



# Sadist

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** Ever wondered what might happen when a sadist meets her match?

Disgraced contract killer Theo inadvertently takes on a hostage when tech mogul William Vanguard tries to extort a powerful underground vigilante network, putting Octavia, his only daughter, in the crosshairs.

But Octavia has a secret. And secrets have a habit of slipping free at the most inopportune moments...

When Octavia and Theo's worlds collide, who will walk away alive?

**Total Pages (Source):** 66

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## PROLOGUE

Theo

“You fucking psychopath.”

I grinned at the sweating, crying man strapped to the floral yellow, blood-soaked lounge chair.

“I mean...undiagnosed, but the signs are definitely not in my favor, Derek.” I gripped his stubbled chin in my fingers, inwardly cringing at the unpleasant feel of it, and tilted his face up to me. “I can ask nicely?”

The coward flinched away from my touch; his skin clammy beneath my grip. I hadn’t even truly started playing with him yet, and he was already breaking.

Ugh.

Leaning in until his shallow pants brushed across my cheek, I gave him the sweetest, most unthreatening smile I could muster.

“Derek...Darling. I need the safe combination.”

“Get fucked,” he spat, straining against the binding around his chest. “She’s not getting a fucking cent.”

“Who...your wife?” I sat back, affronted. “I don’t do personal contracts!” I waved my

knife over my shoulder. “Lianne is cooling off in your freezer. No, Pet. You pissed off The Triarchy and they sent me to collect. Honestly...Did you really think they wouldn’t keep a very close eye on their own accountants?” I gestured around the room with my knife. “C’mon, this place...in this economy?”

His face froze, and apparently not with any concern for his—now—late wife, as his gaze flitted to where I knew his safe lay behind an oil painting on the wall.

“I can pay.”

I snorted. “You can’t. I checked.”

“I can get the money.”

“Nope. Trust me, I checked that as well.” I tapped the tip of my knife on my chin. “Don’t lie to me. You were in the process of moving your property into a trust and your finances offshore. You were about to run, weren’t you?” I tutted. “And unfortunately for you, we need to send a very clear message to anyone else considering such abhorrent behavior. So, Derek—you get a little one-on-one with me. Aren’t you a lucky boy?”

His denial mewled out on a whine, but I already knew the facts. His estate would nearly cover what he owed...his shareholdings would most likely tip the balance back in The Triarchy’s favor again. The digital files to his will had already been hacked and altered. I just needed the hard copy that was in that motherfucking safe to be switched out with the ones in my satchel.

It still irked me that I hadn’t been able to get into it. Lianne had fallen prey to that temper tantrum when she had wandered in moments after the safe had beeped its denial at me yet again. She had pulled a gun on me, but I’d pulled mine faster. The safe itself needed a nine-digit code to override its safety features once I had triggered

them. A nine-digit code that this prick still had in his head, and I was hungry, tired, and still a little sore from the beating I had taken during a job the night before.

“Nine little numbers, and I make this quick,” I crooned, running the tip of my knife along the underside of his eye. The skin parted like butter under the razor edge of my blade, and a tear of blood ran down his cheek.

“Please,” he moaned, his eyes wide and breathing ragged.

His piercing scream made my ears ring a moment later as I plunged the blade into his hand, pinning it to the cushioned arm of the chair, then I leaned back to survey my art. Now both hands were impaled and twitching on the armrests, and I gave the right blade a little flick with my finger, pulling another wail from him.

I watched his face, entranced at the way his pupils contracted then blew wide as he screamed, a vein in his forehead popping out as his skin went red with exertion. A low pulse between my thighs had me pressing them together, and I fidgeted on his lap, getting myself comfy as he thrashed and bucked uselessly under me.

God I love my job.

His screams faded to wet sniffles again as I ran a fingertip over the quivering knife blade.

“I can make it stop,” I said, taking a firm grip of the hilt, a pleasant little shiver running down my spine at the agonized noises he made. “Why don’t you start with the first four?”

When he was still silent, I slightly twisted the blade to a chorus of fresh screams.

“Just fucking tell me!” I snapped, my patience beginning to wear thin, and gave it a

quick, vicious turn.

He convulsed, blood trickling from his mouth from where he had bitten his tongue, and I grabbed his face, making him look at me as I began to twist the blade back.

“N-n-nine,” he choked out.

“Atta boy,” I said, stilling. “Nine what?”

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“S-sss—” He cut off, his gaze unfocused.

“Oh, don’t start that, for fuck’s sake,” I groused, giving his cheek a little slap. “Nine what?”

He gave a half-strangled moan, his eyes rolling, as beneath my finger, his pulse skipped.

I frowned, pressing my fingers to the side of his neck.

“Derek, don’t you go dying on me yet.”

He twitched, bloody foam forming at the corner of his lips, and I swore, ripping the blades from his hands and swiftly cutting the ties that bound him to the seat. I yanked him to the floor, putting my ear to his chest, and swore again when I couldn’t hear anything.

Twenty minutes I did CPR on that weak-hearted fuck. I had managed eleven years without my lips touching a man. I think I was darker about breaking my streak on him than anything else.

And he still died.

The fucking audacity.

Muttering less than complimentary things to his dearly departed soul, I pulled a can of spray paint out of my bag and quickly sprayed my three-pointed crown signet

across his chest before pulling my phone out. I winced as I hit the call button, a low male voice answering after only two rings.

“It’s done?”

“I need a breaker.”

There was a grunt. “Model?”

I crossed the room and swung the painting open, frowning at the disgraced safe.

“Knox Elite. Thumb pad locked down as I was trying to crack it, and it needs a code override.”

There was silence on the end of the line for a second too long before the man spoke again. “How long since it locked?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, just shy of an hour?”

Another beat of silence. “You have roughly five minutes to extract yourself before the authorities arrive.”

“What?” I glanced over my shoulder to the window. “What are you on about? I did it clean. No witnesses.”

“Get your arse out of there and report back to headquarters,” he said.

“I haven’t got the hard copy,” I hissed. “The guy’s dead.”

“Let’s see how the golden child talks her way out of this one, then,” was all he said before the line went dead.

## OCTAVIA

I thought I knew what low was.

Apparently, I was fucking wrong.

When I look back at the life choices that got me here, I guess we can attribute this to “fatherless behavior,” which is ironic considering I only spoke to dear old daddy on the phone last night when he informed me of the ten grand he had dropped into my account.

We call that guilt money, folks. Isn’t it strange how money meant to absolve someone of their sins can make you feel like the damned for accepting it?

My parents probably don’t even know that their daughter is currently sitting in a cold basement with a bucket of her own urine next to her, handcuffed to a metal pipe seemingly made from the strongest god-damned metal on the planet. I woke on a foam mattress with a thin pillow and blanket folded neatly next to me, the chain that secured my cuffs to the pole just long enough to reach what I needed. The concrete room was bare except for the two pipes that ran up the wall on this side, the furthest away from the solid-looking door. Me on one pipe...and the prone figure of another woman chained to the other. I tried not to look at the drain in the center of the room...or wonder why it was there.

I scrunched my eyes closed as a spike of pain rolled through my head...the aftereffects of whatever was slipped into my drink still ravaging my body, and I breathed through another wave of nausea. It didn’t work, and I spent the next few minutes retching into my bucket, though there was nothing left in my stomach to surrender anyway.



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A low groan pulled my attention back to the other side of this infernal room, the soft rattle of chain loud in the stillness as my companion rolled over, a whimper coming from her a second later. She was breathing too lightly to be in the same drug-induced slumber I had just woken from, but from the look of the bruise at her temple, I guessed she would be feeling just as rough.

She was facing me now, and I studied her features. A little older than my twenty-nine years, there were the tiniest of creases at the corners of her eyes on her otherwise flawless face. She had a few freckles across the bridge of her nose, and tattoos seemed to cover much of her skin from the neck down. Her long brunette hair was pulled back into a messy braid that was coming loose, and she wore a simple grey sweater and black joggers that didn't give any indication of who she was or where she had been taken from.

The sweater was rucked up, and the purple outline of a large bruise across her abdomen stretched over the fine lines of another tattoo. She had been brutalized, whoever she was.

She stirred again, her lashes fluttering as another soft moan rose from her.

“Hey,” I said. “Try not to move too much yet, you look like you took a beating.”

I noticed her swallow a few times and poured a cup of water from the jug sitting between us, moving as far as my chained wrist would allow and pushing the cup as close to her as I could.

“Who are you?” Her voice was slightly husky, edged with a hint of pain as she

pushed herself to her elbows and groaned again, resting her forehead against her own thin mattress.

“Octavia,” I offered, not wanting to admit my last name. “Where are we?”

There was a humorless huff of laughter from her as she slowly sat upright, squinting at me with eyes that were the strangest color. Pale green at the center with a deep navy ring around the outside.

“Purgatory.” She leaned against the wall with a sigh and tipped her head back. “And the psychopath guarding its gates is a fucking sadist. I’d suggest you don’t piss her off.”

“Well, that’s ominous,” I muttered, clearing my throat as my voice wavered with the rapidly increasing panic twisting its way through my gut. “What does she want?”

“It’s not her you need to worry about, it’s who she works for,” the woman replied.

“And...who is that?” I asked hoarsely.

“I couldn’t tell you,” she said, closing her eyes.

I blinked at her, more questions simmering on the tip of my tongue, but unsure where to start.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“A long time,” she replied without opening her eyes and wincing as she licked a fresh split in her lip. “I don’t really know, the days blur together here.” She was quiet for a long moment, and I thought she had drifted off until she spoke again, her voice barely a whisper.

“I don’t think I even have anyone who cares I’m gone.” She looked at me with a strange expression. “Do you? Have people who will come looking for you, I mean. Your accent is American...Are you not from here?”

I hated...truly hated to banish the iota of hope I saw creep across her battered face, but I shook my head, staring at my hands.

“I have only just recently come back to the UK from overseas. I was born here, but I’ve been away since I was sixteen.” I gave her a weak smile. “Hence the accent. The friends I do have don’t know I’m back here, and even if they realize I’m gone, they will just think I have taken off to go experience the lantern festival in Taiwan or walk the PCT on a whim or something. They are used to me disappearing and popping back up months later.”

She sat up, wrapping her arms around her bent knees with a soft groan. “What about a lover?”

I laughed in response.

Her shoulders dropped slightly, and she looked at the floor for a long moment.

“You have family here?”

My mind was still scrabbling through the scraps of information I had gleaned over the past few minutes, as the last conversation I had with my father lingered uncomfortably in my mind.

“It’s amusing how quickly you do as you are told when you want something.” As my phone chimed with a deposit notification.

“It’s been very distant for a number of years,” I said quietly. “I do my own thing.”

She let out a soft sigh, resting her forehead on her crossed arms.

“Well, that’s fucking unfortunate.” Her voice was muffled, and she looked up suddenly when I snorted, choking back the unhinged urge to laugh. There was absolutely no need to scare this poor woman more than she already was by thinking she was chained up with a raving lunatic who was laughing at her own dire situation rather than panicking like any mentally sound person should.

“What the hell is funny?” she asked.

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“Nothing,” I said, as a squeak of laughter bubbled up and I masked it with what could only be described as a strangled hum. “Black humor is my default, and I told someone last week that I’d hit my lowest point.” I gestured around me. “Guess the universe said, ‘Hold my beer, fucker, we found a cellar in the pit.’”

She eyed me for a long moment, probably wondering if I had been smacked in the head.

“Why do you think you were taken?”

I shook my head. “I have no great fortune of my own, so it will be tied to my family.”

She cocked her head. “Money?”

“I’d say so,” I replied darkly. “Unless they want a liver for the black market. In which case they are screwed, I spent three months in Russia recently and I still can’t look at vodka.”

That actually got a chuckle from her, before she seemed to catch herself with a look of surprise.

“You don’t scare easily, do you?” she asked.

I was about to throw my usual sarcastic retort back, but something in the way she was looking at me made me hesitate.

“The thing is,” I said after a moment. “Fear is the only time I feel anything anymore.

I doubt they can do worse to me than I've survived already."

Her gaze changed, becoming more intent.

"They could kill you."

I leaned back on my mattress and stared at the concrete ceiling.

"They could."

"You think there are things worse than dying, Octavia?"

I let out a small, amused huff. "There are many things worse than dying. Though I'd rather not, you know? I had plans for summer."

I glanced at her in the resulting silence. Not that it was anything I was unused to. My affinity for the worst kind of humor led to a love-or-hate kind of reaction from everyone I encountered. From the way her lips had tilted ever so slightly up on one side, she was struggling to figure out which.

Maybe it was the lingering drugs in my system, but...Jesus Christ, she was hot.

No, it was definitely the drugs.

Because what the fuck, Octavia, you are chained in a murder basement.

I let her lead the conversation for a while, answering a plethora of questions and skipping around the ones that would expose me as the disgraced daughter of the largest tech mogul in the northern hemisphere. I didn't want to see the hope return if she thought that would—in any way—help us.

Then I peppered her with my own questions, trying to glean any more information as to how screwed I was.

And the result?

Thoroughly. With no lube. I was just sitting here waiting for my jailer to come and enlighten me as to whether I was to be spare parts or used against the Vanguards. Maybe I would get lucky and be sold off in the skin trade to some filthy rich but mentally weak geriatric who I could convince to let me live out my days next to their pool in exchange for a weekly lap dance. I'm sure I could learn to dance like my life and eventual liberty depended on it...

"Where did you go?"

Her question halted my racing thoughts, and I turned back to my cellmate with a questioning hum.

"You're face," she said, watching me in bemusement. "It's very...expressive."

"Uh..." I scratched the back of my neck. "Don't ask. Geriatrics and lap dances."

She snorted, tipping her head back to rest against the concrete wall.

"Well, this has been fun, but I fear I'm not getting anything I didn't already know, and I'm dying for a strong drink."

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“What?”

Ignoring me, she reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a key while I watched in confusion as she notched it into the cuffs and unlocked them.

“What the fuck?” I blurted as she stood, stretching out her back with a low groan.

“Well,” she said, the corner of her lips tilting up in a lopsided smile. “Thanks for filling in some gaps, Sweets. I did wonder why there was nothing on you until just recently.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Theo,” she said simply.

“That tells me nothing,” I seethed.

Covering the distance between us, Theo crouched down in front of me, rested her elbows on her knees, and leaned in.

“All you need to know right now, Sweets, is I’m the one who holds your chain. You don’t eat, drink, sleep, or even breathe unless I allow it. I may as well be your fucking god. Now, be a good girl and get some sleep while I figure out what I’m meant to do with you.”



THEO

As far as falls from grace go, this one has been fucking spectacular. Eleven years have passed since I was thrown in front of the three Chairs with a gun to my temple and offered a contract. Eleven years I have bled for this company, clawing my way up the ladder to become one of The Triarchy's elite...because I love my job, despite how I fell into it.

The Triarchy dwells in the darkest of morally grey corners as it circles the lowest levels of humanity. One foot on either side of the morality line, so to speak, and this is the foot—the kidnap, ransom, and blackmail of select individuals in the name of a dubious Robin Hood idealism—that has never quite sat right with me. Even monsters have weaknesses, and The Triarchy has no problem exploiting them.

I lifted my eyes from their respectful focus on the floor, and I met the steely grey glare that I knew intimately well and held it as I chose my words carefully.

“I brought in the Vanguard girl as requested—but babysitting, Erryn? Give it to one of the others.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at my casual use of her first name, her gaze flashing to the two screens that lit the room with ashadowed figure on each. London, Paris, and Rome. The three heads of The Triarchy, never to be in the same location, but present for all major decisions.

Apparently, I had really fucked up.

It was Boucher—the Parisian Chair—who answered me, his thick accent dripping with disdain.

“Loxley has assured us of her faith in your ability, regardless of your disgraceful

handling of the Obáir job.”

I slowly slid my gaze from Erryn to Boucher, studying the faceless silhouette on the screen.

“My specialty has never been in this division of the company,” I said bluntly. “I have no knowledge of the protocols, nor am I placed to detain hostages for long periods. I have always detained, and then hande?—”

“I have arranged a task force for you and assigned myself as handler,” Erryn cut in. “And your cells are perfectly adequate,” she added with a touch of annoyance.

“You?” I raised a brow at her, earning myself another icy glare. Erryn Loxley, the savage head of the UK chapter, would only risk scuffing her Christian Louboutins descending into the murky depths of my playground for one of two reasons...and we hadn’t been intimate in over eight months. Which meant I was at risk of losing my position, life, or both. I turned my body to block the two screens that watched in silence as I let my gaze drift lower to the waist of her impeccable black dress, lingering on the spot at her hip where an old bullet wound still bothered her.

“I didn’t realize you were still taking field jobs.”

She didn’t look at me as she leaned to pick up a file from her desk and flicked through it, but I noticed the way her jaw clenched and how she shifted in her heels, as if my words had reminded her of the ever-present ache of the old injury.

“I have assigned Zichen and O’Malley to you. O’Malley has experience in this sector, I’m sure he will be happy to offer some guidance. Use them as you need.”

I was already pushing it, judging from the cold purr to her voice, but it didn’t stop me from giving her a disgusted look.

“O’Malley couldn’t guide himself out of a one-way tunnel,” I argued. “Are you being serious right now?”

Crossing the space between us with slow, measured steps, she handed me the file.

“Deadly fucking serious,” she said under her breath. “Don’t fight me on this, Theodora. You have no other options. Everything you need to know is in there, and I’ve arranged for your team to report to you at noon. I trust you will handle this with discretion.”

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There was something in her expression that caught my attention. A flash of something I hadn't seen from her before. Concern.

I took the file with a short dip of my chin.

“Good girl,” she murmured. The two words were little more than a breath as she smirked, all traces of concern wiped away, her cool mask firmly back in place.

I glared at her, hating that she could still evoke a visceral reaction from me with the praise she wielded like a weapon, but she had already turned back to the other Chairs and on to the next agenda item, my dismissal delivered with a flick of her elegant fingers. Seething, I glanced at my watch as I turned on my heel to leave. 1100hrs. Great, no time for breakfast then.

Not even the breakneck speed I pushed my motorcycle to eased the irritation that had been slowly building since everything had unraveled. One safe. Onegod-damnedsafe had taken me from having my pick of jobs to being forced to dabble in the one area of this company that made me deeply uncomfortable.

Relieved to see my assigned team hadn't arrived yet, I passed through the security system, taking the elevator up to the main level as I thumbed through the file Erryn had given me.

Most of it was the bare-bones information I already knew about my house guest, but a familiar green and white logo grabbed my attention. Vanguard Technology, which I assumed was the connection I was looking for.

Octavia's father was William Vanguard, who had inherited the global tech giant. Under his leadership, the company had grown exponentially over the last couple of decades. And there, in black and white, was the reason his daughter was now sitting in my cell.

"Oh William, you sweet summer child," I murmured, punching in the code on the illuminated keypad to my living quarters without looking. "You flew too close to the sun on this one."

Vanguard tech had been incorporated into The Triarchy database two months ago, causing persistent issues. The search engines that I usually had unlimited access to had crashed and needed to be re-coded in the new security systems, which had impacted a number of jobs.

I swore as I read through the next part and took in the true extent of what I had taken on.

Vanguard was attempting extortion. And clearly, he did not do his research on his target. Decades of damning information that The Triarchy would eliminate anyone to keep quiet, was now caught behind a firewall controlled by Vanguard, and Erryn had been the deciding vote to have the systems upgraded. There was a large part on the next page that had been redacted, and from the information around it, I guessed it detailed his demands. Not that I needed to know that anyway. It was my job to get between him and the company and turn the tables on him. Pick him apart and find his weaknesses.

No wonder she wanted this kept discreet. I scanned the next few pages, taking in as much information as I could quickly.

Octavia Vanguard, only known direct relative of William Vanguard.

I skimmed past a page of unnecessary information that I already knew about her.

Trade of hostage for full dissolution of Vanguard tech from Triarchy software and return of master files.

An old termination on sight for William had been amended to capture and detain—but that was no surprise with the delicate nature of how he now held Erryn's balls in his hand. Either way, it was near impossible. The man and his wife rarely left his fortress of a home, and if he did, his security detail was impenetrable. I guess we now knew why.

My unlucky little rage-filled hostage was in a world of trouble, and none of it was her fault. This is the part that didn't sit right with me. Not to mention the way that after only a short time sitting with her, I found her fascinating.

I have seen every reaction under the sun to realizing your life is in someone else's hands. Anger, bargaining, threatening. I was used to every angle that had ever been taken—until I met Octavia Vanguard. She had thrown every assumption I had made about the heiress into the wind.

She had laughed. And in that moment, I had wanted to do unspeakable things to her. Depraved, filthy things...which was less than an ideal situation when, if this turned south, I would be her jury and executioner as well.

3

OCTAVIA

Three days.

Threemotherfuckingdays she left me there. The lights stayed on during what I

assumed was the day before I was plunged into pitch black for long intervals that tore at my sanity.

Somehow, she seemed to know when I had fallen into restless sleep, as I woke to a tray of food and a few bottles of water next to me. Don't ask me how she knew when to slink in. There were no windows anywhere in here, and as far as I could tell, there were no cameras either. I even tried staying awake through the dark hours before I finally succumbed to sleep, my voice hoarse from screaming at the door that I now despised. The same door I had adorned with a pretty mural of yoghurt, mashed potato, and stew that had been hurled in a fit of rage.

The stew was disgusting anyway...much better suited as barely edible art.

I was absolutely fucking ropable and bored out of my mind by the time the door swung open, and Theo strolled in, whistling a low tune through her teeth. I honestly wanted to knock every single one of those teeth out and play knucklebones with them.

"Where the hell have you been?" I snapped.

"Hello to you too," she chuckled, sidestepping the globs of flung dinner artfully placed at various intervals between me and the door. "I see you have decorated."

"How long are you going to keep me in here?" I asked as I lurched to my feet, ignoring the ache of unused muscles.

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“Uh...well, until now?” she replied, raising a brow at me as if it were obvious as she pulled a small key from the back pocket of her dark cargo pants. She tossed it to me, putting her hand on her hip as she waited.

She had no weapons that I could see. Aside from the cargo pants and boots, she wore a simple khaki T-shirt that was too thin to conceal anything. The door behind her was wide open, and the hallway beyond was empty and quiet.

“Behave,” she crooned, seeming to notice where my gaze had gone. “You wouldn’t make it two steps. Unlock the cuff and follow nicely.”

She gave me a serene smile, raising her brows at me as she widened her stance, her hands clasped loosely behind her back, waiting.

I had already removed the cuff and was massaging my bruised wrist where the metal had chafed it nearly raw. Pushing a lank lock of blonde hair off my face, I contemplated the pros and cons of going for the door...or for the full bucket off to one side of the room. The idea of throwing its contents at her was more than a little tempting.

“Touch that bucket and you will absolutely regret it,” she warned quietly, as if she had read my mind.

I chose option two. Dropping my shoulder and lunging, I threw my full weight behind the assault aimed for her unguarded stomach...and met with nothing but air. Stars exploded behind my eyes a moment later when Theo’s elbow connected with my temple.



I staggered, stunned, and trying to clear my vision.

“For fuck’s sake,” she sighed, a firm hand wrapping around my arm to steady me as I swayed. “I warned you.”

I slammed my elbow back, trying to catch her off guard, only to have my wrist gripped harshly, my shoulder screaming in protest as my arm was twisted up behind my back.

“Can you not?” She gave my wrist a firm squeeze. “Please stop before you hurt yourself. Now move.” She released me abruptly, shoving me forward.

I whirled on her. She was slightly shorter than my five foot six, which did absolutely nothing for my ego after how thoroughly I had just been manhandled.

“Go. Where?”

We were barely three inches apart, but she still managed to run an unimpressed look up and down my body.

“To shower for a start.” She reached up and picked what looked like a pea out of my hair. “You reek and have...food...in your hair. I thought you might want to avoid the rotting corpse look for your debut in front of the camera.”

“My what?” I scowled at her, trying to make sense of her words.

“It turns out Daddy Vanguard is a little hard to get hold of, and we need to get his attention.” She swept her arm toward the door. “Off you go, Sweets, a bar of soap awaits.”

God, I didn’t want to do anything this woman told me, but the thought of hot water

was embarrassingly persuasive, so I stalked for the door, my back stiffening at the sound of her amused chuckle.

My cell was off a short hallway, and we passed three other doors before reaching a keypad-secured door at the end...Theo blocked my view with her body as she punched in the code and swung the door wide, beckoning me through.

The next room was...not at all what I was expecting. We were in some sort of industrial-style building with grey concrete walls that had been decorated with graffiti and murals. The large room had been separated into sections...and it was...a home. There was a gym in one corner, a kitchen set up along another wall, a picnic table nearby with a large sun umbrella at its center, and fairy lights woven around the underside. Various large potted plants were placed strategically, providing an odd mix of lush green foliage against the harsh concrete. Light streamed through filthy, barred windows that sat high in the walls, and huge lights hung from a ceiling crossed with exposed metal beams. Off to another side was a desk set up with a dual-monitor computer system that my gaze snagged on long enough for Theo to give me a poke in the spine to keep moving.

“Shower is over there behind the curtain. The boys will be here in twenty, so I would hurry if you don’t want to be caught with your pants down.”

I hurried toward the curtain, trying to take in as much as I could in the process. There was nothing that gave me any idea of where we were...and there were only two other exits from this room. The first was a massive set of metal double doors that had equally hefty deadbolts, and a huge potted tree sat in front of them. Then there was a door similar to the small, windowless one I had in my cell, with an access keypad glowing in the dim light.

It took me a moment to figure out the shower after I had drawn the curtain and let myself breathe a sigh of relief within the semblance of privacy it gave me.

Stripping quickly, I glared at the mess of copper pipes on the wall, finding the ones that branched off to the overhead rainfall shower and playing with the two small levers on them until the water that spilled out in a heavy torrent was a good temperature.

I couldn't stop the groan as I stepped under the water, the heat and pressure washing away the grime of the past few days. Wiping water from my eyes, I blinked at the neat row of bottles on a shelf, found some shampoo and lathered my hair before standing under the hot stream of water for as long as I dared. I managed to turn the water ice cold as I was trying to turn it off, my shriek drawing an amused snort from somewhere in the room. I spotted a neatly folded stack of towels on a stool in the corner. Everything here was perfectly in place—even the ferns in metal holders bolted to the concrete looked as if they didn't have a frond out of place, immaculately manicured without a single leaf lying on the ground beneath. I grabbed a towel, mussing the rest of them in the pettiest display of irritation I think I have ever partaken in. It gave me the smallest glimmer of satisfaction to see that haphazard pile in an otherwise meticulously neat area, and I quickly set about moving the rest of the sparse items nearby out of their neat rows and piles.

“Are you quite done?”

I jumped, nearly dropping the bottle I was holding, and spun to find Theo eyeing me with a raised brow. My towel slipped, and I dropped the bottle as I snatched the fabric back around me, soap splattering across the hem of her pants as it hit the floor.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment and then held out some clothing to me.

“What are those?”

“What do they look like?” she asked with a deadpan expression.

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I snatched them from her, turning and shrugging on the loose, plain white T-shirt. The fabric stuck to my damp skin, my hair instantly soaking my back as I flapped out the grey cotton sweatpants.

“No underwear?” I asked coldly over my shoulder.

“I’m not set up for guests,” she replied. “You can work with what I have, or you can go nude. Either way is fine with me.” She tilted her head. “Especially with that arse.”

Heat flooded my cheeks as I realized the towel had ridden up, and the dark laugh that came from her as she wandered back out didn’t help in the slightest as I quickly pulled on the pants, grimacing at the slightly too-tight fit across said arse.

A heavy fist on the small door startled me, and I froze behind the curtain as two deep male voices joined Theo’s.

I was too far away to hear the murmured words and risked a glance from behind the curtain, instantly locking eyes with a tall, bald man talking to Theo.

“What the fuck?” he snapped, pointing at me as he quickly averted his face. “What is this? Hotel de homo? Why isn’t she in a cell?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Theo drawled, not even bothering to look at me. “What is she going to do? Choke me with a towel?”

“She could identify you for a fucking start,” he snapped, hastily unhooking a mask from the back of his jeans and pulling it over his face as his companion did the same.

Theo snorted. “You look ridiculous.”

Bald Man ignored the comment, shaking his head as he strode past her.

The second man gave Theo a long look as he pulled a folded piece of paper from his back pocket and approached me. His mask covered his face, only the warm, deep brown of his angular eyes peering out from behind it, and the loose strands of his straight black hair were just visible around the edges.

“You understand what is expected of you?” he asked as he handed me the paper. His voice was soft and slightly accented, though I would be a fool not to recognize the steel beneath it.

I frowned at him, snatching it. “Dude, I have no idea what the hell is happening, except for the fact thatthatcrazy bitch”—I pointed to Theo—“locked me in a room for the past few days, and you have some business with my father that I want no part in.”

Theo rested her weight on one leg, smirking at me. “Oh, Sweets, you haven’t seen crazy yet.”

Unfolding the paper, I glanced at the neat writing, desperate for any information. There was nothing. No demand for money or anything else I had expected to see.

I, Octavia Vanguard, am being held in assurance. This video is to declare proof of my captivity. I am presently unharmed, and this will remain the case if contact is made.

“You need to read what is on this paper, word for word. No deviating, no embellishments,” he said. “And we will just keep recording until you get it right. So don’t bother wasting your time or mine. I really don’t care if you need a little encouragement.” His head tilted slightly as his eyes roved over my face. “It will only add to the urgency, if you ask me.”

“Good thing no one asked you then, Z,” Theo said, her tone dropping an octave.

He turned and aimed a glare at her.

“Don’t touch my marks,” she warned coolly. “I don’t interfere with yours, keep your hands off mine.”

“This is fucking weird,” Bald Man muttered to himself as the small camera he had set up on a tripod flashed once, the screen illuminating. “’Ere.” He pointed to a stool against a blank section of the concrete wall. “Sit.”

I crossed my arms. “How about get fucked?”

There was a flash and a burst of stars, my head snapping back as Z’s fist connected with my jaw. I staggered back with a grunt and covered my face, blood gushing from my tongue where I had just bitten it badly.

A rough hand grabbed my shirt and hauled me forward until I was looking at Z again.

“I warn?—”

He cut off with a disgusted sound as I spat a mouthful of blood at him, the scarlet splatter covering his mask and dripping down onto his shirt. He shook me until my teeth clacked together, then froze suddenly.

“Let her go,” Theo warned, her voice promising violence as she stepped around to his side. “Now.” There was no room for argument in that one simple word, and I don’t know what kind of authority this woman had over these men, but I didn’t miss the flash of fear and contempt in Z’s eyes.

His mouth hardened into a thin line, but he released me suddenly, stepping away and

raising his hands in placation, revealing the small blade Theo had pressed against his side. With a flick of her wrist, it disappeared before she clapped him on the shoulder once, squeezing it in what would have been a friendly gesture, if I didn't see him wince.

Leveling a cool look at me, Theo slipped the crumpled paper from my fingers and cast a look over it, the corner of her brow twitching.

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“I think we need a wording change now regardless,” she muttered.

There was a sound of irritation from Z as he snatched the paper from her.

“The Chair wanted?—”

“The Chair will get what she wants,” Theo cut in. “My way.”

My head was starting to throb, and I swallowed with a grimace as my bitten tongue refused to stop bleeding, moving it gingerly to assess the damage.

Theo was watching me again, her gaze lingering where I could feel my cheek beginning to swell as she pointed to the stool against the wall that Bald Man had just placed in front of the camera.

“After you.”

Glaring at her defiantly, I didn’t move an inch.

“Not until you tell me what this is about. Money?” I snapped. “Or has he made a deal with a devil bigger than himself this time?”

“You can sit, Octavia, or I can make you sit,” she said coolly. “And you will find that I am a much firmer hand to deal with. Either way, these two will not be leaving until I have what I need from you.”

We stared off for a long moment, but I could tell that I wasn’t getting anything else



out of her. Not with Bald Man and Z watching. There was a tilt to her lips that suggested she wanted me to challenge her. As if she got a kick out of the fist I so clearly wanted to send flying into that smirk.

Why was that hot?

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I brusquely held my hand out for the scrap of paper, shoving down my deeply rooted stubborn temper, along with the weird fascination I had with this woman, before it got me killed.

“That’s better,” she murmured, as she dangled the paper between two fingers for me to snatch. “I knew you could be a good girl for me.”

4

THEO

It’s an odd place to be—contemplating the moral ethics of fucking your captive. Yet here I am.

You can’t develop Stockholm syndrome in three days of solitude...right? Because that was lust that I had seen written clearly across her face. Anger as well. But I’d take a little hatefucking from Octavia if it gave me the chance to get my hands on her.

I watched her sit on that little stool, her cheeks still flushed from the barely contained rage as she read the note I had rewritten for her, but my mind was fixed on the way her pupils had blown at my words. One sentence that had glitched her for a moment too long to miss.

I knew you could be a good girl for me.

How good would you be for me, Octavia? I wonder if you could take my particular brand of twisted.

O'Malley grunted in satisfaction as he played back the recording through the small screen of the camera.

"Satisfactory?" I asked, though my attention hadn't left Octavia. She was looking at my workspace set up on the far wall, my dual monitors glowing softly with screensavers.

"It'll do," he replied, packing away the tripod. "I'll have the encoded cut sent."

I nodded, my hands clasped loosely behind my back as I waited for them both to leave. I felt Zichen's glare on me until the door clicked closed, my skin prickling with awareness. That man was going to become an issue.

"Hungry?" I asked once we were alone.

Octavia looked at me with an amusing mix of confusion and indignation.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Go on then," I said softly, raising a brow at her. "Beg."

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She opened her mouth and shut it again, indignation winning the war as she simply glared at me for a long moment.

“What the actual fuck? Am I...hungry?”

I shrugged, turning and strolling to the kitchen.

“I’m hungry. I assumed you would be too, considering most of your food is spread around the walls of cell three.” I contemplated my neatly organized cupboards for a moment before grabbing a couple cans of soup and eyeing her over my shoulder. She hadn’t moved. “No?”

“I don’t want your food,” she hissed. “I want out of whatever bullshit my father has gotten involved in.”

I hummed noncommittally, searching for a can opener.

“I can’t help with that one, Sweets.”

“You could let me go,” she said, her tone changing.

I glanced at her with a raised brow as I dumped the congealed mess of soup into a pot.

“Could I?”

“Yes.” She got up from her stool, eyeing me with more than a little calculation as she

crossed the space between us.

Leaning against the counter, I folded my arms and waited.

“You’re not like them,” she said, her eyes searching mine for what I assumed was any sign of leniency. “You wouldn’t let them hurt me. Let me go—you know this is wrong, Theo. I never wanted to be caught up in his drama. I won’t say anything...or even let William know I have escaped. You can do whatever you need to do with him, and I will just disappear...”

I let the silence stretch between us, chewing my lip as I eyed her.

“Please,” she murmured, those pretty eyes of hers widening a touch. “I’ll be so good. No one will know. I’ll leave the country today.”

Oh yes, she would beg beautifully given the chance.

“Octavia...I can’t. Even if I wanted to.”

“Yes, you can,” she pushed, reaching to rest a hand on my arm. “Just leave and don’t lock the door.”

“And tell my employer I let you slip through my fingers?” I countered.

“No one has to know,” she pushed. “You could tell them I couldn’t take the stress, and I ended myself...You got rid of my body.”

I let my gaze rest on that warm touch for a moment. The heat of it slowly seeped into my skin and I forced myself not to drop my arms, though it was an effort. The intimacy of touch was something I was never comfortable with, even when it was being inflicted on me by something as pretty as her. “I think Daddy Vanguard would

guess very quickly we no longer had you in our possession,” I said quietly.

She scoffed. “He won’t know.”

“No?” I studied her face.

“N—” She cut off suddenly, her gaze sharpening as her hand fell away from my arm.

I gave her a slow smile.

“It’s not that he doesn’t believe the validity of your capture, is it, Sweets?” I asked softly.

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

“What is it?” I pushed. “Your mother wanted her inroad to the Vanguard fortune? A little security deposit in the form of an oopsie baby? Does daddy not love you like he should, Octavia?”

“Oh, get fucked,” she hissed.

“Are you offering?” I let my gaze run appreciatively down her body as the soup began to bubble behind me, ignored.

“Are you psychotic?”

“Sadistic,” I offered. “Want to find out how?”

Her hand whipped out, snatching at the pot handle, and I had her wrist before she even got halfway there, squeezing hard enough to feel the delicate bones in her wrist creak under my grip. There was no reaction from her as she glared at me.

“Be nice,” I crooned. “We don’t play with our food out here. Not that kind anyway.” I tilted my head, watching the erratic thump of her pulse at her throat. “So...What is William Vanguard’s weakness if it’s not his daughter?” I mused.

Her jaw clenched at his name, ever so slightly, but it was there. As was the near-imperceptible tightening across her shoulders that I had noticed more than once now. But she stayed stubbornly silent as I reached behind myself to turn off the stovetop.

“Fortune over family,” I guessed. “I’m guessing William didn’t spoil you much as a child, then? That explains the underlying daddy issues I’m sensing.”

Not a flicker from her.

I hummed, reaching with my free hand to pick up the pot, never letting go of her wrist as I took both fuming woman and steaming soup through to the clean cell two I had prepped for her.

“What, no cuffs this time?” she spat at me as I pushed her into the simple chair by the bolted-down table in the room.

“Good behavior gets rewards,” I said simply, pushing the pot to the far end of the table as she eyed it again. I pointed to the toilet at the far side of the room. “See. It even flushes. And if you ask me nicely, you can have a pillow.”

“No, wait.” She made to jump up, and I pushed her firmly back into the seat.

“I’m going to go now.” I said. “Eat your dinner, get some sleep, and if you behave, you can have another hot shower in the morning after I have done a little more research.”

I left her gaping at me in fury, the sound of the pot clanging off the door a second after I closed it, chuckling softly to myself at the stream of truly admirable obscene language that followed.

Pulling out my phone, I flicked through the contacts as I let myself back through the doors and set about warming the other can of soup for myself. O’Malley answered with a grunt.

“Watchu’ want, Lancaster? I ain’t even started it yet.”

“I want a copy of that video uploaded to social media,” I said by way of greeting. “Send it to Vanguard as well, but don’t expect an answer.”

“You what?” O’Malley asked, sounding more confused than his usual baseline.

“Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, all of them.” I enunciated each word clearly. “The full cut. Up the contrast so the bruise on her face is visible as well. Just the file, no context. And make sure you tag Vanguard Technology and their executive team in each.”

“Don’t we want the feds out of this?”

“Not this time,” I said. “I took her myself. The pickup was clean, and there’s no risk of her being traced back. The only one who knows who is pulling the strings is Vanguard, and he will want them involved even less than we do.”

There was a long pause.

“What name do I upload it under?”

“I don’t know O’Malley,” I sighed. “Maybe Angus Lachlan O’Malley, if you feel like taking a long holiday in a concrete box? Use those last two brain cells, rub them together, and figure it out. Send me the link when it’s live.”

“Oka—”

I ended the call and flicked to the next contact. Erryn picked up on the third ring with her signature, “Loxley.”

“What connections do you have to the press?”

There was an even longer pause than O’Malley had given me.

“Why?” Her tone was as cold as ice.

I grinned as I pulled my own steaming soup off the element and took it across to my picnic table, knowing I was about to throw a fox into the organized hencoop that was Erryn Loxley.

“Because I’m sending you a link that I need to go viral.”



5

THEO

Viral was an understatement. By evening the next day, Octavia Vanguard was headline news across TV and radio stations, and was trending solidly at number one on all social media platforms.

With a beer in hand and more than a little satisfaction, I had followed the rapid acceleration of her face across every platform and saw reports that Vanguard Technology had hired the UK's largest PR firm, and they would surely soon be making a statement to the press.

Anonymous stories had popped up faster than they could be squashed by whoever Vanguard had scrubbing the platforms. Speculation over the mysterious abduction of his only daughter, and why it hadn't already been announced by the Vanguard PR team, was rife.

"Ignore me now, William," I murmured as I switched my screens off for the night and checked my watch. 1900hrs. I'd given Octavia plenty of time to stew in her little rage bubble after slipping in to leave her breakfast and lunch inside the cell door at 0400hrs, taking a moment to watch the sleeping woman.

She slept curled up in a small ball, blonde hair fanned out across the pillow as if she had been running her fingers through it before she slept. I had leaned against the doorframe for a good ten minutes, taking in the long expanse of bare leg that was crooked over the blanket, the curve of her arse visible where the long men's T-shirt

that was at least three sizes too big for her had ridden up.

The image of that long, bare expanse had burned into my mind, plaguing me throughout the day until I fled to my gym in exasperation, pushing myself until my ears rang and my head swam...And then took a freezing cold shower.

Did it help?

Absolutely fucking not.

I was a professional, and Octavia Vanguard's god-damned thighs had me behaving like a horny teenager. Maybe it was the eight months of celibacy. Either way, it was less than ideal.

The distraction in question glared at me with open animosity from her seat at the small table as I swung her door open, taking in the fresh array of food decorating the cell.

"You know, at some point you are going to need to start eating the food I provide you," I said coolly. "Hunger strikes are a little dramatic."

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice a little hoarse. "I can't...tell...in here."

"1900hrs," I replied.

"You said I could shower in the morning."

I gestured to the splatters of soup. "Isaidgood behavior gets you a hot shower in the morning. You lasted all of a minute."

She grunted, looking at her folded hands, but didn't say anything. It was the first time

I had seen her look anything other than ready to fight like a caged beast, and I really didn't like how that made me feel.

In fact, fuck her. Guilt? Absolutely not. That was a disgusting emotion that could be thrown into the sun.

“Get up,” I said sharply, making her jump.

“I wo?—”

“I actually really don't care what you do, or do not want to do right now, Octavia,” I cut in. “Get your petulant arse up. Move.”

That got me the glare I had been wanting, and she rose from her seat, looking slightly pale.

Had she really not eaten a thing since she had been here?

I did the math quickly. Four days here, one in transport. God knows what her self-care habits had been like before that, but judging from what I had seen, I highly doubted she was the type to prioritize them. The woman hadn't seen a decent meal in nearly a week, and I was not about to have Erryn informed that I needed to call in a medic for the current—very viral—missing person sensation with subzero blood sugar levels.

She followed me out without further complaint, and I waved toward the shower area with a, “Go on then.”

I listened to the sound of her undressing and then adjusting the temperamental taps until she was satisfied, the soft sigh as she stepped under the water slightly distracting as I searched the neatly organized rows of tinned goods.

I was halfway through heating up a tin of mac and cheese that I was pretty sure had the nutritional benefits of flavored sawdust—but at least it was hot—when she finished, the telltale rattle of bottles as she purposely ruined my perfect organization, making my eye twitch. There was no way in hell I would let her see how badly that irked me. Or how the second she was back in her cell, I would be neatly returning them to their designated places again like a psychopath. I was self-aware enough to see it. Not that it helped me curb the urge to organize my life into neat little conforming pieces.

I didn't bother looking up as her footsteps padded toward me, pouring the food onto two plastic plates before I turned to look at her.

“Sit,” I ordered, gesturing to the picnic table with my chin.

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She looked at me with suspicion.

Rolling my eyes, I took my usual spot, sliding her plate across the table and tossing a plastic fork after it.

“I believe we had this discussion yesterday,” I warned softly. “I don’t like to repeat myself, Octavia.”

She muttered something I couldn’t make out under her breath before sliding into the far seat, not even glancing at the food. Instead, her gaze was flitting around the room, quickly taking in everything she could.

Smart girl.

“This place is coded to me,” I offered, blowing on my forkful. “Even if you get out of the cell...and then past me, you won’t get through the doors. If you get through the doors, you won’t get past the lifts...and if you get past those, good luck getting out of the lower levels. So why don’t you just relax and enjoy my company?”

Her gaze snapped back to mine, and I gave her a wink.

“What’s going to happen to me?” she asked.

“Nothing yet,” I replied, swallowing the admittedly rather tasteless cheesy mess. She tensed as I stood up, and I raised my hands placatingly. “Just getting a drink.”

I didn’t even bother asking her if she wanted one, just grabbed two Cokes from the

fridge and placed one in front of her as I returned to my seat, which she eyed as if it had been poisoned.

“I’m going to need you to eat something,” I said as I sat again, pointing my fork at her untouched plate. “I’m not above force feeding you...I might even enjoy it.”

“Tell me what I’m doing here,” she hissed. “I know nothing.”

“Eat, and you can ask me questions,” I said evenly.

A muscle ticked in her jaw and her knuckles went white around the handle of the fork as she snatched it up, but she stabbed a portion and shoved it into her mouth, chewing angrily for a moment before her expression relaxed, her attention moving back to the plate as she took a second, bigger forkful.

“Good,” I murmured, watching her intently. “Now, what do you want to know?”

“Who do you work for?” she asked immediately.

“I can’t answer that,” I replied, tucking back into my own food.

“You said you would answer my questions!”

“I said you can ask questions,” I clarified. “Not that you would get answers to all of them.” I pointed my fork at her plate in warning. “Try again.”

“Why have I been taken?” she snapped, angrily shoving food in her mouth.

“Because your father is far from an upstanding individual, and his attention was required,” I said.

She huffed mirthlessly at that, and it was my turn to study her.

“He owes your company money, then?” she guessed.

“Again, that’s not something I can discuss.”

“Well, it’s relevant,” she shot back. “If it’s money they want, I can get that, pay it, and be on my merry way.”

“You don’t have the kind of money required to meet a ransom demand,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

“You don’t know what I have set aside!”

“Oh, but I do,” I crooned, leaning forward. “You are surprisingly difficult to get information on, but I am very good at what I do. What is your aversion to social media, by the way? You know it’s 2025, right?”

She just gave me a stony look.

“Twenty-nine and no career of note,” I pressed. “You’ve spent barely any time in the UK in over two decades, don’t own property anywhere, you don’t even have a phone plan or a credit card...fuck...you barely had a digital footprint at all. And I’m gathering from the accommodation you were staying in when you were picked up—paid for in cash, might I add—that you do not have access to the Vanguard fortune. It’s certainly not in the singular account you have under your name, and with the quarterly allotments of ten grand coming from Vanguard holdings that were a month late this time...am I right in assuming that is the extent of the financial assistance you have?”

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She seethed in silence, looking as if she wanted to throw her bowl at me.

“Next question,” I said, smiling sweetly.

“Why this job?”

I frowned. “I didn’t choose it. Your file was given to me.”

“No.” She sipped her Coke as she considered her words. “Why do you do this. What makes someone decide they want to be a criminal?”

“Floristry kinda wasn’t my thing,” I replied dryly.

She raised a brow over the rim of her Coke, and I couldn’t stop the soft laugh that slipped out.

“The job found me. I just happen to be good at it.”

I saw her lips move in something that looked suspiciously like “debatable” and chose to ignore it, scraping the last remnants of cheese-flavored gloop from my plate.

“You’re ex-military?”

I stiffened, but that was already an answer, judging from how closely she was watching me. And there were no records of my military career left to find anyway, so I nodded once.



“What gave me away?”

She shrugged. “I spent time in Thailand a year back. It’s popular with expats, and a few ex-military were regulars at a bar I went to. You all carry yourselves the same way.” She glanced at me again. “What made you go from fighting for your country to...this?”

“These are not the questions I was anticipating,” I said.

“It’s not like you are going to tell me anything that will help get me out of here,” she quipped. “And you seem to know so much about me, it’s only fair.”

“The world is far from a fair place, Octavia,” I said.

“Oh, I am well aware,” she said, her voice turning slightly cold. “As my present company would suggest.”

That made me chuckle as I stacked our now empty plates together.

“I was discharged,” I offered.

“Oh?”

“My commanding officer broke his face in three places on my fist. They don’t take kindly to that sort of thing.”

“So, you have a temper?” she mused. “And let me guess...he deserved it.”

“Oh yes,” I agreed. “It takes quite a lot for me to lose it. I don’t suggest trying to find out how much.”

She reached for the small salt and pepper shakers on the table, deliberately picking up the pepper and sprinkling some on the surface.

I curbed the urge to sweep it into my hand, deliberately not looking at the mess she was now running a finger through.

“How old are you?” she asked, flicking a pepper crumb at me.

I raised my brow at that.

“Would you just like me to give you my birth certificate and blood type while I am at it?”

“Forty-seven?” she guessed.

My mouth dropped open in offense before I could catch myself, and her eyes sparked in triumph.

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“Younger than. Forty-five?”

This little minx.

I glared at her as a second pepper crumb flicked my way, knowing damned well she was baiting me but barely able to keep my teeth clamped firmly shut.

“Do I look forty-five?”

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head, humming softly under her breath.

“I’m still in my thirties and that is all you’re getting,” I said through clenched teeth.

Her lips tilted in the hint of a satisfied smile, fanning the ember that had lit with her presence into a slow burn.

Does she know what fire she plays with?

6

OCTAVIA

In all the ways my father has fucked me over the years, this had to be the worst yet.

Of course. Of course, I’ve been dragged into one of his questionable business deals the first time I return to this god-damned country. Even cutting myself off from the Vanguard name, disinheriting myself, and running from everything to do with them, I

was still not safe. No matter how long my leash is, all it took was a yank on it to have me right back here. And now I was sitting across the table from the woman who had ripped me from my life and held the key to my cell...and she was smirking at me.

I had never wanted to punch someone in the face so badly in my life, and I couldn't even throw a punch to save myself.

She had answered the phone twice since we had been sitting here, while I tried to draw out the time that I could spend outside of that infernal cell. Each call, her tone had been clipped, her replies short, and she had hung up without a goodbye. Meanwhile, I had been enjoying watching her trying to ignore the fact that I had been creating a beautiful work of art with pepper—and now salt—on her clean table.

God, I loved fucking with her. It gave me a little feeling of control over something in a situation where I had none. That and after a few days in isolation, any amusement was welcome. I had savored the Coke, taking small sips as the sugar hit my system and woke my brain up from the dark little corner it had been cowering in. It was the confinement. I hated it. The walls seemed to be closing in on me with every hour I spent in there, the fist of anxiety that had taken up residence in my chest was steadily squeezing harder as the lack of stimulation had begun to wreak havoc. My mind had begun that horrific racing, bringing up memories and voices that I was usually great at ignoring.

Getting up, Theo picked up the bowls and cans, taking them to the bin where she threw them all out just as lights flicked on above my head, startling me. I peered up at the fairy lights that were neatly woven into the huge open sun umbrella that slotted into the picnic table, which served as the dining area.

“Solar,” she said as she returned and beckoned me to follow. “They come on as it gets dark. Let's go, I have work to do.”

Glancing up at the huge windows high up on the walls, I looked longingly at the warm dusk light, the long shadows on the walls deepening. Watching the fading rays of sunlight brought some comfort, and I wanted desperately to prolong it as much as I could.

“Can I...” I trailed off, every part of my pride hating me for lowering myself to this. I should be fighting her. Kicking and screaming, even though it would get me nowhere.

“Can you what, Sweets?” she asked.

“Can I stay here for a bit?” I asked. “I won’t move. Just...let me watch the sunset.”

Theo frowned, blinked, looked up at the windows, and then back at me.

“You want to watch...the sunset?” She seemed amused, and it stirred my irritation immediately.

“Look, I’d rather be out here with a psychopath than left in there with my own thoughts, okay?”

That earned me a raised brow, and she appeared to contemplate for a moment. Then shrugged.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I blurted.

“Did you want me to say no?” she asked, sounding even more amused. “I am a reasonable person, Octavia. As long as you don’t try anything stupid or start finger painting with ketchup, I really don’t care if you stay out here.” She gestured around. “The kitchen and my screens are off limits, otherwise...you can roam during day

hours when I am here.”

I blinked at her for a long moment.

“Every day?”

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“Uh-huh...” She drew out her agreement, that eyebrow raising a fraction higher. “When I am here, like I said.”

“This is fucking weird,” I said. “What’s the catch?”

She huffed softly. “You are no threat to me. I am your best bet at getting out of here unscathed. You are a bright woman. Mutual respect, Sweets. I can’t let you go, but this doesn’t have to be worse than it needs to be. And I’m getting real sick of scraping food off my cell walls. You behave for me, you get rewards.”

The small spark of satisfaction I got from knowing that the food art had pissed her off was quickly engulfed by the wave of heat at the way her voice dropped to a purr with those last few words. I swallowed once before I trusted my voice to maintain its iciness.

“Fine.”

“And you will eat what I give you,” she pushed.

I grimaced. “I don’t think a starved dog could stomach that stew.”

The raised brow nearly disappeared into her hairline.

“Fine,” I repeated.

“Look at that,” she crooned. “Less than a week and you already want to please me.” She winked when my mouth dropped open in silent, dumbfounded rage, every retort

caught in a tangle of words on my tongue.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she chuckled, her eyes lingering on my mouth for a long moment. “Bedtime is 2200hrs.”

Theo worked on her screens while I wandered around the huge space. I had paced my cell, yet it still felt like I was stretching gloriously after being kept in confinement.

She didn’t seem to take much notice of me. The few times I glanced at her, she was studying her screen as she tapped a pen against her bottom lip, the screens setting her face glowing softly and illuminating the long line of her neck.

Not that I was looking at her neck.

I was strangely fascinated with this space. It was meticulously organized while being an eclectic mix of things that shouldn’t have worked together, yet did. I skirted the gym area, with its rack of dumbbells and a handful of exercise machines, and the shower area next to it, which was still the disorganized mess I had left it in. There was no television, but there was a row of wooden shelves loaded with books and a potted plant with dense, dark green leaves that hung in vines down the wall. The dark wood of the shelves accented the grey concrete beautifully, and behind the books, an abstract green and black graffiti mural decorated the wall. Two couches sat facing each other with a rustic coffee table between them, cushions neatly placed on them with an equally neatly folded throw on one of the arms. I took a while and a little satisfaction in curling up on one for a bit to watch the last of the sunset...making sure I leaned on all the pillows until they were less perfectly plumped.

Theo tapped something on her phone as the last of the sun faded and the fairy lights weren’t cutting it, and a few of the huge lights above clicked on, bathing the entire room in a warm light that allowed me to carry on exploring.



The doors were no help to me. The double doors sported deadbolts as thick as my wrist, and the smaller door had the glowing keypad that I had no hope of trying to get through. There was nothing I could have used to even attempt to get to the high windows either, so the sliver of hope I had at finding a way out vanished, and I resigned myself to investigating the rest of the space.

Theo's bed was inside a huge walk-in safe, its mechanism dismantled and the heavy iron door sitting open. I could see a perfectly made double bed in the center of the room, sitting on a forest green rug on the bare concrete floor, accompanied by a small side table and lamp. There was a simple but sturdy set of drawers off to one side, and beautifully maintained potted trees on either side of a smaller vault door that was closed.

On the wall behind her bed was another painted mural, this one of a crow in flight rendered in black with green accents, its wings stretching along the entire width of the bed. Curiosity had me lingering, wishing I could go in there and delve into the private space of someone who could do the things Theo did. I wanted to see what made her tick, what things she kept in those small drawers next to her bed. It was probably as meticulous as the rest of this place, with a singular knife resting in its base. There could be a bible sitting in it for all I knew. That thought made me snort, and I instantly felt her attention on me.

“Something amusing about my bed, Sweets? You seem rather interested in it. Would you like a closer look, maybe?”

My cheeks flamed, and I refused to look at her and give her the satisfaction, instead busying myself looking at another painted design on a wall by the kitchen area. The longer I looked, the more I saw hidden in the depths of what could be passed over as random graffiti art.

“I was looking at the murals, they're beautiful.”

She hummed a note that did not sound very convinced, but I chose to ignore it as I took in the kitchen area at a distance, mindful of her warning that it was off limits.

For a woman who had served me several varieties of canned slop for nearly a week, her kitchen was well organized, with copper pots hanging in a neat row above the long granite countertop. There was a small coffee machine that was spotless, a kettle, and a knife block, all in the same polished silver that didn't have a single smudge on it. She really was a psychopath.

"If you have quite finished using your free time to inspect my living quarters," Theo said after a long silence, "hostage enrichment hour is over."

7

THEO

The phone rang as I was midway through my morning workout, cursing to myself as I racked the bar and picked it up.

"You seen the news?" O'Malley asked as soon as I picked up.

"Nope." I tucked the phone under my chin so I could flick my monitors on, William Vanguard's stricken face filling my screen as I clicked onto the streaming platform.

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“Hello, Daddy Vanguard,” I murmured, leaning in closer.

I had seen his photoshopped, impeccable photos plastered all over billboards and news articles about him. But through the harsh cameras of the press, he looked far more human.

He had the same shade of blonde hair as his daughter, the same hazel eyes, and the same straight, slightly aquiline nose that should have looked harsh on Octavia, yet was a striking feature that made her beauty unique.

That was where the similarities ended, though. The rest of her features came from her mother. The delicate, watery-eyed woman stood next to William, her gaze flitting nervously over the crowd gathered in front of them, blinking at the flashinglights as the paparazzi descended on the press conference like the vultures they were.

“Timid little thing,” I murmured to myself as I arranged my pencils along the desk in perfectly straight lines. “Shedidn’t inherit that trait.”

“He’s been trying to turn the media for the last twenty minutes.” O’Malley’s voice snapped me out of my musing, and I clicked across to the other platform to see Octavia’s picture front and center. She was markedly younger than she was now, looking at the camera with a solemn expression on a large couch, her legs tucked up in front of her and arms wrapped tightly around them.

I grunted, sitting down as William stepped up to the small podium that had been set for him, and glanced down at the unfolded paper in his hands.

“Please,” he began, turning tired-looking eyes to the camera. “If my daughter can see this...I’m doing everything I can to get you back, Baby Girl.”

My lip curled as I grimaced in distaste.

“To those who have my daughter, just tell me what you want!” His voice cracked in a valiant display of emotion as he pulled a kerchief from his pocket and held it to his dry eyes for a moment.

“Send it,” I ordered O’Malley, leaning back in my chair with a smirk as William prattled on while his wife held up that same picture of Octavia.

Glancing at my watch, I kept a careful eye on the paparazzi, minutes ticking by, until one by one they glanced down, their attention drawn by something else.

“Gotcha,” I murmured, as one held their phone up, the screen visible even from this distance with the article I had put together myself, linking in the list of dropped lawsuits against Vanguard Technology.

“Mr. Vanguard!” one of the reporters called, elbowing his way to the front of the crowd. “Can you tell us about the lawsuits? Why so many cases against you have been lodged and dropped in the last three years? Do you think there could be a link to your missing daughter?”

More voices rose from the milling reporters, clamoring to get their questions in as a suit next to William stepped forward to speak into his ear. William moved back as the suit took his place, announcing the interview was over while William and his wife were ushered away from the stage and quickly engulfed by bodyguards and out of sight.

“Well, at least he is now aware of where we will take it,” I said to the quiet phone

line.

O'Malley grunted, and I could hear typing in the background.

"Send another communication request through," I said, turning off the coverage.

Another grunt.

"I'm going to need words, O'Malley," I said, irritation rising. "A simple 'yes okay' is fine, but I do not communicate in neanderthal. And where is Zichen? I have something I need him to look into."

O'Malley huffed softly down the line. "He's busy."

"Well then, tell him to make himself available," I snapped. "This is the job, and if he can't commit to it, I will have him replaced."

"I don't think you have the sway to get anyone replaced at the moment, Golden Girl," O'Malley said. "It's been noticed that you're not Loxley's pet no more, so pipe down. I'll pass your message on, and Zichen will get back to you when he's ready."

Putting him on speaker, I set the phone down as the urge to hurl it into the nearest wall gripped me momentarily.

"You want to repeat that to my face later?" I asked acidly.

He let out a short bark of laughter and hung up, leaving me simmering in my anger.

I glanced at my watch. 0900hrs. Octavia would be well and truly awake and at risk of flinging things around. Stalking to the coffee machine, I turned it on and let the monotony of grinding and packing the coffee beans soothe my temper as the rich

aroma filled the large room. I leaned against the counter, eyes closed, breathing it in and feeling the last of my annoyance ebb away. I almost missed the low buzz of the phone over the noise of the machine, smirking in satisfaction as I noticed the burner phone on my desk light up and vibrate across the surface.

I swiped the screen on the unknown number, crooking my shoulder to hold it against my ear as I carried on making the coffees.

“Hello, William,” I purred into the phone as it connected. “Someone has been a naughty boy, haven’t they?”

“What are your demands?” His tone was flat. None of the emotion that he had displayed so animatedly on the screen just minutes ago.

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“I just want to talk. You are rather hard to get hold of.”

“Do you know how many times I have received false ransom requests? My daughter comes and goes as she wishes, and opportunists are aware of that. Just tell me what you?—”

“Hush now,” I interrupted as I poured frothed milk into a cup. “This can stay very simple. The terms of your daughter’s release have been sent to you. I would hate to have to damage your name further. The internet is not forgiving, it seems, and that PR company is good, but they’re not miracle workers. How much have your shares dropped in the last twenty-four hours, by the way?”

“Is she alive?” he bit out.

“I wouldn’t be negotiating with a dead body, William, give me a little credit,” I scoffed.

“I want proof.”

I huffed a laugh, pulling the phone away from my ear and hitting the code for cell two.

“So demanding,” I muttered. “I see where she gets it from.”

The muffled beep of the cell unlocking was followed closely by Octavia bursting into the room, surprise at seeing me wiping down the coffee machine, making her hesitate. I crooked a finger at her, and to my delight, she came toward me, though hesitantly.

She stopped when I raised my finger at her, keeping her just out of reach, and I put him on speaker, holding the phone out between us.

“Tell Daddy you are alive, Sweets.”

Octavia blanched, her eyes locking on the phone in my hand.

“What?” she croaked.

“Is that you, Octavia?” William barked.

“Yes,” she said, but her voice came out strangled, and she cleared her throat and tried again. “Yes, it’s me.”

“There’s your proof,” I said, taking him off speaker and tucking the phone next to my ear again. “Now be a good boy and hold up your end. There are instructions on how to contact me again in the file you received.” I ended the call abruptly, pulling the back off the phone and removing the SIM card before tossing the small chip into my microwave. I set it to two minutes before sliding the second coffee toward Octavia, who was watching the microwave with concern as it began to spark furiously.

“Good morning,” I said cheerily.

She startled, turning her attention back to me and looking thoroughly thrown.

“Good—what?”

“Morning,” I supplied. “Sleep okay?”

She frowned at me then, getting a hint of that spark back in her eyes.



“No, Theo. I did not. What’s happening? You talked to Wil—my father?”

“Shame.” I gestured at the table. “Sit, drink your coffee while it’s hot.”

“Theo!” she bit out.

God, she really did have balls. I admired her. Truly. It took a certain kind of woman to scold her own captor. Even one as unconventional as I was.

“Yes?” I replied, letting my voice drop into the dangerously soft croon that had made her pause before.

A muscle ticked in her jaw, the faintest pink tinge emerging on her cheeks as she glared at me.

“I will not sit do—” Her retort was cut off as my hand closed around her throat, her delicate fingers grabbing at my wrist as her eyes widened.

Picking up her coffee in my free hand, I walked her back, my thumb over the now erratic thump of her pulse until the back of her legs hit the seat and she sat abruptly.

“Yes...you will,” I murmured, her stilted breaths fanning across my cheek. “I told you that I don’t like asking twice, Sweets.” I pressed my thumb a little harder against her pulse as she tried to swallow.

God, the feel of the delicate lines of her neck moving under my grip was intoxicating. I wanted more. I wanted to squeeze tighter, feel her whimper catch against my palm.

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Her hand tightened around my wrist, her nails digging into my skin, and I pulled away from the touch, releasing her. She panted, her hand resting against her throat where mine had just been, but her eyes were telling me everything I needed to know. Her pupils had blown wide, her gaze locked on mine in a way that I knew she would do anything I told her to in that moment.

And fuck it...after the disrespect I had just gotten from O'Malley, I needed to flex the part of me that craved control.

"Take your coffee, do as you are told, and you can ask me questions while I finish my workout," I said, still crowding her space.

Her hand brushed mine as she took the cup, never breaking eye contact.

"Okay," she rasped, seeming incapable of the smart-ass comments she usually fired at me.

"That's better," I murmured, tilting my head as I let my gaze drift lower to linger on those beautiful god-damned lips. "Can you be a good girl for me?"

Her breath caught, her knuckles going white around the cup, but she nodded once, and I smirked, finally standing and giving her room to breathe.

Her eyes tracked my every move as I made my way over to the gym, the weight of her stare a near-physical caress over my skin.

But she sipped her coffee and sat there.

Quietly.

Perfectly.

Fuck, I was in trouble.

8

OCTAVIA

The low ringing in my ears hadn't stopped since Theo's fingers had wrapped around my throat. Or maybe that was screaming? Was I screaming? In a daze, I brushed my fingers across my lips to be sure, relieved to find that I was in fact not in full gay panic and losing all of my faculties. Some of them, definitely.

Because what the hell, Octavia?

I took a sip of coffee, letting the aromatic liquid fill my senses, and tried to ignore the low ache between my thighs as I watched my abductor waltz over to her weights like she hadn't just manhandled me into a malfunctioning mess.

I took a larger sip as she lifted those things like they were feathers, the muscles of her arms flexing as she did. I nearly choked as my gaze slid to the mirrored wall beyond her, and she winked at me in the reflection. Turning my back on her as my face flared with heat, I stared at my cup, focusing on the tendril of steam dancing from it.

"How will this work?" I asked over my shoulder. "You'll just let me go? I have trouble believing that."

"That's exactly how it will go," Theo replied, grunting softly, and I risked a quick glance to see her lift the weights over her head. "As long as my employers get what

they want, you will be returned to the Vanguard estate.”

“No,” I blurted, turning to see Theo regarding me with curiosity. “Just let me leave, and I will choose where I go.”

“Back to the quaint little hotel I found you at?” she asked after a moment. “I didn’t take you for a fool, Sweets.”

I scoffed. “It was a stop on the way to another destination. That’s all.”

“Oh?” She raised a brow as irritation began to simmer in me. I don’t know why she irked me so badly.

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” I snapped.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she agreed. “But what if I am curious?”

“So you can abduct me again when you want your next paycheck?”

She let out a soft laugh and bent to grasp the handle of another machine, aligning herself with it before pulling the long cord out, her shoulder bunching and flexing as she did.

“Octavia,” she scolded. “I already have you. If I wanted to keep you, I would. I’ll have no need to come searching for you again once your father has fixed his mistakes.”

Why, the fuck did that sting? I might need to check myself straight into a psych ward after this. Full grippy sock holiday. I was too busy being outraged with myself for a moment to catch what she had said.

Fix his mistakes.

This wasn't a cash grab. He had done something, and I was the leverage to manipulate him into fixing it. My mind raced as I tried to come up with something to fill the silence, but Theo spoke before I could come up with anything.

"So, what did Daddy do to make you despise him so much? Got you the wrong color Bentley for your sweet sixteenth?"

"Who said I despise him?" I asked carefully.

"Your face," she huffed.

"What did your father do to turn you into a criminal?" I shot back.

She didn't even falter in her movements, that lopsided smirk that showed the tip of her canine making me shift against the ache that just wouldn't leave me alone.

"I never knew my father," she said.

"That comes as no surprise," I muttered.

"But my grandfather," she continued, "I have never met a better man. Don't blame my questionable life choices on him, Sweets. This is all me." She dropped the handle, letting it clatter back into the machine, and rolled her shoulders.

"So." Theo wandered back toward me, and my heart seemed to pick up speed with

every step. “What did he do?”

I tilted my head so I could look up at her.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me.” She leaned down, and god, it was the first time I had looked into her eyes at this distance. Central heterochromia. I had read about eyes like these and had laughed to myself at the characters in my silly romance books swooning over them. And here I was in manual breathing mode. For fuck’s sake.

“He was never made to be a father,” I replied quietly, attempting to hide how flustered she made me. “I learned I was better off without him years ago. That’s it.”

She hummed noncommittally, her eyes narrowing on me. There were two small scars on her face. One at the bridge of her nose, the other to the side of her brow. Invisible at a distance, but this close, I could just make out the faint silver line marring her skin.

“Do you realize,” she said after a long moment, “that every thought you have dances across your face, Octavia?”

I glared at her, schooling my features into what I hoped was a Fort Knox level of impenetrable to observative assholes.

“Good. Would you like to decipher what it’s saying right now and get out of my space?”

A slow smile spread across her face.

“Octavia, if I were to do what your body is telling me you want right now, I would be

soverymuch more...insideyour space.”

“Don’t be vulgar,” I choked out.

Heat. There was heat everywhere. My face. My chest. Even the air burned. Get a grip, Octavia.

“No?” She lowered her gaze to my lap. “So, if I were to slip my hand down between those thighs of yours, you wouldn’t be soaking through your panties? Aching for me to run my finger through the mess you are becoming and take a little pressure off?”

I dropped the mug, and it shattered in a splash of coffee on the floor, but neither of us moved to do anything about it.

Fort Knox. Nailed it.

“See,” she murmured. “Your expression is begging me to touch you, Sweets. And telling me everything your lips aren’t.”

“Don’t you dare,” I croaked, while my traitorous body hummed with need.

“It would be incredibly unethical of me,” she whispered. “And you have no idea the devil you dance with.”

I reared back. “Oh, so that’s the moral line you are drawing? Good to know they exist—” An alarm sounded across the room and Theo glanced over at the computer monitors, a crease forming between her brows momentarily before it was gone.

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Her absence when she crossed to her desk felt visceral, as if the oxygen had been sucked from the room, leaving me floundering and definitely not turned on. At all.

An irritated grunt from where she was peering at one of the screens drew my attention, and she pulled out her phone, doing something on it for a moment before casting an eye over me.

“If you want a shower, have one now,” she said, the sultry note gone from her voice.

I nodded. It was the only thing I was still capable of doing, so I fled to the sanctity of the shower area, the flimsy protection of the curtain giving me at least the illusion of privacy to gather myself.

Theo was moving around in the living area. I faintly heard the clink of the mug being swept up, and the sounds of things being moved into place, as I stepped under the stream of water, sighing as the heat of it soothed my tense muscles. The longer I was in that cell, the worse it was getting. There was relief in this space. A semblance of freedom that made me eager to stay out here.

I had just lathered my hair when I caught the sound of the main door beeping, so I stuck my head out from under the jet of water, straining to hear. Theo’s low voice murmured something, and another feminine voice replied. I hurried through rinsing the suds out, cut the water, and grabbed a towel from the neat stack in the corner.

“I do not appreciate being blindsided, Theodora,” the unfamiliar woman said reproachfully.



Theodora? I bit my lip to smother the laugh that almost slipped out.

“You have always trusted me to get the job done. This doesn’t work if I have to clear everything with you first. We already know this,” Theo said, sounding unfazed.

“And shall we discuss this?” There was a meaningful silence after the woman’s comment, which I assumed came with a pointed finger in my direction.

Theo’s reply was too low to catch, and I leaned closer to the curtain to try to make out their words as both women’s voices lowered. There was a cold laugh, and then a, “Don’t be ridiculous,” from the unknown woman.

“Oh, and I want Zichen off the job,” Theo said, as they moved through the room.

“Pardon?”

“Well, I assume this proverbial wrist slap is because he raised concerns about my capabilities to the Chairs,” Theo said. “There’s no other reason for you to be here, is there?”

There was a hint of coldness to Theo’s voice I hadn’t heard yet. Not even toward the two men who had been here for the recording. There was no reply from the other woman, and a pause that lasted a little too long.

“I have no time for insecure men. Replace him,” Theo said evenly. “If you insist on giving me a team, at least make it one that isn’t mutinous.”

“As you wish,” the woman said. “I’ll have a replacement linked in by tomorrow.”

The rest of the conversation was lost as the two women moved further away, and I carefully picked my way back over to my clothes and towed my hair, running my

fingers through it, then coiling the long, wet strands into a bun. The door beeped again as the woman left.

I stepped out of the shower to see Theo sitting in front of her screens, multiple windows pulled up as she typed.

“So...what am I meant to do now?” I asked.

“Make yourself comfortable, Sweets,” she replied, distracted with whatever she was doing. “Unless you feel like making me breakfast.”

She turned to look at me when my confused silence stretched on for too long. She looked...irritated. Thrown off, maybe? And I guessed it was from whoever was just here.

“What?” she asked.

“Make you breakfast?” I clarified, feeling like I was missing the point where I had become some sort of weird house guest.

“I like my toast on the rare side. Warm bread with lots of butter,” she said, spinning her chair around to look me up and down. “Unless you would prefer climbing up on the table over there and opening those pretty legs for me. I’m famished.”

“What is wrong with you?” I tried to block the images that had just slammed into my mind, making everything clench. Fuck.

“Oh, many things,” she murmured. “Currently, you are my main issue.”

“Me?” I asked incredulously. “I wouldn’t even be here if you hadn’t dragged me from my life. Every problem you have with me is your own doing, Theodora.”

Her eyes went a little dark, and something in her expression changed.

“Be careful, Sweets.”

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“Orwhat?” I snapped. “You think I’m scared of you?” I barked out a laugh, sounding slightly unhinged. And honestly? I didn’t know what I was feeling. Angry. Frustrated. Untethered. It all hit me at once and made me reckless. “Fuck you. Get your own breakfast.”

I strode past her, aiming for my cell, when an iron grip closed around my wrist and hauled me around until I was facing her again.

“I’m not done with you.”

I glared at her. “Too fucking bad.” My heart was thundering in my chest, but I refused to look away, and a slow smile spread over Theo’s face as she took in the defiance that was gripping every atom of my being.

“Such a stubborn streak you have there, Octavia. I’m going to have so much fun breaking it.” A twist of my arm had me backing across the room, guided by a grip that was going to leave bruises. And fuck if it wasn’t doing terrible things to me. My mind was in full revolt. Part of me desperate to be closer to this woman, the other part raging.

My legs hit something solid, and if it wasn’t for the grip she had on me, I would have fallen. Instead, I sat heavily on the black cushioned bench in the middle of the gym. Every nerve ending within me flared as her weight settled across my lap, her hands pressing my wrists down against my sides.

“I can see every thought you are having right now,” she murmured, tilting her head as her gaze pinned me to the bench. “So why not just ask me nicely?”

“Get. Off. Me,” I bite out. “You have lost it if you think I want anything to do with you.”

That slow, wicked smile spread across her lips.

“I’m getting real damn tired of being dictated to in my own home by women who could do with a couple of really good orgasms to chill them the fuck out—so I will make you a deal,” she murmured, leaning down until she was just inches from my face. Her eyes scanned mine for a moment, her warmth across my hips distracting me.

“You prove to me that you are not lying through your teeth right now, and I will give you freedom. You prove me right, and I show you what happens when people think they can lie to me...and I get to have a little of my kind of fun.”

“And how do I do that?” I said, my fists clenched so hard my nails were biting painfully into my palms.

“I’m going to fuck myself, right here,” she whispered.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“On your lap...and if you truly think I’m as abhorrent as you insist...it should be a real easy for you to not watch.”

My heart instantly skipped a beat, and her eyes lingered on the pulse in my neck with a satisfied smirk.

“What?” I rasped.

“Did I stutter?”

“You will give me freedom?” I asked, trying desperately not to go full gay panic and willing my voice to be normal. “Just like that. You will let me go.”

“Uh-huh,” she murmured. I nearly groaned as she rolled her hips, barely biting back the sound in time. Theo tilted her head to the side. “I open those doors, and I will even give you an hour’s head start before I hunt you down. Do we have a deal or not?”

I considered my options for all of five seconds before slowly nodding. I could do it. An hour was all I needed to get myself away and hidden.

“And I’m meant to trust you will keep your word?”

Theo smiled.

“I promise. And I keep my promises, Sweets.” She let one of my wrists go and leaned forward a fraction more as she reached for something next to me, her lips brushing mine. Not a kiss, but it scorched my skin and stole my breath. Then the bench behind me dropped, and I was suddenly lying flat as she tossed the pin she had just pulled to the floor. Standing abruptly, Theo slipped her thumbs into the waistband of her pants and pushed them off her hips, and I had time to see two small diamond dermal piercings on the front of her pussy as she stepped out of them, before she was lowering herself onto my hips again—this time with nothing between her and the strip of skin bared on my stomach.

I gasped as she gripped my T-shirt in her hands and ripped it open, my hands quickly moving to cover myself.

“Show me,” she murmured, running a light finger down my arm and making my skin pebble.

This was so wrong. So very wrong. My body was reacting to her like no other, and I knew she could see it.

She sighed in appreciation as I slowly lowered my arms, the cool air making my nipples draw tight.

You don't want this. You don't want this. I chanted the words to myself as if I needed convincing.

Theo didn't touch me, even though her expression told me she wanted to. I can't explain what that felt like. Anticipation? Relief?

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“You see the crack in the concrete straight above you?” she asked, and I raised my eyes to it, nodding once.

“Look at that, not me,” she ordered. “And don’t touch me. Sit on your hands.”

I didn’t answer her as I obediently slipped my hands under my butt, my eyes fixed on that tiny crack that promised my freedom. Away from this. Away from her.

Away from her.

She tugged the loose edges of my shirt out from where she rested on me, and I sucked a breath in as her skin settled against mine, her thighs gripping my sides and her pussy right over my navel.

She was already wet. This should disturb me. I should be mortified. So why was this the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced?

“Have you ever fucked a woman, Sweets?”

My eyes immediately dipped to her face with the shock of her question, and then I froze, wrenching them back as she chuckled softly.

“I will give you that one. It’s human nature to look at the person speaking to you.”

I gasped as she delivered a stinging slap to my breast.

“But that’s your final chance. Answer my question.”



“Yes,” I hissed out, my eyes glued to that fucking ceiling crack.

She hummed softly, and it sounded like surprise.

“So, you know how wet a woman can get just from anticipation?”

I bit my tongue—hard—as she slid herself a couple of inches up my stomach and down again.

“You know how delicious it feels to sink your fingers deep into them?”

Her hand slid between us, crooking upward, her breath catching as it flexed and moved. She sighed softly after a moment, leaning back.

“You know what a woman’s pleasure sounds like?”

Her voice was slightly strained as her knuckles dug into my stomach with her movements, and good god, I could hear how wet she was as she slowly fingered herself.

My mouth watered, and I told myself it was from how hard I was now biting my tongue, the coppery taste of blood filling my mouth.

She adjusted herself, and her hand drew back from between us, though her fingertips brushed against my skin rhythmically as she began to tease her clit with her soaking fingers.

Fuck.

“Struggling a bit there?” Her voice was breathy and filled with amusement.

I opened my mouth to fling out a denial, but the small moan she made had it snapping shut again, and it took everything in me not to let my eyes drop.

Everything.

She shifted backward, her free hand gripping just above my knee as her breaths picked up into soft pants. It was the guttural moan followed by a soft curse that did it, sounding like it had been dragged up from somewhere deep within her. It was vulnerable in a way I couldn't explain...

And it was a trap.

My eyes lowered, meeting hers for a second before dropping lower, to where her hand was teasing herself.

Jesus Christ.

I don't know if I said it out loud or in my head, but that sight was going to be forever burned into my mind...and played on repeat.

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She tilted her head, a slow smile playing on her lips as she stopped what she was doing, bringing her hand to her mouth.

My own mouth fell open slightly as I watched her lips wrap around her glistening finger and suck on it.

“I thought so,” she murmured, before rising quickly. “Don’t move.”

“What, no!” I gasped, my head falling back on the cushioned bench. “Fuck!”

The sound of the tap had me craning my neck to see her washing her hands, before returning with a small box in one hand, and something small and black in the other.

“What is that?” I asked, a kernel of concern rapidly coming to life in my chest.

“Consequences,” she said simply, before resuming her position on my stomach. She positioned the small black item beneath her, and I jumped as a press of her finger had it vibrating gently. She gave me a raised brow and a smirk before turning her attention to the box and flipping open the lid.

I couldn’t see what was in it from my position, so I watched her face. The small crease between her brows as she frowned at the contents, another at the side of her mouth. She closed her eyes for a moment, distracted by the vibration of the toy, and shifted slightly to the right.

“This is my consequence?” I asked, suspicion and wariness breaking my resolve to stay silent.

She scoffed. “No. Eyes up, Sweets.”

I let them linger on her for a second longer than I should have, and she slid her gaze to mine, a clear challenge in them, before I did as I was told, fixing my attention on the crack above.

I should get up. Walk back to my cell and away from whatever this game was. But Theo was half naked and straddling me...I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. And I did not want to.

A packet ripped, and then a second later, I yelped as cold metal clamped onto my nipple.

“It's just a clamp,” she said as I fought the need to look down.

“No...really?” I hissed. “I had no idea.”

She pushed something on the toy, and the vibrations picked up. I had to press my lips together to stop the gasp that almost escaped. She had sat it low on my abdomen, and my blood began to heat as the vibrations began to shudder through me as well, the pain of my nipple making everything more intense.

I could deal with nipple clamps...it wasn't the first time I had worn them. If anything, it was taking some of the attention away from the fact I had a woman fucking herself on my lap.

Winning at life. Ish. I could do this...

Theo leaned forward, the nipple clamp twisting slightly...and then white-hot pain shot through me.

“What thefuck!” I screamed, staring down to where there was now a needle through my nipple. I ripped my hands out from under me, ready to push her off, but a precise flick to my newly pierced nipple stopped that in its tracks.

“You thought the clamp was your consequence?” she asked, the color high in her cheeks. “It’s just a little pain, Octavia.”

I cried out as she pinched my tortured nipple between her fingers, a small sound of pleasure slipping from her before she deftly slipped a ring onto the end of the needle and threaded it through. Theo released the clamp a second later...and then my heart dropped as she clamped my other one.

“Theo, please.”

“You can do better than that,” she murmured, her cheeks flushed. “I bet you can beg so prettily if you put your mind to it.”

She ripped open a second needle, cocking her head at me with a lopsided smile as she brought it to my nipple.

“This is fucked,” I snapped. “Get off me.”

She tutted at me. “And you were doing so well...”

The pain was just as intense, but the whimper I let out had nothing to do with it...it was one of need, as the bite of it deepened the ache between my thighs.

She locked onto that sound with the intensity of a predator, leaning forward to watch my face as she pinched it again, harder.

My hands clutched at her hips, and she let me for a moment...my fingers digging into

her flesh and pulling her down on the toy buzzing softly between us, before she knocked them away.

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“Ahhhh,” she whispered, smirking. “I thought so. Masochism looks good on you, Sweets. Now put your hands where I told you to. Don’t make me tell you again.”

I slid my hands back under me, my eyes glued to the sight of Theo as she fucked herself slowly on my lap.

And it was the most erotic moment of my life.

9

THEO

Octavia was a drug, and I was her willing addict. I hadn’t even tasted her yet, hadn’t even kissed her, and I was hooked. And it was a fucking problem.

I had straddled her lap, edging her with enough pain that should have left her writhing. But she had loved it, and her eyes had never left me once.

Arousal and I have an odd relationship. I find pleasure in intimacy, but to reach that truly aching need that takes over your entire body...for that, I need to dip into the darkest side of me. I need control. All of it. I need to take someone and push them to their limits. But what really makes me wet is when someone willingly suffers for me...wants the pain that I can wield like an art form synonymous with pleasure.

And fuck she had wanted it.

Octavia hadn’t said anything when I stood afterward, stripping my top and bra off,

and dropping them on the ground before walking to the shower to wash away my sins. I had needed to get away from her for a moment before I completely lost my mind and did something outrageous like kiss her.

I did not kiss. I barely even touched. It was why Erryn and I hadn't worked even though we were explosive together. We both needed the control that neither was willing to fully give up. Erryn had kissed me once, and I had pulled away. It was too intimate. Too vulnerable. But I needed to know what Octavia's lips felt like, and I had a feeling thatnotknowing would haunt me until the day I died.

I had pulled clothes on my still-damp skin and was toweling off my hair, when my phone buzzed, and I glanced at the blocked number before swiping the screen to answer.

"We have comms from Vanguard," O'Malley said in his usual brusque manner. "He has agreed to send a tech to remove the software. But he has demands."

I scoffed, stepping out from behind the shower and locating Octavia. She was by the kitchen sink with her back to me, and I was amused to note she was wearing a fresh T-shirt of mine that had been in the dryer. The little minx had been snooping.

"Of course he does. What are they?"

"The girl is to be witnessed by their man beforehand. Somewhere public, where she is to remain while their tech does the removal."

I hummed softly. "When?"

"Today."

I shook my head. "Too rushed, the meeting point will need recon first. I'll need to



update Loxley, and set u?—”

“Zichen already confirmed with Vanguard and set up access to the system with Loxley,” O’Malley cut me off. “He has it in hand.”

“—Excuse me?” I said after a long pause. “He fuckingwhat?”

“Look, just bring the girl. Location’s been sent.”

The line went dead, and I stared at the dark screen, a wave of anger nearly sent the small device hurtling into the wall, and I was still staring at it when Octavia’s voice snapped me out of it. She wasn’t looking at me and seemed to be deep in contemplation as she gripped the side of the sink.

“Was that about me?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, studying the delicate blades of her shoulders beneath the thin T-shirt. “It seems your father would like you home after all.”

She stiffened, still not turning to look at me, the muscles in her arms flexing as she gripped the sink tighter.

“So, you’re taking me to him?”

She sounded...I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. But there was one thing entirely missing. Relief. There was no relief in her voice.

And there should have been.

Pulling the vehicle to a stop at the location O’Malley had sent me, I sighed and shook my head, immediately cataloguing the numerous strategic issues with the site.

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“Fucking idiots,” I murmured, passing a hand over the Glock hidden at my hip to reassure myself of its presence. We were in an abandoned parking lot under a bustling motorway bridge, the noise being the first problem. Down the far end was what looked to be a makeshift settlement of tents and cardboard lean-tos, with disheveled inhabitants who eyed me warily as I got out of the car and scoped out the area.

There was an abandoned apartment complex directly across from us, a black cat sitting on the crumbling brick fence around it. That building alone had a dozen dark, empty windows I was uncomfortable with.

An empty can clattered and a fire sparked as I turned to see one of the vagrants poking at a drum that a few more were standing around, warming their hands and whispering amongst themselves.

Don’t try it, I mentally warned a burly-looking person who was showing far too much interest in the blacked-out windows of my Jeep.

Seconds later, Zichen’s sleek grey car pulled up, and O’Malley stepped out with a narrowed-eyed look.

“You bring her?”

“Back seat,” I said acidly as Zichen and a man I guessed was Vanguard’s tech guy emerged as well. O’Malley went to move toward my car, and I stepped in his way, a hand on my gun.

“He needs eyes on her,” he grunted.

I ignored him, instead pointing at the third guy.

“You. Come here.”

“You’re not swinging orders here, Lancaster,” Zichen interjected. “O’Malley, get her out.”

I tilted my head to look up at O’Malley, pleased to see he looked more than a little disconcerted as his eyes went from me to the car, and back again.

“You can open the door and let him take a look at her. Leave the hood on, those vagrants are showing far too much interest.”

O’Malley lumbered past me as I turned my attention to Vanguard’s man. He was a pale, gaunt-looking creature with a sheen of sweat across his brow. He was shifting nervously from foot to foot, looking everywhere but toward my car.

“Tell me you searched him, Zichen?” I asked, not taking my eyes off the man.

“He did,” Vanguard’s man answered, a faint shake to his voice. “Twice.” He swiped at his forehead, leaning to look past me into the open car, his face losing color by the second.

“Miss Vanguard?” he called, a noticeable shake to his voice now.

“Yes!” a small voice called back.

The man nodded once. He was breathing heavily, and I frowned, the hairs on my arms rising as I reached for the gun at my hip.

“Zichen,” I warned.

Vanguard’s man whistled suddenly, and the world exploded.

I was thrown violently to the side, debris pelting me. Something slammed against my shoulder, and then I hit the ground, my skin scraping across concrete as my nose and eyes filled with dust.

Car alarms were going off, someone was screaming, and the sound of metal grinding on metal and terrified shouts filtered through the chaos.

My ears were ringing, my body screaming in multiple places as I hauled myself to my hands and knees, shaking my head to try to clear it.

I stood, my head taking a moment to catch up as the dust began to settle, and I got my first look at what had happened.

Part of the bridge had collapsed. Half a dozen cars had come down with it, with broken slabs of concrete and rubble filling the parking lot. Civilians caught up in the explosion were trying to get out of crumpled cars, other cars half buried under concrete slabs, while a horn blared in an unending scream as I tried to orient myself.

There was something warm and sticky running down the back of my neck, my head swam alarmingly, and I coughed up the dust clogging my lungs.

Where the fuck is my car?

I staggered forward, moving in the direction I thought it should be.

“Lancaster!” O’Malley was leaning heavily against a large chunk of concrete, rubbing at his streaming eyes.

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“What the hell was that?” I choked out, swiping at the air as if it would clear it.  
“Where is the car, O’Malley?”

“Over there,” he rasped, pointing toward a dim shape in the dust.

I staggered toward it, just making out the familiar license plate in the dust, the front half of it crushed under an upside-down SUV.

Shapes moved through the murk on the far side, a warm light flared, and a feminine scream rent the air as glass smashed.

Fire suddenly engulfed the inside of my car and the screaming became panicked.

“No!”

I lunged forward, fire already licking at the window closest to me.

A bottle flew through the air in front of me, smashing through the window and erupting in more flames as the screaming in the car reached a crescendo...then suddenly ceased.

I skidded to a stop just shy of the flames, the heat of them already overwhelming as I stared in horror, my mind sluggishly trying to make sense of what was unfolding in front of me. Rubble to my side crunched in warning, and I barely lifted my gun in time as one of the vagrants pulled a rifle from beneath his threadbare coat and aimed it at me. Blood exploded across the dusty slab of bridge behind him in a macabre splash of crimson on grey as my bullet took him between the eyes. I swung around as

footsteps stumbled behind me, Zichen's grime-streaked expression shocked as he took in the gruesome scene.

"You fucking imbecile," I snarled at him, taking three long strides and swinging at him. He dodged, taking the butt of my gun to his collarbone rather than his temple, cursing loudly as he rounded on me.

"How was I meant to know it was a set up!" he barked. "Did you get her out?"

He wasn't fast enough to dodge my next swing, and I connected solidly with his temple, dazing him long enough to get a grip on his neck and drag him toward the burning vehicle.

"Does it fucking look like I got her out?" I hissed in his ear, holding him close enough to the flames that the heat scorched my skin. "This is on you, you incompetent fuck, and Loxley is going to know it."

I let him go with a shove, delivering a hard kick to his kidney that made him wretch into the dust as O'Malley lumbered into view, his phone to his ear.

"Move," he snapped, as all around us more people began to emerge. In the distance, the faint wail of sirens began to rise over the din of death and panic. "Got an extraction meeting us at Fifth and Carlisle."

I pointed at Zichen. "Take him, and get back to headquarters," I said coldly, lights flickering behind my eyes. I blinked and wiped at them to try to clear my vision.

"What about you?" he called as I took a last look at the car, furious at myself for letting this happen. Ignoring O'Malley, I turned and ran, not caring if they got out before the sirens reached them, and not willing to risk drawing attention by staying together.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket before I had even made it two blocks, after lifting a hoodie from a clothesline that had been drying in a nearby front garden. I had the deep hood pulled up over my head, and the hem came down past mid-thigh and covered the blood and filth I was coated in enough to not draw too much attention. I was already seizing up, wincing as I reached to pull my phone out.

“What the fuck happened out there?”

I had never heard concern in Erryn’s voice before, and it took a moment for my sluggish brain to realize what the edge of panic in her voice was.

“You approved a fucking mutiny, Erryn,” I hissed. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Zichen lodged a handover this morning that was signed off by you,” she said coldly. “I assumed you had it in hand.”

“Assumption really bit you in the arse this time because Vanguard never had any intention of getting his daughter back,” I said, anger making my words sharp. “That was an assassination, and if I hadn’t been steamrolled by Zichen trying to stroke his ego up the food chain, we wouldn’t be so royally fucked right now.”

There was a muffled curse on the other end of the line.

“That’s all you have to say?” I bit out.

“Get yourself to a medic,” she said, before the line went dead.

“I need you to stay in that bed, Lancaster.”

I gave the medic who had checked me over a dark look as I tugged my stolen hoodie

on over the plethora of bandages I had been wrapped in. I had small cuts and grazes everywhere, and a concussion, but nothing I couldn't recover from away from the clinical lights and uncomfortable slab that passed as a bed here.

“The other two?” I asked, picking up my weapon and phone.

“O'Malley has a fractured tibia that is being set as we speak. Zichen didn't wait to be cleared to leave,” he said, frowning at me. “Look, you have a moderate concussion, I really must object?—”



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“Object all you want,” I interrupted. “I want my own bed.” Giving him a nod, I pushed my way out of the small clinic The Triarchy maintained. I headed straight for the parking space in the underground lot that Erryn had messaged was to be my replacement car, and grimaced.

“Funny, Erryn,” I muttered as I looked at the powder blue Volkswagen Beetle with absolute disgust. Message received, loud and clear. I had talked to her like shit...and this was the consequence.

There was no way. Noooooo fucking way I was going to be caught dead with this in my garage. But my head hurt...hell, my wholebodyhurt...and I wanted my bed very badly.

Looking up at one of the many cameras down here, I flipped it off, knowing she’d be getting peak enjoyment out of this, then reluctantly slid into the car. I did the normal forty-minute drive to the industrial area where my building was located, in thirty, and the sun was already setting as I drove up to the nondescript garage door that led into the lower levels. I punched in the code, my eyelids feeling heavier by the second as I waited for the metal door to slowly rise.

Lights in my rearview were my only warning to brace before a vehicle slammed into the back of the Beetle, the small car being easily shunted through the opening garage, spinning slightly to block the ramp leading to the first level.

For the second time in one day, my world erupted in noise and pain as this time the vehicle plowed into my passenger side, pushing my car up the ramp and into the open space above in a screech of metal and tires.

I swore, kicking my door open as the car spun then threw myself out of it, the breath whooshing from my lungs as my already tortured body hit the ground rolling.

Doors slammed, footsteps echoing through the enclosed space, and I struggled to my feet in time to see Zichen rounding the back of the vehicle, his gun trained on me.

“You fucking bitch,” he hissed, and I lunged to the side as he fired, the bullet barely missing me as it hit the concrete behind.

Hogan—the large Irishman who’d had his arse handed to him by me more than once in combat training—came for me from the right, his preferred knife palmed in his hand as he tried to aim it for my neck.

I ducked under the swing, coming up under his arm and delivering a hard punch to his kidney that had him buckling, before disarming him and slicing his hamstring with his own blade in quick succession.

Fisting his hair as I turned, I used his body to shield me from Zichen’s second shot, his body shuddering with the impact as the bullet hit home. Drawing my gun, I dispatched Kier and Richmond—two more of Zichen’s usual crowd—efficiently, before scanning for more.

“You want to explain what the fuck you are doing Zichen?” I yelled, ducking behind the mangled remains of the Beetle. “Now I’m going to have to kill you, which honestly, is more effort than I can be bothered with right now.”

“Loxley terminated me.” His voice came from over the top of the car. “The fucking favoritism that cunt shows you is insanity. Maybe if she opened her legs for the rest of us, we’d get a red carpet through the ranks too.”

I ignored the flicker of anger his words ignited, leaning to look under the car for

movement. His shadow moved forward behind the front tire, and I straightened, pressing my back to the car as I thought for a moment.

“If I’m on a pedestal, it’s not for my skills between a woman’s thighs,” I called, trying to keep him talking. “But I’d work on your aim before you attempt more complex arts like trying to find a clit. Your fine motor skills need improvement.” I glanced under the car again to see he had moved toward the back of the vehicle, though I still couldn’t get a clean shot of his legs.

“I’m going to fuck your carcass and leave it tied up with a pretty bow for Loxley as a severance present,” he yelled, and I smiled, checking the magazine of my gun. Two bullets left, and I couldn’t get to the bodies of the others without exposing myself.

“How are you still breathing if you were terminated?” I called.

He scoffed. “She sent Hogan to do it. Clearly the bitch underestimates loyalty.”

I hummed under my breath as I eyed the fallen men. One less job for me then, won’t have to track those fuckers down.

“Worked out well for them,” I taunted, leaning onto my side and extending my gun under the car. “Maybe if you had been a patient little princess and waited for me to show you how the adults organize hand-offs, this would have gone differently.” I closed one eye as my head spun, and took aim at the foot he left exposed.

His scream rang out the second after I fired as my bullet blew out his heel, and I was up, sprinting around the car before he could gather himself.

He was on his knee, blood pooling around his ruined foot, but he had the sense to keep hold of his gun, and he fired the second I rounded the nose of the vehicle.

The shot went wide, but I didn't have time to think about how close that had been as I returned fire, the headshot I had intended only clipping his ear as he moved just in time. I lunged for him, closing the gap as he took aim again, but I caught his arm and pinned it to my side as my hand closed around his throat and squeezed, sliding through the blood running down the side of his neck.

He twisted, and I screamed as hot, deep pain shot through my leg, causing my grip to loosen enough for him to move and slam my head into the side of the vehicle. The world tilted for a moment, my already concussed brain struggling, and I looked down to see the blade he had plunged into my thigh. I spat in his eyes, reaching down to rip the blade out and thrust it up under his jaw with a satisfying crunch, his body convulsing once before going limp.

I slumped against the side of his vehicle, breathing heavily as my head slowly righted itself, breathing through the wave of nausea that came with it, before slowly hauling myself up. My leg flared as I put weight on it, cursing to myself as I hobbled to the wrecked Beetle and leaned through the shattered window to retrieve my phone—which now had a huge crack through the screen. Excellent. What else could go wrong today?

Erryn answered on the first ring.

“What's wrong?”

God, she was really losing her bite at the moment.

“Next time you terminate, make sure you don't send one of their bromances,” I said, groaning as I hobbled toward the row of cars at the back of my garage. I flipped open the pannier of my motorbike, pulling out a small can of spray paint.

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“I’ll put a termination order out on Hogan too,” she replied, her tone colder than ice. “Seven agents have gone dark since the termination order was placed on Zichen.”

“Well, I’ve dispatched three of them, plus Zichen. No need to thank me,” I retorted, hobbling back to Kier and Richmond and spraying a three-pointed crown on their chest. My calling card. The bodies would be returned to The Triarchy morgue, and that signet would serve as a warning to the other agents who might decide to follow in Zichen’s footsteps. God have mercy on them if it was before I’d had the chance to take a shower.

Blood was running under the fabric of my jeans uncomfortably, the inside of my leg wet with it, and I swayed, waiting for the new wave of dizziness to pass before I moved to Hogan, painting him with the same design.

“Body location?” Erryn asked. “And you should still be with the medic, Theodora.”

“My bloody garage, Erryn,” I replied, darkly. “I want a biohazard team for the bloodstains.”

“You’re slurring your words,” she said after a moment.

“So would you if you had been blown up, hit by a stationary vehicle, and stabbed in quick succession,” I retorted, looking up at the camera that swiveled my way suddenly. I saluted it mockingly with the can of paint to my brow as my head began to swim alarmingly. “Oh...and Erryn. The Beetle was a lovely touch, but maybe send something a little more resilient this time.”

## OCTAVIA

The walls felt like they were closing in. The day had stretched by in minutes that felt like hours. The slow tick of the clock Theo had left in here taunted me with every passing second.

My mind had fixated on every moment from the morning. Theo. Her body. The sound she had made as she had come on my lap, and then the way she had sauntered naked to the shower and reemerged like nothing had happened.

Completelyfuckingunbothered.

Meanwhile, I have two new piercings that remind me every time I move of howutterlybothered I had been.

I hadn't been able to keep my eyes off her. Keep my hands off her. The woman who had held me captive for the better part of a week and tortured my body.

And hadnjoyeddoing it.

Not just enjoyed?—

A wave of arousal ran through me at the memory of how wet she had become as she had inflicted her torture. The glint in her eyes as she had smirked down at me. The surprise she hadn't been able to mask as my body had reacted the way it always did. Need had overtaken logical thinking, and I had descended into hell to burn with my personal devil.

But the day had stretched by. Noon, then the normal time we had dinner...then the

night began to pass as I watched the clock and paced.

By midnight, I was definitely slipping into insanity, my head whirling with so many thoughts and memories that it was starting to blur into one overwhelming noise that my father's voice echoed from too often. My skin was clammy as I rubbed my arms, feeling feverish, even though I knew I wasn't.

Pinching the inside of my arm, I focused on the pain rather than the noise in my head, sat on my narrow bed cross-legged, and closed my eyes.

Fuck Theo. Fuck her for sending my mind into a full crisis and then skipping off after she was done with me. Fuck her for leaving me in here to fester in self-loathing. He was right. I was worthless. I didn't even have the self-respect to say no to the woman who abducted me and mean it.

I pinched harder as his voice echoed in the dark spaces of my mind.

"You are just a whore, Baby Girl. That's all you are good for. Girls like you are nothing special."

I jumped up, breathing heavily, and paced again, going to the door for the hundredth time that day and trying the handle. It didn't move. Just like every other time. A small sound of distress slipped from me as I leaned my brow against the cold metal of the door and breathed deeply.

"Theo," I whispered, hating how broken my voice sounded. "Please let me out of here."

There was a loud beep, the bolt drawing back inside the door, and I slumped in relief, ripping the door open and bolting out of the room in the same heartbeat. It was three a.m.—what the fuck was she playing at?"

I ground to a halt in the hallway that led to the main living area.

It was three a.m.

There was only one reason she would be letting me out now, and the thought made rage ignite in my chest.

“Oh, get fucked,” I said out loud, storming toward the door. “If you think you can treat me like your own personal call girl, you are in for a world of trouble,Theodora!”



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I burst through the door, seeing her leaning against the table.

“I amnota whore,” I snapped, pointing an accusing finger at her. “And I amnotgoing to f—” I cut off as I got a good look at her. There was blood everywhere. She had blood-soaked bandages in a dozen places on her body, and she was pressing her equally blood-soaked and balled up T-shirt against her thigh, the jeans on one side dark with even more of it.

She raised a brow at me, sitting heavily on the seat.

“Noted,” she said, her eyes slightly unfocused. “Now, can you do me a favor and get me the med kit in the kitchen, Sweets? It’s in the top cupboard above the coffee machine.”

“What happened?” I gasped. The longer I looked, the more wounds I saw, and there was a worrying amount of blood soaking her jeans.

“Workplace disagreement,” she murmured, her words slightly slurred and her head hanging low. “Octavia, the kit.”

She swayed where she sat, and I only just grabbed her in time as she fainted, grunting as I took her weight in my arms, her legs still tangled in the bench seat.

“Jesus, you are heavier than you look,” I gasped, lowering her slowly to the floor. Leaving her legs propped up on the seat, I felt for her pulse. It was faster than it should be, and I turned my attention to the mess of her leg. The denim was sticky with blood and stuck to her skin, and I ran to the kitchen, finding the kit and dragging

it out of the cupboard with a grunt.

Flipping open the med kit, I rummaged through it, pulling out bottles of saline and disinfectant. Theo didn't even wake as I undid her jeans and yanked them down her hips. Pulling on some gloves, I doused her entire thigh in saline and antiseptic and cleaned the blood away as best I could with the wipes I found. I swallowed hard at the thin wound in her upper thigh. The bleeding seemed to have slowed, which made me breathe a little easier. Surely if it had hit something major, it would still be bleeding heavily? Though... I couldn't see anything else that would have made her pass out like she had.

Sitting back on my heels for a moment, I ran through every scrap of knowledge I had picked up from my many late nights of binge-watching medical documentaries, while eyeing the contents of the med kit.

As I flushed the thigh wound out it started bleeding again, though only sluggishly, so I pressed gauze hard against it and wrapped her leg tightly, and was pleased to see it didn't bleed through.

Theo groaned softly, her eyes fluttering and breath catching as she tried to push herself to the side. I helped her just in time for her to start retching, but she brought nothing up.

"Steady," I murmured, pushing the hair back from her clammy forehead. "Just lie back for a moment." She looked at me, but it was clear she wasn't seeing me as she nodded, flopping back against the floor with a hand over her face.

"Theo." I snapped my fingers in front of her, but got no reaction, and frowned in concern. Gathering up the blood-streaked packets and putting the med kit back together, I returned it to its usual spot and turned to see she had come to, leaning her weight on her elbow and looking dazedly around. I went to her, gently lifting her legs

off the bench and helping her sit up.

“I’m fine,” she mumbled, trying to push my hands away.

“Oh, yes. I can see that,” I scolded, sighing in exasperation as she made to get to her feet and swayed.

“Here.” I helped her up, slinging one of her arms over my shoulders as I guided her to the bedroom, her steps slow and listless.

“Are you drunk?” I asked. “Or just really bad with blood?”

“Concussed. Twice...I’m an overachiever. Blown up...and stabbed,” she muttered.

“Oh.” I glanced sideways at her. She looked like she had come straight from the frontlines of active war, a thin layer of dust coating her skin and peppered with blood and grazes.

Her legs buckled, and I tightened my arm around her waist.

“Just get to the bed and you can lie down,” I urged.

She barely seemed to register I was there, letting me lead her before collapsing onto her bed.

“Let me get this off you, it’s filthy,” I said, tugging at her shirt.

Theo tried to lie down, and I gripped her shirt.

“Theodora. Arms up or I will cut it off,” I demanded, waiting for her to groggily lift her arms so I could slip the ruined shirt off, surprised at how she didn’t hesitate to

follow the direct order.

Oh Jesus.

She was covered in wounds. Bruises were blooming across her ribs in deep purples and blues, overlapping old ones that had faded to faint yellows. She had a dozen or more scars, both old and new, peeking out from beneath tattoos and marring others, each one telling a story I wanted to know.

“Lie down,” I said, and she did without question, her eyes already closed. Concern flooded me. I knew enough about concussions to know you weren’t meant to let them sleep. But what was I going to do...call an ambulance? On what? To where?

“Oh hey, can you send an ambulance to an unnamed concrete prison where I’m being held captive? My abductor bumped her head.”

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I snorted at the thought, and Theo's eyes fluttered.

"It's not funny."

"No," I agreed. "Some would say you are in quite the predicament."

That earned me a frown, barely a crease between her brows as she fought to open her eyes and failed, slipping back into unconsciousness. I watched her for a moment, reassuring myself that the rise and fall of her chest was steady, before walking back into the living area to get her water.

And then it hit me.

Why did I care?

The woman who had ripped me from my life and was actively holding me to extort my father was incapacitated. Unconscious and unable to defend herself. I, on the other hand, was out of my cell with full access to the weapons I knew were in here. Yet that hadn't been my first thought. I had seen her hurt, and I had jumped in to help her.

The glass I was filling spilled over as I stared at the flow of water, my eyes sliding to the door and its softly glowing keypad. It was shut...but still...

Crossing to it, I tried the handle. Locked. I recognized the keypad as one that needed an eight-digit code—I would be here until I went grey trying to figure it out. But...there were knives in the kitchen. And there was no way she could fight me off.

No.

My skin crawled, and I flung that thought from my mind as fast as it had entered it, my gaze falling on the monitors on the far side of the room. I was on them in a flash, firing up the screens and glancing behind me with a wince as they beeped and hummed to life.

It took me less than a minute to get past the Vanguard security screening, opening multiple pages and bypassing the VPN to bring up our location on one screen, before displaying the prominent news channels on another.

I froze, my fingers hovering over the keys as I stared at the screen.

The words “Vanguard heir murdered in extortion attempt” flashed across the screen with an old photo of me.

“William Vanguard asks for privacy to mourn his late daughter,” another read.

“What the fuck?” I breathed, clicking to another screen that showed an aerial view of a collapsed bridge, multiple cars crushed and smoking below as flames licked their way through a couple of burned-out vehicles. Every channel I clicked through was reporting various renditions of the same account. According to the world...I was dead. Killed in the collapse of the bridge after an unexplained explosion took the lives of twelve civilians.

Was Theo there? Is that where she was injured? I went cold. Was she the one who set off the bombs? Twelve civilians had been killed...Their faces started coming up on screen. Mothers...Fathers. Two were barely out of their teens.

“No.” I shook my head slowly, my hand to my mouth as I clicked through news articles. No...She didn’t do this. The logical part of my brain took over, calming the

panic that had been steadily rising. No. My death is the opposite of what Theo needed to secure whatever negotiation was happening with Vanguard Technology. I was the bargaining chip in this situation—faking my death would undermine their efforts. The more I looked, the more questions I had as reports were released that a burned corpse had been identified as Octavia Marie Vanguard by the coroner.

“Holy Mother of God,” I breathed, sitting back in the chair and clasping my hands behind my neck.

For all intents and purposes. I was now a ghost.

11

THEO

Death hurt.

Anyone who claims it’s peaceful is a filthy liar who deserves to gargle battery acid until their teeth melt, because there is no way anyone could feel like I did and still have both feet in the land of the living. Even my eyelids hurt when I tried to open them. Pretty sure I found some new muscles in my neck that I didn’t realize I had possession of...because fuckingow.

Groaning, I rolled to my side, fighting a wave of nausea so I could call for the nurse. God, how long had I been out? My abused brain sluggishly grasped at the murky memories that hovered just out of reach until a face drifted out of the haze.

Octavia.

How long had it been? My stomach went cold. I’d only left her with a jug of water in my rush to leave. Pain lanced through my skull as my eyes shot open, pushing myself

with a groan as blankets fell off my naked body.

I was in my own bed.

Squinting in the dim light, I could make out the softly glowing fairy lights above the table beyond, my own room lit by the bedside lamp that looked like it had a jumper thrown over it to soften the light.

“What?” I rasped, my voice gravelly as if I hadn’t used it in a long while. My body shook as I pushed myself up trying to remember how the fuck I had gotten myself here.



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My gun was sitting on my bedside table, and I snatched it up, dried blood flaking off the grip as I checked the mag. No bullets. Useful. It was far harder than it should have been to reach for the lower drawer and slide it out, grab the ammunition I needed, and load the gun with my eyes closed to try to help the spike of pain that was ricocheting through my skull with every breath.

Zichen...The image of thrusting the knife into his jaw suddenly floated into view as more scraps of memory started to knit together.

Okay.

I had gotten myself back in here at least.

I think. Did Erryn bring me in? I peered up at my dresser to the place where she usually left her gun. It was bare...and I couldn't smell the perfume that tended to cling to things in her wake.

The weight of the gun in my palm was a small comfort as I stood, glancing around through one slitted, reluctant eye for my phone. Clearly, concussed Theo was capable of mood lighting, but couldn't do useful things like leave the device that controlled ninety percent of my home with the touch of a button handy. Or leave clothes within reach.

Clothes were in the way too hard basket. Blanket it was. I pulled it off the bed and tucked it around myself, breathing through the nausea the movement evoked, and eyed the distance to the kitchen.

Why was it so god-damned far to the kitchen?

“Theo?”

I jumped, training my gun on the figure slumped over the table in the shadows.

“Erryn?”

“No...It’s me.”

“Octavia?” I rasped, trying to blink away the lights that had exploded in my vision at the sudden movement as my mind seemed intent on heading back into the shadowy depths of sleep.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Don’t shoot.”

I lowered the gun, swiping a hand across my eyes and wondering if I had actually died after all, and this was purgatory. It definitely wasn’t hell...because she was here.

“You shouldn’t be up yet,” Octavia said, taking a hesitant step toward me. I brought the gun back up, and she froze, raising her hands, her eyes locked not on the gun, but my face.

“Put the gun down, Theo,” she said, her voice gaining an edge to it I hadn’t heard before. “I’m not going to hurt you, or I would have done it while you were unconscious and bleeding all over me. And who the fuck is Erryn?”

I blinked at her in confusion. While I was what?

“How are you out of your cell?” I asked.

“You let me out,” she said, taking another step forward. I tilted my head, giving her a warning look, and she stopped.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” she asked.

I swallowed, racking my struggling brain.

“Downstairs,” I said after a long moment. “I dispatched Zichen and then...not much after that.”

“You let me out around three a.m. on Saturday. The same day I was reported as dead after an explosion on the M25 killed fourteen civilians,” she said, her tone even and quiet. “Twelve initially. Two more died at the hospital from their injuries. Octavia Vanguard is among the deceased.”

“Wh—” I began, but she cut me off.

“You had a pretty bad concussion,” she went on. “And a stab wound to your upper right thigh that I stitched yesterday. You called me a cunt twice during that. Google has me concerned that your fifth and sixth ribs on your left side might be fractured, based on the bruising.”

My brain really needed to wake up because I was really struggling to follow her. How was I not dead? How was she still here? I glanced at the door, realizing why a second later. She had no way out without me, and no one could get in without me letting them in.

“You got into the computers,” I said, glancing over her shoulder at the dark screens.

“I did,” she said. “I needed a tutorial on how to stitch flesh. I also kept you alive the last three days, and trust me, you are a total bitch to nurse.”

“Why?” I asked, my gun still trained on her.

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“Besides the obvious,” she said, gesturing to the door, “I know who I’m in here with. I don’t know who is waiting behind that door, and I’m currently a ghost. I would rather like to keep it that way.” She shifted on her feet. “Theo, you need to sit down. You haven’t eaten in the better part of three days, and you lost a lot of blood.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Why the hell would you want to stay dead?”

“It’s the chance for a fresh start,” she said quickly. “And considering there have been no reports to contradict my untimely demise, I am going to hazard a guess that I’m standing in front of the only person who knows I am alive.”

“Why would I do that?” I asked. “You are a job.”

“Because I saved your life,” she snapped. “I highly doubt you would have survived that on your own.”

“You think far too highly of my morals,” I said bitterly.

“I don’t think I do,” she replied, slowly lowering her hands.

I lowered the gun, eyeing her warily.

She relaxed slightly, though she didn’t move as I forced feet that felt like lead toward the kitchen, not bothering with a glass as I leaned over the sink and drank greedily straight from the tap. Water had never tasted so sweet, lifting the fog from my mind as the coolness soothed some of the feverish heat I was wrapped in. I drank until my belly didn’t feel so hollow, only then pausing to catch my breath.

Three days.

Shit.

“Where’s my phone?” I asked without looking at her. This was the first time since I had fallen into this job that I was caught off guard, and I didn’t like it.

“Plugged in over by the monitors,” she answered, adding, “It’s off, just charging. I didn’t touch it.” She seemed to realize I was completely incapable of walking that distance, and got up from the table, striding over to where she had left it and brought it to me, though she hesitated for a long moment.

“Thank you,” I murmured as she handed over the phone.

“You’re welcome,” she said. And we both knew it wasn’t for the phone.

She hovered nervously as I turned it on. It was nearly midnight Monday, and I had a dozen missed calls from Erryn’s personal number that started last night. I swore softly, flicking through all the other notifications. I had a couple cameras installed in my living quarters, but none that The Triarchy had access to. Only the garage had a camera that I let link to their feed—with selective blind spots—and it would have been clear to her that I had not emerged from my home since the attack.

“What are you doing?” Octavia shifted on her feet, eyeing me warily.

“Calling Erryn,” I said, wincing as the light hurt my eyes.

“Theo,” Octavia murmured, a hint of pleading in her voice.

I held a finger to my lips as I hit call, Erryn picking up on the first ring.

“Glad you have decided to pick up your phone,” she said, her tone icy, though I could hear the underlying strain of the questions she desperately wanted to ask, but was too rigid to give an inch. “Have an enjoyable sabbatical?”

“Time of my life,” I said dryly. “I’m fine, by the way, thanks for asking.”

“It’s been three days, Theodora,” she said, her tone a little softer. “Why did you not call a medic?”

“You need to be conscious to do that,” I quipped back. “I need a couple more days to get my strength back and get up to speed. I’ll report in when I am good to go.”

There was a long silence on the other end, and I was about to check we hadn’t been disconnected when I heard her let out a long breath. “Take the week. It’s a wildfire at the moment, and I need you to hit the ground running when you come back, now that we no longer have the Vanguard girl as leverage. I’ll have a new team ready.”

“No team,” I said quickly, not correcting her about Octavia, and unable to pick apart my feelings about why I hadn’t. “I work better alone, as has been proven recently.”

“That would be unconventional—” she began.

“Because that’s such a change to our normal, is it not?” I countered. “No team, Erryn.”

“I want an override code for your systems added to The Triarchy’s database this week,” she finally said. “It’s ridiculous that we do not already have one in place.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, then ended the call.

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Octavia was watching me warily as I slipped my phone back into my pocket.

“She’s your boss?”

The relief on her face was evident, and I nodded.

“She is.”

“And you didn’t report me to her?”

“I didn’t report you to her,” I agreed. “Not...yet. But I am far too concussed to be making promises right now.”

“So now what?” she asked.

“Right at this moment?” I said, moving to the table and sitting down. “It’s almost midnight, Octavia, and I haven’t eaten in three days. Please tell me you didn’t find the ice cream while I was out.”

Her brows pulled together in the most comical look of confusion that I huffed a laugh, wincing as it made my head pound.

“I’ll crush up some Aspirin and mix it in,” she said finally, seeming to collect herself. “Are you telling me I’ve been locked up for three days unsupervised, and there was ice cream here the whole time?”



## OCTAVIA

It speaks volumes that being dead was the safest I had felt since...well. Ever. Which, considering my abductor was sitting across from me, disassembling and cleaning an alarming array of weapons, was an odd place to be. I'm an atheist, but I think I have officially prayed to every patron saint known to keep me in the proverbial ground. I'd really rather not rise from the bridge ashes like the second coming of Jesus.

I had spent two days surreptitiously watching Theo since she came to, and I had finally found what made her uncomfortable.

Peace.

I understood it more than she realized. I recognized the way she needed to be in motion. If not her body, her mind— and good lord, her mind was fascinating. There was an impressive stack of blades next to her, waiting to receive the hyperfocused attention of a frustrated semi-invalid who was incapable of sitting still, and I had no doubt that once she had gotten through every weapon hidden in this building, she would just find something else to disassemble and obsessively clean.

The coffee machine hadn't been done in twenty-four hours.

God forbid a speck of dust settled on its gleaming surface.

I even contemplated messing up the bathroom again just to give her something to do...or maybe this time I could reorganize the bookshelf that was sorted alphabetically in perfect lines.

Or...I could just read and not poke the concussed and irritable murder lesbian.

Trailing my finger down the spines of the meager selection of books on said

bookshelf, I frowned, pulling one free to read the blurb with a hand resting on my hip. Unsatisfied, I returned it and resumed scowling at them.

“If you want something a little more interesting, there’s a Kindle in the top drawer of the bedside table in my room,” Theo murmured from behind me.

I craned my head to look at her. She was leaning back against the table, a wet rag over her knee as she worked on sharpening and polishing the small mountain of knives.

“You...read?”

That earned me a raised brow.

“Yes. As would be suggested by...the books?”

“I—” I turned back, suddenly a lot more interested in them. They were a mix of thrillers and crime. Not anything that would usually pique my interest, but there was only so much staring at walls I could stand, and she wouldn’t let me near the computers. “I just thought they were like...here. Maybe you inherited them?”

She snorted under her breath.

“Top drawer, Octavia. I’m not completely uncultured.”

“Some would beg to differ,” I muttered as I made my way across to her room. I hadn’t been in here since she woke, but the bed had been neatly returned to the impeccable state she left everything in. I had sat on the edge of that bed, dripping water into her mouth when she gained enough consciousness not to choke. I had stripped her down and washed the dust and blood off her skin, blushing furiously as I ran a cloth over the exquisite lines of her body. But I hadn’t gone near the side table.

It had held my fascination for days, yet I had been reluctant to snoop through it. It was probably the only place in this fucking building I hadn't explored.

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Pulling the top drawer open, I was surprised by the clutter within, so at odds with the meticulous perfection of everything. It had a stack of newspaper clippings on one side. Coins and crumpled notes, what looked like a Taser, and a few other assorted items. My face ignited with heat as I noted the purple vibrator on the other side of the drawer, quickly grabbing the Kindle and closing it again. I glanced back at Theo, who wasn't looking at me but had a slight smile quirking one side of her lips.

Flopping back down on the couch, I flicked the Kindle on, my eyes growing wider the further I scrolled.

It was all filth.

And I had already read most of them.

The image of Theo lying sprawled on her bed, that vibrator between her thighs, her back arched, and the muscles I had gotten to know intimately as she was recovering, flexing and moving under her soft skin, suddenly flashed through my mind. I nearly dropped the Kindle, fumbling with it for a second. I must have tapped one of the images, as a book started loading, and I decided to just go with it after glancing at the title.

I settled into the couch, my attention divided between Theo and the Kindle. That slowly shifted, though, as I realized how utterly sapphic the book I had chosen was, devouring each interaction between the two main characters hungrily...and by the time I was halfway into it, I was engrossed. One scene in particular heated my skin as I read over it a second time, my traitorous mind replacing the characters with an image of Theo and myself, the filthy words on the page playing in her voice. I

squeezed my thighs together to alleviate the steadily building ache.

“Which one did you pick?”

I jumped, feeling like I had just been caught doing something I shouldn’t, as I realized Theo was studying me.

“Lady—” I cleared my throat. “Lady Venom Takes a Mistress.”

There was a flash of tooth as she smirked and nodded, returning her attention to the knife she was meticulously cleaning.

“Where are you up to?”

I glanced up again, noting the gleam in her eye.

“I—Uh. She just....”

“Use your words,” Theo chuckled.

“She just...pulled out a silicone snake...”

Theo hummed, setting her knife down slowly and leaning forward to rest her elbows on her splayed knees.

“That part is good. Read it to me?”

I balked. “What?”

She tilted her head, that damned eyebrow rising a touch higher.

“Read it to me.”

Fuck.

I opened my mouth and closed it again, giving her a pleading look.

“Theo...please.”

“I love it when you beg.” She smirked. “Come here.” She patted her good leg when I didn’t move. “It wasn’t a request, Sweets.”

I slowly got up and crossed to her, eyeing her warily as she grasped my hips, tugging me down to sit in her lap, my back against her chest and my legs hanging either side of hers. I tried to shift to make sure I wasn’t putting pressure on her injured thigh, but her arm came around my waist, and her chin rested on my shoulder as she peered down at the Kindle I still had a death grip on.

She was so close, her warmth seeping into my back.

“Start reading.”

Fuck me. I lowered my gaze to the filthy moment on the page I was up to...took a shaky breath and started reading.

She was silent as she listened, my words faltering as her hand slid slowly around my side and under the waistband of my pants.

I grabbed her wrist, and she stilled.

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“Are you telling me you don’t want this?” she murmured. “Because your body is telling me the opposite...and you have taken such good care of me. Now let me take care of you.”

My heart was hammering so hard I thought it might stop at any moment, my skin near feverish as her breath disturbed the hair at the nape of my neck. I said nothing, but relaxed my grip on her wrist, slowly.

“That’s my good girl,” she whispered, her hand drifting lower to skim the line of my panties.

“Theodora,” I gasped, and she snorted, the tip of her nose trailing up the side of my neck. “Keep reading, Sweets. Final warning.”

I tried—god how I tried—getting out a few more lines until the tip of her finger slid over my clit and she hummed softly.

“So fucking wet already, my Sweet.”

I closed my eyes, then yelped loudly as her fingers encircled my still-very-tender newly pierced nipple and squeezed.

“Did I say stop?”

“No,” I bit out, bringing the Kindle back up and frantically trying to find my place. I started reading again, my voice catching and straining as her finger began slow strokes over my clit, sliding through the wetness that I would never tell her was from

watching her. Not from the smut in my hands.

I read the same paragraph twice as her finger dipped inside me, sending shockwaves through my body and making me clench around her.

She gave my nipple another pinch as my words began trailing off a second time, her breath hot against my neck now.

“Keep reading,” she murmured. “Because you are not allowed to come until Poesy does, and if you do...” she said as she flicked my nipple gently. “You already know I follow through on my consequences.”

Fuck.

I was already dangerously close, a slight increase in pressure dragging a whimper from me. I glued my eyes to the words and started reading again in a breathy voice. I tried to close my legs a fraction, but her knees were between them, and she pinched my thigh viciously with fingers wet from my own arousal before opening our legs wider and continuing...albeit slightly harder this time.

“Not yet,” she growled next to my ear as my words faltered and I gasped. “You are so close, Sweets. But not yet.”

I flicked across, relieved to see I was on the last page of the chapter as I forced myself to focus. My head fell back on her shoulder, but I raised the Kindle enough to keep reading, the end of one particular sentence trailing off in a moan.

I raced toward the finish, fighting to stay ahead of my own orgasm as I squirmed, the pressure of its approach overwhelming.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” she warned, the scrape of her teeth against my neck



keeping me grounded just long enough to get me to the last sentence.

The final words of the chapter were lost in a rush of breathy pants as she sunk two fingers into me, the heel of her palm grinding against my clit as her teeth sank into the juncture of my shoulder and neck hard enough that I knew she had drawn blood.

I erupted in a wave of pleasure, a sound ripping from me that I had never made before as the pain made the pleasure reach a peak that left me unable to breathe.

The Kindle was pulled from my grasp and thrown across the room, her hand finding my hair and fisting it in a grip that made my scalp burn and a second orgasm roll into the first. She yanked my head back, and her lips crashed into mine. She kissed me savagely, devouring me as if she had been famished for this connection, swallowing my cries as the pleasure rolled through me in an endless wave.

And I couldn't tell which part had felt the best—the orgasm that had just shattered my mind, or the woman I should hate finally kissing me.

13

THEO

There are not many days you could describe as perfect when you live a life like mine. Satisfying, yes. Even fulfilling, to an extent.

But perfect?

I hadn't had a day even close to that in longer than I can remember. Octavia was engrossed in a world of ink and imagination, while I was entranced by the way she would tilt her head slightly with a small frown as if trying to picture something. She chewed on the corner of her lip as she read, and her thumb idly stroked the side of the

Kindle between each touch to turn the page.

The need to touch her had been too much. I don't know if it was that I was already pushed to the edge of my tolerance on everything else that my self-control was slipping, but fuck I'd needed to know what she sounded like. I needed to know what she tasted like. I had kept my hands busy from the second I had woken from my concussion, in an attempt to feel like I was in control of the full riot my body had descended into.

I had intended to just tease her with a little reward for not killing me in my comatose state...Flex a little control after being knocked well and truly off my axis. But when she had gasped my name with more than a little need laced into every syllable, I had given in to my desire, unable to resist trailing the tip of my nose up the side of her neck as I breathed in her scent and slipped my hand lower to feel just how desperate she was for me. God, I had wanted to bite her, feel her tense and gasp as my teeth sank into her flesh. The thought of that had a slow, delicious ache building between my thighs.

She had done exactly what I demanded of her, the words tripping over each other in her desperation to stay ahead of her orgasm as her muscles began to tremor...and for once, I had enjoyed rewarding her as much as I would have loved marking that pretty pale skin of hers. I don't know at what point she stopped coming, at what point I withdrew my soaked hand to grip her chin, angling her so I could kiss her and finally know how soft her lips were...or at what point her hand had slipped behind my neck, dragging me harder against her.

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But I felt it, the moment that tiny possessive ember caught fire, scorching every dark crevice of my soul in a wildfire that was Octavia Vanguard.

My light in the dark.

And I didn't know how I was going to keep her, but I'd be damned if I was going to let that go—especially as I sat at my desk and enlightened myself on what had been happening since the events at the bridge.

Tributes to Octavia had been left at the gates of the Vanguard estate. Flowers and trinkets from people who never even knew her piled up in a gaudy display that made my lip curl in disgust every time the images flashed up on screen.

She hadn't asked me what had happened yet, though I could see the question moving closer to the surface the bolder she was getting—and she was definitely getting bolder. I could feel her eyes on me wherever I was in the room. I coveted it. Wanted her attention, and that alone was a novelty for me.

“What is your middle name?” she asked suddenly, taking me by surprise.

Swiveling my chair around, I gave her a long look.

“Pardon?”

“It begins with E,” she said, eyeing me from her usual spot on the couch. She hadn't been back in her cell since my injuries. We hadn't even spoken of it. And I hadn't commented on the bed she had made up on the longer of the couches...or the fact that

it was kept in a disorganized nest of blankets that she tended to curl up in during the noon hours when the sun streamed through the windows.

She stretched like a cat, my Kindle gripped in her hand, and the sunlight shining off the different hues of golden blonde hair that she wore loose around her shoulders. I wanted to wrap my fist in that hair and use it to drag her onto my strap, but I was barely holding myself in check as it was. The next time I touched her, it would be at her initiation, and I was not going to go easy on her.

“Elain,” she guessed, when I was silent.

“You found my dog tags, I take it?” I asked dryly, turning back to the screens.

“They were hanging on your headboard, it’s not like they were hidden,” she protested. “And I saw a lot more than just your dog tags.”

I raised a brow at her over my shoulder to see that she had ducked her head down, her eyes glued to the Kindle again, but what I could see of her face was flaming red.

“Why, Octavia—did you take advantage of me in my incapacitated state?” I teased. “For shame.”

“No!” Her head snapped up, her gaze narrowing as she realized I was teasing her. “Ethel,” she said darkly. “Eunice?”

“My parents were drunks, not savages,” I retorted.

“Ellie?” She went on. “Emily...Emmerson—tell me if I get warm—Emory?”

“Octavia...” I warned.

“No, that starts with an O, Theodora.” She set the Kindle down, crossing her arms and twisting her mouth. “You look like an Elvira.”

“What the fuck does an Elvira look like?” I cried.

She gestured toward me in a wide circle. “Alll o’ that.”

I glared at her, and she smirked.

“It’s totally Elvira, isn’t it?”

“It’s Elizabeth,” I said through gritted teeth. “You done?”

“Theodora Elizabeth Lancaster?” she asked, her brows rising. “Really?”

I just folded my arms and leaned back in my seat.

“But it’s such a pretty name?” she said, then snapped her mouth shut, turning red. “I mean...it’s not that you’re not pretty...it’s just that pretty is the wrong word. You’re hot.” She covered her mouth, closing her eyes for a moment. “You are an educated woman, Octavia,” she muttered to herself. “Act like it.”

“Do you always talk to yourself, or is that another side effect of captivity?” I asked, waiting for her to calm down.

“Another side effect?” she asked, cracking an eye at me.

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“I’m going to add Stockholm syndrome to the list,” I said, smirking.

“I don’t have a psychological bond with you,” she snapped.

“No?” I teased. “The fascination with everything to do with me is purely coincidental, then?”

The muscle in her jaw ticked, and she pointedly ignored me, lifted the Kindle, and started to read again.

I snorted softly, turning back to the screens and flicking through more news reports.

“You never asked me what happened,” I said into the silence, and I could almost feel her go tense behind me.

“I know what happened,” she said after a long moment. “Whatever it is that my father stood to lose was of greater value than my life was to him. So, realistically, it still doesn’t narrow it down for me because that could be anything from a sandwich to a seat in parliament.”

I don’t know why the unbothered cadence of her voice made me so angry. She didn’t sound shocked, or upset, or even angry. It was just a fact, as if she already knew this about the man who had sired her.

“Who died for me, Theo?”

I wasn’t ready for that question, and I took a moment to compose myself before

facing her.

“Whose body is in a morgue right now with my name attached?” she pressed.

Guilt swept over me as the memory suddenly hit me. The sound of her screams as the fire raged through my car.

“One of the local homeless,” I said. I owed her that truth at the very least. “She had blonde hair and a similar build to you and was happy to sit in my car for £50 and answer to your name if spoken to. I promised I would let her out after...and now she’s just another life whose blood is on my hands.”

“Why did you switch us out? Did you know that would happen?” she asked.

“No,” I said quietly. “But I’ve been in this line of work long enough to have learned to trust my gut, and it didn’t feel right.”

She asked nothing more, and I didn’t say anything else, not trusting my temper, and the next few hours passed in companionable silence.

14

OCTAVIA

I want her.

I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want Theo. It felt like madness, a slow, all-consuming need that was taking over everything. If I wasn’t mentally replaying the moment her fingers had sent me into an earth-shattering orgasm, I was making up new and inventive scenes in my mind to torture myself. And worse, Theo showed absolutely no interest in touching me again.

No...worse is admitting to myself how much that stung.

It was Saturday, the days having passed much like the rest. Theo had found things to do around the building that kept her busy, I had read a large portion of the titles on her Kindle. This only added to the predicament I was in, and we somehow managed to skirt around the huge Octavia-shaped elephant in the room as to what was going to happen to me.

Theo had become quieter with each passing day, and my anxiety was growing by the hour with the fear that it meant she had decided to hand me over to this “Erryn” who had already called twice to enquire about Theo’s recovery. I don’t know why, but each of those calls had made me bristle. She talked to her in a relaxed tone she didn’t use with anyone else...not to mention she had mistaken me for her when she had woken after her injuries.

I listened to the sound of the shower running with rising misery, mentally counting down the days until the inevitable. The water stopped, bare feet padding across the floor to the monitors, and I glanced up, my jaw dropping as I took in the sight of Theo completely nude and leaning over her desk to check something on the screen. I was transfixed. Her damp hair hung free down to the small of her back, covering the tattoo that stretched across the lean lines of muscle. Both of her arms were sleeved with tattoos, and from the side view I had, I could see the sharp V lines of her abdomen that I was dying to run my lips across. Her thighs held my attention for far too long. I knew what it felt like to run my hands up them, soft skin that I could sink my fingers into, the muscle beneath flexing as she held herself in place.

“You’re staring,” she murmured over her shoulder, not bothering to look at me.

I ripped my gaze away, then frowned and glared at her. What the hell did she expect?

“You don’t want me to look at you?”



She chuckled and shifted her weight, spreading her legs further as she clicked across into a new screen, typing something with quick, efficient taps.

“Look all you want, Sweets.”

Fuck me. My mouth was watering as I devoured the sight of her, and she bent further forward to press the button on one of the far monitors, one leg rising just off the ground as she did, giving me a perfect view of delicate pink lips that parted just a little.

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There was a clatter as the Kindle fell to the floor, and I lunged to pick it up, relieved to see it had survived, and when I looked back, Theo was strolling toward her room with her towel over her shoulder.

“You’re just going t—” I cut myself off, clenching my jaw shut.

“Just going to what?” Her voice drifted out from her room.

I refused to answer her, picking up the Kindle and then putting it down roughly on my pillow. I tapped my foot for a moment, my eyes on her doorway. My body was humming with repressed everything. Energy, frustration, desire, irritation. I felt everything, and nothing of what I truly wanted.

Pushing myself off the couch, I stalked to the kitchen, poured myself a glass of water, and stared angrily at the mural on the wall.

“I asked you a question.” Theo’s whispered words disturbed the hair at the nape of my neck, and I jumped, a strangled sound escaping me as I fumbled the glass. Her arm came around me, a strong hand enclosing mine, steadying the glass as water sloshed over both of our wrists.

The only physical connection I had with her was where her hand cradled mine, and that touch alone sent every nerve ending in my body into overdrive.

“You’re torturing me,” I said, trying to pull my hand away and failing.

“If you think this is torture, you can’t handle me,” she murmured, taking the glass.

I turned as she sipped from it, smirking at me over the rim. She had put on a loose T-shirt, though her legs were still bare.

“You underestimate me,” I hissed. I don’t know why her words irritated me so much, but I wanted...god, I didn’t even know.

I wanted.

Wanted her to look at me with more than doubt. Wanted her to see me. Not just to be seen, but seen by her—and I hated her for it. For burrowing her way under my skin and making me want someone after the safety of not needing anyone. I was addicted to the feel of her attention on me.

“Do I?” The question was a low murmur that ran along my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. “You are quite the conundrum, Sweets. Your want is written so clearly on your face, yet you won’t give in to it. It leads me to believe that I was wrong about you.”

“Show me what you think I can’t handle, and watch me prove you wrong,” I said, searching her eyes. “You will find me very hard to break.”

She studied me for a long moment, then slowly held the glass to the side and dropped it. It shattered on the ground, water splashing our legs, but her eyes never left mine.

“Pick up a piece,” she whispered.

I glanced down, spotted a shard of glass by my foot, and crouched to pick it up. My face was level with her thighs, and my head emptied of all thought as I realized she wasn’t wearing underwear. Theo’s fingers slid into my hair and held me there.

“Kiss me,” she murmured, guiding my head to her thigh.

My lips met her warm, soft skin, and I kissed her gently, daring to glide the tip of my tongue along her skin. Her fingers clenched in my hair, drawing out a delicious burn as she pressed me against her upper thigh, over a deep bruise.

“Kiss,” she ordered.

I did, placing a long, lingering kiss there before continuing up her body. A kiss on one of the small dermal piercings above her pussy, another between her breasts through her T-shirt. The scent of her skin at her collar—where I stole yet another kiss—filled my senses. My breath caught as her grip on my hair tightened, and she tilted my head back.

“How far are you willing to take this dance, Sweets?” she murmured, her eyes searching my face.

“Are you this cautious with everyone you fuck?”

She smirked.

“No.”

“Then dance,” I said, my voice breathy. “Unless you’re all talk?”

The slow smile she gave me was lethal. “Touch yourself,” she ordered as she took the shard of glass from me, her gaze raking my face.

I slid my hand down the loose pajamas I wore and between my legs, my fingers slipping through the arousal already coating my thighs.

“Slowly,” she murmured, entranced.

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I slid my fingers around my clit, my breath catching as I pressed down a little harder, finding the perfect angle. My scalp burned as she tipped my head back further, her lips skimming the hollow of my throat.

“Fuck,” I breathed, trying to focus on my movements.

Her knuckles skimmed up my belly, over the tank top I wore, until she got to one of the straps. She sliced one strap with the glass, and it fell limp down my shoulder, then repeated the action on the other, before running it gently along my exposed collarbone.

My heart was pounding in my ears as the cold tip of the glass pressed just below the bone, the weight of her gaze still on my face as she pressed it down in a slow, shallow slice along my skin.

I gasped, my hand losing its rhythm on my clit.

“I didn’t say stop,” she warned.

I whimpered, the burn of the cut turning to a sting that had me clenching against nothing, aching for more.

“I need—” I broke off, ashamed of what I had almost said.

Her lips brushed over the pulse point in my neck.

“Need what, Sweets?”

“Your fingers,” I gasped, my movements erratic.

“You haven’t earned those yet,” she said, the slow drag of the glass exquisite torture. My collar flared with pain, and she tilted her head, watching my face with those mesmerizing eyes. “Come for me, and I’ll give you a reward.”

She moved the glass to my other collarbone, and I moaned as it dug into my flesh, the warm trickle of blood sliding down my skin.

“That’s my girl,” she murmured as my breathing hitched and faltered. “You look so pretty in red. Show me how well you can come for me.”

My leg buckled as the orgasm hit me hard and fast, though it passed just as quickly. I vaguely heard the shard clatter to the floor, gasping as her thumb ran along the shallow slice before sliding up my neck, my blood sticky against my skin as she kissed me, long and thoroughly.

“Get on the bed.”

I nodded against her kiss, breathless, and she released me.

For the brief moments it took me to walk to her bed, the absence of her touch felt stark against the fire that had just consumed me. I paused by the edge, not wanting to get the blood that was smeared across my chest on it.

A drawer closed behind me, and I turned to see Theo pulling a buckle tight around her hips, a smirk on her lips.

“You think you can handle me? I’m going to fucking ruin you. Take your clothes off and get on the god-damned bed.”

I was trying to hide that my thighs had involuntarily pressed together, a warmth starting low in my belly as she clipped the toy into the front of the strap. I held her gaze as I stripped and settled myself in the middle of the bed, leaning back on my hands with more than a little satisfaction when her eyes dipped to my breasts, lingering on the piercings. I ran my fingertips over one, and it tightened around the metal bar, the new piercing still sensitive, then slid my hand down my body, the ache near unbearable, even after one orgasm.

“Did I say you could touch yourself again?” Theo warned, kneeling between my thighs and slapping my hand away. “The next orgasm you have is mine.”

“It will be mine if you don’t hu—” I trailed off as Theo grasped her T-shirt and pulled it over her head in one fluid movement.

She had multiple scars scattered over her body, each one a burning question that I had been dying to ask since I had bathed her blood-drenched skin days ago. I was desperate to know the story behind each one—there was a jagged mark across her shoulder that disappeared into her armpit, and another that looked like it had been stitched across her stomach.

I yelped as she grasped my ankle and yanked me toward her, the sheets sliding with me.

“So impatient,” she crooned as she leaned down, her teeth closing around my nipple in a brief nip. “Maybe you should keep talking and see what happens.”

Her body was warm against my thighs as she knelt between them, her nose running between my breasts as she moved to the other nipple and gave it the same treatment.

“I’m all out of free nipples if you plan on more piercings,” I gasped as her teeth nipped me a second time.

She chuckled softly, and I jumped as her hand slipped between my thighs.

“Your clit is still free.” Her finger slid through the mess she had made of me as she spoke, letting out a low sound as she felt how aroused I was.



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“Fuck, Octavia.”

My cheeks heated as she grasped both my thighs and pushed them wide, the fingers of one hand wet against my skin. I moved to cover myself with my hands and froze at her growled warning.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

My hands lingered in the air.

“Put your hands above your head and hold on to the headboard or I will turn you over and cane your arse until it bleeds. I want to look at what’s mine.”

I stopped breathing for a moment at those words. My mind went blank as my body heated. I don’t even think she knew what she had just said, her attention entirely focused on my body.

The ache that had been with me all day was reaching uncomfortable levels, the need for her to touch me as I lay bared to her so overwhelming, that my hips rolled impatiently.

Her hands gripped my thighs tight enough to bruise as her gaze rose to meet mine.

“So impatient for my tongue,” she crooned, giving my hands a pointed look. “It’s a shame you need to learn how to listen first because you look fucking delicious.”

My hands immediately went to the headboard and grasped it, eliciting an amused huff

from her.

“Well behaved when you want something, I see.” Her hand drifted slowly upward, the tips of her fingers brushing the crease of my thigh, and I nearly moaned in frustration as it paused there, but my own stubbornness wouldn’t let me plead for her to touch me. Not yet...

“I know a good deal when I see one,” I said, my voice far too breathy for my liking.

There was a flash of tooth as she smirked at me again, and then my heart skipped a beat as she bent, dropping a delicate kiss on my abdomen.

“Let’s see how cocky you are in a moment,” she murmured against my skin.

“Oh god,” I breathed as she kissed lower, my knuckles popping against the wooden frame. Her hands pushed my legs impossibly wider as another kiss dropped even lower, the warmth of her tongue flicking briefly against my skin. I let out another strangled curse that I’m almost sure was disgustingly blasphemous, though I could have been reciting the bible at that point and wouldn’t have known.

“There’s no god here baby,” she murmured, her breath warm against my aching body. “But your soul is about to be mine.”

I gasped as her tongue slid over my clit, and there was nothing teasing about it. I didn’t have a chance to compose myself before she had me pinned under a steel grip, her tongue the only thing I could think about as she ravished my already tightly strung body. I came embarrassingly quickly, so fast that I wasn’t prepared for it, my body arching off the bed with a guttural cry, my vision darkening. She shifted, the bed dipped, and then her lips were on mine, stealing the last of my breath as I tasted myself on her tongue.

“See how good you taste?” she whispered, slipping an arm under me to pull me up the bed. “Catch your breath, Sweets, because I’m not nearly done with you yet.

Her lips found mine again, swallowing my cry as she hitched my shaking leg over her hip and pushed the strap into me, bottoming out on the first, long thrust.

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t do anything except cling to the headboard as her lips moved to my throat, her teeth grazing the delicate skin there. My heart was a staccato beat in my ears as her hand into my hair and pulled my head back to give herself greater access to my throat, her hips fucking into me in long, deep thrusts.

“Don’t move those hands,” she warned, her breath hot on my neck, before she pushed herself up, snatching a pillow as she did, and pushed it beneath my hips.

I cried out as the angle had her strap hitting new depths, my legs locking around her hips and drawing her harder against me, my head kicking back into the mattress.

“Theo,” I gasped, as the bite of pain that came with every thrust hurtled me toward yet another orgasm.

She pushed my leg wide, her other hand pinning me to the bed, her thumb resting over one of the cuts at my collarbone as she pressed down.

“You’re taking me so well,” she said, thrusting so deep my mouth fell open in a silent scream. “Breathe for me,” she murmured, her hand sliding up my chest to wrap around my throat. “Because that’s mine too.”

My heartbeat hammered in my ears as she squeezed, the breath I had taken at her words trapped in my lungs. I felt like I would combust at any moment, caught in her web of pleasure. My vision dimmed at the corners, and she released her grip.

“Breathe,” she ordered, with a deep thrust of the strap.

I gasped, and her hand closed around my throat again. There was only her, and what she was doing to me—the edge of oblivion she had taken me to.

“Fuck, you are perfect.” Her words were distant over the ringing in my ears, her hips slowing their rhythm as her free hand slid down to tease my clit, her capable fingers driving me toward release. A sudden pressure that was nearly too much had my eyes flying to where she had turned her hand, sliding a finger inside me along the top of the toy as she fucked me with both.

“I want to feel this one,” she said breathlessly, just as her finger crooked within me and I saw stars. “Come for me, Sweets. I want to hear how good this feels.” She thrust harder, her finger working in tandem, and it only took two more rough thrusts for the orgasm to shatter me. My body locked as she released my throat, the head rush that hit me a second later making the orgasm even more intense. My hands flew from the headboard to her legs, my nails digging into her skin as I gasped through the strongest orgasm of my life, the proof of it flooding the bed beneath me.

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“Good girl,” she crooned, working me through aftershocks that had me twitching and gasping. “Look at the mess you made of me.” She withdrew her dripping hand as I fought to drag breath back into my tortured lungs, giving me a wicked smile as she sucked on her finger. “That’s three. Let’s see if you can make it to five. You’re not done bleeding for me yet.”

15

THEO

I left Octavia sleeping in my bed just as the sun began to rise, loose-limbed and sprawled out in exhaustion. She had earned her rest, taking everything I had given her and begging for more, her skin decorated with the evidence of how well she had behaved for me. I had tested how far her boundaries went, but the deeper I had gone, the more she had responded to me, and there had been no hesitation. Not even when I had wrapped my fingers around her throat as I strapped her savagely, squeezing until I controlled everything. Her pleasure. Her pain. Even her god-damned breath was mine, and fuck I had savored every moment of it.

Checking the time on my screen, I sat, putting down my coffee as it steamed in the dim morning light. Tomorrow, I was going to have to report to The Triarchy and figure out how to salvage the mess I was rapidly creating.

We still held the cards. A stronger hand, in fact, with evidence that Vanguard had intended to sacrifice his only daughter to further his empire. I could ruin him, putting myself into a near untouchable position within The Triarchy in the process...and all it would take was one call to Erryn.

One call.

I picked up my phone, bringing up the most recent number and staring at it.

One call, Theo. To the woman you owe so much.

I had earned every bit of respect I had gained from the Chairs. But Erryn had given me the opportunity to be seen. Held me to the high standards I was now known for...and had trusted me. Did trust me enough to let me closer to her than anyone I had seen.

Erryn Loxley ruled the London chapter of The Triarchy with an iron grip and a stone heart. No one dared to question her. No one but me, and I had never played by her rules. It was that lack of control over me that both infuriated and seduced her. Our trysts had been volatile and entirely on her terms, taking what she wanted from the encounters and leaving again. And that had been fine. It was a mutually satisfying arrangement because going toe-to-toe with me at my worst took a rare type of person.

But Octavia had followed me into those dark little corners and danced with my demons like no one else had. Her presence lit up something deep inside me that I feared had broken long ago. She made me feel.

One call.

The number taunted me from the screen.

One fucking call, Theo. You have known this woman for two weeks. Your loyalty is to The Triarchy, and this is how you ensure the integrity of crucial information that could be its downfall if exposed.

So why couldn't I do it?

Putting the phone down, I swiped a hand across my tired eyes and glanced across at Octavia's sleeping form. The possessive little ember that had been steadily growing in my chest flared.

I couldn't. I couldn't do it.

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The repetitive beep from one of my monitors woke me, and I sat up with a start, my mind taking a moment to catch up as I blinked at the sun streaming in the windows above. I had fallen asleep reading in Octavia's nest on the couch, the noon sun warming my skin as I had attempted to make the most of the last day of my impromptu holiday.

Padding groggily across to the monitors, I logged into the surveillance system and swore quietly when I saw the sleek black Mercedes waiting at the garage doors. I let her in, pulling my phone out, ready to allow Erryn access through the system of doors and the elevator it took to get in, striding to my room as I did.

"Sweets," I said, pulling back the cover Octavia had burrowed into and running a hand down her arm.

"Hmmm?" The sleepy hum was followed by a soft sigh as she stirred.

"I need you to get up," I said urgently. "Someone is here who can't see you."

"What?" Octavia sat up in alarm. "Who?"

"Up," I said, as I thought rapidly. "Quickly."

I couldn't put her in the cells. Erryn had no reason to go looking in them, but still.

The risk was there, and if she saw her, every atom of trust I had worked so hard to build would be gone—and Erryn did not have a forgiving bone in her body. There was no way I could get her into the sub-basement without meeting Erryn coming up, and the living quarters were too open to hide her anywhere. My eyes fell on the repurposed walk-in vault sunk into the wall that served as my wardrobe, and I winced. It would easily fit four people; the heavy door was a smaller version of the one to my room, which I could close securely.

“I need you to get in there,” I said, pointing to the vault.

“What?” Octavia said again, her brows drawing together. “No. I’ll go to the cell?—”

“No, Octavia,” I said firmly, pushing my discarded T-shirt into her hands. “Put this on and get in there. Be silent until I—and I alone—open that door and let you out.”



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“Theo, no—please.” She looked at me with pleading eyes.

“Unless you want the Chair of the company who ordered your abduction to know you are alive and well—get in the fucking vault, Octavia,” I snapped, urgency making my tone sharp. My phone vibrated in my pocket as Erryn requested access to the lift, and I pulled my phone out, letting her through.

“Now!” I snapped.

She was silent as she pulled the shirt over her head, not looking at me. The phone vibrated again, and I let Erryn through the first doors, barely waiting for Octavia to step into the vault before closing it and clicking the lock into place. I strode back out of the room, letting Erryn through the final doors as I glanced around the living area. Octavia had nothing of hers here, yet it felt like her presence was everywhere. I could even smell her here, on me...her sweet, sun-warmed scent clinging to my skin.

“Fuck,” I breathed, heading to the keypad and punching in the code. I opened the door as Erryn arrived, her impeccable attire looking as out of place in the harsh lights of the undecorated concrete hallway as it always did. I should have expected her to turn up today. She never announced her intentions, knowing that if I weren’t on a job, I would be here. And she handled everything related to my work schedule.

Erryn’s icy grey gaze leveled on me as she stepped through the door, unbuttoning her long coat so it hung open to reveal the crisp white shirt and black dress pants she was wearing beneath, a stark contrast to my gym pants and singlet.

“You look tired,” was all she said in greeting.

“Late night getting myself up to date,” I said, gesturing for her to enter.

She hummed quietly, her eyes narrowing as she swept her gaze down me, and then around the room as she took everything in, her eyes lingering on the mess of blankets on the couch.

“Gin?” I asked, and she inclined her head slightly before walking toward my office. I poured her drink and then a whiskey for myself, handing it to her and leaning against the edge of my desk as she reclined in the office chair.

“You are recovered?” she asked. Her eyes dropped to my thigh. “You’re not favoring that leg at least.”

“You replayed the footage then?” I asked, running my hand over the spot where Zichen had stabbed me. Octavia had done an incredible job stitching it. The stitches were so small and uniform that it looked like it had been done by a surgeon, and aside from a lot of bruising around it, the wound was healing cleanly.

“More than once to reassure myself you had not bled out in here,” she retorted, her face stiffening. “Have you entered an override code into your file yet?”

I shook my head, taking a sip of my whiskey to give myself a moment to formulate a response.

“After Zichen’s stunt and the number of agents who have gone dark, I’m not comfortable having that information accessible in a system that is riddled with flaws at the moment,” I said carefully.

Erryn’s brow rose.

“You are well aware that it is a separate system that only the Chairs have access to.”

I gave her a long look.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Then put it in my personal phone, Theodora.”

“I can’t just put it in your phone, Erryn,” I said, mirroring her mannerisms. “It’s all coded to my prints. I can do it, but it will take me a day or so.”

She nodded in satisfaction, and I couldn’t help but bristle over her confidence that I would do exactly as she was demanding, and of course, she noticed my change in demeanor, the edge of her lips kicking up in the hint of a smile. Nothing turned her on more than gaining the upper hand.

“Tell me how bad it is,” I said, nursing my drink.

The tip of her ears went red. Or at least, the one I could see with her pale hair tucked behind it. It was the only tell she had. Where my temper was volatile and wild, Erryn’s was a cold fire that silently destroyed.

“We currently have access to everything in The Triarchy database. We can access it. See it. We cannot move, delete, copy, or anything else until we agree to the terms Vanguard has put in place,” she said after a long moment.

I knew how much it was hurting her to admit that. The mistake she had made would be tearing her up.

“And what are his terms?” I asked. “How much is he asking?”

Cool grey eyes raised to mine, and I could see the fury simmering quietly in their icy depths.

“Not money. William fucking Vanguard wants my Chair.”

I hissed through my teeth, slowly swirling the golden liquid in my glass.

“He would steer this corporation into hell,” Erryn said. “Vanguard Technology has given him the knowledge of which ears he needs to be whispering in. A Triarchy Chair would effectively place him at the helm of an army. Everything we have fought so hard to rid the world of, he wants to control.” She slammed her glass down. “He would have a finger in every black-market operation, manipulating it to strengthen his own empire.” She shook her head, laughing ruefully. “I would killhim myself at the funeral, but the slippery fuck has safeguarded against that too.”

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“The funeral?” I asked, blinking. “Octavia’s?”

“I thought you were up all night researching,” she said, sounding unamused. “His PR company is having a field day with it. And communication was received the day after the bombing that should William Vanguard die for any reason, automations were in place to release all Triarchy files to the NCA.” She shook her head. “Either way, I lose my Chair, whether it’s to Vanguard or to a criminal investigation.” She shook her head. “Every file we have is encoded with two-step security measures. There is no way he should have been able to do what he has done. Even our best hackers can’t get around his software, and it was meant to be an added security measure—” she cut off, her mouth twisting to the side. “I misjudged, Theo.”

She never called me Theo. Nor admitted to any lapses in judgment, and she looked so small and uncertain in that moment that I didn’t know what to do. I raised my glass to her.

“Drink up, I guess.”

She let out a breathy laugh and tilted her glass at me.

“Even the devil has a weakness,” I said. “I just need to find his. And I will, Erryn. I just need time to work out which angle to approach from.”

She hummed, seeming to pull herself out of her moment of vulnerability, and I could almost see when it changed to self-disgust. She got up, draining her glass.

“Your vehicle will be delivered at eight tomorrow. At least attempt to keep this one

longer than six months. You are a valuable asset—but not three vehicles in one year valuable.”

“Ouch,” I said, walking her to the door. She turned as she reached it, studying me for a long moment. “You would tell me if you were not up to returning.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a statement. As if reassuring herself that there was still that level of trust between us.

“I’m fine, Erryn,” I said, trying to give her a reassuring smile. “You could have just called, you know?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I needed to have eyes on you,” she said, waving her hand at me in dismissal before turning on her heel and leaving.

16

THEO

I waited until surveillance showed Erryn’s car pulling away and the door of the garage safely lowered before I strode to my room and twisted the handle to the vault.

“She’s gon—” I cut off as my eyes fell on the small, curled form of Octavia, pressed against the far back corner of the vault. She had her arms wrapped around her legs, rocking slightly as she murmured something too low for me to hear.

“Hey...” I stepped into the vault with her, pushing past the rack of clothes to the spacious area behind, and dropped to my knees in front of her.

She didn’t acknowledge that she had heard me, her lips moving as she counted to herself.

“What’s going on?” I touched her arm, alarmed at how clammy her skin was.

She exploded as soon as my hand made contact, flinging out her arm and slapping my hand away.

“Don’t touch me!” she snapped, slamming her back against the wall, every breath ragged as she gasped for air.

My eyes caught on the mottled bruises on the inside of her arm where she was pinching herself viciously, and I reached to pull her hand away.

“Don’t—” She shook her head. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“Octavia.” I laced every bit of authority I had into the word. “It’s me.” Slowly...watching her closely the entire time, I grasped both her wrists in a firm grip. “Look at me.”

She did, though her pupils were blown wide, her gaze slightly unfocused as she struggled to control her breathing.

“Is h-he gone?” She stumbled over her words, and fuck she looked so...broken. Every shield that she had held so firmly in place was gone.

“Zichen?” I asked. “He’s dead, Sweets. He can’t hurt you, and he wasn’t here. It was Erryn.”

She shook her head, blinking rapidly. “I can’t—” Her chest heaved. “I can’t breathe.”

“Yes, you can. Stay here with me, not wherever your mind is taking you right now,” I said as gently as I could. I brought her hand up and placed it against the side of my neck, and covered it with my own. “Come back to me,” I murmured.

Her eyes fixed on the spot she touched me, though she was barely holding back the full-blown panic attack she had descended into, and I placed her other hand against my face. The shock of letting her touch me like that seemed to break through whatever hell she was lost in, her eyes tracking the movement of her hand as I slid it slowly along my jaw.



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“That’s my girl,” I whispered, as her thumb moved of her own volition to trace along my lower lip.

Her whole body trembled slightly, and I hooked a hand under her bent knee, scooting her closer to me.

“I like it when you touch me,” I whispered, pushing aside my own shock as I realized it was true. I wasn’t just tolerating this. I liked the feel of her hands on me.

A whimper slipped past her lips at my words, though she said nothing, her thumb skating over my cheek then under my eye, her fingers pushing back a long lock of hair that had escaped its braid as I slept. Her other hand slipped down my neck to my chest, and I wasn’t prepared for the rush of emotion I felt as she pressed a hand over my heart and closed her eyes. Her lips moved silently, her body relaxing bit by bit as we sat in the back of my wardrobe, Octavia counting my heartbeats in silence.

“Can I get out?” she whispered after the silence had stretched into minutes and the tremors had stopped.

I didn’t answer, just took her hand and stood, pulling her up with me and leading her out.

Jesus Christ, she was pale.

She had a death grip on my arm, though I don’t think she even realized, and I led her to the bed, getting onto it myself and pulling her in until she was curled between my bent legs, her head on my chest as I reclined against the headboard. It took a little

while, but she slowly relaxed, her heartbeat slowing to match mine as we lay together in silence.

This woman had been through so much in the past few weeks, and she had taken it in stride. I hadn't seen her break once in situations others would have lost their minds...but ten minutes in a dark vault had broken her so thoroughly that she was clinging to me. Her captor. The woman who had caused all of this. It didn't make sense. None of this reaction made sense. Zichen had hit her before I'd had a chance to step in, but she had taken an elbow from me and came up ready to fight.

Her arm snaked out, and she plucked my dog tags from the table beside the bed, bringing them close to study them as she brushed her thumb over the raised metal indents of my name and number.

"85108909. Is that your identification number?" she asked quietly.

"My service number," I amended. "Though I have been scrubbed from the database, so don't bother trying to look for it. I'm as much of a ghost as you are."

"How long were you in?"

"Six years," I said after a quick tally. "I did my basic training in the UK, then was transferred to the US. I would have stayed there if I hadn't been discharged."

"So, what did he do?"

"My commanding officer?"

She nodded against my chest, her thumb still tracing my name.

"He hated me from the start," I replied, my lips quirking up at the memory of him.

“He tried every trick in the book to get me to crack, and I would show him I was stronger every time. If he made me run fifteen laps, I’d run thirty. If he wanted fifty push-ups, I’d do a hundred. Then he tried to get me for ignoring his commands, so I hit him with malicious compliance and did exactly what he asked. To the letter. He never could control me, and his clear personal dislike began to be noticed. No one else was drilled like I was, and a rumor circulated that he was reprimanded for it. It ran like wildfire through the bunkhouses, and his reputation tanked. No one respected him, so he stooped low and tried to intimidate me into hanging my boots up in the showers one day. It had been a particularly long week. I was exhausted and in pain...it was fine until it wasn’t. My temper took the wheel. Dishonorable discharge for my efforts.”

“You have a temper?” she murmured. “I would have never guessed.”

“Younger Theo was a nightmare,” I said, chuckling softly. “She was all bite and bark with a chip on her shoulder and a point to prove.”

“Not much has changed, then,” Octavia muttered.

“I have way more self-control,” I protested. “Case in point...Zichen. I’d have made him chew and swallow his own testicles if he had pulled that shit in my house in those years.”

Octavia hummed softly, the sound nearly amused, and I relaxed a little, daring to let my hand rest on her arm as I hooked the trailing chain from my tags and looped it over her head. It was a small thing. A necklace with my name punched into it. But she had let me put it on her...hadn’t refused it. Had let me soothe her demons and chase them away.

“Wear them,” I said into the silence that followed. “I like seeing it.”

She tilted her head up to look at me, her fingers closing around the small silver plate possessively as she studied my face with a look that made my stomach flip.

“I didn’t know you were claustrophobic,” I said, hoping she understood it for the apology it was.

She looked away, her face freezing, and I thought she wasn’t going to answer me until she sat up abruptly.

“I’m not,” she said, wiping a hand over her eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...” she trailed off and shook her head. “Sorry.”

She was off the bed before I could say anything, padding silently to the kitchen in only my T-shirt and tags. It felt like a guilty pleasure seeing her draped in things that were mine, and I contemplated switching all of the clothes I had given her for my own, just to keep seeing her walk around in them. The tap started running a moment later, and I listened to the sound of her moving around in the kitchen as I mulled everything over.

I couldn’t get the image of her curled up at the back of the vault out of my head.

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Or her words.

Don't touch me.

It was the first time she had said those words to me and actually meant them, though it clearly wasn't me she was seeing in that moment. Disgust and hatred had been laced in every word she spat.

Is he gone?

My ears started to ring, my stomach going cold as clues began slotting together.

The small comments.

Whatever it is that my father stood to lose was of greater value than my life was to him...

Her reaction every time I mentioned his name...

No. Fuck no.

Sliding slowly off the bed, I followed her into the kitchen, watching her intently. She was standing by the counter, her hands gripping the edge of it as she stared at the empty glass in front of her.

"It was William, wasn't it?" I asked, forcing my words to sound calm.

“I just don’t like the dark, Theo. That’s all.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I said. “I can see straight through it.”

“Then leave it alone so I don’t have to lie,” she retorted.

I leaned against the counter, crowding her space until she looked at me with haunted eyes. “It was hush money, wasn’t it?”

Her face told me everything. Agony. Shame. Terror. It was all there in plain view. How had I not seen this?

“What is your father paying you to keep silent about, Octavia?” I asked, lethal rage overtaking every part of my mind. I fisted my hands, refusing to give in to the rage and risk scaring her. “What did he do to you?”

She raised her chin, glaring at me in defiance.

“Let it go, Theo.”

“Absolutely the fuck not,” I snapped. “I need to figure out what the fuck to do with you. I can’t make the right decision if I don’t know what I’m dealing with.”

“What happened has nothing to do with this,” she retorted, gesturing between us.

“It has everything to do with this! You were the only leverage we had against your father, and I need to know if returning you to his protection would put you in more danger than you are already in.”

“I was never fucking leverage!” she yelled, losing her temper. “I let you think I was to keep myself alive, Theo. I don’t know what he has on you, but he has been two steps

ahead the entire fucking time. And this time, I wasn't fast enough to be a step ahead of him!"

"What does that mean?" I cried.

"You want the truth? It was never a choice between me and whatever he stands to lose, Theo, because he wants me dead!" She was furious, her neck and cheeks blushing red from anger as she yelled at me. "I should have known the second he made me come back to the UK, but I was out of funds and took the easy option for once." She barked out a mirthless laugh. "The first time I ever actually needed that money and look what happened." She gestured around the room. "Fucking ironic, isn't it?"

I refused to let her see that her words stung. It was irrational of me to hope this might be something else. She was my hostage—no matter how I now felt about her—that wasn't going to change.

"I'm going to need you to tell me everything, Octavia," I said quietly. "You're asking for a hell of a lot of trust, letting you go. I'm asking for a little in return."

She was breathing heavily again, though she was now looking at me strangely. And for once, I couldn't read her.

"What?" I asked.

"You're just going to let me go?" she asked quietly. "Just like that. Now you know—" she cut herself off.

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I hadn't admitted it to myself yet, but clearly the decision had already been subconsciously made, so after a moment, I nodded.

"Yes."

She walked over to the table and sat heavily, closing her eyes. She looked...ruined. As if the emotional weight she had been carrying all this time had finally taken its toll, with the relief of knowing I was giving her freedom back. I wanted to take it back already. Throw her back into the cell and lock her in there. Mine to keep.

Except she would wilt in the dark.

And that would be even worse than watching her walk away.

"When I let you go," I said, taking a moment to compose myself. "You need to disappear, especially if you can't trust your father. Octavia Vanguard stays dead, and that can't change. Whatever he did, there is no coming back for anything. Not vengeance or compensation."

The words felt like acid on my tongue, the edge of panic already curling in my gut at the thought of never seeing her again. I clenched my fists against the visceral need to reach out and grab hold of her.

She let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

"I have been trying to escape him for fifteen years, Theodora. He took everything from me." Her face pinched, and she refused to meet my eyes. "I have always donated the



money he gives me. It makes me feel dirty, like somehow it makes what he did acceptable. I have never touched a cent of it.”

She was fidgeting as she spoke, and I could tell how deeply uncomfortable it made her to speak of this.

“But three months ago, I was notified that my identity had been used to start a business that was recently liquidated with fifty thousand pounds owed in taxes. I knew I would be able to fight it, but I was at risk of legal action if I didn’t make a down payment. I would risk arrest at the border or deportation from foreign countries with a criminal conviction. I needed money quickly and planned to use that money as a good-faith payment until I could get it squared away.”

“Except the payment was late,” I said.

“Yup.” She grimaced. “I made the mistake of asking if it could be paid a week early. It killed me to do it, and the second he caught wind that I needed it, he used it to his advantage. He refused to put the payment through unless I returned to the UK. I thought he was just doing it to feel like he had control again, and I needed to come back to lodge the fraud investigation anyway. But I don’t believe in coincidences, Theo.”

“He lured you back here,” I guessed, trying to temper the rage curling in my stomach. “He would have known what happens to the families of those who cross the company I work for.”

“Two birds, one stone,” she whispered. “He gets what he wants, and his biggest loose end is tied up. It’s extortion, isn’t it? That’s what he has on your company. Information that could bury them, and they retaliated by taking me hostage. You played his game perfectly.”

I said nothing, my mind racing over how thoroughly I had misjudged what this was. Her thumb was pressing into one of the larger bruises on her inner arm, as if the pain was keeping her grounded.

“Why are you scared of the dark, Octavia?” I asked, already knowing I was going to hate the answer, but needing to know regardless.

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

“Fuck it,” she murmured. “You don’t want this anyway...”

I didn’t get a chance to question what she meant before she continued, her tone flat and emotionless.

“He would lock me in a chest at the foot of his bed when I wasn’t obedient. When I didn’t please him,” she said, sounding so disconnected from the words that it didn’t even sound like her. “It started when I was ten. I ran away when I was sixteen.” She raised haunted eyes to the roof, swallowing hard. “There were fifty-two nails in the lid of the chest. I would count them to keep myself calm. Over and over, until I went a little mad, I think. The longest I was in there was three days after he was too rough and I threw up on his—on him. Lying in my own mess, counting the nails over and over.”

White hot, life-ending rage burned its way through my veins, and I moved slowly, not trusting myself to keep my temper in check as I lowered to a crouch in front of her.

“This is where you look at me with disgust and pity and tell me how sorry you are about the tragic state of my life,” she said, her voice flat and emotionless. “Save it, Theo. I’ve heard it all before.”

“No, Sweets,” I said calmly, though I was anything but. “This is where I tell you that

I am going to skin that sick fuck alive.”

17

OCTAVIA

I don't know what I had been expecting from Theo, but rage hadn't been it. The pity that would make me crumple into a self-loathing husk wasn't there. The hand on my knee hadn't moved, and she was still looking at me.

“Did you report it?”

“Yes.” The simple question took me off guard, and I shook my head. “I mean, I tried. The sergeant I was giving my statement to asked me three times if I was lying to get a payout from him. And with the payments he had already started...it looked bad. I dropped the charges and left after a lecture about how girls like me ruin good, hardworking men's lives, and I should be ashamed of myself. I left the country the following day.”

The hand on my knee tightened, but she said nothing, a muscle in her jaw flexing.

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“Say something,” I blurted.

“I’m thinking,” she replied.

“Think aloud.” I needed to know what was going through her head behind that cold mask.

“There is a funeral being held for you next weekend,” she said finally. “And I am trying to decide if he legitimately thinks you perished in that fire. Surely DNA must have proven otherwise, but I’m not sure how badly the body they recovered was burned.

It wasn’t what I was expecting her to say, and I blinked a few times. “Badly,” I said after a long moment. “I was watching the live reports, and I got hold of the autopsy. There were little more than bone fragments remaining. It was a witness testimony that tipped the scales—one of the homeless in the area reported hearing me confirm my identity just before the explosion. The silence since has confirmed it.”

“Okay.” Theo nodded slowly, and I couldn’t help myself. I needed to touch her. I needed to know if she would pull away from me after hearing my darkest secret. I tentatively ran my fingers over her hand where it rested on my knee, her skin hot against my cold fingers.

“You’re frozen.” She took my hand in hers, and my stomach fluttered as she brought it to her lips and blew on them. “It’s not cold in here, Sweets. Do you feel okay?”

I nodded, a tornado of emotions hitting me at once. She wasn’t recoiling from me, but

she was letting me leave.

I was going to lose this.

She was going to let me go, and I was never going to see her again. I leaned in, pausing as I got closer, searching for the disgust I still expected to see. But her brow only quirked a little.

“Can I...” I trailed off, feeling ridiculous. I was chasing the need for reassurance that I shouldn’t even want, desperate to be sure that her spark of desire for me was still there. Want. Need. Lust. Fuck, I would take anything. She had told me that she intended to let me walk away from her, then cradled my hand like it was precious. She had fucked me like she owned me, then left me in her bed to sleep elsewhere like she didn’t want to be near me. She was a walking dichotomy, and I was at her mercy.

“Can you what, Sweets?” There was a low purr in her voice that heated my blood, and she drew her lips along my hand, still blowing warm air across my skin before taking the tip of my finger between her teeth and nipping at it.

Why? I tried to read her and failed through the maelstrom of emotions clashing around my head. Did she know what I wanted and was just playing into it? Anxiety clawed at my insides as she kissed the next finger, then nipped at it too. Was she stalling to think? Trying to hide her disgust through distraction?

Fuck it.

Closing the distance, I crashed my lips to hers, slipping my hand behind her neck and pulling her against me. I had taken her by surprise—I could feel it in the moment of stillness under my hands as I ran my fingers up and into her hair, tugging at it.

Show me you want me. The words were a plea echoing through my mind as, for a

moment, I thought she would pull away.

And then her hands gripped my waist, and I felt the moment she took control back, kissing me savagely. A wave of relief hit me, and my throat caught.

It wasn't enough, though.

She was going to let me walk out that fucking door and didn't even care that she would never see me again. She was making me feel all of this conflictingbullshit,and she didn't even care!

I bit her lip.

Hard.

Her hand gripped my throat, and she reared back, fingers brushing over where I had sunk my teeth. They came away stained crimson, and I glared at her as I pushed against the grip on my neck.

Her thumb pressed against the pulse flaring at my neck.

"Naughty girl," she crooned softly. "You made me bleed."

"Fair's fair," I bit out, too many emotions hitting me at once after the blessed numbness. It always happened this way. Panic. Emptiness. And then it would come rushing back, and either send me into the dark to repeat the cycle or leave me emotionally frayed.

That god-damned brow arched higher, and her hand squeezed a little tighter.

"No, Sweets. There is nothing fair about this situation."

“No?” I choked out past her grip.

“No,” she echoed. She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes searching my face.

“What do you need right now?”

I pressed my lips together, refusing to let my reply slip free.

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You, Theo. How had I gotten to this point?

“Talk to me, Octavia.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Sweets....”

“What’s the point?” I demanded venomously.

She tilted her head. “Feeling a touch brattish, are we?”

I glared at her mulishly, and she let out a soft, huffing laugh.

“Get up.” She stood, the grip on my neck making me go with her as she steered me toward her gym area. Snatching a hanging skipping rope off one of the other machines, she released me, only to grab my hands and tie them efficiently with the rope.

“Gym bondage?” I asked dryly. “Original.”

“Oh, Sweetheart,” she crooned. “Keep going. Please.”

She wanted a reaction, and I wasn’t going to give her one. She wasn’t going to see the turmoil I was in. I wasn’t going to let her see my desperate need for her to take it back. For her to not be so flippant about never fucking seeing me again after finding out how soiled my soul was, when it cut deeper than she could know. She could do



whatever the hell her sadistic black heart wanted, and she was going to get nothing. She was the same as everyone else. The tags around my neck clinked together as she hefted the other end of the skipping rope over the pull-up beam above us and yanked it tight, my arms stretching above my head.

“You done?” she asked, wrapping it around her fist and leaning in close.

“Are you?” I retorted, keeping every bit of emotion from my voice to hide the agony of my double meaning.

A slow smile spread across her lips, and she hauled against the rope again, my body stretching upward as she tied off the skipping rope...and then disappeared behind me. There was a rending sound, and the T-shirt I was wearing loosened and then fell off altogether as she made a few swift cuts with a flip knife. A second later, the shredded remains of the shirt were over my eyes as she blindfolded me.

I stiffened at the sudden dark, but her warm hand flattened over my stomach, her low voice in my ear making gooseflesh rise all over my body.

“Stay with me, Sweets,” she whispered. “Do you want to know my favorite interrogation tactic?”

Fuck her.

“I bet you’re going to tell me,” I said obstinately through clenched teeth.

There was a low laugh, and then I couldn’t feel her there. I strained my ears to hear her moving around, but the woman was so damnsilent.

One heartbeat. Two.

My body tensed as the silence crept in.

Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. I counted every beat, each one a little faster than the last.

“Theo.” My voice wavered, and a moment later her hand brushed my rear.

“I’m here,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. “The answer, my Sweet, is fear.” Her voice dropped low to the ground as she gripped my ankle and fastened something around it. There was a clank, and then she gripped the other, doing the same. “Fear breaks down barriers that even pain cannot...so we are going to play at the edge of yours while you tell me what’s going on in that pretty head of yours,” she continued. A click, and my legs widened, my feet slipping against the concrete. Another click, wider. Another click, and I had to shift my weight, my body stretching up as my stance widened with every click of whatever she had attached to my ankles. “Darkness is your fear. So, we are going to play in it together.”

One more click, and I was spread wide.

“Beautiful,” she murmured, her voice coming up closer again. “You look good enough to eat.” Her hand stroked up my inner thigh, and I jumped, the bar holding my ankles clanking against concrete. “Now, Octavia. tell me why you’re angry that I’m letting you go,” she murmured, her breath disturbing the hair next to my ear.

Fuck.

18

THEO

The sight of Octavia stretched out and tied, a spreader bar holding her in place for me, was the most delicious sight of my life. Her attitude had flown through a range of

emotions, then landed solidly on anger. It was in every line of her body. In the cadence of her voice. It drowned out the voices of her memories that had risen the moment I told her that I was letting her go. Small, dark spaces were where her demons lurked. I didn't want her back there with them, but I wanted her compliant...vulnerable to me on the edge of the panic that threatened to drag her down, because the hope that was curling in my chest was threatening to send me to my knees.

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Her head turned with the sound of my voice as I circled her, reveling in every line of her body.

“Why would I be angry?” Her words were clipped, but there was a slight tremble to her voice.

“That’s what I want to know,” I murmured, stepping closer and running my palm over the curve of her arse. “Because it is exactly what you have been asking me to do, Sweets.” I slid my fingers lower, skating along the lower curve of her arse and she shifted on her feet in anticipation of my touch. “Talk to me.”

“I’m not fucking angry, Theo.”

I huffed, stepping back, and she stiffened at my absence.

“Theo?”

I said nothing for a moment, letting her teeter in the dark, before leaning in to brush my lips over the long shallow slice at her collar, breathing in her scent as I did. The tags hanging between her breasts clinked softly as I brushed past the chain.

“Why did you let me mark you last night?” I asked, my lips grazing down the puckered line.

“Curiosity,” she said tightly.

“And?” I pushed. “Was your curiosity appeased? Did you find what you were looking

for?”

“No.” She leaned into me as I ran my lips along the second slice.

I stepped back again, and she rocked against her ties, her lips falling open slightly, and a crease forming between her brows as she searched for me.

“Theo,” she breathed. “Please.”

I said nothing this time, moving silently away toward one of my plants, pulling a thin length of bamboo from its pot, wiping the end off on a large leaf.

“Where are you?” The tags clicked again as Octavia shifted, tilting her head as she strained to hear me.

I let the silence stretch for another heartbeat...two...until her breath began to pick up. I ran the tip of the bamboo down her side, and she jumped, her head swiveling in my direction.

“No?” I asked softly. “What were you looking for then?”

“I don’t—” she cut off with that stubborn lift of her chin I enjoyed so much, and I gave her a warning flick of the bamboo against her thigh.

“Say it,” I ordered.

She stayed stubbornly silent, and I raised my brow, drew back the bamboo, and whipped it once across her outer thigh.

Her mouth fell open with a gasp, but this time I kept the end of the bamboo touching her, trailing along her middle as I circled her.

“You don’t...what?” I asked.

“I don’t know what I was looking for,” she breathed. “I don’t—I don’t know what it is.”

“Then explain it,” I urged, running the bamboo tip up her stretched arm and then back down.

“No.”

She jolted as I whipped the bamboo across her arse, an instant red welt forming across her perfect skin.

“Try again,” I murmured.

“Get fucked, Theo.”

I grinned. “I’d hoped you would say that. Count with me, Sweets. Just like you did in the vault.”

She made a small sound as I gave her a welt across the back of her thighs, my mouth watering at the need to kiss the mark it left on her skin.

“One,” I said.

Fuck, she marked so beautifully.

“I was going to give you five,” I murmured when she was silent, “But if you want to be stubborn, it will be ten.”

“Two,” she bit out as the bamboo cracked across her skin a second time, her breath slowing to an even rhythm.

She counted the next two as I crisscrossed them without a flicker of reaction as she sank into the moment.

“Where is your head right now, Sweets?” I asked, dealing the last welt across her arse, my gaze fixed on the beautiful lines, unable to deny myself the pleasure of seeing it. She took the bite of the bamboo silently, her body relaxing between each strike as her breathing slowed.

“It’s quiet.”

I smiled, stepping forward to run my hand over the hot, raised marks. “Is that what you were looking for?”

“Yes.” The word was barely more than a breath, and I rewarded her with a soft kiss on her shoulder.

“That’s my girl.” I squeezed the crossed marks on one thigh. “Now tell me why you

are angry with me.”

“Because you are fucking infuriating.”

A smile tilted my lips as I kissed behind her ear.

“Is it because I’m letting you go?”

“Because you fucked me then discarded me, just like everyone else does. You looked at me like I meant something, but don’t want me.”

There it was.

Oh, my love. How incredibly wrong you are...

I ran my hand down her body as I stepped onto the spreader bar behind her, keeping it firm against the floor as my fingers slid into the mess between her legs. That got a reaction, and she whimpered as I ran a firm finger over her clit.

“At what point did I say that I don’t want you?” I asked against her neck.

“You told me never to come back,” she breathed, pushing her hips back into me and away from my assault on her clit. “Fuck.”

“Did I say I didn’t want you?” I pushed, rocking my hips forward into her arse and forcing her firmly against my touch.

“Same fucking thing,” she hissed, her thighs shaking as she squirmed against me.

“Don’t put words in my mouth. Did I say that, Octavia?”



“No!” she blurted, and I curled my fingers, sinking two into her.

“Does this feel like I don’t want you?” I snapped. I had dared to hope and convinced myself I was insane. She had no reason to want to stay...yet I had seen glimpses of something in the way she looked at me. But I would never be able to trust it because I had never given her the choice.

“Just because you want my body doesn’t mean you want me,” she flung back. Her body clenched around my fingers as I curled them within her. “I let you mark me, so I had something of you to keep.” She gasped as I pressed the heel of my hand against her clit, not giving her a second of relief from the onslaught. Her legs strained against the bar, and I pressed down harder on it, forcing them to still. “I wanted something I can touch to remember your hands on me,” she said. “But they will heal and fade, and then you’ll be gone.”

I grappled with the wave of territorial anger that her words evoked in me. “You want something to keep?” I removed my hand, dripping with her arousal, and stepped around to face her, dragging the makeshift blindfold from her eyes.

She glared at me, panting. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

“Answer me!”

“I want to keep you!” she yelled. “And fuck you for it! How dare you make me feel like this then tell me to fucking leave!”

I’d give her something to keep. Etched in her skin like she had crawled under mine the moment I met her. I snatched my tags, yanking until the chain snapped from around her neck as I stalked toward the kitchen and turned on the burner. The stovetop flames roared to life, and I placed the metal tag over it, her words running

through my head on repeat.

I want to keep you.

It didn't take long for the tag to glow red, and I snatched the chain, stalking back toward her.

"You are fucking mine," I said, slow and even. "You were mine the second I saw you, tipsy and singing to yourself as you went back to that shithole motel I took you from. I have tried not to fall for you, but it's useless. So yes, Octavia. I'm letting you go because I have no choice, but you are mistaken if you think I'd let anyone touch you without knowing who the fuck you belong to."

"What?" Her eyes searched mine, confusion etched into every part of her face.

I palmed the tag, the scorching heat searing into my palm as I pressed it to the soft skin by her hip bone. Her legs spasmed, and I slammed my foot down onto the bar, keeping her in place for a moment longer as I branded her skin. Marking her as mine before claiming her mouth in a savage kiss.

There was a soft chink as I let the tag drop to the floor, her lips moving against mine as she murmured something breathlessly against my lips, and I pulled back to see what she was saying.

"Undo me. Undo. Theo. Please," she panted, chanting it under her breath. "Please. I need to touch you."

One yank of the knots had her hands free, and the second they were, she was removing the restraints at her ankles. A breath later, and she was on me, pushing me

back toward the couch, her hands ripping at my clothes.

Fabric tore as she pulled my shirt off, and I groaned as the warmth of her mouth found my collar, nipping her way up my neck as her hands fumbled with the button of my jeans.

I helped her, lifting my hips and pushing my jeans down, my body aching for her touch. I never wanted touch. I had tolerated Erryn, grown comfortable with her over time. She had been able to pry pleasure from my reluctant body. But I had never ached like this for her.

She knelt between my bare thighs, pushing me against the couch and kissing me as if our roles were reversed, and I let her, slipping my fingers into her hair and pulling her closer.

Her hand trailed down my side to rest at my hip, and I took it, slipping it between my thighs.

“Does this feel like I don’t want you?” I asked against her lips, and her kiss faltered as she slid her fingers through my arousal. “No one touches me unless I trust them, Sweets.”

There was a soft intake of breath, and she pulled back enough to look at me, just as I grabbed her wrist, lifting my hips for her.

She made a small sound as her fingers sank into me, my hand wrapped tightly around her wrist, and then she dragged her gaze down to watch as I rolled my hips, fucking myself with her fingers.

She had moved before I knew what she was doing, slipping down my body to kneel between my legs and trail excruciatingly slow kisses up my thigh as she slipped her

hand out of me and away from my grip.

“Not this time,” she murmured between kisses.

“What?”

Her teeth scraped along my skin.

“You’re not controlling how I fuck you,” she murmured, her tongue flicking out and trailing slowly up my skin in a burning trail. “Not when I have been dreaming about doing this every god-damned minute of every day.” Her hands gripped my knees, pushing them apart. “You are always in control, Theo. But not this time.”

She licked me with the flat of her tongue in one long, slow tease. My mind emptied, and a sound that I was not proud of escaped me.

“Lie back and let me taste you,” she said, with a small groan of pleasure, before sinking her tongue deep inside me.

I swore, reminding myself to breathe as her fingers sank into the muscles of my legs in a punishing grip as she slowly moved up to wrap her lips around my clit. I entirely lost the ability to breathe as she sucked gently, my hands finding her hair and sinking into it.

It felt incredible. It sounded utterly depraved...her soft noises of satisfaction drowned out by my ragged breathing as I surrendered to her mouth and the pleasure she dragged from me. I was on the edge of an orgasm in seconds, unable to stop my hips from moving as I gripped her hair, fucking her face...only to have her slow and change tempo.

“Octavia,” I breathed, gripping the couch to stop myself from ripping her hair out.

She breathed a laugh, and my eyes cracked open to see her peering up at me, just as she sucked again.

I did cry out that time, and again a second later as her fingers joined her talented mouth, sinking deep inside me. When she edged me a second time, I wrapped a leg around her back, trying to force her to give me the orgasm that was so damn close.

“If you don’t....” I trailed off in a moan, my breath catching as she slowly worked a third finger into me, the slight burn as my body stretched around her nearly tipping me over.

“If I don’t what?” she murmured, sliding the tip of her tongue across my clit.

“Let me come,” I ordered, rolling my hips harder onto her fingers.

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“Ask nicely,” she said, her breath teasing tortured, aching flesh.

“Octavia,” I growled.

“Theodora,” she replied innocently, crooking her fingers at the perfect angle. “You asked if I knew howweta woman can get from anticipation.” Her tongue flicked against me in time with a well-placed roll of her fingers, and I groaned. “You asked if I knew how delicious it was to sink my fingers into them.” She pushed deeper into me, and I bit my lip until I tasted blood to stop the cry threatening to rip from me. “You asked if I knew what a woman’s pleasure sounded like,” she murmured. This time I couldn’t stop the sounds she wrung from my body as shelowered her head and ran a firm tongue over my clit until I shattered around her hand.

“Yes.” Her voice filtered slowly through the ringing in my ears. “I do. But the only sounds I’m going to remember for the rest of my days are yours, Theo. And they were even better than I had imagined.”

19

### OCTAVIA

Theo was asleep on my stomach, her long, dark hair unbound and fanned over my chest as I ran my fingers through it. We were laying on the floor in a mess of blankets and strewn pillows from the couch, and my arse had long since gone to sleep—but I wouldn’t have moved for anything. Not when her fingers were wrapped around my free wrist, holding onto me even in sleep.

I had lost count of the hours, my body deliciously sore from the attention she had lavished on me, and my jaw ached from how long I had spent between her thighs, dragging orgasm after orgasm from her until she had made me stop. I licked my lower lip, savoring her taste on it as I trailed my fingers along her hairline.

“What the fuck,” I whispered under my breath, gazing down at the face I had gone from hating, to?—

I cut myself off, unable to finish that line of thought.

“I agree entirely,” she murmured in a sleep-roughened voice as she cracked an eye open and surveyed me. “What time is it?”

“Just past four,” I said, leaning to peer at her discarded watch on the side table.

“How are you still awake?” she asked, nestling back against me. “I’m almost offended.”

Theo looked so different with her hair loose and her features softened by sleep. I dared to trail the backs of my knuckles down her cheek, committing the sight to memory.

“I think I’ll have trouble getting up, if it makes you feel better?” I said.

She huffed, a lopsided smile teasing the corner of her lips as she closed her eyes again. “Don’t stop.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“Hair,” she mumbled, turning her face into my bare stomach and mumbling something incoherent that sounded surprisingly like “Please baby.”



“Wow,” I said, chuckling softly. “All it took to turn you into a demanding, tamed puddle, was a few orgasms. I should have seduced you sooner.”

She grunted at me, grasped my hand and placed it back on her head while delivering truly diabolical side eye.

I snorted. “You know, you could have told me this is all it would take.”

“I didn’t know I liked it so much,” she mumbled, shivering delicately as I scraped my nails along her scalp. Her eyes fell on the brand at my hip, and she gently ran her thumb over the tender mark, her name clear within the rectangular outline.

The matching mark on her hand had cracked and bled during our frenzied attack on each other, streaks of dried blood decorating my skin. She had both figuratively and literally bled for me to brand me with her claim.

“Tell me about the company you work for,” I murmured, scratching my nails slowly up the back of her neck as my heart kicked up a few notches. This was it. The moment I found out what this was. Was it a fleeting moment that would cave under the trust I was asking for, or would it be real?

She stilled, her breath coming shallow, and in that moment, my stomach turned cold, my fingers stilling in her hair.

Shifting her body, she turned until she could look at me, her eyes searching mine.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” I replied quickly.

Her lips thinned as she pressed them together, her eyes lingering on my brand as she

thought for a long moment before sighing quietly.

“I had been deported back to the UK after being court-martialed and discharged from my US transfer,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I floated for a while, but money ran out, and employment opportunities are limited for someone with my record. I was young, and when the opportunity came to make some fast cash fighting in an underground ring, I jumped at it.” She paused for a moment, her lips tilting in a smirk. “I was good. I made a name for myself fast. It got me noticed by the organizers...and from there I was taken on as private security for their less than morally clean corporation.”

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“This is who my father is going head-to-head with?” I said dryly. “Fight club?”

She chuckled. “No, Sweets. I gutted fight club from the inside out when I realized who they were. It just so happened that they were already on The Triarchy’s radar, and Erryn was leading the team trying to infiltrate them. I razed the entire place to the ground in twenty-four hours after she had been working on it for over a month. The next day, I found myself in front of the three Chairs of The Triarchy, looking down the muzzle of Erryn’s Glock, and was given an ultimatum: Work for them or be terminated on the spot.”

I blinked at her. “Theo...you had no choice in this?”

“There’s always a choice,” she said. “I could have disappeared at any point over the last decade, but I’m good at this. And I can make a difference.” She picked up my hand and traced the outline of a three-pointed crown. “That’s my signet. My calling card to tell everyone who took the kill. A crown because I have the strength to keep the three Chairs in power, or take it.”

“With abduction and murder?” I asked, raising a brow.

There was a flash of teeth as she smirked.

“There is more to what I do than just that. But I wasn’t lying when I said that hostages were not my area of expertise?”

“Nooooo,” I cut in. “You don’t say?”

“What gave me away?” she asked, doing a great job of looking offended.

“Might have been when you seduced the hostage, but to be honest, I haven’t seen your code of conduct and company policy, so I could be mistaken with my assumptions...” I trailed off, distracted by her smile as she chuckled to herself.

“The Triarchy have...morally grey methods,” Theo said after a moment. “Abduction and murder are tools they use for the greater good, and their results are the reason I’ve stayed. In a corrupt world, they keep the worst of humanity in check.”

“And my father fell on the wrong side of that?” I asked.

A muscle ticked in her jaw, her eyes losing their softness.

“Your father,” she said quietly, “and I use that term in the loosest possible way—doesn’t know what’s coming for him.”

“This...Triarchy. They will keep trying to take him down?”

She was silent for a moment, and I waited for her to choose her words.

“The Triarchy needs something from him,” she said finally. “Or rather...needs something back.”

“Tell me,” I urged.

Shifting against the mattress, she was silent for a while, her mouth pursing as she frowned at the ceiling.

“I’m telling you this because you need to know what will happen if he wins,” she said. “Vanguard Technology was integrated into Triarchy software a while ago, and it

corrupted the files to give William access to everything. To the records that could put its entire existence in jeopardy.”

“What is he asking for?” I asked. “Money?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He doesn’t want money—he wants Erryn’s Chair, which would give him control of the UK chapter and all of its resources.”

I stared at her in horror. “That kind of power...”

“My concern is that he’s already tried to have you murdered once,” she said. “And with the software we have available to us—not to mention a global network of assassins—you would always be looking over your shoulder. If you ever slipped up, he would be notified. I can’t let him get that foothold, and it’s why I need you out of the country. If he gets the Chair, the transfer of power will be quick. I doubt I will retain my position, and if I survive that, I definitely won’t have the resources to get you out like I do now.”

I froze, an icy hand closing around my heart.

“What?”

She looked at me, a crease forming between her brows.

“I will get passports and documentation sorted through my contacts. You won’t be picked up leaving?”

“After everything, you are still sending me away?” I choked out.

A look of confusion crossed her face. “Sweets...I can’t hide you here forever, and your face is everywhere. You cannot stay in the country. What did you expect was

going to happen? I need to focus on making sure he doesn't get that Chair."

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“You said—” I cut myself off and shifted, trying to pull myself out from under her, mortified by how gullible I had been.

A warm hand closed around my ankle.

“Octavia.”

“What?” I spat.

“I’m coming to find you after.”

My ears were ringing from the violent storm of emotions that I usually avoided like the plague, so I chose to focus on the way her thumb was running up and down my ankle in soothing strokes.

“I need you out of the country in case this goes to shit. But I am coming to find you once it’s over.”

“You...are?” I breathed, struggling to pull back the hot flare of anger. Tears were threatening, and I refused to give in to them.

She rolled, prowling up my body as she pushed me back against the pillows and settled herself between my legs.

“Yes,” she murmured, leaning in to kiss me. “You think I’m letting you get away after showing me how devastatingly good your tongue can be, my Sweet?”

I leaned back as her lips brushed mine, raising a brow and hoping she couldn't see how emotional I was. "Just my tongue?"

She grasped my hand, pulling it between us, and I sighed softly as she shifted her hips, my fingers slipping through slick, delicate skin and finding her clit.

"Fine," she breathed, rolling her hips against my touch. "Your fingers are adequate."

"Theodora," I said, my voice wavering ever so slightly as I tried to sound offended. "Let me remind you what had you chanting my name like a fucking prayer last night."

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It didn't happen all at once. Cohabitation snuck up on us like everything else had. We developed a rhythm that seemed as natural as breathing. We ate together, trained in the gym...when she wasn't using the equipment to ruin me.

I cooked more than once after sending her off with a shopping list that had her grumbling under her breath, desperate to eat something that wasn't from a tin, only for her to slather it in ketchup—which is a fucking war crime in my opinion. I had watched in horror as she wolfed down the lasagna-ketchup-soup abomination that had taken me hours to create and mere seconds for her to defile.

She'd laughed. A real laugh. Like something fractured had finally snapped into place...and then she fucked me into a boneless mess on the picnic table, under the fairy lights. But it was the nights that I adored most, when she seemed to relax in the darkness and tell me about her life. There were silences too. Quiet stretches where we didn't need to say anything, where the air felt full of something neither of us could name. It was almost enough to make me forget that my funeral was creeping closer—the day I would leave the country—and had to trust that I'd left enough of a



mark on her to make her follow...

It was Friday, the night before the funeral, when I came out of the shower to find a yellow envelope sitting on the bed next to my neatly folded clothes. I didn't say a word. Just wandered out to where Theo was busily working in her office and placed it on the desk between us like a loaded gun.

Her hand slid up the back of my leg as she finished reading the latest media release that had just popped up, a picture of my face plastered front and center, and it felt...easy. In a situation that was so exceptionally complicated...when she touched me, none of it mattered.

"What is this?" I asked quietly.

She dragged her gaze from the screen to the envelope, then up to me. "Passport," she said, her thumb skating along the curve of my arse. "New name. New papers. Plane ticket. Funds. Everything you need."

I glared at that fucking envelope like it was the devil itself.

"We've discussed this, Sweets," she murmured. "The best time for you to go is while all eyes are on that funeral. That PRfirm is blowing this up to be the most televised event of the year—no one is going to be looking for you at that airport.

I gingerly picked the package up, ripping it open and peering in. "Jesus Christ," I muttered, eyeing the neat stacks of money alongside the passport and a thin folder of papers.

"You can't take more than ten grand through customs undetected," she said, "I wanted you to have cash in case you needed it, and there is an account set up for you at your destination with more—the details are all in the paperwork."

I blinked at her. “Where is that coming from?”

“One of my personal accounts,” she said, winking. “Oh, and don’t bother arguing, you will lose.”

“Theo!” I hissed.

“To quote you,” she said, clearing her throat. “Get fucked.”

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“I don’t need it,” I argued, shaking my head.

“I really don’t care,” she replied, leaning back in her seat and giving me a flat look.

“Call it a security deposit if you must. I don’t know what will happen here either.”

I leveled a dark look at her as I slid the passport out and thumbed it open. A dark-haired version of me stared back, and I raised a brow at her. “Dye or wig?”

She chuckled. “You can choose. I got the washout stuff because I thought you might be precious about your golden locks...”

I opened my mouth to argue and faltered as I read the name.

Elvira Lancaster.

I slid my eyes back up to see the wicked smirk on her face.

“You look like an Elvira,” she teased.

“Lancaster?”

“You’re mine, aren’t you?” she asked, her eyes darkening as she hooked my thigh and pulled me closer. She kissed my hip, right over the brand. “And my name looks good on you, Sweets.”

Every single iota of irritation...fled.

“Elle for short,” she murmured, raising my T-shirt and kissing my stomach. “Ellie, if you want. To new friends.” She raised her gaze to mine and held it. “But, My Love, to me.”

I had no words. Nothing. Just a warmth in my chest that I had never felt before.

“It’s not often I render you speechless,” she murmured, undoing the top button of my pants. “Let’s see if I can take your breath away too.”

20

THEO

My Love.

In a few short weeks, this woman had torn down every wall I had. To be honest, she had me addicted in days, going from numb to feeling it all. I kissed the soft, warm skin under the button I had just undone, Octavia’s hands sliding into my hair as I did.

Fuck I loved that.

The feel of her fingers twining into my hair, grasping at my body, her nails raking my back. I couldn’t get enough. I kissed the puckered skin of the brand I had seared into her flesh, her fingers tightening in my hair as I slipped her pants down.

I pushed away the insistent, nagging pain that came with knowing I was taking her to the airport in less than twelve hours to board a plane that would take her halfway across the world from me. I had chosen Australia for its climate, the image of her basking in any ray of sunlight she could find over the last few weeks making me smile, as I imagined her doing the same on the beach.

My girl didn't like the dark, so I would give her the fucking sun.

She made a small noise as I nipped at her skin, and then another as I tugged her pants off her hips, sliding them down her legs. My hands found the slightly raised marks she still had from the caning I had given her as I slid my hands up to cup her arse, and I traced gentle fingers along them as I kissed my way down from her navel.

"Come to bed," she said, stepping back suddenly and taking my hand.

We didn't even make it halfway there before I had her back in my arms, kissing her until she was breathless, and found hersodamn wet when I slid my hand between her thighs. I walked her backward, my fingers teasing her slowly until we bumped into the dresser in the bedroom, and she made a soft protest as I took away my fingers.

"Top drawer," I said, kissing the corner of her lips.

She turned and opened the drawer, throwing me a confused look over her shoulder at the contents.

"Oh...You didn't find that drawer in your days of snooping?" I teased. "There's a false back—pull the lever underneath it.

She did, and the drawer slid further out, and her eyes widened at the array of items it housed. I plucked up the leather cuffs, smirking at her as I buckled one around her wrist, and tugged on the attached heavy metal ring.

"Do I get to use any of these on you?" she asked, holding out her other hand to me.

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“Maybe,” I said, tightening the buckle until it was firm. “If you have the energy after I’m through with you.” I gave her a wink. “But I don’t think you will. Sit on the bed, my love.” The words had their intended effect, and I watched the conflicting feelings on her face in amusement.

She swore under her breath, moving to the bed and perching on the edge. I stooped to grab the hidden chain tucked under the mattress at the foot of the bed, stretching across to grab her armand tug her flat, and she glared up at it as if it had offended her. I clipped the chain to her outstretched arm, then moved to the head to secure her other arm.

“You just have...chains...on your bed...just in case?” she asked. “How many people do you bring back here,Theodora?”

“Jealousy?” I crooned, rounding back to her side and enjoying the view. She was stretched out across the bed—her arms stretched between top and bottom. “I haven’t been a nun, Octavia. But I don’t usually bring people here.”

Crossing back to the drawer, I grabbed the two coiled lengths of rope that were new additions. I wanted to take my time with her. Enjoy her. Taste her until I would never forget what she felt like on my tongue...but the little minx was impatient.

It only took me five minutes, and a lot of curiosity from Octavia, to have the beautiful latticework of knots up her legs that had them bent, spread wide, and securely tied to each end of the bed...and then I had to take a moment to gather myself at the sight.

I ran my fingertip up her bound thigh, the muscle beneath it flexing as she shifted and

tested the rope.

“Oh, no,” I murmured, giving her a wicked smile. “No, Sweets. These are staying until I am very...very satisfied.”

She was already drenched and getting wetter by the second, and I let my gaze linger on that beautiful sight as my finger travelled along her incredibly soft skin.

Crossing back to the drawer, I took out a selection of toys, throwing all but one on the bed next to her with a smirk. I clicked the small vibrator on, finding the setting I wanted as I lowered myself to my knees and kissed her clit, laving my tongue over it once as she jolted and gasped.

Fuck she tasted incredible.

I had to force myself not to just keep licking and sucking her delicious pussy for the next few hours until she couldn't take it anymore, but I wanted to see her beg...and I wasn't controlled enough to stop when I had my mouth on her.

She swore as I touched the tip of the vibrator to her, running it round and round her clit in small circles as her breathing kicked up.

“I could do this every day for the rest of my life and never get bored,” I murmured as she began moving against the restraints, her fingers gripping the chain so hard her fingertips were white. I bent and licked her again, the breath she had been holding exploding from her lungs as I began the slow, teasing circles again.

“I need more,” she gasped on a moan, her hips rolling against the movement of the vibe.

“No,” I said, nipping her sharply on the thigh.

She cried out, and I blew softly on the bite, waiting for the sting to pass before I returned the toy to her clit, taking her to the edge again before halting it with another bite.

After the fifth climb, her body began to shake. “Theo,” she gasped.

“Yes?” I asked, replacing the vibe with my mouth again, just to kiss her lightly.

She made a choked sound, her hips chasing my mouth as I pulled away.

“Don’t stop.”

“That’s not how you ask nicely,” I chided, teasing her entrance with the tip of the vibrator before sliding it back up.

“Come on baby, you can do better than that.”

She shuddered, dragging a breath in, then cried out in frustration as I took it away again.

“Please.”

I huffed softly. “Is that all you’re going to give me? Maybe you need a little encouragement.”

I unclipped her hands, sliced the ties on the ropes, and flipped her, her legs still bound in a wide kneel as I dragged her to the side of the bed and laved her with my tongue a few times, then sank it deep inside her as I teased her with the vibrator. I took her to the edge that way, over and over, always stopping at the telltale flutter of her walls around my tongue to blow gently against her and bring her back down.



I had her writhing, sobbing my name. But still, it wasn't what I wanted, and I kept her on that edge mercilessly.

She let out a frustrated growl as I pulled back again, and I slapped away her hand as she reached between her legs, desperate to come.

“Please,” she breathed, panting hard. “Please, Theo. Please let me come. It's too much. Please.”

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I chuckled softly, my fingers circling her entrance.

“That’s better.”

I sunk one finger in, and she moaned softly, pushing back against me, and I bit her gently on the arse. “Be still.”

“I need...” She trailed off, gasping as I bent my finger and gently stroked her.

“No, Sweets,” I crooned, getting to my feet behind her. “You don’t get to come until I tell you to. Now be a good girl and bite the fucking pillow.”

Her groan was muffled as I slipped a second...then third finger into her, her walls contracting around me as I lightly passed the vibrator over her tortured clit, fucking her harder and harder with my fingers.

Her breath rasped, each one coming with a whimper of pleasure as I carefully added a fourth finger, working them into her before pressing the vibrator firmly against her.

“Now come for me, my love. Let me hear you.”

She did...instantly, clenching around my fingers so hard she popped one of my knuckles as she screamed, her whole body going rigid beneath my hands. One orgasm rolled into the next as I dropped to my knees again and devoured her, needing to taste what I had just done to her with a groan of satisfaction.

Octavia relaxed, panting as I licked up the last of her arousal with my tongue,

savoring her taste, and then she tried to move.

“Oh, no,” I murmured, getting up and kissing the small of her back before reaching for the dildo next to her. “You begged to come, Sweets. Now you will beg to stop coming.”

Stepping out of the building the next day with Octavia’s hand laced with mine was not how I had seen this going. I had carried her in over my shoulder, drugged and limp, thinking I had been the one to capture her, but she had ensnared me. All of me. Even the parts I had kept hidden at all costs. The world had cruelly shown me what love was, and I was unsure if I was ever going to be allowed to keep her.

Staying in the blind spots of the cameras, she slipped into the back of the Hummer Erryn had sent and settled down into the footwell where the camera wouldn’t see her as we left. We had dyed her hair in the early hours of the morning after we’d thoroughly sated each other, then had both fallen asleep on the floor of the shower after I helped her wash the dye out, relaxed under the steaming water, with her nestled in my arms.

We had changed her appearance to match the passport, added a few layers of clothes that had changed her shape slightly, and I had watched her morph into someone else as she changed her mannerisms into a sullen, unapproachable shell that would make anyone think twice before approaching her.

The drive to the airport had been quiet. She had climbed into the front seat once we were on the motorway, pulled my hand into her lap, and stayed silent for the trip.

It was leaving her a road out from the airport that had broken my heart.

The taxi I called to take her the final leg had arrived too soon, and I nearly pulled my gun on the driver when he called out for her to hurry. She had clung to me, and I had

pressed her against the side of the car and kissed her long and gently, trying to memorize every curve of her lips against mine.

“Keep the documentation on you at all times,” I warned, handing her the bag I had packed with some essentials. “And get out of the airport the second you land. Turn on the phone I gave you once you are there, but don’t call out on it. That’s how I’ll contact you.”

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

“Promise me you will come?”

“Once this is settled,” I said, tucking her hair back and thumbing away the tear that slid down her cheek. “You will be okay. I’ve made sure of it.”

She nodded, kissed me one last time, and drove away.

And fuck it had broken me. Because even though I hadn’t promised...I knew she would hate me when I didn’t come for her. And it wouldn’t be for lack of trying.

But Erryn was very good at her job. And utterly savage.

21

OCTAVIA

My heart was pounding as I handed the passport over to be scanned, waiting for the alarms to go off. Waiting for the ticket agent to look up and recognize me...forsomeonetorecognize me. A hand on my arm as someone said the name that had died in that explosion with an innocent woman who had deserved better.

It would lead me into an interrogation room, which would result in William realizing I was alive. And then I would be taken to the Vanguard estate and locked in another jail with the real monster.

I flexed my fingers in my pocket, trying to stop the shake in my hands as the bored-looking ticket agent peered at the screen.

“There’s been a bit of an issue with your seat, dear,” she said, peering at me over her glasses.

My stomach turned to ice.

“There is?”

She nodded. “The planes had a last-minute switch, and seating is different in that model, so it looks like you have been bumped to first class.”

I tried not to faint on the spot from relief, nodding mutely.

“It’s your lucky day, Miss Lancaster!” She beamed a fake smile at me, handing me back my ticket and passport. I took it and fled, weaving my way in and out of the milling people toward the escalators that led to customs. It felt like everyone was looking at me, even though it was no more than the usual glances as I slipped into line and put my bag on the belt, checking my watch. It was nearly one, and my funeral was due to start in thirty minutes, the absurdity of it making me want to laugh.

“Pockets?”

I jumped as the security officer barked the word at me from his side of the belt, and he smiled in apology.

“Sorry, Miss.” He gestured to the jacket I wore. “Anythin’ in your pockets?”

“Oh.” I shook my head, thrusting my hands into them to check, and found only a small, folded piece of paper, which I pulled out and showed him, noticing an “O” scrawled on the front.

“Chuck it in the tray with your bag.” He gestured for me to drop it in, and I did, my fingers itching to grab it and see what it was. Theo must have slipped it into my pocket as we said goodbye.

I nearly ran through the scanner, my eyes glued on the tray that was slowly making its way through the X-ray machine and snatching it off the belt as soon as it slid toward me. I unfolded the small slip of paper, my eyes hungrily scanning the small, neat writing. Three words that I could hold onto.

I love you.

I refused...refused to break down sobbing like a tired toddler in the middle of the airport. So I grabbed my bag off the belt, waved a hand of apology to the line of people behind me that I had held up, and beelined for the first electronics shop I could find. It felt weird using the money Theo had sent with me to buy a phone, but I had no way of touching my account without it setting off alarm bells—if the money was even still in there—but it made me feel a little less disconnected to hold that tether to the world in my hand. I paid for it quickly, chucking a prepaid card on top at the last minute before taking my new purchases to a quiet corner.

I had the phone set up and running in a few minutes, my back to the bustling airport as I plugged the device in and connected to the internet, searching YouTube for the latest information on the funeral.

There was a live event already streaming, and I clicked on it, having a near-out-of-body experience at the sight of my own funeral.

It was huge.

Paparazzi were covering the event from all angles, showcasing the cathedral decorated with white roses and thick candles that glowed softly in the low lighting.

People were milling everywhere as they found their seats and left gifts under a photo of me that sat in pride of place at the front of the building. My lip curled in disgust as I watched people I had never known mourn me, all while the man responsible wasn't even there.

My mother sat in the front row with dry eyes and was being doted on by a few women I vaguely recognized from dinner parties in distant memories. She was the one loss I had an inkling of sadness for. She had never been a good parent. I had been handed off to nannies from the second I was born. Theo had been right in her assumption that I had been the ticket to my mother's easy existence. A trophy for William's arm, and a cover for his black heart. But she was still my mother, and there were times she had looked at me with the faintest hint of affection in her pale blue eyes.

I was glued to the screen, unable to drag my eyes away as people who hadn't bothered to talk to me since school got up and spoke about me as if they knew me.

I actually laughed as Emma Spencer, my high school nemesis, stood up and made a speech complete with crocodile tears.

"Octavia and I were best friends through school. A true bright light in our year. I can't believe I'm never going to see her again."

"Oh, please," I muttered. "You called me a cunt and poured a milkshake on my science project because I wouldn't let you take credit for contributing absolutely nothing." I shook my head as a boy I had dated for a week stood up next, his face a picture of sorrow.

"Don't do it," I warned. "I'm watching from the afterlife and very much judging you, Steven-terrible-kisser-don't-answer-his-call." I wondered briefly if Theo had gone through my old phone and found the wild array of names I had people saved as.



Surely, she would have questioned smelled-like-bologna and cried-after-sex. But then again, she had surprised me more than once.

It got more comical as it went on, and I almost forgot I was watching the death of the old me— until the speeches concluded and the cameras panned to the heavy wooden doors that opened to reveal a group of men I had never seen before, bearing a white coffin on their shoulders.

I sobered immediately, guilt weighing heavily on my heart as I watched the body of a woman I had never known take the burden of my old life into her death. She would rest in an opulent casket, in a beautiful grave site, but never have her name engraved on the stone above. I made her a silent promise that I would have fresh flowers sent to the grave every month and would rectify this before I was laid to rest myself.

I checked the time, noting I had ten minutes until my gate opened. Slinging my bag over my shoulder and pulling up my hood, I headed toward the gate, still glued to the screen.

The pallbearers started their slow walk up the aisle to the somber music, and I scanned the crowd for William. My mother still stood with her friends; her eyes locked on the coffin that was slowly coming toward her with a look of such sadness that my heart gave a little squeeze.

But he hadn't even bothered to show his face.

The camera swung back to the coffin, zooming in slightly. They had stopped halfway up the aisle, and I frowned, nearly bumping into a woman with a pushchair as I squinted at the screen. One of the pallbearers had stepped away from the casket and was pointing to its side.

I joined the group of passengers waiting at the gate just as it opened, refusing to look

at the plane waiting patiently through the windows to take me half a world away,  
anxiety escalating with every step I took.

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The casket had started moving again, but there was a flurry of movement on one side of the hall, and I watched in fascination as the casket was lowered onto its plinth, and a group of people came up to inspect it.

Someone stood up and waved as another man grabbed the side of the casket.

Was he trying to open it?

My heart picked up as he was pulled away by another, a few people in the waiting crowd standing up to get a better look.

“Ma’am, your passport and boarding pass?”

I jumped, realizing I was at the front of the queue with an unimpressed flight attendant holding her hand out to me. Mumbling an apology, I handed both over, not looking as she scanned it and waved me through.

Someone had grabbed the casket lid, and the camera had switched angles to one of the paparazzi who had shouldered their way through the gathering people, and it was then that I saw what had upset the pallbearer.

A thin line of scarlet was slowly dripping down the side of the coffin.

Fresh blood.

The body inside that casket was nothing more than ash and bone fragments. I had seen the autopsy when I hacked into the morgue database and found it. There was

barely anything left.

So why the fuck was there fresh blood running down the casket?

The camera panned out to a wide-angle shot as official-looking people began ushering the gathered mourners out.

Someone behind me gave a frustrated huff and pushed past, and I realized I had halted in the narrow hall that led to the plane. I stepped to the side, pausing against the wall, only to look back down and see that the live stream had ended.

“No!” I clicked through all the links I could find, seeing they had ended at the same time, scrolling further down until I caught one. It looked like it was through one of the attendees’ cell phones. A young woman spoke to the camera as people bustled through the cathedral behind her.

I clicked into it, my eyes scanning the comments that were popping up under the video.

Was that blood?

Yo, what happened? Why is the live feed down?

Flip the camera, show us what’s going on.

The girl had her hand over her mouth. “Guys, there’s something going on with Octavia’s coffin. Someone just opened it!”

Show us!

Can you get in closer?

A man appeared by her shoulder, and the camera blacked out for a moment as he tried to take her phone. There was a scuffle, and then it flicked back on, bouncing as she appeared to be running down the aisle toward the now open coffin.

I hit screen record on my phone as the picture swung wildly back and forth, unable to make out much more than a blur.

“Ma’am, you need to make your way to the plane.”

I looked up to see the same, unimpressed flight attendant gesturing me on, but I hung back, anxiety squeezing my chest.

“I just need a minute.”

“Is there a problem?”

She was looking too closely at me, and I shook my head, turning away from her and slowly walking toward the back of the line of people waiting to board.

I glanced back at the live stream, swearing as I saw the girl had been escorted out of the building, and hit end on the recording, clicking into my gallery and bringing up the video. I took it back, frame by frame. Most of it was just a blur of people and white roses until I reached the point she had made it through a knot of people, holding her phone high to show a bird’s eye view.

My father’s body was in the casket.

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Pieces of him.

The only part of him that was whole was his head and torso, a look of absolute terror and agony etched into his face, though his mouth was stretched open with something stuffed into it as he lay in a puddle of his own blood and body parts.

My eyes widened as I zoomed in and realized it was his own testicles...cut off and shoved deep into his throat.

But it wasn't his mangled corpse that had fear draining the blood from my face.

Nor was it the word etched into his chest, crimson against his pale chest.

RAPIST

It was what was underneath it.

A green three-pointed crown that had just put a target on Theo's back for sealing the fate of The Triarchy.

She had murdered him to ensure my safety and doomed herself in the process.

"Theo," I breathed. "What have you done?"

In that moment, her words over the past few days made sense.

She couldn't let him take the Chair, but there was no real way of stopping him. She

had been so adamant that I took a flight at the same time as the funeral. I was never meant to see this. Not until I was safely where she wanted me, because his death just created a ripple that would lead to the exposure of The Triarchy.

And that crown was her apology to Erryn. Making it known who was to blame.

Erryn was going to kill her.

I was never going to see Theo again.

22

THEO

The contents of my bag were laid out on the motel bed as I organized them neatly back in, re-checking the small array of items. This was it. This was everything I was walking out of my life with, leaving The Triarchy in flames behind me.

It had come down to a choice between Erryn and Octavia. It had been no choice at all in my mind, even though there was a bone-deep ache in my chest.

William would have gained the Chair. I would have been removed for the hand I had in Octavia's abduction, and if I had survived that, I would have been helpless to stop the inevitable. One slip, and Octavia would have been exposed. And William would have sent a veritable army to terminate her, lest she expose him.

I would have lost her either way, and gambling with her life was a risk I couldn't take. So, I did the one thing I could do.

William thought he was untouchable at that funeral. His safeguards against The Triarchy held their leash tightly. His face had been splashed across the media as a

grieving father, bereft of his only daughter and heir.

I had made him scream until he shredded his own vocal cords, and when I had grown tired of his wailing, I had cut off all he held most dear and shoved it deep into his throat, only his testicles protruding from his vile mouth, and then carried on until his heart gave out from the agony I inflicted on him.

I had started with fifty-two slices in the most delicate parts of his anatomy. One for every nail in the chest he had kept Octavia in, and I had made sure he had survived fifty-two minutes of the torture. I wish I had fifty-two fucking days to slowly skin him alive, but I worked with what I had.

I had my laptop open to the flight tracker. Octavia's plane had been in the air for nine hours. I wouldn't relax until I knew she was there and out of the airport, but I needed to get moving. Erryn would have already put a global termination order out for me, and I would need to stay ahead of them all if I had a hope of getting out of this.

Grabbing the small burner phone I had picked up from a gas station, I punched in the numbers to Octavia's. I just...wanted her to hear it from me. I hated that she was going to learn what I had done through a screen. She deserved to hear it from my own lips, and god knew if I was going to make it out of London. I had a flight booked from Manchester in two days, but I needed to survive that long first.

I hit call and immediately froze.

It didn't go straight to voicemail as I had anticipated.

It rang.

There was a click as the call was answered, my eyes going to the small image of the plane on my laptop screen. The plane Octavia was meant to fucking be on,



somewhere over the Pacific Ocean.

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“Of all the fucking knives aimed at my back I have dodged,” the icy voice murmured down the line. “I never thought yours would be one of them, Theodora.”

“Erryn?” I breathed, panic overriding every sense I had. “Where is she?”

There was a soft huff on the other end of the phone. “I never thought of myself as a vindictive person,” she said. “But I must say, I’m going to really fucking enjoy putting a bullet in this one.”

The line went dead, and so did my heart.

No.

The word detonated through me. I stared at the screen, at the ghost-flight that had taken off without her, and felt something deep inside me fracture.

Erryn had her.

I moved before I knew what I was doing. The phone clattered to the floor. My laptop slammed shut. The bag zipped with a vicious pull. I was already out the door and into the crisp air, breath fogging in a haze of adrenaline as I raced toward my car.

The Triarchy’s headquarters was an unassuming fortress, and there was only one way I was getting in there now. I would have to force my way in.

And when I kicked in that door—god help anyone standing between me and Octavia.

I think I'd played out every possible scenario of what would be waiting for me as I drove. I don't know how I didn't get in a wreck. Every second they kept her under that roof, pieces of the humanity that Octavia had coaxed out of me peeled away until there was only the darkest part of me stripped bare.

The first guard didn't even see me coming. His body dropped with a soft thud, and I dragged him into the shadows. Two more followed the same way. People I had known. Stood in briefing rooms with. Worked alongside. And I didn't care. Alarms tripped behind me, but I was already through the main building and heading for the upper levels. I had minutes. Maybe seconds.

Erryn fucking had her.

Gunfire tore down the corridor behind me. I rolled between cover, returned fire, and didn't stop moving as I left a massacre in my wake. Shooting out the lock, I kicked through the reinforced doors of the command floor, steel squealing under the impact. The hallway beyond was chaos—scattered guards, someone screaming orders, red emergency lights pulsing like a heartbeat.

Erryn's office sat at the end of the corridor, and I swore to every god that had ever been ...If she wasn't in there.

If I was too late...

Two more bodies fell as I streaked down the corridor toward the door, my last two bullets embedded between their eyes. A third man flinched as I trained my gun on him and pulled the trigger, a brief look of relief flashing across his face at the dull click of the empty magazine before I pulled my blade and slashed it across his throat. Warm blood splattered across my skin, but I was already turning, the red haze of rage overtaking me as I dispatched every person who put themselves between me and that fucking door.

My breath rasped in my chest as I skidded to a stop, punching in the access pin like I had a hundred times before, memories rising and cutting tiny wounds in my soul.

Erryn pressed against this door as I had whispered in her ear. Her hands on my skin, my lips at her neck as our entwined bodies burst inside and sprawled onto the desk beyond...

The door swung open to silence. My thundering heart was all I could hear as I stepped inside, drawing my blade.

Octavia sat at a terminal, her hands moving over a familiar interface, eyes locked on the code unraveling in front of her. And across from her?—

Erryn.

Gun aimed at Octavia.

Scared, hazel eyes met mine, and relief slammed into me so hard I barely held back the sob that caught in my throat.

She was alive.

I still had her.

Two steps had me across the room, relying on the familiarity between Erryn and I to stay her hand as I swung my blade to her throat, and I didn't miss the brief look of shocked pain that passed across her face before the cold mask reclaimed it. My blade rested against flesh I had kissed a thousand times, the muzzle of her gun shaking slightly as she pointed it at Octavia's temple.

"You wouldn't," Erryn scoffed.

“You hurt her, and I will fucking end you,” I warned, and meant every damn word.  
“Lower your weapon, Erryn.”

She cocked her head to the side, sliding her gaze from me, to Octavia, and back.

“Why her?”

“Lower your god-damned weapon, Erryn,” I snapped.

“Theo, it’s okay.” Octavia didn’t look at me as her fingers flew across the keyboard, and it was only then that I properly looked at what she was doing. Code. The dual monitors were filled with it, flying across the screen at speeds that made my head spin.

“You threw your life away for a liar,” Erryn murmured, the silencer of her Glock mere inches from Octavia’s head. “You didn’t know what she was, did you?”

Octavia’s back stiffened, but she kept working.

“She had the ability to fix this, and she never told you,” Erryn said, a cruel smile tilting her lips. “And now look at what you have done. Everything you have worked for...gone.”

I dragged my gaze from Erryn to Octavia.

“Sweets, what is she talking about?”

She didn’t answer me, her breath catching in a sob. I could just see the side of her face from my position, and the truth of Erryn’s words was clear on her devastated face.

“Octavia?”

“I’m sorry.” The word was barely more than a whisper.

“What’s going on?” I snapped.

“It’s mine.” There was a waver to Octavia’s voice, though her fingers never faltered on the keys. “Vanguard tech. Their software. The systems. It’s all mine. I built it, perfected it. My father stole it from me and turned it into this.” She glanced at me, her beautiful eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t lie to you, I just didn’t tell you. I would have. I would have told you everything. But before...I couldn’t trust you. And then when I did...I was a ghost. If I’d said anything, you would have known I could break through the firewalls, but then you would have had to tell them I was alive. You would have had to choose between me and...” she trailed off.

“You would have had to choose between her life and mine,” Erryn finished, anger flickering in her eyes. “And I guess we know who you chose.”

“You can break the firewalls?” I asked, my ears ringing.

The cold metal of a gun pressed to the back of my head.

“Lox.” The low, sultry voice was laced in a French accent, and I froze as I realized how ridiculously short-sighted I had been.

Erryn’s gaze was fixed on whoever was behind me, her head tilted away from my blade.

“I’m okay, Helena.”

“I’d be a lot happier if that blade was removed from your throat.”

The woman behind me rounded my side, her gun skimming my skin as she did. Her

pale green eyes were startling against the light brown of her skin, and the dark mass of curls pulled back from her face. She grinned at me, and there was a hint of something feral in that smile, enhanced by naturally long canines that belonged in one of Octavia's damned novels.

"Theodora Lancaster," she murmured, hatred dripping from her voice. "I've wanted to meet you for a while. Why don't you take your knife away from Lox's neck before I cut your hand off, shove the bleeding stump down your throat, and drown you in your own blood?"

"You can fucking try," I warned.

There was a dark laugh, the muzzle of the gun pressing harder against me.

"Helena," Erryn warned.

"She has a knife to your neck, Lox," Helena murmured. "This bitch isn't walking out of here."

Octavia tapped two more keys, and the screens went dark.

Erryn's head whipped to the side, a tiny line of crimson appearing on her neck beneath my blade, ignored as she stared at the screens.

"It's done?"

Octavia swiveled her seat slowly, her eyes meeting mine for a long moment, full of unspoken words.



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“Theo,” she said quietly. “You are going to turn around and walk out of here.”

Helena barked a laugh. “Oh no, she isn’t.”

“And so am I,” Octavia continued, raising her eyes to Erryn. Behind her, the screens blinked back to life as they began rebooting. “The software has been removed, as you requested.”

Erryn’s shoulder drooped slightly. The only outward sign of relief she would give.

“Prove it.”

Octavia tilted her head, leaned back, and pressed a few keys, bringing up the home page now set to the prior system.

“See?”

Erryn crossed to her laptop, tapping something into it, her eyes tracking across the screen, then closed her eyes for a moment, and sighed.

“It’s done.” Erryn looked at me with an apology clear in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

The world slowed as she raised her gun toward Octavia. I lunged, swinging my elbow back to connect with Helena’s ribs as I caught her wrist, wrenching it down onto my shoulder and knocking the gun from her grip. Erryn moved, her gun now trained on me as my knife twirled in my hand, and I sent Helena to the ground, following her down as I put my full weight behind the blade.

Octavia screamed at the crack of gunfire, and my shoulder exploded in agony. I was thrown back; the breath knocked from my lungs.

“Stop!” It was Octavia’s voice. I struggled to get my bearings, my right arm limp against my side as I searched for her.

“Either of us dies, and it’s over, Erryn!”

Octavia was standing in front of me, and I groaned, trying to suck air in past the pain of my shoulder, and I peered down to see a jagged bullet hole in my jacket. From the feel of it, it had gone clean through. I blinked, pulling myself to my knees and trying to make sense of what I was looking at.

Erryn was kneeling on the floor, her arms around Helena in a growing pool of blood, my knife protruding from the downed woman’s abdomen.

“Let me take her to the medic!” There was panic in Erryn’s voice, and I looked up to see Octavia pointing Erryn’s own gun at her, though Erryn didn’t appear to notice as she fumbled with Helena’s shirt, ripping it open to reveal the wound.

She pushed the hair back from Helena’s face. “Lena,” she murmured. “Please. Not now. Open your eyes for me.”

“Theo and I walk out of here,” Octavia said, her voice shaking. “You don’t come after us. You don’t come after her. I have sent an encrypted copy of every file in the database offshore, and I have to enter a code into it every three months to ensure it stays locked. If I die...If anything happens to Theo, I will not only leak the files that you have been so concerned about, I will tear down this corporation from the inside, leak the personal details of all three Chairs to the NSA, and ensure that you spend the rest of your life behind bars. Do I make myself clear?”

I pushed myself to my feet, swaying slightly, and Octavia stepped closer, slipping an arm around my waist.

“What did you do?” Erryn’s face was a mask of rage as she glared at Octavia.

“Took a leaf out of daddy’s notebook,” Octavia replied. “All I want is for Octavia Vanguard to stay dead, Erryn. Ellie Lancaster walks out of here today. Your files are safe if we are.”

Helena groaned, her eyelids fluttering, and Erryn looked at her.

“Yes. Just...She’s losing blood. Let me get her a medic.”

Octavia lowered the gun slowly and nodded, Erryn fumbling in her pocket for her phone. She pulled it out and punched in a few numbers before holding it to her ear.

“Code one. Main floor, state office. Hurry!” she snapped into the phone, before raising her gaze to both of us. “Get the fuck out of my office,” she said coldly.

23

OCTAVIA

“Theo, stop wriggling for fuck’s sake,” I murmured, cleaning the small, puckered wound in her shoulder. I swiped the gauze around the clean skin, drying it before carefully applying a fresh bandage.

“It itches,” she grumbled, scowling at me when I slapped her hand away as she tried to scratch it.

“If you pull these stitches, I’m taping bandages onto your hands and you will have

gauze paws for the foreseeable future,” I warned, raising a brow at her. “You really are the worst patient.”

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“Well, I have a nurse who’s as stubborn as a fucking rock,” she muttered. “But I guess I have to add nursing to the list of skills I didn’t know you had.”

I moved to redress the exit wound on her back, pleased with how it had healed over the past ten days, and gave her an apologetic look in the mirror in front of us.

“I can apologize again?”

“Like you did last time?” she chuckled. “Ouch!”

“Oh, stop being a baby,” I sighed, gently cleaning the wound. “And no. We tried that, and you opened your stitches up. You are banned until it’s healed.” I met her outraged look in the mirror. “You would have stopped me getting involved if you knew the truth.”

“Damn fucking right I would have. I can’t believe you walked in there alone.”

“There wasn’t time,” I said. “I’m lucky I got ahead of the file release as it was. And I didn’t realize that you would call. I didn’t even know she had my phone.”

“She meant what she said, Sweets.” She looked at me with haunted eyes. “She would have put a bullet in your head. Erryn is a fucking savage.”

“If I had told her that I was putting in a failsafe while removing the tech, she would have stopped me?—”

“I know, I know,” Theo interrupted, looking disgruntled. “I just...” she trailed off. “I

didn't know what I was going to see when I walked into that room."

I wrapped my arms around her neck, enjoying the way she leaned back into me, her warm hand resting on my arm.

"Right. Bed," I ordered, kissing her neck as she gave me a dark look. "I'll come join you," I added.

"How the fuck have I ended up pussy whipped in my own house?" she murmured, as she honest-to-god pouted. "Kiss me at least."

I did, reveling in the feel of her lips on mine, and ignoring the dull ache of frustration from my temporary vow of celibacy. Honestly, it was fucking torture.

We hadn't heard from The Triarchy since the day we had walked out, a trail of blood in Theo's wake, and were recovering in the relative safety of her fortress while we figured out what to do next. We hadn't really talked about it. But the undeniable fact was, we had to leave as soon as Theo was up to it.

I told her everything.

How I had written the code now used in Vanguard Technology's systems at fifteen. How William had stolen it from me and built on my tech to create an empire that he had used to extort and bully his way into power. How I had used my ability to hide my digital footprint to stay hidden all these years until I had fallen for the trap that lured me back. Then I had shown her how I had accessed her systems while she was concussed and added myself to her security software, and in the process, beefed up her security.

She hadn't believed me until I leaned across her and pressed a few buttons on her keyboard that had simultaneously unlocked every door in the building. She had

watched the main door swing slowly open, her jaw dropping.

“Baby, I could have left at any time,” I told her, sinking into her lap to kiss her. “But you looked so cute while you were concussed.”

“You have a savior kink, don’t you?” she had murmured back. “I hate to break it to you, but I’m beyond redemption.”

We had slipped back into an oddly comfortable pattern, but we were both waiting. For what, I don’t know. It seemed like each day it was getting worse, and I knew as soon as Theo was recovered, it would come to a head, and a decision would have to be made. We were back in limbo. Our lives were safe. But neither of us knew what came next.

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I was making dinner, and I pulled it out to see the door alarm notification, clicking into it to see a sleek, black car at the entrance.

I crossed the room to where Theo was snoozing on the couch, the Kindle lying across her chest, and woke her gently, showing her the screen.

She was awake instantly, pulling her own phone out and regarding it warily.

“It’s Erryn,” she said, looking up at me.

“What does she want?” I asked.

Theo shook her head, looking as uneasy as I felt.

“If she came to kill us, she wouldn’t come alone.” Theo got up with a groan she attempted to hide before heading to the bedroom, returning and tucking a gun into the back of her pants, then hitting the button on her phone to let Erryn up.

It felt like a decade passed before a beep sounded at the door.

“She won’t hurt you, I promise,” Theo murmured, pressing a kiss to my temple before turning to face the door. She looked outwardly relaxed, yet I could see the energy fizzing just beneath her skin, ready to launch into whatever she needed from it.



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The door swung open, and Erryn stepped into the room, her expression giving nothing away as she ran her gaze over Theo, and then me.

“You have a new record,” she said coldly, her words aimed at Theo. “Twenty-three confirmed kills in one day.”

Theo tipped her head. “What can I say? I’m an overachiever. And motivated.”

Erryn narrowed her eyes, and I could see the anger and hurt still simmering below the surface.

“Helena?” I asked. Erryn had lunged for Helena as Theo took her down without a thought for herself, fear etched into every line of her face. It was the same way Theo had looked at me when she burst through that door. Possessive, terrified love.

Erryn turned her cold, grey eyes on me, a muscle twitching in her jaw. “She’s recovering.” She studied the pair of us for a long moment. “So, you decided to stay in the country?”

Theo nodded. “Not for much longer.”

There was a strained silence, and Theo stepped slightly closer to me.

“Why are you here, Erryn?” she asked finally. “You could have called.”

Erryn shifted on her feet, shaking her head. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said quietly. “I needed eyes on you.”

I could almost feel Theo relax, the tension that had followed her for days seeming to melt from her skin.

“I’m fine.”

Erryn nodded once. “Well, that’s great, but I’m not just here for you.”

I stiffened as she turned to me, her eyes searching mine, the silence stretching for a moment longer than was comfortable.

She let out a long, resigned sigh.

“I need a hacker.”

The End