Dixie nodded, his artificial eye flashing at rapid-fire rate as he interacted with the house's computer systems.

Nearby, Byron worked just as heatedly, keeping pace even though he wasn't a living computer like Dixie. Hard to beat a guy who'd been alive for more than three hundred years, and that was just his time on earth. Byron had never said how old he'd already been when they crashed.

Oberon always wondered what it must have been like to go from star-travel technology to medieval Europe, watching as superpowers crept into a society that was never meant to have them, and technology slowly, very slowly, started to approach something vaguely resembling what he'd had before crashing.

It was mind-boggling. Terrifying. Even Oberon wasn't crass enough to ask that kind of question, and even if he was, Byron would probably—rightfully—tell him to fuck off. The only persons Byron seemed to wholly confide in were Ariadne, his fellow crash-lander, and Leland, his precious, snuggly, soft romance.

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Something flashed a lurid red on one of Dixie's screens, and his expression said everything as he turned to face them again, eyes landing on Scones. "She's dead, I'm sorry. They went in to capture her, and she wasn't having it, took about nineteen of them in a firefight before sheer numbers finally got her."

"Thank you." Scones did a sharp heel-turn and walked from the room. A moment later the back door slammed, and just seconds after that, Oberon could just barely hear an agonized scream. Rage. Despair. Anguish. Oberon had screamed just like when he had learned his entire family was dead.

After the grief came the hate, and that wouldn't subside until he watched the life bleed from Margaux Lachapelle's eyes.

"It would be nice if just once a plan of ours did not crumble before we ever got to execute it," Oberon said. "Maybe we should stop making plans."

Byron sighed. "It does feel that way sometimes. Give me time; I'll come up with something, if only because I know if I don't, you'll go gallivanting off anyway to try and do it yourself—whatever it is, you cagey faerie."

"I'ma cagey faerie? That's a hell of a stone for you to throw, Alien Overlord."

"Yes, well, I recognize my own and all that. Are you up for some light recon?"

Oberon laughed. "Is the sky blue?"

Byron managed a brief smile. "I'll let you know when everything is ready for

briefing."

Oberon saluted mockingly and departed, returning to the kitchen for yet another round of coffee. While he waited for it to brew, he pulled up the news and related reports already obtained by Dixie and Byron. As they'd briefly mentioned, it looked as though they'd nailed Scones through good old-fashioned process of elimination.

Of the perhaps seven people in the whole world who could pull off every kill shot that had brought down several Dogs, four had air-tight alibies for at least half of them. Of the remaining three, only one had the money and means to travel so extensively, and after that the alibis Scones and his mysterious handler had arranged had swiftly fallen apart.

Strange, he would have thought Scones would be far more careful than that. Maybe he simply hadn't cared, past slowing the inevitable. Hadn't he said as much earlier? Sort of, anyway.

Reading over the details of Scones's hero kills, it was hard not to be impressed. Oberon had never paid close attention before, save to make note of which Dogs he no longer had to worry about. Finally going over the details, he could see why so few people could have made the shots. Even leaving out the targets were Dogs, and so a thousand times more difficult than ordinary humans, the shots came from tricky angles at difficult times of day—and night—and in places where it should have been easy for authorities to catch him. The gun and ammo used were top of the line, the kind that only those with special licenses could purchase. Even the black market rarely got a hold of them, they were that tightly controlled.

Oberon pulled up the specs on the gun, purely out of professional curiosity. He rarely used guns, relying more on stealth to do his jobs. The guns he did use... well, this one was so far out of his league it was laughable. If he tried to use it, he'd probably only succeed in killing himself. Handsome piece, though, as such things went.

"We called it the Widowmaker."

Oberon half-turned, watching as Scones stepped further into the kitchen. "We?"

"Military, the other groups I was in. You don't get to use a gun like that without being very, very good at killing. Kind of weapon where if you're great, it'll make you greater, but if you're only good, nevermind worse, then it's wasted on you." He moved to stand next to Oberon, and touched the screen, which shimmered and whited out briefly before switching to whatever source Scones had provided, likely an implanted microchip.

The gun that came up then was the same and yet not. It was the same matte black, splotted with various shades of gray to break it up, but the scopes and other features were different. "This is mine. My latest one, anyway. The accuracy required for my shots means one of these bastards is only good for about ten shots."

"All that time and effort and money, and it has to be ditched after ten shots?"

Scones laughed. "Welcome to the military. Those actually used by the military are handed off for training and the like, or cannibalized for parts. Mine are destroyed when I'm done."

"How do you get them?"

"I stole an entire shipment years ago. They're in a storage facility in the middle of nowhere, with no attachment to me whatsoever. I'm aiming to get to it before they do, in fact."

Oberon snorted. "Byron won't allow that."

"That's why I wasn't going to ask."

"I'm probably going to regret this, but..." Oberon sighed. "Want some help?"

Scones's eyes widened the barest bit before he caught himself. "You're asking to help me?"

"I said I'd try to get along and I meant it, but don't think I don't still dream about throwing you in a crater."

"Aww, you dream about me."

Oberon rolled his eyes. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight, after everyone is asleep, or at least settled in, since I suspect Byron doesn't actually do much sleeping."

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"He doesn't." Neither did Oberon. Call it the curse of those who lived way too fucking long, though Oberon had nothing on Byron. Enough, though, they'd shared a lonely night or two being sad together on the couch. "Good luck leaving without him and his security measures noticing."

Scones laughed. "What's he going to do? Ground us and send us to bed without dinner? We're adults, and we've signed no contracts. If you really want to help me, I'd be grateful for it. There's very little that can't be done with such an experienced chameleon on my side."

"Flattery is good, keep it up. I'm off to prepare then. I'll meet you here around midnight. Don't be late."

"Never been late a day in my life. I'll be here, love, ready and waiting."

Oberon left, ignoring those words and the undercurrent that made them crackle, like live wire poking out of ripped sheathing.

Up in his room, he set to the cumbersome chore of packing. A tedious chore for normal people, for a shifter it was a whole new level of challenging. Even keeping to clothes that could adapt to various shapes and sizes, he still had all manner of possibilities to account for, while also ensuring he could move quickly and easily, instead of being weighed down by enough luggage for an entire tour bus.

He vastly preferred being able to dress well and beautifully, but for this mission, it would have to be cargo pants, t-shirts, and hoodies. They were the easiest and most forgiving thing to wear, short of something stretchy like sweatpants.

Once he'd finally finished packing clothes, he switched to the other piece of luggage. Tossing the empty case on the bed beside the first one, he went to the northwest corner of his room and shoved aside the trunk of extra blankets and pillows there. He then removed the false panel in the floor and unlocked the gun safe. He could have simply gone to the practical gun store that Byron kept in the basement, but he preferred his own equipment whenever possible.

Two handguns, a pocket piece, an ankle piece, and assorted knives. He was better with the knives than the guns, but his strength had always been not getting into a fight in the first place.

The last item was his packet of identities, everything from various chips to convince networks he was who he said, to old-fashioned paperwork for the rare occasion it was necessary. All the identities had been set up by Dixie, which made them airtight, and he'd made each one similar enough in general build and stature that he wouldn't need to change clothes to shift between them.

After all was finally ready, he went to get a shower. He'd learned the hard way that the best way to start any mission was squeaky clean because there was no telling when the next chance for a shower would arise.

Once she was clean, she pulled on gray sweatpants and a dark blue tanktop before settling at her desk to take care of some last minute work, ensuring all her identities had more than enough money in their accounts, as did the three backup identities if the first five failed. Next, she double-checked safe houses and stashes. This retrieval mission should be a simple in and out, but the easier a mission seemed, the more likely it was to blow up in their faces—another hard-won lesson.

She'd been more than happy to leave the espionage and rebellion stuff to her husband, happy to be wife, mother, and fashionista. All this murder and intrigue... Well, she'd gotten to be pretty good at it, but it was still far from her favorite thing to do.

By the time all of that was done, it was late enough for dinner, but the last thing Oberon wanted right then was to be surrounded by people who had senses sharply honed to mischief. Instead, she munched on the snacks squirreled away in her room before climbing into bed for a few hours rest before departure.

Thankfully, sleep came, and the nightmares were minimal.

Her alarm chimed at twenty to midnight. 'The time when all witches stir,' her mother had loved to say, in preparation for the witching hour itself. Before life had taken her parents away, the first of many losses. She'd thought old wounds finally healed—as healed as they got—when she'd created a family of her own.

She'd gotten complacent, like a fool.

Oberon made her bed, and then pulled on the clothes she'd left out: black cargo pants, sturdy socks and boots, a light gray tanktop, a forest green t-shirt, and a lightweight heather-gray hoodie. She'd gone with short hair, black and slightly curly, brown eyes, unremarkable, see them and forget them features, ambiguous race. Average height leaning toward short, the kind of figure that wouldn't stand out as one gender or another to most eyes.

All in all, boring. Perfect for the mission at hand, but god, did she hate being boring.

Slinging her bookbag of odds and ends, including the hidden compartment with her alternate identities and other illicit materials, over one shoulder, she hefted her duffle and weapons tote over the other shoulder and headed out.

Scones was already in the hallway, nothing but a black duffle at his feet. He might never get a modeling contract, but Oberon would be lying if she said he wasn't attractive in his own way, especially then, dressed all in black, his hair combed back out of his way, long and lean, always looking ready for violence—like he'd handle it

easy.

If only the stupid bastard wasn't the son of the woman that Oberon hated most in the world. Oberon jutted her chin out in a silent are you ready.

Scones rolled his head toward the door, and they headed out.

Oberon drew up short, however, as she registered what waited for them in the driveway. "Your stupid motorcycle? Really? We have our pick of vehicles, and we go with your flashy piece of shit?"

"It's neither flashy nor a piece of shit, thank you very much."

"Motorcycles are flashy by their very existence. Soldiers, I swear to god. We're supposed to be lying low—quiet, easily overlooked and forgotten. People are going to remember a man and a woman riding around on an expensive motorcycle."

Laughing, Scones said, "I'm not a complete idiot, you know. My face might be bland as plain toast, but my mind is as sharp as yours."

"Nobody is as sharp as me."

Scones smirked as he swung a leg over the motorcycle. "I said mind, not claws. Now get on. We'll get a new vehicle once we're off the mountain." He offered the spare helmet.

Sighing, Oberon stowed her gear, though it was all a bit much for the poor bike, strapped the helmet in place, and settled behind Scones. He was exactly as well-muscled as he always looked, and warm, almost hot, pleasant against the chilly night air.

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Ugh. She needed to stop thinking positive things about Scones. Algernon Lachapelle. If she forgot that for a moment, it would bite her in the ass. Never get complacent.

She held on firmly, head resting against the space between Scones's shoulder blades. Even through his layers, she could feel that his heart was racing much, much more than seem warranted for the occasion. Surely this wasn't enough to affect him so? This was barely a walk in the park for them. About as thrilling and dangerous as getting out of bed in the morning.

Maybe it was less the situation and more the company. Scones was forever insisting Oberon had nothing to worry about from him, but Oberon had given Scones plenty of reason to worry abouther.

Or maybe she was simply losing her goddamn mind.

Thankfully, the trip down the mountain only lasted about an hour by her watch. From there, it was another twenty-ish minutes to the nearest sign of civilization, which was a tarted up traveler station, complete with a truly alarming number of tacky souvenirs.

"Hang tight, I'll be back with a car," Scones said. "Time to grab snacks or something if you want them."

"I'll be here." She'd have to start eating gas station junk food eventually, but she didn't have to yet. No matter how tempting gummy bears sounded.

Scones slipped away, moving through the bustling center with surprising ease, not standing out the way Oberon had expected, given military goons usually had all the

subtlety of a trainwreck.

She sat-leaned on the bike, arms folded across her chest, ever alert to her surroundings. A couple of rough looking guys cast looks her way, but when she stared them down, decided to go find easier prey. Presumably. They certainly didn't seem to be looking for new friends.

Just as Oberon was getting fed up with waiting, the world's most boring white four door sedan pulled up alongside her. The passenger window lowered, and Scones leaned over the center console. "Get it."

"What about your precious baby?"

Scones grinned, mischievous and more delightfully wicked than Oberon would ever fucking admit. "I'll send word to Karl to retrieve it for me, and trust me when I say no one here will be stupid enough to mess with it more than once."

"Oh, booby traps, nice," Oberon replied as she slid into the passenger seat. "So where are we going?"

"Carolina, into the mountains, right up against the border."

"Oh, good, I love running into drunk hillbillies with guns who are overprotective of their stills."

Scones laughed. "They're not that bad."

"Forgive me if I don't trust a lunatic sniper on the run from his bloodthirsty, mass murdering mother."

That just got him more laughter. "For some reason, it never once occurred to me that

you'd be the uptight one in the group. You always seemed devil-may-care from a distance."

Oberon shot him a look. "What in the hell is that supposed to mean? Have you been watching me or something?"

To her astonishment, Scones's cheeks turned a ruddy red. "No, I've watched the Anti-Heroes. I always knew our paths would cross someday, and I wanted to be sure my ops never interfered with yours. I was actually rather pleased when Matt called me for help. Nice not to always have to do everything more or less alone..." He looked for a moment like he was going to cry, face shutting down, his grip on the steering wheel making his knuckles go white.

Then he relaxed and was the same as ever, and goddammit Oberon did not want to feel sorry for the bastard but... "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Risk we take," Scones replied. "We knew that day would come too. At least she went out her way. Melody was her name. What they call a 'real firecracker' over here. She didn't have any powers, but that never slowed her down. Sometimes I think the most dangerous of us are those without powers."

Oberon huffed a laugh. "You're not wrong. Karl doesn't have a scrap of power in him, but the G.O.D. is terrified of him. Byron doesn't have power either, but he's also not normal."

"Then there's you—powerful but not," Scones replied. "You certainly don't have the firepower of the others."

"No, I don't," Oberon said, an edge to her smile. "Sometimes, though, all it takes to be dangerous is to be invisible. Karl does it his way, I do it mine, and the G.O.D. can't pin down either of us. Not yet, anyway. Almost, once, but thanks to Byron's

beloved, we made it out." She sighed and shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. She hated long car rides, hated being confined. "So we've got what, eight hours of driving?"

"About that, yeah."

"I'm going back to sleep, then. Wake me when it's my turn to drive, if you're not one of those 'must always be in control of the wheel' types." She didn't wait for a reply, just pulled up the hood of her jacket, folded her arms across her chest, and focused on her breathing until sleep took over.

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She woke to the patter of rain and the rhythmic sweep of windshield wipers, and stared out at a lazy storm and long stretch of road. "How long was I out?"

"Just over four hours," Scones replied. "I just refilled the tank. Got some snacks in case you were hungry. They're at your feet."

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She'd slept four hours? Through stopping and starting? All the noise Scones must have inevitably made? Oberon's heart lurched and flipped, then started pounding. Since when did she sleep so deeply with anyone around? Let alone in a moving car with a fucking Lachapelle.

Oberon drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Whatever. Clearly she'd been far more tired than she'd realized. She looked down at the bag of snacks at her feet and retrieved it. Her heart, which had just begun to calm, started thud-thudding all over again. Salt and vinegar chips. Gummi bears. Iced green tea. Her favorites. "How did you know what I liked?"

She looked up when no replay came, and didn't know what to make of the way nearly his entire face had gone red.

He glanced at her, then away. "I just picked it up somewhere."

That was a bald-faced lie, but Oberon didn't press the matter. She wasn't in the mood for whatever the real answer would be. "Any interesting chatter?"

"Nah, nothing but the same shit. They're looking for me pretty hard, but they won't find me. How do you Yanks say it? 'They ain't gonna' find me?'"

Oberon laughed despite herself. "Dixie would say it that way, yeah. They seem to have gotten too close already."

Scones's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Yeah, well, Melody gave as good as she got."

"That's not what I meant," Oberon said with a wince. "I meant, they know who you are now. Your mother..."

Scones laughed, mean and smug. "Right now she's probably being interrogated. Locked up like all the people she's tormented over the years. Everyone, from the people who hate her to the precious few who can stand to pretend to like her, probably thinks we were colluding the whole time. I hope she's fucking miserable."

"You really do hate her, don't you?" Oberon asked quietly. "You've said, even explained it, but..."

"But Lachapelle is Lachapelle?" Scones smiled wryly, never taking his eyes off the road, hands gripping the wheel tightly. "We can't help the family we're born in, but I left it the very moment I could. Nobody hates my mother more than me, except maybe you."

Damn it. Oberon didn't want to let go of the grudge. It felt too easy. Far, far too easy. It also felt like maybe she already had... perhaps when she'd listened to Scone's anguished scream over Melody's death. Nobody could fake a scream like that. It was the scream of a broken heart. Of pieces lost forever, no matter how good a repair job was done on what was left.

Fuck everything. Who would have thought this was where her life would lead? Traveling with the son of Margaux Lachapelle, even starting to trust the bastard, maybe even not hate him entirely. Shouldn't there be some big, flashy occasion that changed her mind? Scones swooping in to save her life in the most dramatic way possible? At the eleventh hour when all hope seemed lost?

Not because of grief and a few snarky comments.

Fuck, she was getting old. Possibly senile.

Sighing, Oberon opened the bag of chips and started eating. They really were her favorite, a brand with sea salt and malt vinegar, super sour with a faint hint of sweet that just made it all better.

"Pretty sure your French relatives are appalled with you right now."

"Don't underestimate how scathing my Chinese relatives would be," Oberon said. "They'd give the French ones a run for their money. Elitist snobs on both sides; it's a miracle I was conceived at all. You should have seen the arguing that ensued when we were planning the wedding." Thankfully Evan's family was far more reasonable, happy so long as their son and daughter-in-law were happy, and they didn't have to give any speeches.

"You had a beautiful dress," Scones said softly. "I remember it from my mother's files. She was always careless about what she left out at home. I used to poke around." The car wavered as his grip on the steering wheel faltered. "Even as a dumb kid I knew what she did that day was wrong—beyond wrong, beyond everything else she'd ever done. I already hated her by then, but that day... reading about... well, I've waited a long time to meet you. To tell you I'm sorry my mother is such human garbage."

"And that I had a beautiful wedding dress?" Oberon asked dryly, because she didn't trust herself to focus on anything else that Scones had just said. There was clearly more going on in his head than Oberon had realized, more about her in that head than she ever would have suspected or guessed. Why? Because of her slaughtered family? She wasn't even the greatest of Lachapelle's victims, just the one most determined to fucking kill her.

Scone's face turned red again, and if he stared any harder at the road his eyes would pop from the strain. "Look, just because I have a face like a wet mop doesn't mean I don't appreciate beauty when I see it."

Oberon narrowed her eyes at Scones, but those mismatched eyes stayed firmly on the road. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to her that Scones would be bothered by his own looks. Well, to be fair, she'd been doing her damndest not to think about Scones at all.

Still, the way Scones moved, the truly haunting number of kills to his name, all the life experience he must have... and he was unhappy he wasn't model pretty? Oberon might not like the bastard—she didn't know what she thought or felt where Scones was concerned—but she wasn't going to be party to making someone feel bad about their own looks. That was a low she wouldn't stoop to. People shouldn't be ridiculed or punished for things beyond their control, especially something as trivial as looks.

"Pull over."

"What?" Scones said, daring her a brief look.

"Pull over!"

Scones obeyed that time, pulling onto the shoulder and throwing the car into park.

"What's wrong?"

Oberon undid her seatbelt and sat up enough she could turn to face Scones, braced on one knee. Stupid, she was stupid. This was stupid. But she was going to fucking do it anyway. "I'm only going to do this once, understand me?"

"Yes?" Scones asked, bewildered, as he copied her and removed his seatbelt. Oberon leaned across the center console, one hand braced on the armrest, and sank her other hand into the hair at Scones's nape before dragging him in close and taking his mouth.

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He tasted salty-sweet, gasping into Oberon's mouth before he jerked slightly and dove into the kiss like a man obsessed, stroking his fingers gently against Oberon's cheek before cupping her face, firm but gentle. Oberon let go of his hair to shift to a less awkward angle—well, as less awkward as it could get, given the situation—as Scones's tongue pushed into her mouth and control of the kiss abruptly shifted.

Fuck, she really hated to admit it, but the bastard could kiss. What else could that mouth do?

No. She absolutely was not letting her thoughts wander that road. That way lay stupidity, and she had a strong policy against that.

Tearing away, breaths expelling shakily, Oberon withdrew, barely resisting the urge—the need—to lick her lips. "Not bad for a wet mop. Now get back to work."

Scones stared a moment, eyes filled with more shock than really seemed warranted, and then slowly, stiffly obeyed, hands trembling faintly as he did up his seatbelt, put the car into gear, and pulled back into traffic.

Oberon rested her temple against the passenger window and stared at the landscape beyond, trying desperately to put her mind on anything other than the kiss she could still feel on her lips.

Had she lost her fucking mind? What was she going to do next?

She didn't want to think about it.

Instead of dropping the matter like a sensible person, however, she asked, "Guess I should have asked what your preferences are before doing that. Though it certainly didn't seem like my current form wasn't your preference."

The car wavered again, which was hilarious. Scones surely must be the kind of person who could remain unaffected by things that would break most people inside of five minutes. He was a sniper, for crying out loud. Why was he freaking out so much over a kiss and some flirty talk?

Ugh, why was she flirting with a Lachapelle?

"I don't really have preferences, beyond 'old enough to consent' and 'consenting,'" Scones finally replied. "Well, and if they in any way approve of my mother, I leave faster than lightning strikes. Otherwise, I like it all."

"Really?" Oberon asked, interest piqued far more than she liked admitting.

Scones shrugged one shoulder. "Sure. Male. Female. Agender. Bigender. Cis. Trans. Intersex. Whatever. Smaller than me. Bigger than me. Skinny. Fat. It doesn't matter." After a beat he added, "I like people, despite how my kill numbers would suggest otherwise. The problem—"

"The problem?" Oberon echoed.

"Nothing. Forget it."

Oberon let him be. Not hard to guess he was probably going to say something like 'the problem is me'. Being a professional killer and the son of Margaux Lachapelle hardly made one ideal relationship material.

She certainly wasn't one to judge. After her family had been murdered, she'd sworn

off relationships entirely. Any and all shapes. The closest she'd come in years was aligning herself with Byron and, by extension, all his other little friends. Even then, she kept all the distance she could. Doing anything else was a fool's game.

"What... what about you?" Scones asked, almost tentatively. "What appeals to a person who can be literally anything and anyone?"

Oberon opened her mouth to say 'none of your damn business,' but that wasn't fair. She'd started this conversation after all. Don't ask questions if you weren't: a) prepared for all possible answers; and b) willing to answer the question yourself.

"Enthusiasm," she said at last, as it was close enough. "I don't want someone who just wants to fuck because they're bored, because there's no one better around, that sort of bullshit. If they're not with me because they want to be with me, desperately and eagerly, then I don't want them. Past that, as you said, consenting and old enough to do so." She pursed her lips. "Someone asked me once if I was able and willing to shift into a child."

"I've heard there are shapeshifters that do that kind of thing for truly impressive amounts of money."

"You could give me your mother's head on a plate, and I still would not let somebody use me to fulfill their fantasy of fucking a child," Oberon said coldly. "Infinitely better than raping an actual child, but I couldn't handle it. I'm impressed that anyone can."

"Me too," Scones with a shudder. "I think I'd put a gun in my mouth if I had to do that even once."

"Good thing you're not a shapeshifter, then. What's it like being a 3-level breezer?"

Scones glanced at her briefly, a cute little mischievous grin curving his mouth.

Damn it. He needed to stop doing things like that. If he didn't, Oberon was going to do something really fucking stupid. Much, much stupider than a simple kiss.

"What's it like being a peasant, you mean?" Scones asked, eyes back on the road. "It's an awareness, I guess you'd call it. Sort of like when you're driving, and you can feel when the car hits or scrapes something, you know? Like that, but sharper. I can feel it, and sometimes coax it to help me out. Hard to miss a shot when the wind itself is willing to listen to you every now and again."

It sounded delightful, but not more delightful than shapeshifting.

"So what it's like for you?" Scones asked. "I never read about shapeshifting hurting, but..."

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Oberon stared out the window. "It hurts the way muscles hurt after a workout, and much the same, the more I do it, the less it hurts. Going much bigger or much smaller can ache, my body can only shrink and grow so much, and I'm a 7-level, so I can't do non-human species. Wouldn't want to, anyway."

"I shudder to think what the G.O.D. and world militaries would do if they had 10-level shapeshifters to hand."

"The stuff of nightmares," Oberon replied. Her biggest fear was being captured, experimented on and exploited. Another thing she and Byron had in common, along with Matt and Dixie. Of the four of them, she was the only one who hadn't been under the knife of a mad scientist. She wanted vehemently to keep it that way.

Silence fell for a couple of minutes, and then Scones said, "So can I ask a question that isn't just copying yours?"

Oberon huffed a laugh. "I suppose that's fair."

"Do you have a favorite form? I know from research that shapeshifters don't actually have a default appearance, as it were, they just most often cling to the one they had before their ability kicked in."

No one had ever asked her that before. "Not really. It's true that back in the day I stuck to the form I grew up with." She still would if she could fucking remember it, but she'd rather die than admit that. "These days, when I'm not looking a particular way for a job, I do whatever suits my fancy."

"Did you ever have lovers that tried to make you stay a certain way?"

"Two, when I was young. I dumped them immediately." Oberon cast him a sideways glance, but Scones eyes were, of course, on the road. "What's it like trying to score a date as Algernon Lachapelle?"

"Thrill seekers and power seekers, pretty much as you'd expect. Jokes always been on them, though. My mother wouldn't offer me a glass of water if I was dying of thirst. She'd just tell me to stop being a whiny pissbaby and get back to work."

Oberon snorted. "Your mother is, and I cannot stress this enough, a stone-hearted bitch who deserves to be shot in the face."

"You've no idea how many times I've thought of doing precisely that."

"Why didn't you?"

"Various reasons, but among them: I'm not going to prison or on the run for her. It wouldn't necessarily solve anything, not at the times I could have done it; and I feel like other people have priority on that privilege."

Oberon wasn't sure what to say to that. She'd waited decades for a chance to kill Lachapelle... but fuck, the woman apparently had used her son as a punching bag and forced him to become a killer. There were entire fucking battles in history that didn't have Scones's body count. As much as she hated to fucking admit it, she couldn't begrudge him if Scones wanted the honor of ridding the world of Margaux Lachapelle.

Instead of saying any of that, though, she only said, "Why Algernon?"

Scones groaned. "Because that was the name of some bloodthirsty tyrant in history

that my mother loves and admires. I think she was hoping I'd live up to my namesake, but ransacking villages, raping and murdering my way across the continent, really isn't my style. Well, the murder part is, I guess." He sighed, and after another lull said quietly, "My middle name is Stéphane."

"Algernon Stéphane Lachapelle," Oberon said, the French rolling easily off her tongue. "Why don't you go by your middle name?"

"Didn't want all the people I despised using the only name I have that I like," Scones replied. "I seriously doubt I'd ever fail to recognize you, no matter how you look, but if you're ever in doubt, use that. I'll know it's you for sure."

"All right." Oberon didn't know what else to say. She'd woken up yesterday as cheerfully ready to punch Scones in his stupid face as ever. Now she was running off with him on an off-books mission, and they were, despite everything, building trust.

Every time she thought life couldn't possibly get more complicated, she was proven wrong.

What in the hell was going to happen next?

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They arrived in the late evening, as the sky was turning purple and stars were just beginning to glimmer, though the clouds swiftly approaching promised rain would soon take over.

Slamming the car door shut, Oberon hastened into the twenty-four-hour diner they'd stopped at. After this, they'd crash somewhere for a few hours, and then finally hit the storage facility. Better to be rested and refreshed in case anything went sideways.

The smell of eggs, pancakes, and coffee washed over him as he stepped inside, and Oberon pulled off the baseball cap he'd dug out of his luggage while they'd been stuck in a traffic jam that had resulted from a six car pileup on a two-lane road. He'd also changed himself up just for variety and security's sake.

He sat at a booth that would let them see the whole room without pinning them into a corner. Most importantly, they had clear sight of the door. Not that Oberon expected there to be a problem. He'd been keeping an ear on the chatter, and hadn't heard anything that indicated anyone gave a damn about them.

Though he wouldn't be surprised if Byron and Dixie were doing some work on their end. Byron was likely pissed as hell, but he wouldn't leave them high and dry.

The server shuffled over, stifling a yawn. "What can I get you, boys?"

"I'll take the largest breakfast platter you've got," Scones said. "Eggs scrambled hard. Wheat toast, strawberry jam. Lots of coffee."

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"Coffee, oatmeal, yogurt, and fruit for me," Oberon said. "Couple of eggs over easy, biscuits."

Not even bothering to write of it down, the server said, "You got it," and did a tidy heel turn. She called out the order to the cook in that diner lingo Oberon didn't understand and came back a minute later with coffee for them, along with enough packets of cream and sugar for twelve. Oberon wasn't complaining. "Thanks, darling."

"My pleasure," she said with a smile, and winked before she sauntered back behind the counter.

Scones gave him a look.

"What?" Oberon asked. "I can't help it I'm naturally charming. It'll get us better service, so stop complaining."

"Not complaining, just amused you can do that, even when you're this close to falling asleep in your coffee."

Oberon laughed. "I've been doing it so long, it's instinct. Couldn't turn it off if I tried. She wouldn't complain if you called her sweetheart, either."

"Rather not. People will remember a ginger British bloke awkwardly flirting."

"Surprised you don't dye it."

"Have a couple of times, but if you think I'm pasty with red hair, you should see how much worse it is with black or blond hair. Brown can look all right, depends on the undertones."

Oberon pursed his lips, picturing the myriad shades of hair. "Yes, I can see where blond and black would not work so well. You were clearly meant to be a redhead, no point in fighting it, I suppose."

"Yeah, we're not all blessed with your good looks."

"I don't think it counts when I can change my appearance on a whim," Oberon replied. "You're hardly a chore to look at."

Scones made a face. "Whatever. I'm not interested in discussing me. All I want right now is food and bed."

"A hot shower," Oberon said. He also wouldn't mind a good fuck to work out some of his tension, but his options there were limited, to say the least. He'd just have to find some other way to bleed all the tension out before it made him do something stupid.

All the coffee probably wasn't helping, but if he didn't have coffee, he would fall asleep in his breakfast, and that was a waste of good oatmeal.

Which thankfully arrived a moment later, accompanied by cream, butter, and brown sugar, the exact opposite of the healthy breakfast he'd been halfheartedly going for. Oh, well, guess he'd just have to eat it anyway. Woe and suffering.

He poured his third cup of coffee and then dug into the breakfast with gusto. "Nice to have relatively real food for once."

Scones laughed. "Still prefer a good beans on toast, but try to ask for that on this side

of the pond and you'll get dragged to the village square and burned as a witch."

"As you should," Oberon replied.

Scones rolled his eyes. "I don't want to hear it from a country that advertises waffle breakfast tacos."

"Don't look at me, I'm French-Chinese: Two places where... actually, I think together they make one single place that knows food. There's no excuse for calf's head, urine eggs, and a host of other abominations."

"Yet you think beans on toast is bad."

"I said what I said."

"Next you'll be insulting black pudding."

"I've had worse, I'll say that."

Scones grinned, and goddammit if he wasn't more than a little cute when he did that. Oberon had officially lost his goddamn mind.

He put his focus back on his breakfast, until there was barely even a crumb left. Once they were paid up, Scones drove them to the hotel they'd reserved ahead of time. That Oberon had reserved, because he didn't trust Scones not to be one of those types that just picked the first sketchy hovel he saw. Oberon had standards, and they included a clean bed and an amazing shower.

At the hotel, Scones whistled and gave him a look. "We're supposed to be laying low, Your Highness."

"I'm not laying low with cockroaches and bedbugs," Oberon retorted.

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"I think all the assumptions those words imply are the greatest insult you've levied on me yet."

"Sorry, you only get one apology kiss, if that's what you're angling for."

Scones laughed. "Wouldn't dare dream of it."

The words were exactly the reply Oberon had expected, yet something about them sent the back of his neck tingling all the same, like something was off about them, even though he couldn't begin to imaginewhat. They were as innocuous as innocuous could be.

Maybe he was just tired. Probably he was just tired. At the counter, he went through all the usual pleasantries and then finally presented the confirmation number he'd been emailed.

"One moment," the clerk said with a smile.

A moment later, her face fell.

Oh, great, because this trip hadn't been long enough.

"I'm so sorry, sir, but it looks like there was a booking mistake, and we've only got one room for you, instead of the two requested."

As mistakes went, that was barely worth Oberon's time. "That's fine, as long as the payment is adjusted."

"The difference and half off the new total. I apologize for our mistake," she said, and slid their keys across the desk. "Enjoy your stay."

Oberon stuffed the keys, really just little wooden fobs with chips inside, into his pocket and followed Scones back out to the car. Grabbing their belongings, they headed up to the third floor and all the way down the hall to their room just two doors from the end.

As he opened the door, the scent of citrus cleaners washed over him, chased by eucalyptus. The room was dark, but lights came on as they walked further into the room. Scones immediately went to the enormous, room-length windows and snapped the curtains shut.

"I guess that's a reasonable paranoia for a professional sniper," Oberon said, though he had been going to do the same thing. He put his bags on the luggage stand—and only then registered the mistake he'd made when just accepting the single room.

There was only one bed. Not two. He'd reserved singles, and forgotten to request a double, and the clerk hadn't thought of it either.

Sighing, he pulled out what he needed for a shower and headed into the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind him.

Thankfully, this part of their stay was perfect. There was an enormous shower with a frosted glass sliding door, a bathtub that ran that fine line between bath and jacuzzi, and every other luxury he could possibly require.

Setting his toiletry bag on the counter, he pulled out what he needed, put it in the shower, and then turned on the water to let it heat up. Thankfully, that was as perfect as every other component of the bathroom, and moments later he was cheerfully boiling himself, letting the steam carry some of his tensions away.

When he finally could not stay in the hot water any longer without getting lightheaded, he climbed out, toweled off, and head back out to the main room.

Scones looked up from where he was typing away on the computer he'd pulled up—and froze, eyes going wide, cheeks going damn near as red as his hair. He snapped his gaze back to the computer, swearing softly as he fumbled his typing.

Oberon rolled his eyes, pulled boxers and a t-shirt from his bag, and dressed. He toweled his hair as he located the controls for the TV screen, which flickered to life as a large rectangular screen hovering over the bureau that took up most of the space against the far wall. He flicked to the news, unsurprised when the screen filled with pictures of Scones, from his days in the military through his career working directly for the G.O.D. and a smattering of shots taken after he'd retired and had been spending time with his mother, or at least spending time in her vicinity.

"Did they go through and find the worst possible fucking pictures of me?" Scones asked, groaning as yet another military picture flashed, this one with him covered in dirt and blood. "Who the fuck even took that picture?"

"You're remarkably naïve for a professional murderer," Oberon said. "Of course they're picking the worst possible pictures, and that image is probably a composite that's been further doctored."

"Not that doctored, if at all," Scones said sourly. "I remember that mission. It went south. Like, all the way to Antarctica and started digging south. That blood all over my face belonged to my commanding officer that I'd just stabbed in the throat. Do not stand in the path of arterial spray unless you want to know what a mouthful of hot blood tastes like." He made a face, some of the lovely color leeching from his skin. "I resigned about three months after that, and I'd have done it sooner, but we were in the middle of a fucking jungle with no way out but to fight through."

Oberon's brows rose. "I'm genuinely impressed you're not a fucking psychopath."

"Who says I'm not?" Scones muttered as he turned back to his computer. "Doesn't look like there's been any suspicious activity at the storage place."

"Or they're smart enough to keep it off camera."

Scones snorted. "That would be really fucking impressive, given the number of cameras I installed. They're all up and running, no one has found any of them and destroyed them. Guess we'll see." He turned off the computer and stood. "If you're good for the bathroom, I'm going to take my turn at a shower. Did you leave any hot water?"

Oberon laughed. "It's a hotel; they don't really run out."

"I think they didn't plan for you."

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"Ha, haha, ha," Oberon retorted.

Scones grinned as he grabbed up his toiletry bag and clothes and vanished into the bathroom.

Oberon hated he was disappointed Scones wouldn't be changing out here. Honestly, what the hell was wrong with him? Just days ago he'd have been happy to slit Scones's throat. Why was he now giving more consideration to fucking the bastard than he wanted to admit?

What would Margaux have to say about her oldest mortal enemy fucking her son?

That wasn't the way to go about this, though. If he really wanted to fuck Scones, it should be because he wanted to fuck Scones, not because he wanted some petty revenge Margaux Lachapelle would never care about anyway.

Sighing, Oberon sprawled out on his back across the bed.

He didn't bother to sit up as Scones came out of the bathroom, simply yawned and enjoyed the view. Like him, Scones was in boxers, but he wore a tanktop rather than a t-shirt, and my what lovely muscles the bastard had. Oberon had already known that, but seeing them with no clothes in the way was something else entirely.

Oberon stifled another sigh at himself and sat up—and stopped to see a little leather portfolio on the floor, the kind meant to hold a picture or two. "You dropped something," he said, and bent to grab it.

"No!" Scones said, and moved across the room so fast Oberon was left reeling. "Sorry, it's just—"

"I understand 'private' when I hear it shouted," Oberon said dryly. "I wasn't going to pry, anyway."

"Sorry," Scones said. "It's... someone important to me. I shouldn't even have the photo, but I couldn't resist taking it when the chance presented itself. It's about the only thing I always carry with me no matter what I do or where I go."

He hadn't said 'picture of someone I'm in love with,' but he may as well have. Oberon didn't say anything, just yawned as he watched Scones tuck the leather fold away in his dufflebag. Curiosity burned, but it was clearly something Scones didn't want to talk about, so Oberon let the matter drop. "Which side of the bed does the mighty sniper prefer?"

"Closest to the door, so move over," Scones said as he finished toweling his hair dry and absently combed through it in a completely failed attempt to tame it. He went to the door and fussed with all the locks, then also dragged over a chair to put in front it. Last, he put a gun on the bureau and another beside him on the nightstand.

Oberon snorted as he got comfortable. "You must be fun in a crowd."

"I don't do crowds," Scones replied.

"That tracks," Oberon said, and turned off his light. If he pretended he was going to get some sleep, instead of lying there thinking about a hundred different things, maybe his brain would trick itself into actually doing that.

He wasn't going to be that lucky, but he could try.

Two hours later, he gave up and climbed out of bed and went to sulk at the table. Thanks to rooming with a paranoid sniper, he couldn't even stare mindlessly out the window.

A groggy voice, sexier than it had any fucking business being, said, "Are you always this restless, or is tonight unusual?"

"Eh," Oberon replied.

Scones rolled out of bed and vanished briefly into the bathroom. When he came out again, yawning, hair tousled, ridiculously pasty skin almost glowing in the weak light from the bathroom before he turned it off, he mumbled, "Any way I can help? Last thing we need tomorrow is either of us exhausted."

Oberon mentally listed out every single reason he shouldn't say what he was about to say, and then said it anyway. "Not unless you want to fuck."

He'd never seen someone choke on nothing before, but that was definitely what Scones did, wheezing out a moment later, "What."

"You heard me," Oberon said, heat prickling along his spine, tingling across the back of his neck, because he definitely knew an interested party when he saw one. "Yes? No? Do you want to be tied to the bed and persuaded?"

"Not really my thing," Scones said dryly. "Yes. If you're offering, I'm accepting."

Prickling heat turned into buzzing anticipation. Who would have thought he'd ever want to fuck a goddamn Lachapelle? "How do you want me?" he asked, standing up and prowling toward Scones. "Tits? No tits? Cock? Pussy? Combo platter?"

Scones laughed and reeled him in close the moment he got within grabbing distance,

nuzzling along his jaw and cheekbone, as though content simply to hold and breathe him in. "Combo platter. You're ridiculous. I want you however I can have you. I told you, I like everything."

"Fine, but now's your last chance to get the watermelon tits of your dreams."

"Shut up, shut up," Scones said, laughing harder even as he pressed an almost shy kiss to Oberon's mouth.

Such a strange and intriguing mix of contrasts, this one. Oberon never would have pegged Scones as the shy type. Pegging Scones, hmm. Definitely a thought to save.

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Before he had to face the fact he'd just blithely made a note for future plans with Scones, Oberon gripped the sides of his face and plunged into the kiss. He had never struggled with shyness, so if Scones needed him to be the bold one, he was more than happy to keep doing so.

Scones tasted salty and sweet, maybe left over from their meal, maybe just him. His arms were tight around Oberon's waist, but only for a moment, before they skated up and down his body, fingertips alternately pressing and stroking, a mix of sensations that left Oberon shivering delightedly.

Pulling away, he licked his lips and shoved, sending Scones to land on his back on the bed. Not one to delay the inevitable, Oberon ditched his clothes and then got rid of Scones's, afterward letting him get settled against a mound of pillows before straddling his lap. For all he was a skinny fuck, Scones didn't lack for muscle. He was lean and mean, like a snake, or a bird, predators who moved and behaved quite differently from the more hugely built ones like wildcats and bears. "Anything you particularly love or hate?"

"Don't manhandle my balls. Fuck, you'd be surprised how many people try for a sexy grab and yank."

Oberon winced in sympathy. "I've yet to decide what's worse: people who get overly grabby, or people who think the only way to fuck a cunt is the jackhammer method."

Scones laughed, fitting his hands to Oberon's thighs, fingers digging in just enough to feel the press. "I was probably guilty of that at sixteen. Too much porn."

"Well, so far you seem to have learned your lessons," Oberon said, splaying his own hands across Scones's chest, enjoying the feel of soft, warm skin, the way his muscles moved, throat working as he fought the moans Oberon had provoked. Leaning down, Oberon kissed him again, because as good as he'd been in the car, Scones was infinitely better now, where there was no awkward reaching and twisting to do.

Tearing away from his mouth, Oberon kissed his jaw, then his throat, lingering when that got him a hitched breath, and the hands on his thighs clamped down briefly. He kissed the spot again, then worried it with his teeth, relishing the moan that finally tore free of Scones's throat. "You don't have to smother every noise."

"Habit," Scones said with a short, rough laugh. "Usually it's not a problem."

That was a damning commentary on Scones's previous lovers, but Oberon didn't voice the thought, just took another teasing bite of that spot that seemed to drive Scones wild before finally setting to work on the rest of him.

He really did not understand how someone like Margaux Lachapelle had managed to produce someone like this. While he had zero desire to fuck Scones just to make her angry, he hoped somewhere that chills were running down her spine.

Oberon kissed the crease of Scone's hip before nuzzling his way to the hard cock demanding attention, licking and kissing teasingly, until Scones sank a hand into his hair and yanked. "Do it already, you bloody bastard." Scone's accent had never been so strong, as poncy British bastard as it was possible to get.

"Maybe I prefer to see you suffer."

In the next breath, Oberon was on his back, with absolutely no idea how he'd gotten there, Scones looming over him, pale skin gleaming with sweat, that ridiculous hair tousled, and a gleam in his eye that made it very hard to breathe.

Before Oberon could say anything, there was a hand wrapped around his cock—firmly enough to stroke, but too loose to be satisfying, leaving him aching, desperate. "Do you need a refresher then, love?" Scones asked, and once more Oberon was rendered unable to reply, reduced to some moans of his own as Scones's mouth dropped over his cock and went to work like his life depended on it.

"Fuck me," Oberon said, head pushing back into the pillows, hands flailing for something to grab.

Scones pulled off his cock long enough to say, "That's on the menu, never fear," and with a laugh at Oberon's swearing, went back to work, cheeks hollowing as he sucked, pulling Oberon in deep, until he hit the back of Scone's throat.

Oberon moaned, every thought flying from his head. When had that last happened? He couldn't recall.

Reaching out, he curled a hand into Scones's soft, fiery hair, unable to resist thrusting into his mouth a bit—and more when the grip on his hips encouraged him to do so. Who would have thought he'd find so much delight in fucking Scones's mouth?

As much as he would have liked to drag it out, make the pleasure and anticipation last forever, Scones was simply too damn good at sucking cock. "I'm going—" he broke off as Scones just sucked harder, as though hungry for it, determined to take everything Oberon gave.

Far be it for him to protest or complain.

Pulling off his softening cock, Scones rose up on his knees and wiped his mouth and chin, filthy from come and spit, with the back of one hand. His eyes burned with an intensity that left Oberon breathless and reeling. It was grossly out of place in a hotel room where two people were fucking to burn energy and go back to sleep.

"Can I still fuck you?" he asked, voice rough.

"You had better." Oberon beckoned him close, spreading his thighs. "I guess we should have discussed this sooner, but you've no diseases to worry about with me."

Scones laughed. "I know that much about shifters, and I would have already said if I wasn't good to go." He buried his face in Oberon's throat, pinning his hands to the bed with his own, rutting against him as he sucked and licked and bit at Oberon's skin as though determined to leave a permanent mark.

He drew back with a groan of protest after a few minutes and went to his duffle, pulling out a dark green tube and returning to the bed with unseemly haste, as though he might die if he didn't get back between Oberon's thighs.

Oberon moaned, grasping at the blankets, as Scones's fingers, slick and warm, steadily worked him open. "That's enough," he said eventually. "I'm neither new nor fragile. Make me feel it."

Something flashed, hot and bright, in Scones's eyes before he withdrew his fingers, slicked his cock, and slowly pushed into Oberon's body. Fuck. Oberon hadn't felt this stuffed full in a long time. He couldn't wait to try it with a cunt just to see how that felt.

Scones fucked into him steadily, deeply. Oberon could only hold tight, one hand fisted in Scones's hair, the other digging into his back, holding him close thrust after thrust. There was no way he'd come again so soon, but he didn't care, soaked in pleasurable sensation, Scones's panting breaths in his ear, sweaty skin sliding, his thighs aching from being stretched wide and clamped tightly to Scones's body, urging him deeper, faster.

Moments later, Scones sank into him one last time, messily kissing his throat as he

came, shuddering hard in Oberon's arms. Once he'd calmed, he pulled out gently with a long groan and rolled over to sprawl, sweaty and chest heaving, next to Oberon. "If you're not able to sleep now, I did something wrong."

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"I would say you did everything right," Oberon said around a yawn, turning to sprawl on his stomach, reluctantly sharing the pillow. He meant to say something else, but suddenly it was too much effort to speak, or open his eyes, or...

He swore, for a moment, as he slowly drifted off, that he heard Scones whisper his name. Not his call sign, not any of his aliases, but his real name that he hadn't used in years.

Before he could determine if he'd really heard it or his mind was playing tricks, Oberon was finally fast asleep.

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He woke while it was still dark, roughly thirty minutes before his alarm.

The first thing he noticed were the aches. Mild, negligible even, but certainly not aches he was used to feeling these days. He could feel dried come on his thighs. Next to him in the bed, Scones still slept, so still that if not for the slight rise and fall of his chest Oberon would have thought him dead. Bastard must have an utterly ridiculous resting heart rate.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. He didn't know what was worse: that he'd fucked a goddamn Lachapelle or that he wasn't nearly as sorry about it as he should be. Try as he might to focus on who Scones was, who his mother was, his stupid, backstabbing brain just kept going back to ardent kisses and how nice Scones had felt wrapped in his arms as he fucked Oberon thoroughly enough to leave him feeling it the next day.

Swearing some more, because apparently that would help, Oberon climbed out of bed and went to grab a quick shower to clean up.

When he came out of the bathroom, Scones was awake and dressed, sitting at the table on the far side of the room going through various handguns. On the bed was a case that could only hold a rifle—a sniper rifle, a class all its own.

Oberon frowned. "Do you think we're going to run into the kind of trouble that requires sniping?"

"I don't go anywhere without it," Scones said, loading one of his weapons and sliding it into the shoulder holster he'd put on. "Doubt we'll need it, though. We go into the storage place, get my shit, and get out. Shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes, and I'm aiming for ten." He stowed another gun, this one at his waist. "This stash should not be on anyone's radar, but I'm not banking on it, especially since..." His mouth twisted, and he didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Oberon didn't offer condolences again; at this point, it would just come off patronizing. "So we just... walk in, open the storage unit, grab five thousand guns, and walk out?"

Scones laughed as he holstered the last of his guns and stood, tucking spare ammo into a pouch at the small of his back. "Trunks, on wheels. Five of them. Three trips max. The guns are stowed and ready to go. This isn't the movies, where I have fancy metal racks filled with the damn things like some sort of museum showpiece for only myself to admire."

"I mean that would certainly be in keeping with your mother," Oberon said with a snort.

Scones's laughter faded. "Can't deny that. Hopefully by this point, though, you get I'm

not my mother."

"I know," Oberon said with a sigh, though really what he knew was absolutely nothing. Well, he was a fucking fool, he knew that much. Last night never should have happened. He couldn't be sorry about it, though, not really.

"Don't worry," Scones said levelly, expression blank as Oberon looked up to meet his gaze. "No repeats, I get it. Never expected them. You wanted to sleep. I'm still a Lachapelle. I'm not going to whip out a fucking engagement ring or something, Oberon. Are you ready to get to work?"

Despite his voice and face giving nothing away, Oberon still had the sense Scones was hurt. That was stupid, though. What was there to be hurt about? It was only the most extraordinary circumstances that had brought them into each other's orbit, and soon they'd part again. Last night had been a quick, albeit extremely pleasant, fuck. One and done.

"Yeah, I'm ready." Time to get this the fuck over with so he could put his attention back where it belonged: on getting the sole remaining picture of himself that remained, deep inside G.O.D. territory. No more side quests. No more distractions.

Scones closed the case on his rifle, slung his overnight bag over one shoulder, and led the way out of the room.

Oberon slid into the passenger seat, twitchy and restless. "Am I the only one who feels like something is about to go seriously fucking wrong?"

"No. I just don't know why, damn it. Nobody should know about this place."

Sighing, Oberon settled into his seat and waited in tense silence as they drove. The trip to the storage place was quick and easy. The gate opened for them without fuss,

so Scones must have some sort of electronic pass. The rows upon rows of storage units were somehow ominous, the buildings white with bright orange doors and showy locks that weren't nearly as good as they wanted people to think.

Scones pulled up to one of the medium sized units, car facing the direction of the gates for a quick exit, and climbed out. He didn't close his car door, a move that Oberon copied.

Unlike most of the units around them, Scones's unit had an impressive lock. Scones frowned as he examined it.

"Something awry?" Oberon asked.

"No, which should be reassuring, but somehow it just troubles me more. Hang on, I want to check out the unit directly behind mine.

Oberon sighed. "I wish I could call you paranoid." He drew his gun and moved to the driver's side. "Go, then. I'll keep watch here."

Scones nodded, but instead of simply walking around their unit, since they were just one over from the end of a row, he climbed onto the trunk of the car, jumped and grabbed the edge of the roof, and hauled himself up in an absolutely unnecessary display of upper body strength.

"Show off!"

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That got him a quick, flirty little grin that Oberon absolutely hated. Then he was out of sight, which made Oberon positively twitchy. He focused on deep breaths, scanning their surroundings, and praying fervently that he was worried about nothing.

Scones returned just a moment later, jumping to the ground as deftly as a cat. "They're waiting to ambush us. Probably too fucking late now, but let's try to get the hell out of here."

Oberon slid into the driver's seat as Scones took the passenger, slammed the door shut, and threw the car into gear.

They didn't get far before the door blew on Scone's storage unit and G.O.D. spec ops came pouring out, more of them abruptly filling the space in front of and behind the car. Oberon slammed the gas and kept going, which worked for getting them through the mess and the cheap gate, but unfortunately didn't last much longer after that. Just enough for him to get across the road and into the ditch.

He climbed out and ran into the woods, Scones right there with him. "Well, fuck."

"Bloody hell, this is even worse than I expected," Scones said. "We can't outrun all of them, not spec ops."

A terrible, sinking feeling settled in Oberon's gut. An ice-cold realization about how this situation was going to have to go if they stood any chance of coming out of the mess alive.

If these goons captured Scones, he was as good as dead. They might shoot him here.

They might drag him back for Lachapelle to do the honors herself. Either way, Scones was a dead man walking the moment they caught him.

Oberon, on the other hand, was far too valuable to kill. No, they would vastly prefer to torture him for decades on end, learn all they could from him, find ways to recreate and misuse his abilities. If he was alive, he could be rescued.

Damn it, he never should have started liking the stupid bastard.

They ran across a creek and up a hill, where Scones led them west, instead of back down the hill, not stopping until they came to an outcropping of rocks. "All right, we've got a couple of minutes, let's take stock— What is that look on your face?" Scones scowled. "No, do not do what I know you're considering."

"Darling, I have never in my life listened to anyone but myself. You're a good fuck, but not that good."

Scones grabbed him, yanked him close. "I'm not letting you do something so fucking stupid."

"I do what I want," Oberon said. "Would you feel better if I gave you a big, dramatic kiss first?"

"No."

Oberon kissed him anyway, just for the thrill of pissing him off. "Don't take too long coming for me. The longer you take, the less impressive your thank you." He gave Scones a shove, then turned and ran back the way they'd come, shifting as he went, taking on Scone's appearance and making all the noise he possibly could.

Scones called his name, but thankfully his training took over after that, because he

didn't chase after Oberon.

Oberon ran down the hill, deeper and deeper into the woods, leading the goons on a merry chase before they finally caught up to him in a canyon where he accidentally trapped himself.

She shifted again, this time into a form sure to unsettle everyone who saw him: a young Margaux Lachapelle. The way she'd looked back when she'd murdered Oberon's family.

They grabbed her up roughly, yanking and jerking, binding her hands and arms behind her, binding her ankles, before finally locking a collar around her throat that would keep her from using her powers. So she was stuck looking like this until she was able to shift again.

Not the form she'd choose to be stuck in, not by a long shot, but it would unsettle everyone else and piss off Lachapelle, and that counted for something.

Scones would probably laugh and be utterly horrified at the same time.

"Team Bravo to Base, we've secured Target 2. Repeat, Team Bravo has secured Target 2. Returning to Base."

"Copy that, Team Bravo. Any sign of Target 1?"

"Negative, sweeps out."

"Copy that. Base over and out."

Oberon said nothing as she was thrown over the shoulders of a particularly large goon and hauled back through the woods. After a few minutes, some more guards came

roaring up on four-wheelers, and then they were zipping through the woods at a speed best described as 'abjectly stupid'. If this was how she died, she was haunting every last fucking one of them.

Thankfully, it didn't come to that, and they returned to the road just minutes later. A transport truck awaited her, and Oberon went without protest as she was searched, stripped to her boxers and undershirt, and finally loaded into a glorified fish tank with bars on the outside of the unbreakable glass for good measure. At least they'd taken the handcuffs off.

There was a place for her to sit and strap in, which was nice, because she really didn't want to be bounced around a glass cube while the assholes driving hit every pothole they could.

How long she sat there, she didn't know, though it must have been at least an hour. Finally, the goons seemed to give up hope of catching Scones, which undid a knot in Oberon's stomach she hadn't even noticed was there until suddenly it was gone.

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Scones had escaped. There was hope that Oberon would get free. There were only so many places the G.O.D. could take her right now, which was reassuring and not. The others would know where to find her... and the G.O.D. would know they'd try and take additional precautions.

Well, not her problem to work out. She'd done her part. Now all she had to do was endure whatever the G.O.D. did to her between now and when she was rescued. Hell, maybe there'd be a chance for her to get what she was after. All she needed was one good opening to shift and slip away. Nobody would be able to pin her down after that.

One step at a time, though. For now, the next step was strapping herself in, so she didn't turn into a ping-pong ball.

They headed out just seconds after she'd done so, and Oberon used the opportunity to grab what sleep she could, because she was going to need to have her shit together when she finally came face to face with Lachapelle. Which she would. Lachapelle hated her just as much as she hated Lachapelle.

When the truck finally came to a halt hours later, Oberon was sore, still tired, and in desperate need of a piss. They hauled her out of the cage and dragged her into a building that looked like a defunct gas station but was far more than that inside.

She'd helped level more than a few of these waystations in her time, mostly in Europe and Asia. By the time she'd come stateside, she was on to higher level ops.

One of the guards dragged her across an almost painfully shiny linoleum floor and

into a room barely bigger than a school locker, where she fumbled around briefly before finally being able to take a piss. Maybe she should have stuck with a dick. Well, too late now.

She'd barely finished when the door opened, and she was hauled off like a sack of laundry again. "Fuck all of you."

They laughed meanly as they all but tossed her back into the cage

Another couple of hours, give or take, and they drove into the dark, dank depths of an underground parking facility. Oberon wasn't surprised when the elevator she was hauled into took them down instead of up. All of the G.O.D.'s dirtiest secrets were underground. Probably an entire essay's worth of symbolism in that, but she was a spy and murderer, not a scholar.

Given the starting point, the travel time...

She was right where the Anti-Heroes had wanted to be all along anyway: the International Records and Archives Hall. Made sense, though. Anywhere else they could have taken her was rubble or compromised. Her comrades might be a bunch of do-good dumbasses, but they did the job and did it well.

Hopefully that held true when it came to rescuing her.

Down, down, down they went, until it took everything Oberon had not to hunch her shoulders in a futile attempt to get away from the crushing weight of being trapped. At least when going up, there was always multiple ways to go out or down.

Here... here she could only go up, and there wouldn't be many ways to do that. Two, if she was really fucking lucky, and she highly doubted it.

Eventually, they stepped out into a dark, dull hall, nothing along it but red-light sconces and doors that blended in almost seamlessly.

They dragged her down to the end of the hall, where two guards had to present retinal and voice scans before the door opened. Should Oberon be flattered or offended?

Inside, the cell was as unremarkable as she'd expected: a depressing bunk, a toilet and sink, and a tiny shelf above it for supplies she didn't have and nobody would be stupid enough to give her. Probably wouldn't even give her a toothbrush and soap.

Sighing, Oberon stretched out on the bunk, stiff and cool, the threadbare blanket next to useless. Not that she thought she'd be doing much sleeping, or in any condition to notice, let alone complain, when she was given a chance.

No, the only thing in her future was some tense conversation, poking and prodding, and a whole lot of pain.

Turning on her side, folding up the pathetic pillow beneath her to make it halfway decent, she stared at the wall and let her mind roam.

To think if this all went as south as it possibly could, the last thing she'd ever done was kiss Scones. Where was he now? Probably hiking his way back to base until he could commandeer a car or contact backup. Who knew how many caches the wily little bastard had stashed around the country.

Byron was never going to let them hear the end of this, even though it should have been a stupid retrieval mission. Well, whatever. The Anti-Heroes were still going on their precious mission, if with a minor alteration in the plan. Alright, major alteration in the plan. Rescues ops were always the most difficult ops.

She flinched as a sharp ring filled the small cell and sat up as a voice said, "Go to the

door, stand with your back turned, hands behind your head.

"Yeah, yeah," Oberon muttered. Rolling out of the shitty bed, she did as told and let them once more cuff her wrists and ankles.

They escorted her out, nearly dragging her along when her shuffling steps finally wore out their patience, and into a different elevator than the one they'd taken before.

This one went up—and up, all the way to the top, because of course the G.O.D wanted to be as close to the sky as they could get without giving up their mortal comforts.

As the elevator finally chimed, Oberon tensed. Setting her shoulders, she walked as well as she was able out of the elevator, only barely tolerating the guards still holding her arms. This was not how she'd wanted this eventual meeting to go, but this was better than finding out on the news that Scones had been 'shot while resisting arrest'.

The hallway between the elevator and the double doors at the other end was unnecessarily long and so over the top ostentatious that Oberon was offended on behalf of interior designers everywhere. Glitzy. Shiny. Golden. Scarlet. All of it slammed into her eyes like a digital billboard right outside her bedroom window.

At the end were double doors emblazoned with the seal of the G.O.D. and their stupid fucking motto about helping all humanity. Grand Order of Defenders, her ass.

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The doors opened, and Oberon was escorted further into the room, to a small-ish square in the middle of it where she was chained in place, at each ankle and at her wrists.

Several meters away, behind a desk bigger than most beds, was the mother of Satan herself. Her face filled with offense and anger as she took in Oberon's appearance.

Oberon smiled, which just made her bristle further. "Hello, Marge. Long time no see."

"Get out," Margaux said to the guards, and glared when one of them was stupid enough to try and voice an objection.

The guards went, the doors sliding almost soundlessly shut behind them.

Margaux moved around the desk, the large room echoing with the sound of her four-inch patent leather pumps, glossy, no-nonsense black that went with the black pinstripe suit she wore, a dove gray shirt beneath that gleamed with mother of pearl buttons. Her hair, more gray than black now, was pulled back in a chignon, and her lipstick was the same power red she'd worn all her life. Her makeup was more subdued now, clearly going for a matriarch look rather than the femme fatal she'd played to in her younger days.

There was no mistaking her relation to Scones, though her eyes weren't mismatched, and were utterly dead and cold. No matter how grim Scones could get, the hard life he'd led, there was always life in his eyes, a warmth that Oberon suddenly, abruptly missed.

"You haven't changed," Margaux said. "Still disrespectful. Still rude. Still arrogant and foolish."

"We all have to live with the mistakes we've made. You mademewhen you murdered my children."

"Collateral damage, which you and your thugs would know all about."

"Not half as well as G.O.D., or did you forget that's how you also made the mistake you've labeled Countdown?" Oberon knew exactly how pissed off she and the others were about that, a nobody insurance salesman who outwitted one of their best and did a whole lot of damage in the process. Without a single bit of power in him.

Her mouth pinched at that, but she only said, "Speaking of mistakes, where is my worthless son?"

"Do you think I bothered to ask where he was going to hide before we parted ways?"

Margaux sighed like an exhausted mother with a bratty child. "You have some idea. There's only so many places you and your fellow cretins can hide."

"Yet you've only found us once," Oberon replied. "Give it up, Marge. I don't have anything to tell you, and even if I didn't, I wouldn't. Even then, Fortune is way ahead of you and would be at none of the hidey holes I know about. Scones and I went off without permission, so I don't know where the others are, wherehe is, or what they're going to do next. Fortune doesn't look kindly on Anti-Heroes that fall out of line."

That put upon sigh again as she folded her arms across her chest. "Do you really want to do this the hard way, Oberon?"

"We both know the hard way is the only way for me, you stupid bitch. Especially

making your life as hard as possible. Speaking of making people hard, your son is a good ride. Can't have gotten that sort of skill from you, not as frigid and selfish as you are, so I assume it's like father, like son."

That put a crack in Margaux's ice queen façade. It smoothed away in the next heartbeat, but the blow had landed. Oberon sent a silent apology to Scones, making a note to apologize properly when they met again. "Somehow I'm not surprised, not after everything else I've learned recently about my own flesh and blood."

"No one deserves to be stabbed in the back by family more than you. Look, can we just get to the part where you start hurting me? I'm kind of bored with the utterly predictable chitchat."

Margaux laughed. "In a hurry to join your family, ma petite?"

Was that the best she had? Oberon remained silent, letting her think she'd landed her hit. She had nowhere to be, after all, she could drag this out. Anyway, whatever her boasts, she wasn't actually in a hurry to get to the torture portion of this visit.

Drawing closer, the click of her heels ringing, Margaux brushed back a strand of Oberon's hair. "I really was beautiful in my day. You even got the mole I had removed about ten years ago. Excellent detail work, but there are reasons they gave you the designation Oberon, I suppose."

"After a Faerie King who threw a temper tantrum and tricked his beloved wife into loving a man with the head of adonkey? Or did the G.O.D. name me after one of the other tales of Oberon? Or is it because I can be anyone and everyone's dream, and you'll never entirely know if you were asleep or awake the entire time?"

That put another crack in her façade. "Oberon, because nobody can trust their eyes when you're around."

"Well, that's boring." Oberon sighed. "What are you doing here, anyway? Shouldn't you be at your precious summit?"

"It was pushed back a couple of days. Some things are more important than talking incessantly to people too stupid to think for themselves."

"Surprised they're letting you do anything, given it's your own son who's been murdering Dogs left and right."

That really hit the mark. Didn't put a crack in her façade, but a whole fracture.

"Are you under supervision, even up here on top of the world? Are they waiting to see if you've been a rat the whole time?"

Margaux strode forward and backhanded her, the large diamond ring on her hand cutting Oberon's cheek. "Shut your fucking mouth. You're trash. You were trash back then; you're trash now."

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"Maybe so, but at least I didn't abuse my child and turn him into a mass murderer, make him hate me so much he went and fucked one of the people I hate most in the world. What you should really be asking yourself, though, is what organs did I have when he fucked me? Hmm, Grand-mère?"

She screamed at that, her façade shattering entirely, striking Oberon over and over, until her face was a mass of cuts and bruises, and even her nose and lips were dripping blood.

Throughout the beating, Oberon just laughed.

The pain didn't stop until guards rushed into the room and dragged her away.

Behind them came a new figure, tall, imposing, and so white he'd make snow jealous. Oberon stared, brain turning over and over as she tried to puzzle out who the man was and why something seemed off about...

Well, fuck. This was Montague St. Augustine, president of the G.O.D. headquarters in the Kingdom of Britain, Margaux's longtime on-off lover and, to judge by that hair and heterochromia, Scone's father. Unlike most of the G.O.D., he was seldom seen in public, one of the more shadowy figures. He must alter his appearance for public events, because in every picture and vid Oberon had ever seen, he'd had brown hair and a perfectly matched set of hazel eyes.

What was he doing here? Even if the summit dates had changed, he should be there, not here in the archives Oberon was supposed to be blowing up right about now. Byron was going to tear her apart when they were back at base.

"Take the prisoner back to their cell," St. Augustine said. "Fix their face. Margaux, sit down."

The words of Margaux's reply were lost as the door slid shut, but the scathing tone was clear enough.

Oberon was escorted into the elevator and down, down, down they went.

Until they suddenly stopped about halfway down. She'd thought they'd take her back to her charming little cell in subbasement seventy-three, but they were stopping on floor... nineteen. Interesting.

Right off the elevator it was apparent this floor was a medical wing, which was a strange thing for what amounted to a glorified library to have. Every last wall was clear glass, save for here and there where it had been frosted. She wouldn't be surprised if the walls could be rearranged at whim to make more or fewer rooms as needed.

The guards led her into a room that was already occupied by another patient, which seemed strange, but Oberon wasn't going to argue.

The person was naked, covered in burns and scrapes and bruises. They looked like they'd been through hell. Which they probably had. They were unconscious as the doctor bent over them worked on stitching up a wound, chest barely rising and falling, tears and blood drying on his face. He had brown skin, his facial features strong and elegant, and rich, true black hair cut crudely short. He looked like he could be from somewhere in South America, the United Tribes, or both. He had muscle mass for days, but it was true fighting strength, not showpiece muscle.

Something familiar...

The realization hit her like a fist to the face.

This was Rodeo. He was a 6-level titan, his strength estimated to be about that of a full-grown bull at peak ability. Many titans also had other natural body enhancements. In Rodeo's case, he had unusually strong bones, often described as 'strong as bull horns' to keep with the theme of his strength and the designation assigned by the G.O.D.

He'd vanished months ago, and nobody had been able to figure out why. It'd been right around the time Dixie and the others had destroyed the Mason System.

Wait, hadn't Byron or Dixie mentioned that there were prisoners here, but they'd never known who? Fuck, hopefully they'd be able to get Rodeo and whoever else was here out as well.

The guards shoved-dumped her on the cot on the opposite side of the room, then moved to stand guard at the door. At least she wasn't chained to the fucking floor this time.

She sat there for what felt like ages but according to the clock on the wall, was only about thirty minutes. The doctor, or whatever they were, scrubbed up in a different room and returned. He looked Oberon over with a critical eye, voice as detached as the surroundings as he asked, "What happened to your face?"

"Margaux Lachapelle."

The doctor grunted and set to work gathering supplies.

Oberon didn't waste breath explaining that if they'd let her shift, the worst of it would go, one of the side effects of being a shifter. Her ability couldn't fix everything, but it could fix a lot.

She sat in silence, only twitching occasionally at the pain as the doctor cleaned and treated her face. Most of it got salves and bandages, but a couple of cuts apparently warranted stitches. That was going to fucking hurt when she shifted.

The doctor had just finished up when the building went dark, followed almost immediately by red emergency lights kicking on, warning alarms blaring.

Well, then. That was impressive work, even for the Anti-Heroes. Or had Scones done something phenomenally stupid like come alone?

The urge to fight her own way out was strong, but for the moment it made more sense to stay put. She'd chosen the role of damsel in distress, and deviating from that right now risked throwing off the whole plan.

"Get her to lockup," the doctor said. "This one too."

One of the guards slung Rodeo, still unconscious, over his shoulder. The other roughly grabbed Oberon by the arm and yanked her upright. "Let's go."

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They headed quickly back to the elevators, almost faster than Oberon could manage to keep pace with, given her ankles were still in restraints. At the elevators, the guards kept sweeping the empty lobby as though expecting something, or someone, to appear. Instead, everything was cast into strange shadow by the eerie red lights that shone down. The alarmstrobbed in Oberon's head, threatening to turn a mild headache into a full blow migraine.

She swore the guards nearly cried in relief when the elevators arrived, opening with a cheerful ding completely at odds with the situation. Shouldn't elevators lock down in an emergency situation? Hmmm...

Down, down they went, all the way to the sublevels this time. The elevators dinged, the sound not going far against the dull cement walls that surrounded them.

A sharp bang rang out, making Oberon flinch and cry out even as she registered it was a gunshot. She covered her ears as the second one came. The guards on either side of her lay still on the ground, blood oozing from holes right in the middle of their foreheads. "Fuck." She looked down the hallway, where a shadow parted from the rest of the darkness and removed its facemask. "Give a girl some warning, asshole. My ears are ringing."

"Sorry, love," Scones said. "Next time be in the cell assigned to you."

"Not my fault your mother did a number on my face." When Scones gave her a look, she added, "All right, fine, it's entirely my fault. She's laughably easy to provoke, what can I say?"

Scones holstered his gun and started rifling through the clothes of the dead guards, turned away from Oberon as he asked, "Do I want to know what you said? Why the hell do you look like her? It's creeping me out."

"Because it creeped her out too," Oberon replied. "As to why she tried to beat me to death... I may have implied there was a possibility I was carrying her grandchild."

Scones choked on air again, whipping around, the keys in his hand jangling. "Youwhat. Have you lost your bloody mind? You didn't even have the parts for that!"

"Well, she didn't know that, and it worked, because your father kicked me out before she could get anything useful out of me."

"My father is here?" Scones strode up to Oberon and got her cuffs and collar off.

Oberon rubbed at her sore throat. "Finally. Thank you. Grab that poor bastard there. He's one of us."

"The plan did not include—"

"Do it anyway!" Oberon bellowed.

Scones lifted his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay."

"What happened to the other guards down here? Are any other cells occupied?"

"Dead and no," Scones said as he heaved Rodeo over one shoulder. "Why does this guy weigh so fucking much? He's at least a stone more than he should be at his size."

"He's a 6-level titan." Oberon helped herself to some weapons the dead guards would no longer be needing, as well as their clothes and gear, shifting into a body type that

could fit it all properly.

When he was ready, he asked, "So what's the rest of the plan?"

"Head for the loading docks," Scones said. "Plan is a little generous, honestly. We didn't have time to come up with much, as the longer you were here, the harder it would be to get you, and Byron especially was vehemently against you being here long enough for the experiments to start. He's almost as upset about this as me."

Oberon smiled ever so faintly as he nodded to the elevators. "He would be. How did you keep the elevators working?"

"That's all Dixie. Once I got him inside, which was easier said than done, let me fucking tell you, he took care of the rest. Level three."

Not bothering to ask why the loading docks were on the third floor, Oberon mashed the button to open the elevators and led the way inside. Scones grunted as he rested against the back to ease some of Rodeo's weight. "You realize dealing with him is just—"

"I don't fucking care," Oberon retorted. "Byron would want him saved, and I'm part of the stupid Anti-Heroes. Which reminds me." He stepped in close, twined his fingers through Scones's hair, and kissed him until they were both panting for breath and the chiming of the elevator forced them apart. "Thanks for coming for me."

Scones smirked, and that was far hotter than it had any business being. "I was promised a really good reward if I did it quickly."

Oberon smiled in reply, then put all his attention on the situation.

The elevator doors slid open, and they surged out, firing away at the guards waiting

for them. Numbers were against them, but the guards couldn't kill them, which went a long way toward evening the odds.

The remaining difference was covered by having the world's best sniper on their side.

"Where are we going?" Oberon asked, wiping sweat from his face as he stepped over bodies, heading for the far side of the docks, where several different vehicles waited. Building must be on some sort of incline that put the third floor at ground level on one side. He didn't remember that from the specs, but he also hadn't given a fuck.

"East," Scones said with a grunt, nodding his head to his right. "Look for a red door."

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"Red door," Oberon echoed, back tracking slightly and heading in the indicated direction, one gun still drawn, his shoulder and thigh stinging where he'd been grazed, despite the armor he now wore.

Scones had it worse, bleeding from a superficial head wound he was trying to staunch with one hand while still carrying Rodeo. He was sweaty and red-faced and exhausted, but he kept moving without a word of complaint.

Oberon wasn't pleased with the hot, squirmy feelings that Scones provoked in him, but he couldn't exactly deny them either. Not after fucking him. Not after getting captured to save him. Not after being rescued by the bastard and kissing him in thanks.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, and fuck. No help for it, though, the damage was done.

The red door came into view. It was large, steel, more reminiscent of something you'd see on a ship that, when closed, could keep out a truly impressive amount of water. Next to it was a screen that looked as though it did retina, fingerprint, and facial scans.

No, not fingerprint, Oberon realized as he reached it. The fucking thing scanned DNA, the one component even the highest-level shifter could not mimic. "How are we getting through?"

"Leave that to me," Dixie drawled, voice spilling out of a speaker set above the scan station. "Few seconds. Just leave it slightly open behind you so I can get in."

Oberon hadn't even counted to five when the red light turned green and the seal on the heavy door gave way. He went and pulled, but the door was even heavier than it looked. "You're going to have to help me."

"Let— Let me," said a weak, raspy voice.

Oberon turned sharply and stared as Rodeo slowly rose—and rose. The bastard cleared six feet and was well on his way to seven. He was pale and shaky, but the look on his face brooked no argument as he heaved toward the door and pulled.

It swung open like an ordinary door, clanging hard against the wall, which must be heavily reinforced. "What's through here?"

"The private collections," Rodeo said grimly. "The few things they store that ain't digital, and emergency bunkers, rations for staying down here for months, even years."

Oberon frowned. "Byron never mentioned any of that."

"Wasn't relevant to our plan before," Scones said. "Plan has changed."

"Impressed there's a plan at all, given how tense you seem," Rodeo said.

Rodeo and Dixie were clearly going to get along, though Rodeo's drawl sounded more Upper Carolina, where Dixie was Province of Texas, a small US territory deep into the United Tribes, the result of some long-ago negotiation that traded that province for the bulk of what used to be Pennsylvania, the remainder having then been folded back into Maryland.

"How are you feeling?" Oberon asked as they stepped through. "Want a gun?"

"Naw, I'm better off fighting the old-fashioned way," Rodeo replied. "Assuming ya'll ain't here for me, just taking me along. Who are you?"

"Oberon, that's Scones," Oberon said.

Scones lifted a hand, but didn't take the time to stop or turn around, entirely focused on whatever might be ahead of them. Oberon hung back to take the rear, though as Rodeo swung the door closed again behind them, that seemed increasingly unlikely. By now the people with clearance would be focused on evacuation, and guards with clearance would be in short supply and needed elsewhere. At least for a time.

"How the fuck are we escaping this way?" he asked.

"We're not," Scones said. "The plan is to hide out here while the rest of the building is brought down, let everyone think we didn't make it out, and escape later once everything dies down."

Oberon stared at him. "Are... are you shitting me?"

"I wish I was. Come on."

"What about Dixie?"

"Joining us shortly. He had to break into the system and then set the explosives. My job was get you and get to ground."

"Explosives." Horrified realization slammed into Oberon like a fist. "No! They can't! Not yet! I don't have—" He stopped as the muffled booming of explosives overtook the space, making everything shake and thrum.

It was followed by the sound of the enormous door opening again. Scones surged

back the way they'd come, gun up—and relaxed as Dixie came into view, dressed in the same borrowed clothes and armor that Oberon and Scones wore. "It's done. All we gotta do now is sit tight."

"No, no, no! I didn't get to find it! My last fucking chance!" Oberon screamed: in grief, in rage, in sheer helplessness.

Gone. Gone forever. He would never get himself back now.

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"Oberon!" Scones grabbed him by his arms, shook him, then pulled him close. "What in the world is wrong?"

"You wouldn't understand. I had one job, one fucking job in this place, and now my chance is gone forever." Oberon tore away, in too much pain to tolerate attempts to comfort, sinking to his knees, hands trembling in his lap. "The only place it could be is here."

Dixie frowned, then said hesitantly, "Then I'll have it, darling. I took damn near the whole archive and transferred the whole damn mess of it to Byron."

"It won't be there," Oberon said bitterly. "It doesn't—"

"Don't say it doesn't matter when you look like someone has died," Scones cut in, voice harsher than Oberon had ever heard it, like he knew all too well how Oberon felt. "What's wrong? What were you looking for?"

Oberon broke, tears streaming down his face. "Me. That's what I was looking for. The fucking Dogs wiped out my existence. Everything about me. I never existed so far as the world is concerned. Including—"

"Including all pictures of you," Scones said, his voice breaking. "Oh, no. Oh, no. I thought—"

"You thought the same thing as everyone else," Oberon said bitterly, looking down at his hands.

Dixie stared between them, bewildered. Nearby on a stiff-looking sofa, Rodeo was fast asleep. "What am I missing?"

"Shifters don't have a 'default' form," Oberon replied, still speaking dully to his hands. "Once we come into our powers, our default setting is a blank slate. A creepy nothing that none of us likes to use. I no longer remember the 'me' I was before my life was literally destroyed in a fire. It's been so long that I've forgotten it. My last chance to getmeback was the hard file somewhere in this building."

"Well shit," Dixie said. "We're on lockdown for at least seventy-two hours, but once Byron clears everything and re-establishes communications..."

Oberon shook his head, pushing to his feet and justgoing. Where, he didn't fucking know, there weren't a whole lot of options. All he wanted was to be alone.

Opening the first door he came to once he was away from the others, he slumped in relief to see he'd found a bedroom. It wasn't much, just a bunk, dresser, and desk, but it was all he needed. He stripped off his stolen gear, sat down to remove hisboots, then stripped down to boxers and tank top and finally sprawled on the surprisingly comfortable bed.

It was over. He'd never get himself back. Herself. Themselves. The person he'd been when he'd fallen in love, gotten married, and had three beautiful children... was gone. Forever. Unless some random individual somewhere in the world somewhere happened to have a screenshot or newspaper clipping of him that had missed the purging of his existence, no image of him remained anywhere. Even if someone did have a random missed clipping, so what? Oberon would never know them, never find them.

His old self, that woman he'd loved being for so long, was really and truly gone.

How long he lay there, Oberon didn't know. It seemed like forever had passed, and only mere seconds, when the door opened with a soft hiss. Dragging his head up, wiping his messy face, Oberon stared blearily at Scones and rasped out, "What?"

"Can we talk?" Scones asked, and if Oberon didn't know any better, he'd swear Scones sounded scared.

Sighing, he heaved himself up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, wiping uselessly at his face.

"Here," Scones said, sitting next to him on the bed. "Thought you might need it." He handed Oberon a hot damp cloth that smelled faintly of some piney soap.

"Thanks." Oberon cleaned his face and set the cloth aside. "What did you need to talk about?"

Scones looked at him, then looked away. "I, uh, I need to say I'm sorry. I didn't know you couldn't— I had no idea you were looking for a picture— I wasn't trying—" He bent his head, bracing it in his hands. "Fuck, I'm screwing this up."

"Screwing upwhat?" Oberon asked. "It's not your fault. You have nothing to do with this, and it never occurs to anyone that shifters can't remember every single form they change into."

"No, that's not what I mean— I mean, I didn't know that, and I feel stupid given I should have, after everything I've learned, everything I've done over the years, but I— That is— I mean— Goddammit, why is this so hard?" Scones dragged his hands down his face and stood up to pace restlessly around the room.

Oberon was getting a headache, but whatever was wrong had Scones in knots, and that troubled him far more than a headache. "You're not making any sense. What has

you so upset?"

Coming to halt, Scones stared at him, eyes full of anguish, face lined with so much pain that Oberon hurt just looking at him. "I didn't know. I swear to you I didn't know that's what you were looking for. If I'd known—" He shook his head, then took a deep breath and stepped forward, dropping to one knee as he reached into his jacket.

Pulling something out, he presented it to Oberon. "This belongs to you. Just please, please don't go back to hating me. I don't— I won't ask for anything else, but please don't hate me again."

"What..." It was the leather fold from the hotel room, the one that Scones had been so strangely possessive and defensive about.

Hands shaking, Oberon took the fold and opened it—and burst into fresh tears as she took in her own long-lost face, in her wedding gown she'd been so proud of. She shifted without thought, the picture enough to stir long forgotten memories, all of it coming back to her.

Standing, she hastened into the bathroom and stared in the mirror at a face she hadn't seen in decades. Had been certain just seconds ago that she would never see again.

As she settled into the form she'd missed so desperately, though, one question clanged in her mind like alarm bells.

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Stepping back into the room proper, she stared at Scones, who sat on the bed again, head buried in his hands. He looked like he'd just lost his whole world. The leather fold lay on the floor where Oberon must have dropped it, though she didn't remember doing so.

Standing in front of Scones, who tensed and slowly dragged his head up, staring at her with an expression of heartache and pain, Oberon asked, "Why did you have that picture of me?"

Scones looked away., folding his arms across his spread knees. "I stole it years ago from my mother's file. She was always rather careless about bringing them home, leaving them out. Arrogantly certain, I guess, that no one would dare to touch her things or even glance in their direction. I was angry with her that evening, though, an indignant child who thought to defy her by nosing through her things. I saw you, your family... wound up reading most of the file before I had to bolt before she caught me. You, your story... you haunted me. Later, when she went to bed, I went back and stole one of the photos. I knew my mother would never miss one out of what had been at least twenty.

"I held onto it, learned more about you whenever I was able. Tracked you in the news, other public channels, pried into military and G.O.D. files whenever I could. Don't know why. I could never get you out of my head. Over the years..." He let out a faint huff of laughter, looked at Oberon, then hastily looked away again. "I was so happy to finally meet you, even though I always knew you'd hate me. I didn't... I wasn't trying to keep the picture from you or anything. It's my most precious possession, and it never occurred to me you'd need it."

Oberon swayed, sat down on the floor right in front of Scones.

Who'd had her picture for years. Decades. Had kept track of her all this time. Had loved her all this time.

Every moment they'd spent together came back in a whole new light. Especially the hotel, where—

"Anyway, I'll leave you in peace now," Scones said roughly, still not looking at her as he pushed to his feet.

Oberon surged to her feet, blocking him, hands on his chest.

"What?" Scones asked roughly.

"You can't really think I'm letting you go anywhere," Oberon replied. "Not after a confession like that."

"Oberon— Don't—" Scones's voice cracked.

"Shush now," Oberon said softly, and leaned up to kiss him, sliding her arms up his chest to twine around his neck.

Scones froze, and then with a rough, broken noise wrapped his arms around Oberon and held her almost painfully close as he kissed her like it might be the only thing that saved his life.

Oberon had the sneaking suspicion that might be truer than she wanted to know, and that it could easily go both ways. The son of her greatest enemy. Who would have thought.

Tearing away with great effort, panting against Scone's chest, she had a sudden hot, aching need. She tugged impatiently at his t-shirt. "Off. Now."

Scones choked. "What?"

"Now, I mean it, and if you don't listen to me, I'm going to start in with the comments about how much older I am than you. I'm older than your mother for crying—"

"All right, all right." Scones nudged her back out of the way and shrugged out of his jacket, then pulled his t-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. "You sure know how to sweet talk a guy." He sat on the bed to remove his boots, throwing them aside, out of the way before standing again to work on his pants. "Also, we're not exactly out of the woods—"

"We're locked in a glorified panic room until a devious faerie comes to rescue us. There's a living computer and a human bull standing guard. We're fine. Stop talking and do as you're told, unless you don't want me to ride you while my tits bounce around in your face."

Scones groaned, cock twitching visibly in his pants. He pressed one hand to it, attempts to undo the fastenings forgotten as he glared. "Stop that!"

Oberon smirked as she pushed his hands out of the way and worked at the fastenings herself. "If you really want me to stop, obviously I will. I think, though, that it would be nice for both of us if we did this with all cards now on the table."

Calloused fingers brushed along her cheek, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, the gentle gesture doing more to make her shiver than the most erotic touch. "I want you however I can have you. Sex is the least important part, in the end."

"But if I said I really want to push you down on that bed and ride you, tits bouncing

in your face, you wouldn't say no."

"I would say you're evil incarnate," Scones said with a groan, eyes closing, throat working. "Fuck me, you're incendiary." He sat again and kicked off his pants and boxers, then sprawled across the bed as Oberon gestured.

Stripping off her own clothes, shivering at the way Scones looked her over, mismatched eyes burning, Oberon replied, "I'm about to be a lot better than that." Straddling his hips, she cupped his face and dove into another kiss, licking into his mouth, sucking at his tongue.

Scone's hands spanned her waist, slid down to her hips, then down and around to cup her ass, gripping and kneading, sending a shiver down her spine. "Scones—"

"Stéphane," Scones said. "Please. I've never had anyone I trusted enough to use that name."

Oberon smiled. "Stéphane. It certainly suits you better than Algernon or Scones." Much better than Painkiller, a name she wasn't ever going to bring up again. She danced her fingers across his lips, then leaned in to lick them before whispering his name again. Stéphane groaned, reaching up to sink a hand into her hair and kiss her back with an aching, almost desperate hunger. "I don't know how your piece of shit mother managed to produce someone as magnificent as you, but it's the only good thing the bitch ever did."

Stéphane laughed, his hands skimming her thighs—and then they were moving, flipping, and Oberon abruptly found herself on her back. "You're such a sweet talker," Stéphane said. "Call my mother more names."

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"You have weird kinks," Oberon said with a laugh that turned into a moan as Stéphane dragged his tongue along her inner thigh, then chased the wet trail with small, stinging kisses, working his way steadily to where she desperately needed his mouth to be suddenly. "Stéphane!"

"Yes, just like that," Stéphane murmured, before he put his tongue to work on Oberon's clit, teasing and stroking until he got his lips around it to suck and work harder. When Oberon was writhing and swearing, he shifted slightly to go deeper, fucking her with his tongue until she screamed her climax, nails biting into his scalp.

Pulling back, Stéphane wiped his mouth and looked down smugly at his work. "I'm not going to lie, it's a lot of fun having a lover who can come in any shape, size, and combination."

Oberon laughed breathlessly. "Don't worry, it's a lot of fun on this end too. Now lay back down, because I really did want to ride you. Thank you properly for coming to rescue me and all that."

"I doubt my services were all that required, monarch of the faeries."

"As long as I had that fucking collar on, I wasn't going to have much luck." She pushed until Stéphane withdrew and once more stretched out on the bed. Oberon kissed him again, then straddle him once more and took hold of his cock. Her gaze never leaving his, she lowered herself down on his cock, until the delightful sensation of being stuffed full sent her head tipping back, moans filling the room. Stéphane's hands rested heavy on her hips, steadying without controlling, eyes roaming her body, burning in their intensity.

Eventually Stéphane groaned her name, hands almost painfully tight on her hips, and after a few more thrusts, came deep inside her. Oberon's second climax spilled through her, drowning out every noise and thought.

When she finally stretched out beside Stéphane, it was impossible to keep her eyes open. Far too wrung out and exhausted from the day to move, she for once stayed right where she was, pressed along the length of Stéphane's body, enjoying the scent of him, the warmth of his body, even the arm that came up tentatively to hold her.

"I don't know why you want me after all," Stéphane said quietly, "but I hope you realize you're going to have a hard time getting rid of me now."

Oberon smiled but didn't bother to open her eyes. "Don't worry, I need you for my new revenge masterplan."

"Dare I ask?"

Lazily trailing kisses along Stéphane's sweaty chest, Oberon finally dragged her eyes open to meet his curious, mismatched gaze. "Why, to make out with you on live television where your mother will have no choice but to see it, and even the G.O.D. will never be able to wipe the event from the earth. I want her to die knowing that not only is her legacy a backstabbing traitor, but that I'm the one who seduced you away with my shameless harlotry."

"I feel so loved," Stéphane said with a laugh. "I hope someone captures the look on her stupid face."

Oberon kissed him. "Jokes of vengeance aside, that is not the only reason I want you."

"I know," Stéphane said quietly, reaching up to brush her hair from her eyes, trailing

his fingers down her cheek. "That's not really your style. I told you, I know you. I was never a stalker, but I did keep apprised of you as I was able. I never really thought..." He swallowed, eyes closing. "I never thought I'd be here with you."

"Really? Because winding up with the son of my greatest enemy really seems the only suitable outcome for a fairy king. The only thing that would be more appropriate would be to bear her grandchild, but I'm not even looking in that direction until—unless—we can live normal lives. Which is unlikely."

"I'm not really sure I should let my line continue, anyway," Stéphane replied, but Oberon didn't think she was missing the barest hint of longing in his voice.

Tucking that observation away to examine far, far into the future, she drew him in for one last kiss and then settled down. She wasn't thrilled Lachapelle had lived to cause pain and suffering another day, and being stuck in a bunker for at least a month was not a thrilling conclusion to this adventure, but she fell asleep smiling anyway.

When she woke some time later, she was alone, but there was a distant murmur of conversation and the smell of food. Sitting up, she pushed back the blankets and swept the room—and smiled to see a pile of clean clothes waiting for her. The shelter must have spare clothes stored.

One quick shower later, she headed out to find the others, which proved to be an easy enough task. The main portion of the shelter was a large common area, with sofas, tables and chairs, and more. Off to one side was a ridiculously large kitchen, and along another wall was a fancy coffee and tea station and several vending machines filled with every snack and drink imaginable.

The shelter had a liminal space kind of feel, with a design choice that was somewhere between space shuttle and forgotten bus station. Stéphane and the other two sat at one of the larger tables, eating family style from several fragrant dishes. Indian food, if he

wasn't mistaken.

"Morning," Dixie drawled.

"Good morning," Oberon replied, twisting her hair up into a quick bun before sitting down next to Stéphane, squeezing his thigh in greeting before helping herself to the food. "Who made all this?"

Rodeo smiled in a slow, sweet way that probably got him out of a great deal of trouble. "Ain't good for much, but I can cook. Owned several restaurants before I got sick enough of the Dogs to do something about them. This place is well-stocked, can eat like this for six months at least. Hopefully ain't gonna come to that."

"Shouldn't," Dixie said. "Plan, such as it is, is to lay low here for at least a month. After about fifteen days, Byron will start trying to re-establish communications with us. Until then, total blackout, since we have to assume the Dogs are keeping careful watch of this place."

Oberon frowned. "Won't they think to check the shelter, if only because it's all that's survived? Aren't there further archives down here?" She looked around reflexively, but all she saw regarding the archives was another heavy-looking door that was bio-locked.

"We're buried," Dixie said. "It'll take them months to dig this place out, given how far underground it is. By the time they reach it, we'll be long gone. Remember that plan that went south, where we were going to dig out an escape route?"

"Hard to forget," Oberon replied. "We lost our HQ."

"Well, Byron is going to cannibalize elements of that plan to get to us down here. Once he can open communication channels, we'll start coordinating on it."

Stéphane drained his cup, which seemed to be filled with iced tea or something. "So we really have nothing to do but sit here and relax for at least fifteen days."

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Dixie nodded. "Ayuh, that's about the size of it."

"Huh," Oberon said, then glanced at Rodeo. "So what are you in for?"

Rodeo's face tightened. "Me and Technophile walked right into a fucking trap a few weeks ago. They've been interrogating us ever since. He was taken away two days ago. Ain't seen him since. I assume the worst."

"We'll figure it out for sure once we can talk to the outside world some more," Dixie replied. "For what it's worth, though, I don't think they'd kill him. He's too rare and valuable. Not sure what they're actually doing, but I don't think he's dead."

Rodeo looked ready to cry for a moment, but he only swallowed and whispered, "I hope not."

Technophile. 9-level zapper. Not a rare power, but definitely a rare level. The last 9-level had managed to wipe out an entire city, causing hundreds of thousands to die. He'd been declared a domestic terrorist and the G.O.D. had dealt with him swiftly and brutally.

Dixie was right in that the Dogs wouldn't kill someone like that. No, they'd do much, much worse. If Dixie was a living computer, then Technophile was a living generator. His designation came from how good he was at controlling electronics. He didn't need to be a hacker or anything else, because he could just make the electricity itself do whatever the hell he wanted.

"I hadn't realized you two worked together," Oberon said.

Rodeo looked at her, then down at the table as he replied quietly, "It was a new thing."

"We'll get him back," Stéphane said.

"We'll do our best," Oberon said, giving him a look. "Don't make promises we might not be able to keep. Look at how fantastically we botched this mission."

Stéphane shrugged. "I'm not the one who gave myself up."

"I'm not the one my mother would have shot on sight."

"She most definitely will now," Stéphane replied, "given the tall tale you spun."

Dixie looked between them, then just shook his head. "I don't wanna know. Glad you two are getting along, though."

Rodeo smiled faintly. "It surely is something to meet such a notorious bunch, though I had no idea Scones was part of the group. Thought you worked solo too."

"I did. Recent thing."

Dixie laughed. "We seem to acquire all the solo misfits." He clapped Rodeo on the shoulder. "Welcome to the Anti-Heroes."

"It's an honor."

Oberon finished eating and stood. "Right, that's enough 'yay team' for my taste. Can we poke around that room over there?"

Dixie followed where she pointed. "Lemme make sure everything is disabled. Don't

see how it couldn't be, given the whole damn building fell, but better safe than sorry."

A few minutes later, the door opened with a hiss, and Oberon stepped through into a dark room that smelled of old paper and stale air. He'd only gone a couple of steps when glaring fluorescent lights flickered on.

Revealing rows upon rows of shelves, file cabinets, crates, and more. "So these are the super secret archives."

"Specs and internal documents only ever refer to it as 'Vault 0'," Dixie replied. "Ya'll have fun, I'm gonna go do dishes and then pick a room and sack out. Wake me if you need me."

"Enjoy your sleep, and Dixie—" Oberon waited until Dixie turned back, then finished, "Thank you for coming to save me."

Dixie touched his forehead in lieu of tipping the hat he normally wore. "Ain't no need for all that, Oberon. You're family, even if you're the crankiest about it. Anyway, you might wish I hadn't helped once Byron gets hold of the two of you for gallivanting off."

Oberon groaned. "How long did you say we'll be down here?"

"At least a month, and no, that ain't gonna get you off the hook," Dixie said, and touched his forehead again before winking and departing.

Oberon smiled as she turned back to Stéphane. "Well, it was fun while it lasted, darling." To her shock, Stéphane's face went pink. Oberon quirked a brow. "Why are you blushing?"

"I'm not!"

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"You are so," Oberon said, and nudged him until he was braced against the side of a filing cabinet. "Fess up, Stéphane." That just made him go redder. "Oh, I see. You like hearing your name and pet names. Darling." She kissed Stéphane's cheek. "Sweetheart." The other cheek. "Honey." She laughed as Stéphane dragged her into a proper kiss.

When they finally drew apart, Oberon licked her lips and said, "Didn't peg you for the type to be melted by silly endearments."

"My life hasn't exactly been filled with pleasant names, you know. Algernon. Scones. Painkiller. When my mother was really pissed at me it was just 'boy' or 'you stupid boy'. When I was in the military, she loved being able to say my rank."

"She had a chance to nickname you Algae and passed it up? That woman really is supremely stupid."

"Algae is not an improvement!" Stéphane replied.

Oberon grinned. "Nonnie?"

"Shut up, shut up, and also shut up," Stéphane muttered before kissing her again, biting at her lips when Oberon just laughed. Between kisses, he said, "Aren't we supposed to be going through files?"

Snickering against his mouth, Oberon licked his lips and said, "You can go through my files."

Stéphane groaned. "That was terrible. I want to break up."

Oberon laughed harder and dragged him into a kiss that meant business, not remotely disappointed when she was the one suddenly pushed up against the filing cabinet, pinned there and her legs pulled up to wrap around Stéphane's hips. Nipping at his jaw, she said, "You're just being all commanding alpha because I look like a delicate little French-Chinese woman right now."

"If you want me to pin you as some six-four gym bro, I'll try," Stéphane said. "Or you can pin me. You're such a brat, have I mentioned that?"

"Not nearly enough," Oberon replied, and then there was nothing but kissing and touching, all thoughts of doing actual work gone from her head.

Until there was a loud banging, making them jump apart. Oberon glared at Dixie. "What?"

"Sorry to interrupt," Dixie said, not sounding very sorry at all, "but ya'll need to come see this. It's important enough Byron broke protocol to send it."

"Well. Fuck." Oberon straightened her clothes and fixed her hair, shooting Stéphane a sympathetic look as setting himself to rights took a bit more effort.

Once they were ready, they joined Dixie and Rodeo in the main space again, where Dixie had pulled up three vid screens, all of them filled with news or data.

Oberon stared, mouth agape, trying to take in what she was seeing. That she was really seeing it. "All right, have I finally gone off the deep end? Is this really telling me that Margaux Lachapelle and Montague St. Augustine have been arrested as traitors to the G.O.D., guilty of colluding with the Anti-Heroes and secretly helping their son the whole time?"

"My mother would sooner cut out her own eyes and tongue and eat them than do any of that," Stéphane said. "So would my father, for that matter. Shit, he doesn't even acknowledge I exist if he can help it. What in the hell is going on?"

"I dunno, but Byron thought it important enough that he broke protocol to send these to us. They were arrested about two hours ago, at her home in France, some fancy country estate."

"Oh, it's fancy all right," Stéphane muttered. "The Dogs have thrown both of them under, I don't believe it. They need to save face, and they chose to sacrifice both my parents? Have they said anything about what they'll be facing?"

"Full tribunal, though obviously no hard dates yet." Dixie waved a hand, and the screens moved. "I've only got recordings. Byron didn't want to tempt fate by sending a live feed. Here it is...St. Augustine is being taken to Château d'If, which is about what I expected. Lachapelle is being taken to...well, fuck me."

Oberon's mouth flattened. "Alcatraz. She's not going to make it to trial." Alcatraz had belonged to the United Tribes for centuries, after they'd traded with Mexico in exchange for a stretch of land near the border. They'd held onto it, retaining the original name La Isla de los Alcatrazes until they'd 'agreed' to sell it to the G.O.D. back in the late nineteenth century. The G.O.D. had subsequently turned it into a prison island, the absolute worst of the dozen or so prisons they had scattered around the world. Château d'If came in about fourth for terribleness.

With rare—incredibly rare—exception, anyone who went into Alcatraz never came back out. Given she was also a Dog, and most of the people in Alcatraz had been put there by her...

"Sounds like she's getting exactly what she deserves," Stéphane said. "Good fucking riddance. Any champagne in this place?"

Rodeo snorted. "Yeah, there's a whole-ass room full of every alcohol you can think up. The Dogs didn't believe in being uncomfortable down here, which works for me. Pity we can't keep the place, it'd be fucking useful."

"Don't worry, our faerie overlord has better hidey-holes than this," Oberon replied. "I like the sound of champagne."

"On it," Rodeo said with a laugh, and rose smoothly to his feet, heading off toward the kitchen, whistling something that was probably usually played on a fiddle.

When he'd returned and poured four glasses, Rodeo lifted his, "To the fall of the Dogs."

"May they rot in hell," Dixie added.

"To the pending death of my cruel and heartless mother, may she never rest in peace."

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"May she burn in the same flames she used to kill so many others, including my husband and children," Oberon said. "To the end of the G.O.D."

"Cheers," the other three chorused.

Oberon took a sip of her champagne, which was of course the true French stuff, the likes of which she hadn't had in decades. "So I definitely don't feel like working anymore. What sort of amusements are to be had in our bunker?"

"All kinds," Dixie said, and pulled up a small screen, scrolling through what seemed to be a ridiculously long list. "What about pool? Mahjong? Think this place can even convert to a fucking basketball court. This place is obscene."

"Mahjong," Oberon said. "None of you stands a chance against me."

"Them's fighting words," Rodeo said with a grin. "Bring it on."

Dixie rolled his eyes, but punched in the command, and Stéphane refilled their glasses as the table came up, and they all settled in to play.