



Make Me Your Hitta

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Category: Urban

Description: Xenobia

I hate Adonis Cardelo.

He's dominating, lethal, and, not to mention, my brother's best friend.

But those aren't the real reasons why the dangerously handsome brute gets under my skin.

I hate him because he's back as my personal bodyguard after stealing my heart and disappearing six years ago.

Like my shadow, he's everywhere.

He believes he can protect me from the darkness closing in around me, but the last thing I want is to be trapped under his smoldering, watchful gaze.

Between our fiery quarrels and his possessive touch, my resistance is weakening by the day.

Submitting to him will ruin me forever, but in his arms might be the only place I'm truly safe.

Adonis

Xenobia Hawthorne has always been off-limits.

I've kept myself away for six years, watching and waiting from a distance.

Her scars are a painful reminder of my past failures.

They illustrate the wickedness that runs through my veins.

Now that I'm back, I've vowed to keep her safe from the man who almost took everything from me.

My father.

As the temperature rises, the old flames of desire begin to spark between us.

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Adonis “The Guardian” Cardelo

The mansion’s marble floors echoed my footsteps. Each click of my nine-hundred-dollar shoes was another nail in the coffin of my freedom. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I instantly felt the darkness at my back like a shadow. I fished it out long enough to jab the red ignore button and shove it back down.

Fuck. How did I end up here again?

My jaw clenched as I approached the study door. The old man was waiting, ready to cash in on a debt I could never repay. A life for a life. Mine for his son’s—my best friend. Payment for everything that happened years ago. The last time I stepped foot inside the Hawthorne mansion.

I knocked twice, short and sharp.

“Enter,” he commanded, his gravelly voice chilling my spine.

I forced my way into the dimly lit room, thick with cigar smoke and regret. Don Hawthorne sat behind his massive desk with a tumbler of amber-colored whiskey in his gnarled left hand that was missing its middle finger. It was a constant reminder of his dangerous life as a mafia boss.

He was in his mid-fifties but still wielded the kind of presence that commanded the respect of everyone in the room as if he were still a young boss. His skin was a rich, deep chocolate brown, and his hair, though graying at the temples, was still dark, thick, and cut into a fade. The salt-and-pepper goatee that encased his lips was neatly

trimmed. His posture was aligned and assertive, giving off an air of dominance alongside the tailored suit on his body and the gold watch on his left wrist.

His chocolate brown eyes were cold and calculating. He scanned his surroundings with sharp awareness before boring into me.

“Adonis. You’re late.”

“Traffic, sir,” I lied. “Won’t happen again.”

He grunted, waving me into a chair. I perched on the edge, muscles coiled tight.

“The Toussaint’s are making moves,” he growled. “I’m going away on business. I’ll be flying back and forth between New York and Miami for the next month or two until the deal is sealed. I need eyes on Xenobia at all times. With Santo gone, you’re the only one I trust.”

My stomach clenched at her name. Xenobia. Damn, how long had it been? Six years and three months. Over two thousand days. I knew precisely how fuckin’ long.

“With all due respect, sir, I know we have an arrangement, but there are other men—”

“I said you!” he hollered as his fist slammed the desk. “You owe me, boy. Or have you forgotten?”

The scar on my jaw throbbed. How could I forget? The words that followed froze my blood.

“You can have your old room back across the hall from Xenobia’s. She needs a guard dog. You’ll be her shadow, day and night.”

Shit. Day and night? With her? My body betrayed me, blood racing to my dick. I shifted quickly, praying to God he didn't notice.

"Yes, sir," I gritted out.

A knock at the door saved me from further humiliation. It creaked open, and there she was.

Xenobia.

My breath caught in my throat. She was even more beautiful than I remembered, all curves and hellfire. Her brown eyes flashed as they landed on me, full lips curling into a sneer. Her long, wavy brown hair cascaded down her back like a delicate waterfall. Her sandy brown skin was as smooth as butter, and her eyes were a deep, passionate brown that seemed to hold a thousand unspoken words she wanted to say to me. Despite her natural beauty, there were visible scars on her cheek and collarbone, remnants of a past attack that she carried as a silent reminder of all that we'd lost that day.

She inched closer, moving with a level of poise and confidence that contradicted her young age. Her posture remained upright and assertive.

"What's he doing here?" she snapped.

I bit back a groan. This is gonna be hell.

As the only daughter of a well-known mafia boss, she exuded the same air of authority as her father. The only difference was that I knew there was a softness behind her fiery eyes and tough exterior. Unsolicited memories flooded my mind: Xenobia and me as kids, chasing each other through these same halls, her laughter echoing off the marble floors, and how she looked at me like I was her whole world.

Now, her eyes were cold, distant. What happened to us?

My mind raced back to the beginning of it all. Our mothers had been childhood best friends. When she became pregnant with me, she fled New York. We lived in Houston until I turned twelve, and she sent me to New York to live with Xenobia's family for my safety. When we pulled up to the Hawthorne gates, she told me she was doing it for my safety and that they would watch over me. Three months later, she was murdered by a mafia hitman in the two-bedroom apartment she'd raised me in.

For nine years, I was raised alongside Xenobia's older brother, Santo, who was the same age as me. We were like brothers. Xenobia was three years younger than us and was the annoying kid who always wanted to tag along, and we'd have to ditch her. It wasn't until we got older that I started to look at her differently. It was the summer she turned eighteen, to be exact. She gave herself to me, and then two nights later, our worlds cracked in half.

It was Santo's college graduation party. We were all celebrating when the Toussaint family ambushed us. I could still hear the words that made my spine chill when they fell off Cecil Toussaint's lips: You know why I'm here. Where the fuck is my son? He wanted me—his son. Cecil Toussaint was my father.

That night, my father's men killed Xenobia's mother for being my mother's best friend and taking me in for so many years.

They killed Santo while trying to protect his sister.

Once he was gone, they came for Xenobia next.

My Nobi.

I fought off men by the dozen trying to get to them all. I was able to kill Xenobia's attacker before being captured and taken by the other half of my bloodline I never knew existed.

Fast-forward six years, and I still refused to go by anything other than my mother's last name, which was given to me at birth. I would never claim the Toussaint bloodline. I'd been working under my father's regime and pretending to be brainwashed, all along being the mole in my father's operation by keeping in secret contact with Xenobia's father. I was the one who warned him that the Toussaint's were planning to attack and kill his daughter. Somehow, my father had gotten wind of Don's business arrangements and planned to take out his last living heir before moving in on the Hawthorne family's territory. There was no way I could let that happen. I was more loyal to Xenobia's family than my own.

My father had been pressing me to oversee a specific part of our territory that would put me close to the Hawthorne mansion. I'd refused thus far, but once I discovered his plan to move in on Xenobia and her family's territory, I told him I wanted the job. I knew my father would approve because it was what he'd always wanted. All the while, I planned to protect Xenobia, get from underneath my father's cruel thumb, and be with the family I knew and loved. It was the perfect cover. I knew the move could cost me my life, but I owed it to my mother, my best friend, and the girl I'd secretly given my heart away to all those years ago. Being with her meant committing the ultimate treason, but the guilt of being unable to protect her had been eating away at me for far too long.

Don's voice snapped me back to reality. "Out. Both of you. Adonis, get to work."

I stood tall, forcing myself not to look her way as we exited. The study door clicked shut behind us, and I exhaled slowly. Time to focus.

I moved through the mansion like a ghost, cataloging every weak point. French doors

in the sunroom—too easy to breach. I'd need to upgrade the locks, cut back the trees on the grounds, and add sensors. The back staircase was a security nightmare. We'd need cameras there, pronto.

My mind raced, planning and plotting. Doing so was easier than thinking about her. About how close she was now, how I could almost feel the heat of her body as we walked the silent corridors. She gave me a dirty look and peeled off, moving down a hallway and out of sight.

I paused at a window, staring out at the sprawling grounds. My reflection stared back, bearded jaw clenched tight. I had to keep it together. For her safety. For my sanity. But how the fuck was I supposed to do that? To be near her every day, to protect her, when all I wanted was to—

Fuck. No. I can't go there. Xenobia Hawthorne was off-limits—always had been, always would be.

I squared my shoulders and moved on. I had a job to do, feelings be damned. Xenobia might hate me now, but I'd keep her safe. I'd given myself no other fuckin' choice.

I headed down the main hallway, mind still racing with security plans, when she ambushed me. Xenobia stepped out from a doorway, blocking my path. My breath caught in my throat.

Fuck, she was gorgeous. And furious.

She wore a white, long-sleeved silk blouse that puffed at the shoulders. Its subtle shimmer and ruffled neckline complemented the high-waisted black skirt that stopped above her knee. It was perfectly tailored, hugging her curves and drawing attention to her slender waist. Her long, wavy hair cascaded over her lean shoulders, partly covering the scars on her collarbone.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” she spat, hazelnut brown orbs blazing.

I froze, drinking her in. The scar on her cheek was stark in the dim light, a jagged reminder of how I’d failed her. Her chest heaved with anger, and I forced my gaze back to her face.

“Answer me, Adonis,” she demanded. “Why are you suddenly playing bodyguard after six years?”

I swallowed hard. “Your father asked me to ensure your safety. That’s all.”

She hissed out a bitter laugh that cut me to the bone. “Right. And you just couldn’t say no to Daddy dearest, could you?”

“Nobi—” I started, but she cut me off.

“Save it. I don’t need your protection, and I don’t need you.” Her words were venomous, but I saw the hurt behind them.

I stepped closer, voice low. “This isn’t up for debate. I’m here to keep you safe, whether you like it or not.”

“And if I refuse?” she challenged, chin tilted upward in defiance.

God, I wanted to kiss that defiance off her gorgeous brown face. I wanted to push her against the wall and show her exactly how much I cared about her safety. But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

Instead, I met her glare with a steely expression.

“You don’t have a choice in this, Nobi. I’m not going anywhere,” I confirmed before walking away.

“Fuck you, Adonis. We aren’t done here.”

I halted my step. “Yes, Xenobia. We are. Go do something with yourself, and stay out of my way. I have shit to do.”

I kept walking that time, forcing my mind back to the task at hand. There was no way I could let her see how she affected me. How every glance, every word, set my blood on fire.

“Garcia,” I barked into my comm. “Status on the new cameras?”

“Almost done, boss,” he answered through a crackled reply. “Just finishing up in the east wing.”

I tilted my chin in a nod, although he couldn’t see me. “Good. I want eyes on every entrance and exit. I don’t want any blind spots.”

Fire coursed through my legs as I strode through the mansion and away from her, continuing to catalog every weak point. The place was a fortress with floor-to-ceiling windows, brick masonry, and handcrafted architecture, but even fortresses had cracks. And I’d be damned if I let anyone slip through on my watch. But as I worked, thoughts of Xenobia kept creeping in—the way her eyes flashed with flames when she was angry or how her lips curved when she used to smile at me before everything went to shit.

“Focus, mothafucka,” I muttered, shaking my head.

I couldn’t afford to get distracted. Not when her life was on the line. Not when every

shadow could hide a threat or expose my secret. But, fuck. It was hard to keep my head straight with her so close.

As I turned a corner, my eyes caught her through an open door. She was curled up in a window seat, reading a book, but I could see the tension in her face. For a moment, she looked like the girl I used to know before the scars and the bitterness.

My chest ached. I wanted to go to her, to bridge the invisible gap between us. But my legs wouldn't move. I was there to protect her, nothing more. No matter how much I longed for something I knew I could never have.

And yet, I stood there like a simp, drinking her in. The sunlight caught her long, wavy hair, showing the strong dark brown luster. Her fingers absently traced the jagged, raised scar on her cheek, and I felt a surge of rage at the mothafuckas who'd hurt her.

Suddenly, I was thrown back to that carefree summer day years ago, celebrating Santo's college graduation. He, Nobi, and I were lounging by the pool, laughing and splashing. Xenobia's brown eyes sparkled as she dunked me, her touch electric on my skin. I'd known then, with a gut-wrenching certainty, that I was in love with her. And that I could never tell a soul.

"Fuck," I whispered, dragging myself back to the present.

My fists were clenched so tight my knuckles ached. I forced myself to breathe, to push down the memories and the want that threatened to choke me. Xenobia must've sensed my presence. She looked up, her eyes locking with mine. For a split second, I saw a flicker of the old warmth. Then her icy walls slammed back into place, her gaze turning to frost.

"What the hell do you want?" she snapped.

I swallowed hard. “Just checking the perimeter. Don’t mind me.”

She rolled her eyes, turning back to her book. But I could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers trembled slightly as she turned to the next page. I wanted to go to her, to pull her into my arms and promise that nothing would ever hurt her again. But I couldn’t. I was her brother’s best friend and her bodyguard. Nothing more.

So I did the only thing a real nigga could do in my situation. I walked away, burying my heart deeper with every step. I forced myself to focus on the mission, methodically checking each window and door. The mansion’s shadows seemed to deepen as I moved, every creak and groan setting my nerves on edge. The place had always given me the creeps, but now it felt like a tomb.

As I rounded a corner, I nearly collided with Xenobia. She stumbled back, her hand flying to her throat in shock. We stared at each other for a moment, the air crackling with unspoken words.

“Jesus, Adonis,” she hissed. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack? As big as this damn house is, I still can’t manage to get the fuck away from you, can I?”

I couldn’t help but notice how close we were, her scent washing over me. Fuck, she still uses that same vanilla and peach nectar-scented perfume.

“Sorry,” I managed, my voice rougher than I intended. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Xenobia’s eyes narrowed. “What are you really doing here, Donny? Playing the dutiful guard dog for Daddy? You should’ve just stayed away. I don’t fucking want you here.”

Her words stung, but I kept my face neutral. “Just doing my job. Somebody’s gotta

keep you safe while he's away on business."

She laughed. It was a sharp, bitter sound that sliced through me. "Safe? In this house? That's rich. I have bodyguards out the ass. I don't need another one, especially not you."

I stepped closer, unable to help myself. "Xenobia, I—"

"Don't," she cut me off, her voice low and dangerous. "Don't pretend you care when we both know you don't."

My heart pounded as I stared into her eyes, seeing the hurt and anger swirling there. I wanted to tell her everything. But I couldn't. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I clenched my jaw, trying to keep my cool. "Look, I get it. You're pissed. But this ain't about what you want or what I want. It's about keeping you alive. I tried to say no, Nobi, but he didn't give me a fuckin' choice."

Xenobia scoffed, stepping backward. "Again, I can take care of myself," she spat.

"Yeah? Like you did the last time?" The words were out before I could stop them.

Her expression went blank and then flushed with anger. "Fuck you, Adonis."

I stepped closer, backing her against the wall. My voice dropped low, intense. "Listen to me, Xenobia. I don't give a fuck if you hate me. But I will keep you safe, even if I have to chain you to the goddamn bed and lock you inside your room to do it."

Her breath hitched, and I saw something flicker in her eyes for a second. Something that wasn't anger. "You wouldn't dare," she whispered.

I leaned in, my lips nearly brushing her ear. “Try me, Nobi.”

With that, I turned and strode away, my heart pounding. I didn’t look back, but I felt her eyes burning into my spine.

Later, alone in my room, I paced like a caged animal. The conversation with Xenobia played on repeat in my head. What the fuck was I doing? I should’ve never picked up her father’s call. Three run-ins with her already. How the fuck was I going to keep her safe when all she was hell-bent on doing was pissing me off?

I collapsed onto the bed, exhausted but wide awake too. But when I closed my eyes, I could only see her face. The way she’d looked at me—the sweet scent of her butterscotch skin. The past and present swirled together, memories I thought I’d buried clawing their way to the surface. Xenobia, laughing as we raced through the garden as kids. Xenobia, screaming and crying the night her mother and brother died. Xenobia, covered in her family’s crimson blood. My blood-stained hands from stabbing her attacker to death.

But I’d been too late. She’d almost died that night.

I groaned, pressing the heels of my hands against my tired eyes. It was gonna be a long fucking night. As I lay there, trying to shake off the ghosts of the past, my phone buzzed—a text from Luca, my guy on the inside of my father’s operation. He was the only one who knew I was on the Hawthorne detail. I’d paid him handsomely to keep me in the loop on my father’s moves while I was away.

Luca: Movement in the ranks, timeline moved up. Something big brewing. Watch your six.

Fuck. Just what we needed.

I sat up, running a hand over my curls. My father's men were like sharks, constantly circling, waiting for a moment of weakness to strike. And now, with Xenobia vulnerable and the old man distracted with a new business venture, it was the perfect fuckin' storm.

I got up and moved to the window, peering into the darkness. The estate grounds stretched out before me, shadows upon shadows. Somewhere beyond the walls and the guards, danger crept in closer.

My jaw clenched. I'd die before I let anything happen to her. The Hawthorne family—as fucked up as it was—was all I had left in the world. But as I stood here, the weight of it all pressing down on me, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were standing on the edge of a cliff. And the Toussaints? They were just waiting for the right moment to give us a big ass push.

I turned away from the window, my mind already racing through contingencies. Sleep could wait. I had work to do. Because in this world, in this life? The moment you let your guard down would be the moment you lost everything.

And I wasn't about to let that happen. Not on my watch.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Xenobia Hawthorne

Who the fuck does he think he is, coming back into my life after six years? Just walking around my house and talking to me as if nothing ever happened?

I was beyond pissed. I didn't know if I was madder that I hadn't seen Adonis since the ambush or that he somehow was still the closest thing to my icy heart after all this time. My heart almost leaped from my chest when my eyes landed on his. He still had the power to snatch my breath straight from my lungs. Still, I hated his handsome ass, for good reason too.

When I woke up in the hospital after surviving a brutal attack, he wasn't there.

When we buried my mother and brother, he wasn't there.

When I asked my father where Adonis was, he said we would never speak of him again, all for him to be standing in his study six years later, and I needed answers.

The oak door cracked open beneath my palm as I burst into my father's study. My fury sizzled like lightning, scorching everything in its path.

"What the hell were you thinking, making Adonis my bodyguard?" I snarled, slamming my hands on his massive desk. "I don't need a babysitter."

He didn't even flinch. He just sat there, cool as ice, those stern, chocolate-brown eyes boring into me.

“It’s for your protection, Xenobia,” he replied, voice soft but unyielding as iron.

“Bullshit,” I spat. “I don’t need a watchdog. I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m twenty-four years old. I can take care of myself.”

But even as the words left my mouth, phantom pain bloomed across the scars chiseled into my skin. Reminders of how close I’d come to death. How fragile my human form truly was.

Daddy’s full lips thinned. “The Toussaints are moving against us. We can’t trust anyone right now. We can only trust family.”

“So you stick me with Adonis?” My laugh was bitter, bordering on hysterical. “He’s not even real family, more like the adopted orphan you opened your doors to when his mother was killed. Plus, the guy’s a stiff. He’s going to get in my way and cramp my style.”

“With Santo gone and me in and out of the state on business, he’s the only one I trust completely,” my father admitted. His gaze softened a fraction. “Please, Xenobia. Let him keep you safe.”

I wanted to scream, rage, and shatter every priceless antique in this mausoleum of an office. But the fight drained out of me, leaving only a bone-deep weariness.

“Fine,” I muttered, turning away so he wouldn’t see the tears stinging my eyes. “But don’t expect me to like it.”

As I stormed out, I felt the walls closing in, my cage tightening its grip. And worst of all, a traitorous part of me whispered that maybe I didn’t mind having Adonis watch over me. As much as I hated to admit it, I’d loved him once upon a time. More than a young girl should’ve loved her brother’s best friend. But after I was attacked, he

disappeared, leaving me to rot here all alone.

I slammed the office door behind me, my heart pounding like a caged rabbit. The hallway stretched before me, all polished marble and priceless art, practically a museum of our family's power. And here I was, just another pretty, powerless exhibit.

"Fuck this," I muttered, my voice echoing off the cold stone. I needed to get out, breathe, and remember who I was beyond the scars and the Hawthorne surname.

My feet carried me down familiar paths, past watchful guards who tried to hide their pity. Poor little Nobi, always running away . If only they knew the storms that raged inside me. I burst into my studio, slamming the door so hard the windows rattled. It was my sanctuary, my escape. But even within the privacy of these walls, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. I could smell Adonis's scent and knew he'd been here. Probably still was.

"Dammit, Adonis," I hissed, spinning around. But the doorway was empty. Of course it was. He was too good to be caught so easily.

As my father's only daughter, growing up in a house with not one but two pre-teenager tormentors was never my idea of a good time. My childhood was nothing short of overprotective chaos. The mansion was always buzzing with conversation, stamping feet down the polished staircase, and sometimes even heated arguments echoing through my father's study walls. Santo, my older brother, had always been overly protective and often acted as my second father, ensuring I was safe from the cruel truth of our family's deadly mafia ties. Having Adonis around only added another layer of excessive protection.

Although all my material needs were provided for, and then some, anything emotional that might've led to my happiness or someone getting to know me was

nonexistent. Simple things like my likes and dislikes were of little to no interest to my parents, and mostly, all of my academic achievements had gone unnoticed throughout my school-age days. My father's business deals always came first. The only thing I got was the art studio after the accident. I didn't know if it was more of a consolation prize for surviving or a pacifier over the grief of losing my mother and brother, but I still loved it.

Without a second thought, I grabbed a paintbrush, attacking a blank canvas with furious, aggressive strokes—red, black, violent slashes of color, each a scream I couldn't voice. Art allowed me to express all my pent-up emotions and frustrations in a way that words could never do. It was my therapy, helping me process the trauma and heartbreak from my past and giving me the constant structure I needed to keep the dark thoughts from taking over.

"I'm not some fucking damsel," I growled to the empty room. "I'm not weak."

But the lies tasted bitter on my tongue. Because deep down, in the darkest corners of my soul, I knew the truth. I was afraid, terrified of the violence that lurked just beyond our walls. I hated myself for that weakness, and a tiny part of me was glad to have Adonis's watchful gaze around to keep the monsters at bay.

I stepped back, wiping sweat from my brow, leaving a smear of crimson paint across my skin. The painting before me was chaos, a storm of emotions I couldn't control, just like my life. Growing up in an environment where trust was rare, my art became the only thing I trusted. The simplicity of putting my brush against a blank canvas and being in the driver's seat to create whatever my heart desired gave me a sense of freedom and control that was otherwise unavailable in my life. Through my art, I could momentarily transport myself away from the weight of my family's blood-stained legacy and into my safe haven.

"Fuck," I muttered, tossing the brush aside. It clattered to the floor, splattering paint

like blood.

That's when I felt it—the weight of his gaze. I didn't need to turn to know Adonis was there, silent as a shadow in the doorway.

“Come to make sure I don't run away?” I spat, refusing to face him.

His voice was low, steady. “You know why I'm here, Xenobia.”

My scoffing laugh extinguished in a crackle of heat. “Yeah, thanks for that reminder. Now I can't get the fuck away from you.”

My fingers traced the scars on my arm, memories of pain and fear carved into my skin. Adonis's brown eyes followed the movement, making my stomach twist. I wore specific clothing and makeup to keep people from staring at the permanent scars I carried. They were a constant reminder of the time when danger slithered into our seemingly safe haven and blew up my life. It took a long time for me to stop looking at my marks as a form of punishment every time I faced my reflection in the mirror.

“You can't protect me from everything,” I whispered, more to myself than to him.

But in the silence that followed, I knew he'd heard. And for a moment, just a heartbeat, I let myself imagine what it would be like to feel genuinely safe in his arms again. To let him siphon away the pain and fear.

I spun around, masking my feelings with anger, letting it flare hot and bright. “Why are you back after all this time, Adonis? To babysit me? To report my every move to my father? To get rid of your guilt for turning your back on us after we took you in and never looking back?”

His expression remained blank, but I saw the tension in his jaw. “I'm back to protect

you in your father's absence. And no. I am not reporting to Don about your movements unless you go off the property."

"It's been one day, Adonis," I said, stepping closer. "And it already feels like you're suffocating me. Following me everywhere, watching my every move. Can I even take a shit without you being there to wipe my ass?"

Adonis's eyes narrowed, but his voice remained infuriatingly calm. "The threat is real, Xenobia. The Toussaint family—"

"Fuck the Toussaints!" I shouted, my paint-stained hands balling into fists. "I could die at any time, so what's the point in worrying about safety?"

"You sound like a child."

I scoffed. I was close enough now to see the flicker of something in his eyes. Concern? Pity? It only fueled my rage. "Fuck you. I've survived worse than whatever boogeyman my father's pissed off this time, remember?" I hissed, gesturing to the scars that marred my skin.

Adonis's sharp gaze softened just a little. "You almost died, Nobi. I held you while you almost died. I can't afford to make the same mistakes. I can't afford... to be distracted." His voice dropped to a whisper. "So please... just let me do my job, and then I'll leave again."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. I stumbled back, suddenly aware of how close we'd been standing. My heart was racing, and I couldn't tell if it was from anger or something else.

"Just... just leave me the fuck alone," I muttered, turning back to my painting. "For the thousandth time, I can take care of myself."

But even as I protested, I knew it wasn't true. And the worst part? A small, disloyal part of me didn't want him to go. I felt Adonis's eyes burning into my back as I faced my canvas. My hand trembled as I picked up the brush again, desperate to lose myself in the swirling colors and forget his presence.

"Xenobia," he acknowledged, his baritone voice deep and rough. "I'm not going anywhere."

My chest tightened with frustration and something else I couldn't quite name as I slashed the brush across the canvas.

"Why not?" I spat, not turning around. "Why won't you just disappear again? Tell my father you quit so he can hire someone else. Someone less... you."

Adonis's heavy footsteps echoed in the studio as he moved closer. I tensed, my grip on the brush making my knuckles harden.

"You know it's more than that," he murmured.

I whirled around, nearly colliding with his chest. "Do I? Because from where I'm standing, you're just another mothafucka following my father's orders." I was so livid and didn't have a real reason to be.

His eyes locked with mine, intense and unreadable. "Is that really what you think of me?"

My breath caught in my throat. We were too close. The air between us crackled with electricity. I caught the scent of his cologne, a mix of sandalwood and something darker.

"I don't know what to think anymore," I whispered, hating how vulnerable I sounded.

Adonis's tattooed hand twitched at his side like he wanted to reach out but was holding back. I fumbled in reverse, gently bumping into my easel.

"Just... just let me paint," I said, turning away again. "It's the only thing that makes me feel sane right now."

I heard him sigh, but he didn't leave. As I lost myself in the chaos on my canvas, I could feel his presence like a shadow at my back. Protective. Suffocating. And somehow, terrifyingly necessary.

I set down my brush, my hands shaking. The canvas was a mess, with blues peeking through the reds and highlighting the black before white streaks flashed downward, almost like lightning... like the scars that crisscrossed my skin. I traced one along my forearm, feeling the raised ridge under my fingertips.

"You don't have to stare, you know," I muttered, knowing Adonis was still here. Always here. "Everybody stares, and it's annoying as hell."

"I'm not staring, Nobi," he confirmed quietly. "I'm watching."

I scoffed. "Same difference."

But it wasn't, was it? His gaze felt different. Not pitying, like the doctors or strangers. Not clinical, like my father's men assessing a liability or their fate if they fucked up. Just... aware, I guess.

I turned to face him while folding my arms across my chest. "You ever wonder what it's like? To be the China doll with scars like Humpty Dumpty everyone's afraid will break again?"

Adonis's jaw tightened. "You're not—"

“Save it.” I cut him off with the wave of my hand. “I’ve heard it all before. I’m strong, a survivor, blah, blah, blah. Doesn’t change the fact that ever since that night, my father hasn’t looked at me the same and hasn’t let me go anywhere without a guard, and now you’re my shiny new set of prison bars.”

He took another step closer, his eyes blazing. “You’re bullheaded, childish, reckless, and your ego is too damn big for your own fuckin’ good. You know that? But you’re not breakable, Xenobia.”

One eyebrow edged toward my hairline. “Flattery will get you nowhere with me.”

“It’s not flattery if it’s true,” he shot back.

His full-bodied voice was rich with a tone that I found both soothing and menacing. He spoke steadily, choosing his words carefully to ensure his thoughts were conveyed precisely how they were meant to be.

We stood there, glaring at each other, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Part of me wanted to throw my paintbrush at his stupidly handsome caramel face. His smooth skin seemed to glow under the studio lighting. His eyes were a deep, captivating brown that pulled me out to sea and threatened to watch me drown every time I looked at him. They were always filled with a mix of intensity and warmth every time I caught his gaze. His hair was tapered into a fade on the sides with low, jet-black curls on top, and he had a thick, groomed beard that stretched from ear to ear.

Even with his attractive features, there were visible scars on his neck and collarbone, from what I assumed came from the night of the attack. Still, he carried himself with a confident, almost noble stance as if nothing could sway him. His militant posture was as straight as an arrow and exuded dominance and strength. Dressed in a tailored dark suit and crisp white button-up that fit him perfectly, he looked the part of

someone who commanded respect and brandished authority like it came second nature to him.

I turned back to my painting, trying to ignore how violently my heart was pounding. “Just... go away, Adonis. Let me have this one thing to myself.”

His sigh was heavy with resignation. “No matter how many ways you put it, whether a question or a demand, you know I can’t do that. So, you might as well stop giving me all this extra static. You’re only wasting your breath and my time.”

“Yeah.” I muttered in defeat while staring back at my reflection in the wet paint. “I know.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Adonis

The security monitors flickered with over a dozen bodies watching the Hawthorne estate. My gaze pinged from screen to screen, cataloging every shadow and tracking each movement. I instinctively marked all the exits, ensuring an armed guard was at each post. I'd had heightened alertness ever since that fateful night. Now, I noticed shit I would've brushed off in the past. The perimeter fence on the east side needed reinforcing, and more floodlights needed to be installed for optimal night vision. I made a mental note, already forming my plan as I prepared to meet with Xenobia to review the latest safety precautions. My heart quickened as random memories of our first stolen kiss flooded the forefront of my mind. It had been a moment of weakness, her lips soft and yielding against mine. The taste of her lingered still whenever I closed my eyes.

A soft knock broke my concentration, and I pushed the forbidden thoughts away. "Come in," I announced.

My feet remained rooted to the ground as my heart somersaulted in my chest. Xenobia sauntered inside with a quiet grace and simmering defiance, standing at the back of the security room wearing a black sweater dress that stopped just above her knees, and her arms crossed.

"New protocols," I said, my voice gruff as I cleared my throat. "You need to know them, especially while your father is away."

Xenobia's eyebrow arched. "Now? I'm first-aid and CPR certified. Shouldn't that be enough?"

I sighed, running a hand over the tattoo on my nape. “Can’t waste time, Nobi. The Toussaints are getting bolder. Now isn’t the time to take chances.”

“How do you have all this intel on the Toussaints anyway?”

“I have connections.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Sure, fine. Whatever.”

As I outlined the new security measures, my mind wandered. I remembered how she looked at me that night, vulnerable yet fierce. How I’d ached to protect her, to keep her safe from the darkness that surrounded us both.

“No leaving the grounds without an escort,” I continued, forcing myself back to the present. “All visitors have to be vetted forty-eight hours in advance. And the code to the panic room—”

Xenobia rolled her eyes skyward for the second time. “I know the code, and I know how to use the damn panic room, Adonis,” she snapped.

I met her gaze, seeing the frustration there. The longing for freedom. It mirrored my desire to break free from duty and expectation. But we were both trapped—she by her family name, me by my vow to keep her safe. She could protest all she wanted, but a boring life was better than death. Whether she knew it or not, she needed me.

“Look, I know this shit ain’t easy,” I said softly. “But please, Xenobia. Work with a nigga here.”

For a moment, I thought I saw something soften in her eyes. A flicker of understanding. Then it was replaced by that familiar steel I was always met with.

“Fine,” she replied. “Anything else you need to mansplain to me?”

I shook my head, watching as she turned to leave. Her lavender and jasmine-scented perfume lingered, a bittersweet reminder of what could never be. I turned back to the monitors, pushing down the ache in my chest.

Part of me—a dark, selfish part I hated—relished the thought of her safe and close in my arms, where I could always protect her. Where I could pretend, just for a moment, that she was mine. In the silence, I allowed my mind to roam back to that day—the sweet taste of her soft, full lips and her soft skin under my calloused hands. I hadn’t been a soldier or guardian for one perfect moment. I’d just been a man, holding the woman he... No. I couldn’t let myself go down that road again. I was here to protect her, nothing more. Taking her virginity had been a mistake, a moment of weakness we both regretted.

Didn’t we?

I kept a watchful eye on Xenobia all day while also keeping my distance so I didn’t have to hear her complain about me breathing down her neck or blaming me for clipping her wings. As the stars began to populate in the night sky, my phone buzzed with a text. It reminded me of my other responsibilities—ensuring things ran smoothly in my absence in my father’s territory.

With a glance around to ensure no one was watching, I slipped out of the Hawthorne mansion, blending into the shadows. I knew the risks of leaving my post, but I had to show my face so as not to blow my cover. I moved at high speed through the city streets with all five senses on high alert.

After arriving at my father’s territory, I found Luca and a few of my father’s men assembled and ready to discuss the latest developments. I stepped in, my menacing presence instantly commanding respect. I led the meeting, listening with intent while

offering counsel. They ensured everything was under control and running to my liking. My father had put me in charge of a territory that already ran like a well-oiled machine, but my occasional pop-ins were crucial to ensure everyone's respect never wavered.

At the close of my visit, I checked in with Luca one last time to ensure everything was on track before heading back to the mansion. When I arrived, my mind had shifted back to my primary duty of protecting Xenobia. I slipped back into the security room to double-check the cameras, ensuring everyone was at their posts before my final walk-through, and retired to my room. A wave of satisfaction washed over me as I realized I'd fulfilled my responsibilities without compromising Xenobia's safety or blowing my cover. For now, at least.

The interruption from the night guard made me rage. Xenobia had tried to slip past the iron gates that had been reinforced to keep her safe. My hands clenched into fists, dull nails biting into my palms. Of course, it was the one time I actually fell asleep, trusting my team to keep her within the perimeter. Imagine my fucking surprise when I was woken up by a phone call at two o'clock in the morning, alerting me to her attempted escape.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I barked at her, my voice low and dangerous as I approached her in the garden. "Are you trying to get yourself fuckin' killed?"

Xenobia whirled around, eyes flashing wide as she caught my gaze. She wore a strappy black mini dress with the back cut out and accessorized it with gold hoop earrings and strappy black heels. "I was thinking I'm going to go out and enjoy my fucking life for once."

"At two in the fuckin' morning? You could've been killed!" I roared, feeling the words rip from my throat. "Do you have any idea what's out there? What they'd do to you dressed the way you are?"

She stepped closer, chin raised in defiance like it always fuckin' was. "I'm twenty-four. I don't always make the smart choice every time. But I'm smart enough to know I can take care of myself," she confirmed before flashing me a small pistol strapped to her thigh.

The sight of it made me chuckle. "Like hell you can with that baby ass gun." My hands itched to grab her shoulders and shake some sense into her stupid ass. To pull her close and never let go. "You have no idea what you're up against."

Xenobia's scoff was brittle. "And you do? Last time I checked, you weren't bulletproof, Adonis. You're just... you."

Just me. The words stung more than they should've. I was her protector, her shadow, nothing more. Why the fuck wasn't I okay with that?

"Let's get one thing straight. I'm the one keeping your ass alive," I declared, my voice rough with emotions I couldn't name. "You need to fuckin' be grateful and listen more than you speak."

Xenobia's eyes narrowed, a devious smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. "I'm never going to make this easy on you. You wanna come running home like a lost pup when Daddy calls, then I'm gonna make you work for every fucking penny."

I opened my mouth to retort when my phone buzzed. Fuck. I shouldn't have answered for Luca, but curiosity overrode everything else.

"What?" I barked into the receiver, keeping my eyes locked on Xenobia.

Luca's voice on the other end was hushed and urgent. "Adonis. Your father's men are on the move. He's officially put a hit out on Xenobia. It's happening soon."

My blood ran cold. I ended the call without a word, my mind galloping with one dreadful thought after another. The threat I'd been warning Don Hawthorne about for months was finally here, and Xenobia was standing in front of me, beautiful, defiant, and vulnerable all rolled into one. Thank God Don had the foresight to bring me back before he left the state. Even if he hadn't, I'd have been here.

No one would take my Nobu from me.

"We're done here," I established, my voice harsher than intended. "Get in the fuckin' house. Now."

Xenobia's eyes widened slightly, picking up on the shift in my tone. I thought she might argue for a moment, but something in my expression must have warned her off. She turned toward the house, her clicking steps measured and deliberate.

I watched her go, my heart pounding as I resisted the urge to pull her dress up over her waist and bury myself deep inside her. How badly I wanted to grab her and press my lips against hers, forcing her to feel the things she'd long buried. I'd sworn to protect her, but how could I when my feelings were compromising everything? My father's men were closing in; that was a fact, and I didn't have time to sit in the what ifs. I'd made my bed and lay in it as soon as the threat was neutralized.

I barreled into the security room, my mind a flurry of strategies and contingencies. The monitors flickered with scenes from around the estate. I barked orders to my team, my voice tight with barely contained tension.

"Double the patrols. I want eyes on every inch of this place. If a squirrel so much as chomps a nut wrong, I want to fuckin' know about it. No one takes breaks. If you need to piss, whip it out and piss where you are. Sleep breaks will be in four-hour increments, and you do not leave until your relief has taken position. Understood?"

My comms crackled with a chorus of affirmations. My fingers flew over the keyboard, adjusting camera angles and recalibrating motion sensors. Each click felt like a ticking clock, counting down to an inevitable confrontation. My father's army wasn't as powerful as the Hawthornes had once been after retaliating for the death of Xenobia's family members, but recently, they'd been gaining ground, offering power and promise to any young mothafucka who'd fall in line. Taking Xenobia out would all but ensure the destruction of the Hawthornes.

"I'm gonna go get some coffee. You need some?" I asked Titus, my second in command, as I stood.

"Nah, boss, I'm good," he confirmed, barely sparing a glance at me as I turned and left.

I wandered the halls, drawn to the east wing where our bedrooms were. The sun was rising, and the maids were already awake, bustling around, cooking and cleaning. The kitchen was alive with the smells of freshly baked biscuits and sizzling bacon, but I didn't care. I kept wandering until I stood in front of her room. The door was ajar, and I saw Xenobia's silhouette in her window with a glass of wine in hand. I considered saying something about it but didn't. It had to be five o'clock somewhere.

She was so damn gorgeous. Even from where I stood, I could see the tension in her shoulders, how she carried herself like she was always ready for a fuckin' squabble. My throat went dry as I watched her, remembering how it felt to hold her once upon a time, to taste her... to love her. I should've left, but instead, my fists clenched. I couldn't look away. She looked so damn sad, and I knew it was partially because of me.

Xenobia turned, catching sight of me. For a moment, we just stared at each other. Then she raised her glass in a mocking toast, her lips curving into that smirk that always got under my skin. I wanted to go to her. To scale that fucking wall she'd

built around her heart and smash through the cracks if I had to. To feel her skin under my hands, to—

“Sir?” One of my men approached, snapping me out of my thoughts. “The night patrol is ready to switch out. It’s your shift.”

I cleared my throat, forcing myself back to reality before I closed her door. “Right. Let’s go.”

As night fell, I prowled the grounds outside, hyperaware of every shadow and rustle of leaves. The air felt thick and heavy, like something was coming. My hand strayed to my Glock, fingertips brushing the cool black metal for reassurance.

But all I could think about was Xenobia, alone in that room, vulnerable. Strong as she was, she didn’t know what was out there. The last man who’d attempted to take her life was a rookie. Someone with something to prove. But this time, my father’s men wouldn’t take it easy. They’d finish the job. She had no idea what kind of monsters were hunting her.

Monsters like me, maybe. Because, fuck knows, I was no better than the animals I was protecting her from. Not when it came to her.

I leaned against the cold stone wall of the pool house, my eyes scanning the darkness. Every beat of my heart felt like a betrayal. Thump. I was her protector. Thump. I was her brother’s childhood friend, for fuck’s sake. Thump. I was the reason her family was attacked. Thump. I still want her to be mine.

The memory of our time flooded me. It was right here, in this godforsaken pool. It was a perfect day. I’d tried to hold back my feelings, and then...

“You don’t understand,” she’d spat, those fierce eyes boring into me. “You can do

whatever the fuck you want.”

I’d grabbed her then, forgetting everything I shouldn’t be feeling. “The only thing I want to do is kiss you, Nobi.”

“Then do it.”

And then we were kissing, all tongue and feelings and want. It was wrong, so fucking wrong, but it felt like coming home. She’d roamed my body with her hands as I set her on the edge of the pool, tugging at the waistband of her bikini bottoms. I shook my head, trying to rid the thoughts. That was then. This is now. I had a job to do.

“I can’t keep doing this,” I muttered while running a hand over my beard. “I can’t protect her if I can’t fuckin’ think straight.”

But even as I said it, I knew it was all bullshit. I’d burn down the world for her if I thought it would keep her safe. I’d destroy myself if it came to that. And that terrified me more than any threat outside the Hawthorne walls.

I pushed off from the wall, squaring my shoulders. Whatever happened, whatever I felt, I’d do my duty and keep her safe, even if it meant never touching her again.

“Bring it on, mothafuckas,” I whispered to the night. “I’m ready for you.”

As I made my final round of the estate, the shadows seemed to lengthen, reaching out with long, grasping fingers. The air grew thick and heavy with an unnatural stillness that made my jaw tighten. Something wasn’t right. I paused by the rose garden, Xenobia’s second favorite spot. The crimson flowers looked almost black in the moonlight. A twig snapped somewhere in the darkness, and I whirled, hand trained on my gun.

“Who the fuck is there?” I called out, my voice a venomous growl.

Silence answered me, but I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. My skin crawled, every instinct screaming danger. I looked around, trying to find the source, only to see my team walking their stations.

It's probably just a rabbit.

I turned to head back inside, and a flicker of movement caught my eye. There, just beyond the gate—a figure, barely visible in the gloom. It vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving me to wonder if I'd imagined it in my paranoia. My phone buzzed in my pocket, making me jump. A text from an unknown number:

Unknown: Tick tock, watchdog. How long can you keep her safe?

I stared at the screen, my blood running cold. My father's men were here, closer than I'd thought. Somebody knew my secret and was fuckin' with me. As I hurried back to the house, the night seemed to press in around me, full of unseen threats and whispered promises of violence to come. The game had changed, and I feared none of us were ready for what was coming.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Xenobia

I felt his eyes on me before I opened mine, lurking in the corner of my bedroom like some brooding statue. I stretched unhurriedly, pretending I had the luxury of him not being here, though my skin prickled with awareness. What had happened after he'd ordered me to my room like a child? His jaw was clenched tight, dark circles rimming his eyes. Something must have gone wrong. But I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking.

I padded to my vanity, the cold marble floor shocking my bare feet. In the mirror, I caught a glimpse of Adonis's reflection—stoic and watchful as always. A muscle in his cheek twitched before he averted his gaze.

“You gonna stand there all day or what?” I snapped, running a brush through my tangled curls. “Why are you even in here?”

He ignored me and remained silent, infuriatingly so. Fine. Two can play that game.

I went about my morning routine, hyperaware of his presence but refusing to acknowledge it. He would only be in my room for one reason. Someone had made a move, and he didn't trust anyone else to ensure I was safe except him. A part of me felt violated that he'd been in here, probably watching me as I slept. And yet, the traitorous part of me welcomed his protective presence. I hated myself for it, but I couldn't deny the feeling of safety he brought. Damn him.

I needed an escape, however brief. Snatching up my phone, I tapped my best friend Damara's name, desperate for a dose of normalcy. I walked out of my room and

down the hall toward the library.

“Hey, girl, hey.” Damara greeted me when she picked up on the fourth ring.

I immediately huffed into the receiver. “Hey, girl. You will not believe the morning I’m having.”

“Oh Lord, here we go. You’re lucky I’m literally about to get my latte. Is this about you know who?”

Knowing we were on the same page, I launched into a rant about Adonis, my words dripping with annoyance. “He’s just always there, y’know? Breathing down my damn neck, watching my every move like a trained hawk. It’s so fucking suffocating I could scream.”

Damara’s amusement tinkled through the phone. I cut my eyes at Adonis standing in the doorway, wondering if he could hear me. His expression gave nothing away. I didn’t give a fuck if he did.

“Would it kill him to crack a smile occasionally?” I continued. “Or, I don’t know, have an actual conversation that doesn’t end in the words I’m here to protect you ?”

But even as the complaints poured out like hot lava, I felt the undercurrent of something else. Something I wasn’t ready to examine too closely. The way my pulse quickened when he was near. How I found myself seeking him out, despite my protests.

I shook my head, banishing those dangerous thoughts. “Anyway, enough about my grumpy ass bodyguard. Tell me something good, Mara. I need a juicy distraction.”

“You know you called the right one for that.”

As Damara launched into a story, I caught Adonis's gaze. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of... hurt? Regret? But then it was replaced by his usual melanated mask of indifference. I turned away, Damara's voice fading to background noise as my mind whirled. What game were we playing, Adonis and me? More importantly, which of us would emerge as the victor, and what would become of the loser?

Damara's voice cut through my swirling thoughts, laced with a teasing upswing in her tone. "Oh, come on, Nobi. Tell the truth. You weren't even listening to anything I just said. You were thinking about him, weren't you? You can't fool me. All this complaining about Adonis? Sounds like somebody's still got a little crush."

I nearly choked on my spit. "What? No. Is your latte laced with crack? That's ridiculous. He was Santo's best friend, for God's sake. And a pain in my fucking ass if you haven't noticed."

"Mm-hmm," Damara hummed, unconvinced. "Whatever lies you tell yourself are between you and God, honey. But I've known you too long. You complain too damn much about somebody you claim you don't care about."

I rolled my eyes, even though she couldn't see me. "Whatever, Mara. You're delusional if you think I'm thinkin' about that nigga."

But her words had stirred something in my gut, a fluttery sensation I didn't want to name. I glanced at Adonis again, taking in the thick beard wrapped around his chiseled jaw and the intensity in his soulless brown eyes. My thighs clenched. Dammit.

"Anyway," I retorted with an eye roll, desperate to change the subject. "Tell me about that guy you met last week. Any updates?"

Damara laughed, a sound so carefree it made my heart ache. "Oh, girl. You should

see him. Those tattooed arms, that cocaine-white smile... I swear, if he weren't so damn sweet, I'd think he was out of my league."

I smiled, genuinely happy for her. "That's great, Mara. You deserve it. I can hear you cheesing through the phone."

I felt a pang of longing as she gushed about her new man. Not for her guy but for the freedom she had. The ability to date, to fall in love without the weight of family expectations crushing her soul with every breath.

We met in the distinguished halls of St. Mary's Academy for Girls, where it was said that legacies were born and future leaders were bred. We were sixteen, which was a hard time to forge friendships—genuine ones, at least. Despite the dark shadows and rumors about my family's affiliation with the mafia and my father's ruthless reputation, Damara Thorpe didn't shy away. She was my roommate and heir to her family's financial empire, Thorpe Financial.

Like me, she was dressed in designer and had her future curated by her wealthy parents since she took her first breath. Though from different worlds, we understood what it meant to carry the weight of our family's legacies. To escape, I found solace in art, while she found hers in literature and boys.

As the semesters stretched on, our connection strengthened. The Thorpe estate was the only place my father allowed me to go during spring breaks because Damara had bodyguards for protection. That didn't stop us from spending the afternoons riding horses and sneaking out through the garden late at night to meet up with boys from the city.

Our friendship became the exception to the rule, sprouting an authentic connection that transcended my mafia ties and her financial wealth. She was the only one I could vent my frustrations to and the only one I trusted with my secret about my past with

Adonis.

“God, I wish I could just... run far away sometimes, you know?” The words slipped out before I could stop them. “Just be normal for a day. No bodyguards, no family legacy. Just... plain ‘ol me.”

Her voice softened on the other end. “Oh, Nobi. I know, babe. But hey, maybe one day, right? We’ll take that girls’ trip we’ve always talked about. No mafia, no drama. Just us living our best lives.”

I managed to chuckle, but it was hollow. “Yeah, maybe. Someday. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

As I hung up, the tension in my muscles returned. I caught Adonis’s gaze again, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of concern in those dark, brooding eyes. But then it was gone, and I was left wondering if I’d imagined it all.

I stabbed at my penne pasta, the fork scraping against the fine China with an irritating screech. Adonis sat across from me, quietly eating. As usual, my father was away on business and wouldn’t join us. The dining room felt too big and empty, amplifying every clink of silverware and frustrated sigh.

“So,” I paused, breaking the quiet, “did you enjoy eavesdropping on my conversation earlier today? Learn anything juicy about Damara’s new boo?”

Adonis’s eyes flickered up from his plate, his face emotionless. “I don’t eavesdrop, Xenobia. I observe. And for the record, I don’t give a fuck about your phone conversations.”

I scoffed. “Right. Because observing is so much better.” I jabbed at the pasta aggressively, red sauce splattering onto the fresh, white tablecloth. “Tell me, oh great

observer, what deep insights have you collected about me today?”

He calmly set down his fork, his gaze steady. “You’re upset.”

I scoffed. “No shit, Sherlock,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “What gave it away? The sarcasm or the death glares?”

To my surprise, Adonis leaned forward slightly instead of bristling, his voice softening. “You want to know what happened six years ago but refuse to ask. You want to tell me to fuck off, but you can’t. Tell me, Nobi, why is that?”

His words hit too close to home, and I felt my walls rising. “Spare me the psychoanalysis, nigga. You don’t know shit about me.”

“Don’t I?” he challenged, and for a moment, his eyes held love in them. It knocked me off my square.

I pushed back my chair, its legs screeching against the floor. “You know what you’re paid to know. You’re not entitled to anything else. Not to get to know me, not to do that... that thing you’re doing. So just learn how to do your fucking job from a distance.”

As I stomped away, I heard his quiet reply: “I know more than you think, Xenobia. And I care more than you realize.”

I froze on the other side of the dining room wall, my heart pounding. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

I stormed into my art studio, slamming the door behind me. The smell of turpentine and oil paints hit me like a wave, familiar and comforting. I grabbed a fresh canvas, slapping it onto the easel more forcefully than necessary.

My hands shook as I squeezed paint onto my palette—maroon, black, and deep purple—colors I associated with rage and frustration. I began painting, not knowing what I was creating. It didn't matter. I just needed to get my feelings out of me and onto the canvas.

“Fuck Adonis,” I muttered, jabbing my brush at the canvas. “Fuck this whole messed-up family.”

As I painted, the tension in my body slowly lightened. The world narrowed to just me, the brush, and the canvas. No expectations. No danger. No infuriatingly observant bodyguard. I lost track of time, letting the painting consume me. Gradually, a figure emerged from the chaos—a black couple, their faces obscured, arms reaching toward one another but just out of reach. I was so absorbed I didn't hear the door open.

“Interesting piece.” Adonis's deep voice startled me. I whirled around with my paintbrush brandished like a weapon.

“Jesus, Adonis. Don't you know how to fucking knock?”

He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “I did. Twice. You were.... preoccupied.”

I stared him down, extremely aware of the paint smeared across my hands and probably my face. “What do you want?”

His eyes scanned the room, ever vigilant. “Checking the perimeter. I know you love it here, but this studio has too many floor-to-ceiling windows. You're too exposed. It's not safe.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right, because art supplies are such a hot commodity for assassins.

Besides, you follow me around like a stray cat, so I think I'm fine here."

"Your safety isn't a joke to me, Xenobia," he said sternly.

"And what about my sanity?" I shot back. "Which I'm quickly losing, by the way, thanks to your constant hovering."

Adonis took a step closer, his presence filling the small but spacious studio. "I'm here to protect you."

I rolled my eyes as a loud groan escaped my lips. "Don't you know any other words, or have you not been programmed to say anything else? All you talk about is protection and safety. It's like you're a fucking machine, Adonis. Tell me what the fuck you're protecting me from! The Toussaint boogeyman? Or just living my own damn life?" I challenged. "Because right now, I don't see any threats, just an asshole from my past who keeps interfering with what I want to do in the present. So either prove that this threat is real or get the fuck out of my way."

I stood my ground as Adonis approached, although my heart was bucking against its reins. His dark and unreadable eyes locked onto mine. Without warning, he reached out, his calloused thumb gently wiping a smudge of paint from my cheek before his hand flattened on my skin. His eyes looked at my lips before meeting my gaze.

"You've got some paint..." he murmured, his touch igniting a fire under my skin.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My body screamed to lean into his touch, but my pride kept me frozen in place.

"Don't," I whispered, hating how weak my voice sounded.

Adonis's hand lingered, his fingers tracing the edge of the scar on my cheek.

“Xenobia...”

I jerked away, my paintbrush clattering to the floor. “I said don’t!”

He stepped back, hands raised. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” I snapped, but my anger felt hollow. Empty. “Just... just go, Adonis. Please.”

He nodded once, his face a mask again. As he turned to leave, I saw anger on his face. I collapsed onto my stool, hands shaking.

What the hell was that?

Later that night, I tossed and turned in bed, Adonis’s fiery touch haunting me. When sleep finally came, it was irregular and filled with wild dreams and flashbacks of our past—two days before everything changed.

I stepped into the pool house, eager to find a private place to paint. Instead, I found Adonis. His brown orbs blazed as he looked at me. It was strange because I’d never seen him look at another woman that way. And I had seen him look at so many women over the years.

He’d just never looked at me.

Not like that, anyway.

Not like he saw me as a grown woman and not as Santo’s annoying baby sister. It set something aflame in me. It felt like my insides were molten lava—hot and flowing. The tiny scrap of turquoise material between my thighs grew damp as I squirmed against it.

His eyes darted downward as if he could somehow sense what was going on in my body, and the tip of his tongue shot out to lick his bottom lip.

Slowly, he let his eyes travel back up to mine. “That bikini is almost indecent,” he acknowledged.

Looking down at my feet, I blushed. “Sorry. I’ll grab a cover-up and—”

He shook his head. “Nah. Don’t cover up on my behalf. You look good in it, all grown up and shit.”

There was something in his voice that made my head jerk up. My shoulders snapped back, pushing my C-cup breasts out a little further. His eyes automatically zeroed in on them. “I am grown up, Donny. I’ve been officially legal for two months now. You just never noticed.”

He rubbed his nape. It was his turn to blush. “Oh, I’m noticing now, Nobu.”

“Good.” I didn’t know what else to say. It wasn’t like I had worn the bikini for him—well, not entirely. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. I was trying to find a place to paint and didn’t know anyone was in the pool house. Bighead never said anything, and I don’t wanna disturb you.”

Grabbing my towel, I started to walk past him when Adonis grabbed my wrist, stopping me in my tracks. “Or you could stay and keep me company,” he suggested, his cinnamon-scented breath wafting past my nose.

Turning my head slowly, I met his eyes. Was he asking what I thought he was asking? Or was he trying to be friendly? It was impossible to know unless I asked. Unless I—

I turned my body into his. My hands were flat on his hard abs. “Do you want me to stay, Donny?”

He glanced down at my hands briefly before lifting his gaze back to my eyes. “Yeah.”

Adonis breathed in as I stepped closer to him. We weren’t quite touching, but we were close. I didn’t want to come on too strong, but I didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding either. “Stay,” he insisted as one warm, rough hand slid across my hip. Adonis drew me to him. Hard. So hard that my breasts crushed against his chest and spilled upward, threatening to spill over the triangles of my bikini top. “Keep me—”

I surged upward, cutting off his sentence as my lips smashed into his. He let out a howl and whipped his head back, quickly drawing his fingers to his lips.

“Shit,” I hissed. “I’m really sorry.” Embarrassment flooded me. I had just made his lip bleed. “I’m gonna go.” I tried to detangle myself from his arms, but Adonis tightened his grip.

“I’m fine,” he promised with a chuckle. “I kinda like your eagerness, but let’s start this slower.” His fingers closed around my chin and tilted my face up to his.

His first kiss was gentle. His full lips were soft and yielding at first, but then he deepened the kiss. His tongue played over my bottom lip, asking me for access to my mouth, to my tongue, to me. The answer was yes to everything.

With a moan that vibrated through my chest, I gave it to him. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I wrapped my arms around his neck and thrust my tongue into his warm, wet mouth. I couldn’t believe I was kissing Adonis Cardelo. It didn’t feel real; it was more like a dream than anything else.

The hand on the small of my back darted downward to squeeze my ass, and I moaned again. I wasn't just kissing him; I was making out with him. It was like all my teenage daydreams had finally come true. If I could go back and tell the old me that this would happen, I probably wouldn't believe me.

It was happening, though, and it was making me so wet I thought I might drip. I'd never been so turned-on from kissing before, but then again, I had never kissed him before. The hand on my ass moved upward, his fingertips tickling over my ribs to brush against the underside of my breasts. His kiss deepened for a second, and then he slowly pulled his face away. Greedily, I reached for him again. He shook his head slightly. His brown orbs searched my face like he was waiting for me to say something. I didn't. I couldn't. I was too breathless for words, and my mind was too dick dizzy to form a complete sentence.

"Shit." He cursed, but it sounded more like a plea for control as his hand covered my breast and squeezed, kneading it in his hand. The look on his face told me he was as shocked as I was that this was happening. Still, I closed my eyes, letting the tingling sensations flow through me.

His lips found my jawline and slowly traveled across my throat. He lathered the swell of my breasts with his mouth, his tongue teasing under the material to touch the edge of my diamond-hard nipple.

It was almost too much. Loosening my grip on him, I reached for the ties of my bikini. Two tugs and the material fell, baring my ample breasts for him. Adonis didn't hesitate. He cupped my naked breasts in his hands and sucked one chocolate-colored nipple into his mouth after another.

My nipples continued to harden, straining against his long tongue as he licked and sucked them. I grabbed at his broad shoulders to steady myself.

“You have some beautiful fuckin’ titties, Nobi. I could suck on them for hours, but...” The hand that held me to him slid back to my hips. His fingers worked the knots that held my bikini bottom together at the sides. He made short work of untying them. The scrap of material fell almost instantly, but instead of letting it drop to the floor, he caught it up and brought it to his face, breathing in the scent of my arousal as his eyes met mine.

I sucked in a breath. Why the hell was that so sexy?

“You soaked these,” he murmured. There was so much heat in his baritone voice that I felt my pussy cream on the spot.

I stood in front of him, totally exposed. It should’ve been embarrassing, but it wasn’t. How could I be embarrassed when he was looking at me with so much heat and lust in his eyes?

Adonis wanted me as much as I wanted him.

I let my hand wander over my body without thinking about what I was doing. Taking my time, I cupped my breasts in my hands before slowly skimming across my flat stomach and dipping them between my satiny, caramel thighs. I sank two fingers inside me easily. I was so fucking wet, and it was all thanks to him.

Adonis’s eyes followed my rhythmic movement as my lips parted to speak. “Other places taste good as well.” Wantonly, I lifted my hand to my lips and sucked the two fingers into my mouth, tasting myself on them.

“Share.” He grunted, pulling my fingers from my mouth and sliding them into his. His eyes closed. “Again.” As I guided my hand back between my thighs, his fingers joined mine in teasing at the entrance of my water park.

I whimpered with desire.

“I want to do nasty fuckin’ things to you, Nobu,” Adonis admitted while dragging his fingers across my aching, hairless pussy before pushing one deep inside me until he couldn’t go any further.

“Do you?” I asked innocently, although I already knew the answer. I could see the outline of his dick through his navy blue swim trunks. I reached for it, tracing it through the slinky material.

He groaned, grabbing my hand. “Yes.” He pressed my hand against him, moving it up and down. “You want that, too, don’t you?”

I flashed a devious smirk up into his face. What a stupid question. Of course, I wanted it. He must’ve been blind if he hadn’t noticed how much I’d always liked him.

“Yes,” I answered, hooking my fingers into the waistband of his trunks before sinking to my knees on the hard tile floor. Lifting my eyes to him, I smiled. “Let me show you how much.”

His eyes followed me down as his swim trunks fell to his ankles. I reached for him, curling my warm palm around the base of his erection, and squeezed. Slowly, I began to move my hand up and down. My tongue played over my lips, wetting them. We both knew what was coming. I couldn’t wait to wrap my cherry-flavored lips around the thick, one-eyed monster staring back at me.

A bolt of electricity flowed through me as I licked the length of him—all nine inches and the mushroom-shaped tip. The deep, guttural moan that tore its way out of his mouth was more a growl than anything else. Glancing upward, I saw him smile. That was when I realized he liked everything I was doing to him.

My lips opened into a wide O-shape as I ducked my mouth over the head. I suctioned my lips around his girth as I took him to the back of my throat and held it there.

“Fuck, you look so fuckin’ good like that,” he growled, palming the back of my head.

I bobbed up and down, sucking short and soft before swallowing him down like I was a parched woman in the middle of the desert, and his cum was the only thing I wanted to drink. It was bliss. It was hot as fuck. It was my very first time.

“Let me see you touch yourself,” Adonis declared.

He kept a firm grip on the back of my head, ensuring none of my loose curls fell over my face and obscured his view. He pinched one of my nipples between his thumb and forefinger. I gasped with pleasure.

“Play with your clit, Nob. Sink a finger into that wet ass pussy,” he demanded.

I did what he asked without him having to ask again. My body moved slowly against my hand. I moved my mouth in time with it, so it was almost like I was fucking him and not the finger that was buried deep inside my pussy.

Yanking at my arm, Adonis pulled my fingers up to his mouth and tasted them in turn. I knew my taste turned him on by the way his dick swelled against my tongue. Pulling the length of his erection from my mouth, he jerked it for a few seconds.

“Tongue out,” he commanded as a drop of precum seeped from the tip. “Taste.”

I watched his eyes roll back as my tongue ran over the head. I smirked when a little moan of enjoyment tumbled from his lips. It was innocent but animalistic all at the same time. Adonis hooked his strong hands underneath my arms and pulled me to my feet before he kissed me.

He lifted me into his arms, and I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist as he inched toward the bedroom. Each step was torture. I ground against his erection with needy hip jerks until he couldn't take it anymore. He stopped mid-stride and slammed me against the nearest wall.

His mouth hungrily claimed mine as he reached between our bodies. The tip of his erection slipped up to my entrance quickly, but he had to work for the rest of it. I was a virgin, and my pussy was airtight and wetter than water. I gasped as my world fractured into a mosaic of pain and pleasure. As badly as I wanted to enjoy the moment, the angle was all wrong.

"Fuck, this pussy is so fuckin' tight," he groaned, his voice laced with a raw edge of possession. "Are you okay?"

"Don't stop. Keep going."

Bending his knees, Adonis pushed upward. There was a moment of searing discomfort, a barrier giving way, but then he was fully seated within me, and everything clicked into place. It was right—our connection, our union. A grunt fell from his lips as he filled me completely. For a second, neither of us could move. The pain felt good as if he'd been made perfectly for me. I wiggled against him, and he buried himself inside me further when I thought that was impossible.

Adonis snaked his body in and out of me with the kind of passion that I didn't think was possible. I clung to his muscles, my nails leaving little crescent-shaped indents in his skin. Our lips came together as hard as our bodies.

A moan slipped past my lips. "Yes. Yes. Don't stop, Adonis," I whispered.

Sweat coated us, making our bodies slip and slide against each other, but nothing was wetter than the junction between my thighs. I felt my juices coating him, dripping

down his thighs.

It was all because of him. Adonis had me so turned-on. My pussy spasmed and then clenched around his girth. I carelessly tossed my head back against the wall and screamed.

“Fuck, Adonis! Fuck!”

Adonis quickly covered my mouth, muting my pleasure-filled moans. He replaced his hand with his lips, stifling the long, drawn-out whimpers with his name thrown in. I came hard and fast, a constant flow of contractions around Adonis’s throbbing dick.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he thrust into me once more. “Fuck.”

His hips jerked back and forth as he filled me with his seed.

“Shit,” he growled before catching my lips with his again, only this time, his kiss was softer. “You made my pull-out game trash.”

I giggled, while still trying to catch my breath as he eased me back to my feet. “It’s okay. I’m on the pill,” I explained. “So that means we can do it... as much as we like.”

Adonis smirked as he put on his swim trunks. “You were amazing.”

I leaned against him, resting my cheek against his pounding heart. I was sore in the best ways, but I’d take the pain again if I knew it would lead to that kind of mind-blowing pleasure at the end. “Yeah. It was fun.”

He bent forward and kissed the top of my sweaty forehead. “Fun? Yeah, it was definitely that.” I tried to step away, but he grabbed me. “Hey, where you goin’?”

“Shower and then painting by the pool,” I answered, feeling his eyes glued to my ass as I sauntered away. I glanced over my shoulder. “You can join me if you like.”

I awakened with a gasp, sheets tangled around my legs, my skin glowing and pussy tingling.

“Fuck,” I groaned, burying my face in my pillow.

This is bad. This is so, so bad.

“Remember why you hate him, Nobi. Remember,” I whispered into the darkness.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but Adonis’s handsome face was etched behind my eyelids. Even in the dream, his touch felt more real than anything else in my life. I rolled over, kicking off the sweat-damp sheets.

“Jesus,” I panted, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I fumbled for the bedside lamp, desperate to chase away the shadows and for Adonis to sit in the corner, ready to rush to my side and hold me as the memories subsided. But he wasn’t there. I heard rustling outside my door and could sense he was out there, probably contemplating whether to come in or not. Part of me wanted him to.

In the harsh light, I stared at my trembling hands. What the hell was wrong with me? Adonis was my bodyguard, my protector. Nothing more. He couldn’t be anything more. But I knew I was lying to myself, even as I thought it. The way my skin burned at his touch, the electricity that crackled between us... it was more than just friendly affection.

“You’re fucked, Xenobia,” I muttered, running a hand through my long, tangled hair.

How was I supposed to face him, knowing I couldn't hide my feelings forever? As the adrenaline faded, exhaustion crept back in. I left the light on as I lay back down, afraid of what other forbidden thoughts might be waiting in the dark. Tomorrow, I'd have to figure out how to deal with this mess. But for now, all I wanted was dreamless sleep.

Adonis

I watched her from my spot, my eyes never leaving Xenobia's delicate form. I told her this shit was a bad idea, but she threw a tantrum all damn morning until I caved. The only reason I'd even agreed was because I had my team secure the entire fucking street before we even got in the car. Now that we were here, I realized what a terrible fucking decision it was and why parents should never give in to screaming children. The kids were always fuckin' wrong, as was Xenobia in our case. "But I need to see my friends." She'd cried. Bullshit.

The bustling café around us faded into a blur of potential threats, each passerby a possible assassin sent by my father in my mind. The world was full of evil mothafuckas. Xenobia's carefree laughter cut through the air, which should've brought joy to my ears but only tightened the knot in my gut. She was too happy-go-lucky, too exposed. Didn't she understand the danger that lurked in every shadow? I shifted in my seat, the leather holster a comforting presence at my side. My fingers twitched, itching to grasp the cold metal of my weapon, just in case.

At her table, Xenobia tossed her hair back, the light catching on the darkened scar that traced her collarbone, a reminder of past failures—mine and others. Her friends chattered away, oblivious to the dark undercurrents that swirled around their little cluster.

"Can you believe he said that?" Xenobia's voice carried over to me, laced with entertainment. "Some people just don't know when to quit."

My jaw clenched as I shifted the brim of my hat. Was she talking about me? Our last

argument still burned in my memory. Her fiery words had seared into my brain. She glanced my way, those fierce brown eyes meeting mine briefly through my shades. A challenge or a dare? I saw the defiance there, the stubborn set of her chin that screamed my presence wouldn't bully her. I wanted to march over there, to drag her away from the exposed position. But I kept myself in check. That wasn't what she needed from me. Not now, at least.

"Lighten up, Adonis," I muttered, forcing my shoulders to relax. "You're here to protect her, not suffocate her."

But as Xenobia laughed again, bright and careless, I couldn't shake the feeling that darkness was closing in around us. And I'd be damned if I let it touch her again. A flicker of movement caught my eye. A man in his mid-thirties, scruff on his jaw, had been nursing the same espresso for the past hour. Nothing unusual there, except his gaze kept drifting to Xenobia. Not with the usual appreciation most men showed—this was different. Calculating. Hungry. My muscles tensed, adrenaline flooding my system. I'd seen that look on faces moments before they pulled a trigger.

"Shit," I whispered, hand instinctively moving to the concealed weapon at my side.

I scanned the café again, looking for accomplices, exits, and anything out of place. The weight of responsibility crashed down on me like a tidal wave. If I were wrong, Xenobia would be furious. If I was right and did nothing...

No choice. I had to put my intuition first. I had to move.

I strode toward her table, keeping my face neutral despite the storm raging inside. Xenobia's laughter cut off as she saw me approach. Her eyes narrowed, that familiar spark of defiance igniting.

"Ladies," I said, nodding to her friends. "I'm afraid we'll have to cut this short."

“What? Why?” Xenobia demanded to know, her tone sharp enough to cut glass.

I leaned in close, pitching my voice low. “Security concern. We need to go. Now.”

She searched my face, looking for any sign of deception. I quickly lifted my shades and met her gaze steadily, willing her to trust me or try me just once. Either way, we were fuckin’ leaving.

“Fine,” she said finally, gathering her things. “But this shit better be good.”

As I ushered her toward the exit, I felt the suspicious man’s eyes boring into my back. My skin crawled, but I didn’t dare look back. Get her safe first, then deal with the threat . One step at a time, Adonis. One step at a time. Once we got outside, I motioned for my men to flank us until we got in the armored SUV and peeled off.

The drive back to the estate was suffocating. Silence hung between us like a physical barrier, thick and oppressive. I gripped the steering wheel tight, and my knuckles hardened as I wrestled with the storm inside me. Duty. It’d always been about duty. Protect Xenobia at all costs. But fuck if it wasn’t getting more complicated every day. I snuck a glance at her through the rearview mirror, sitting ramrod straight in the back seat. Her jaw was clenched, eyes fixed on the stretch of road ahead.

“You gonna tell me what that was all about?” Xenobia’s voice cut through the silence.

I swallowed hard. “Just doing my job.”

She scoffed. “Right. Your job. I wasn’t done there, you know. But as per usual, you ruin every-fucking-thing.”

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to stay focused on the road. Spoiled little fuckin’

brat. I'm here to keep you alive, not help you maintain a fuckin' social life. I itched to teach her ass a lesson, to take her over my knee and spank the attitude right out of her. We pulled up to the estate, the iron gates swinging open to admit us. As soon as the car stopped, Xenobia was out, storming toward the house like a tornado. I scrambled after her, my heart pounding.

"Xenobia, wait—"

She whirled on me, eyes blazing. "No, you wait. I'm sick of this shit, Adonis. Sick of being treated like a child, like I can't take care of myself."

"It's not about that," I started, but she cut me off.

"Then what is it about? Huh? You get off on controlling every aspect of my life or overplanning so much that it sucks the joy out of everything?"

I felt my temper rising to match hers. "You think I enjoy this shit? You think I like watching your every move, wondering if today's the day someone decides to take their shot at you?" I barked, clenching my fists while fighting to keep my voice steady. "We received intel that they're close. I got a threat. The dangers lurk around every goddamn corner. I've seen it, lived it. I'm trying to keep your ass safe, and you're making it impossible."

"Safe?" she spat, taking a step closer. "You're suffocating me, Adonis. This isn't living. So, fuck it. I'm done worrying about it. I've cheated death before, and I'll do it again. And even if I die, I'd rather die living the life I wanna live than locked up like some pretty bird in a cage. We all gotta go someday, right?"

Her proximity was intoxicating, her scent filling my senses. I could see the fire in her eyes, the determination set in her jaw. Damn, she was beautiful when she was angry. And that thought terrified me.

“I can’t lose you too,” I whispered, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

Xenobia’s orbs widened, surprise flickering across her face. For a moment, the air between us crackled with tension.

Then my phone rang, shattering the moment.

I answered, turning away from Xenobia’s piercing gaze. “Cardelo.”

“It’s happening,” my informant’s voice crackled through the line. “The Toussaints are making a move in two days or less.”

My blood ran cold. I listened to the details, my mind already racing through contingencies. When I hung up, I turned back to Xenobia, my face a mask of stern determination.

“What is it?” she asked, worry creeping into her voice.

I met her gaze, steeling myself. “We’ve got trouble coming, so I’m going to need you to trust me, whether you like that shit or not.”

I moved like a ghost through the estate, my footsteps silent against the polished floors. Every shadow, every corner, every potential entry point screamed vulnerability to my trained eye. I’d been lax, too distracted by... other things. Not anymore.

“Get snipers in the tower,” I barked into my comm. “I want eyes on every inch of this place. Titus, get those new motion sensors up. Not in an hour. Not tomorrow. Now.”

My mind raced, trying to find a weakness in the defenses I’d been creating. The weight of my Glock pressed reassuringly against my ribs, but it wasn’t enough.

Control was only an illusion. The police couldn't offer the type of protection she needed. Nothing would ever be sufficient when it came to her. There was only me.

As night fell, the estate transformed into a fortress. I prowled the grounds, restless and cagey. The argument with Xenobia echoed in my head. If she only knew. If she could see the nightmares that plagued me, the constant fear that gripped my heart. I was to blame for what happened. My father burned down their world for me, and I hadn't been strong enough to hold off his men. I wasn't strong enough to save Santo or his mother. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw their broken bodies, their blood on my hands... my failure. Whenever the pungent scent of blood hit my nose, I wanted to cry, but I was never able to.

I found myself outside Xenobia's door, wanting to open it to tell her everything that was going on. But she didn't need to know. She didn't need to feel the terror that I felt. She could hate me if she wanted, but I'd never let her feel like she did all those years ago.

"Get your shit together, Cardelo," I muttered, forcing myself to walk away and head to my base.

I slouched into the security room, the glow of a dozen monitors casting eerie shadows. My eyes were fixated on the central screen, tracking Xenobia's movements throughout the mansion as her footsteps carried her down the halls. She wore a satin robe and fuzzy slippers. She ended up alone in the library, curled in a massive armchair. Her delicate hand moved almost of its own accord, slipping beneath the thin fabric of her robe to graze the sensitive skin of her nipple. A sigh escaped me, a sound of longing that filled the silence of the room.

"Fuck," I whispered, unable to look away.

Even on grainy footage, her sensuality shone through. The way she held herself, her

chin lifted defiantly, as if throwing up a middle finger at the world. My chest tightened. I imagined it was my fingers, not hers, coaxing pleasure from her petite body. The fantasy sent a thrill down my spine. I leaned in, studying the curve of her neck, the slight furrow between her brows. My fingers itched to smooth it away, to—

“The fuck are you doing, nigga?” I growled at my reflection.

Xenobia was Don Hawthorne’s daughter. He would kill me if he knew all the filthy shit running through my head. But the excuses rang hollow. I couldn’t shake the memory of her fire, how alive she made me feel. It was like waking up after years of sleepwalking. I stared at the screen with a boldness that rebelled against every lesson of restraint I’d ever learned.

Her right hand wandered lower, slipping beneath the elastic of her panties. It awakened a hunger I’d only allowed myself to acknowledge in the darkest corners of my mind. Pleasure coursed through my nerves, sending blood pooling at the tip of my dick. I wanted the line between being her protector and something far more dangerous to blur, to hover over her, to feel her breath hot against my skin.

I leaned forward, watching her mouth move. How badly I wished the security camera had audio. I would’ve killed to hear her sweet whimpers—to hear her moan my fuckin’ name. I wanted to listen to every hitch of her breath and every stifled whimper.

“Fuck, Nobi,” I whispered into the darkness again, my voice barely more than a breath as I studied her fingers moving in slow circles.

The need in me swelled, a tide too powerful to contain. I found myself at the door, locking it before I returned to my private show. A part of me felt like a creep salivating over her—for watching her intimate moments, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away if I tried. She was too intoxicating.

Before I knew it, my erection was exposed, and my hand was sliding up and down my rod. My heart raced, pounding against my chest with the force of my yearning. I didn't stop, couldn't stop. The buildup was exquisite, torturous even. Her chin lifted, and her eyes zeroed in on the camera in the corner. For a second, we stared back at each other. Did she know I was watching her? Had she been putting on a show for me? The thought sent a jolt straight to my core.

“Fuck.” I grunted into the darkness, louder this time, my voice laced with an edge of defiance and a plea for more.

She spread her legs wider, and heat radiated from my body. I wanted to reach out, to trace the softness of her jaw, to feel the strength of her thighs locking my head in place as I quenched my thirst with her juices. But instead, my hand remained confined to the base of my dick, imagining my strong hands taking over her body and guiding that wet ass pussy straight to ecstasy.

With each passing moment, the line between us blurred, protector and protected, melding into something far more primal. The space separating us might as well have been non-existent. The palpable electricity of unsaid words and unacknowledged desires bound us together. It was dangerous, forbidden, but in that small room, with threats looming just beyond the walls, danger had already become our constant companion.

The silence stretched between us, thick and heavy with unspoken tension. I bit down on my lip, suppressing a moan that threatened to escape as Xenobia's fingers continued their dance below the thin fabric of her panties. She arched her back to make sure her exposed breasts were in view, showing me how much she truly wanted me.

“Nobi,” I whispered, my voice laced with the heat of my arousal.

Her fingers didn't pause in their exploration, but my body jerked with pleasure, seed erupting from the tip of my dick. My chest heaved in and out as I wiped the sweat from my brow. After cleaning myself up, I found myself at the window, staring out into the oppressive darkness. Somewhere out there, my father's men were making their next move. Two days or less. The thought of them touching and hurting her made my blood boil.

"I swear I won't let them near you," I whispered, my breath fogging the glass.

But as the words left my lips, a chill ran down my spine because I knew, deep down, that the real threat wasn't out there in the night.

It was right here, inside these walls.

It was me.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Xenobia

The gunshots tore through my dreams, jolting me into a waking nightmare. I bolted upright, heart hammering against my ribs. Darkness pressed in, suffocating. I was disoriented as I listened to the pop, pop, pop outside. Where was I? What was happening? Reality quickly crashed over me in sickening waves. I was in my room, in my father's mansion, and someone was attacking us.

"Shit, shit, shit," I hissed, fumbling for the lamp. My fingers trembled, knocking it to the floor with a crash that made me flinch with fear.

Fuck the light. I had to see what was going on.

I crawled over to the window, ducking low as I yanked back the heavy curtains wide enough to peep through. The garden below erupted in chaos. Muzzle flashes lit up the night like deadly fireflies. Dark figures darted between shadows, locked in a lethal dance of destruction and survival.

And there, in the thick of it all, was Adonis. My breath caught in my throat as I watched him, eyes stuck like glue. He moved with deadly grace, barking orders to his team even as he returned fire. He was always in control, even when the world was falling apart around him. Part of me wanted to curl up and hide under the bed like a scared little girl. But a more prominent part couldn't look away. This was my world—it had always been my world, even if I'd been sheltered or too defiant to accept the truth. The violence. The danger. The constant threat hanging over us all.

"Dammit, Donny," I whispered, pressing my palm against the cool glass. "Please be

careful.”

My scars itched, a phantom reminder of the last time our enemies had come for us. I’d survived then. We’d survive now. We had to. Another explosion rocked the night. I stumbled back from the window, my heart lodged in my throat. This was bad... really fucking bad.

“What the fuck do I do?” I muttered, forgetting every safety protocol Adonis had gone over with me so many times it was practically baked into my brain. “What am I supposed to do?”

Stay put and hide like a good little mafia princess? Or grab the gun he’d placed in my nightstand drawer and join the fight? I raced back to the window, eyes once again searching for Adonis until I found him. He was a force of nature, all coiled strength, and lethal precision. The way he moved, it was like he could predict where the bullets would fly before they even left the chamber. I’d seen men twice his size crumble under less pressure, but Adonis? He was crafted from something more brutal.

“Shit,” I breathed out, my nails digging into the windowsill.

Part of me wanted to scream at him to get to safety—to stop being so damn heroic. But I knew better. This was who he was—The Guardian, the shield against the darkness my father had hired to watch over me. My heart raced with fear and something I didn’t want to name. Couldn’t name. If I put a name to it, everything would change. But watching him out there, risking everything to keep me safe... it stirred something in me I couldn’t overlook.

“Panic room,” I muttered, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. “I have to get to the panic room.”

I found myself at my bedroom door, reaching for the handle, my body moving before

my brain could catch up.

The night exploded into a symphony of violence. Gunshots cracked through the air like thunder. Each blast sent a jolt through my body. My breath came in ragged gasps as I crept down the grand staircase, my bare feet silent on the cold marble. All I had to do was make it to the panic room.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The rhythm of death pulsed in my veins.

I pressed myself against the wall, peeking around the corner. The garden was still a war zone. Muzzle flashes lit up the darkness like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

“Two on your six!” Adonis’s baritone voice cut through the chaos, sharp and clear.

I inched closer to the door leading out to the garden, my eyes finding him instantly. He’d moved from the statue, now crouched behind an overturned table. Even in the madness, he was a rock, steady and unshakeable.

“Copy that,” one of his men growled, pivoting smoothly to eliminate the threats.

I should’ve been terrified. I should’ve run to the panic room as intended and barricaded myself behind the door or hid under the covers like when I was a kid. But watching Adonis command my father’s team and seeing their absolute trust in him was all too breathtaking to miss.

“Wow,” I whispered in awe.

Adonis’s head snapped toward me as if on command, his eyes widening for a fraction of a second. “Xenobia! What the fuck? Get to the panic room. Now!”

But I was rooted to the spot, mesmerized by the lethal dance unfolding before me.

The air crackled with tension, thick enough to choke on. “I—”

“I said move!” Adonis snarled, his voice carrying a ferocious bite I’d never heard before. It sent a shiver down my spine that had nothing to do with fear.

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words died in my throat as I saw the change come over him. His eyes hardened, becoming chips of ice in the darkness. When he spoke again, it wasn’t to me.

“Flank left,” he commanded, his tone allowing no argument. “We end this shit. Now.”

The gunfire faded, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Adonis as he stalked through the garden, his movements predatory and precise as he took in the carnage.

“Secure the fuckin’ perimeter,” he barked, his voice unnaturally calm. “Dispose of the bodies. I want this place spotless.”

My stomach churned. Bodies. Plural. How many people had just died outside my window? Adonis’s men moved with grim efficiency, dragging lifeless forms into the shadows. I caught glimpses of blood-stained grass under the moonlight and heard the soft thud of dead weight being loaded into unmarked vans. It should’ve horrified me. Instead, a vile fascination took hold. This was my reality, stripped of its golden facade. Raw. Brutal. Real.

The commotion of my father’s voice through the speakerphone drew my attention. “What in the fuck—” he roared.

“Toussaint,” Adonis answered simply, wiping blood from his knuckles. “They’ve gotten bold.”

My father morphed into rage. “So soon? We were still negotiating terms over an agreement.”

I snorted. Agreements. As if those mean anything in our world.

Adonis’s jaw tightened. “With all due respect, Don, agreements can be broken. Your daughter’s safety is my priority.”

“Your priority?” my father spat. “My home is a fucking war zone again!”

I tensed, waiting for Adonis to snap back. But he stood there, taking Daddy’s anger through the receiver without flinching. His loyalty was disturbing. It made me want to scream, to shake him until he showed some goddamn emotion.

“We’ll finish this conversation tomorrow, Adonis. I’m flying back into New York in the morning,” my father announced before ending the call.

I slowly retreated to my room, the taste of copper on my tongue. I knew sleep wouldn’t come easy after everything that transpired. I heard the heavy tread of footsteps coming up the stairs behind me. My heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to break free. I knew those steps. Adonis. I backpedaled from the door. Part of me wanted to hide, but I couldn’t look away.

The door creaked open, and there he was. Adonis looked like he’d been to hell and back. His shirt was ripped with dark stains that I knew weren’t oil splattered across the fabric. A nasty gash ran above his beard along his cheekbone, still oozing blood.

“Xenobia,” he said, his voice rough. “Are you alright?”

I couldn’t speak. My throat felt like it was closing up. All I could do was stare at him, this man who’d just killed Lord knows how many people for me. To keep me safe.

My protector. The one person in this fucked-up world who made me feel... everything.

“I’m... you’re hurt,” I finally choked out.

Adonis’s lips twitched in what might’ve been a smile on anyone else. “It’s nothing. I’ll be fine.”

I wanted to laugh. Nothing? He looked like a walking nightmare. But underneath the blood and the bruises, his eyes were the same. Steady. Intense. Fixed on me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. My body moved before my brain had the chance to catch up. One second, I was frozen; the next, my hand was hovering inches from his face. I wanted to touch him, to make sure he was real, to feel his skin under my fingertips and know that he was alive.

His shoulder was inches from my lips, his skin a temptation I could no longer resist. I sighed, wanting him to take me but afraid he’d turn me down. Would finding out he didn’t want me hurt more than the overwhelming longing that filled me? I reminded myself I had to be careful. But we almost died tonight. I couldn’t let the moment pass by. Could I?

“Xenobia,” Adonis said again, softer, almost like a warning.

I should’ve stepped back. I should’ve remembered all the reasons why it was wrong. Instead, I met his gaze, my heart pounding so hard I was sure he could hear it.

“Thank you,” I whispered, “for keeping me safe.”

Underneath the moonlight shining through the room, I felt his gaze like a physical touch, igniting my skin where it lingered. The air between us crackled with tension. I could see the muscle in Adonis’s jaw working as he clenched his teeth. Fighting for

control. Always in control. I'd never wanted to break that control so bad in my life. To see what lay beneath the surface of The Guardian, the perfect, emotionless soldier. But I didn't. I couldn't. I stood there, trembling, caught between fear and something far more dangerous until I couldn't take it anymore. The tension, the fear, the fucking longing that'd been eating me up inside for years. I threw my arms around Adonis, pressing my face into his blood-stained chest. He stiffened for a second, and then his arms came up, wrapping around me tight.

"I thought—" My voice cracked. "I thought they might've killed you."

Adonis's hand came up to cradle the back of my head. "It'll take more than that to get rid of me, Nobi."

I pulled back just enough to look at him. His face was so close I could see every tiny scar, every line of worry etched into his skin. "Don't call me that."

"What should I call you then?"

My heart pounded so hard I thought it might explode. "Yours," I whispered, letting the word hang between us—an invitation, a challenge.

The brush of my lips against the smooth skin of his cheek felt like the first drop of rain after a drought, soothing yet not nearly enough. For a second, neither of us moved. The faint scent of his cologne mixed with something undeniably male made my head spin.

"Adonis," I whispered again, softer this time, like a plea laced with the raw edge of need.

Would he continue to torment us both with his stillness, or would he finally give in to the desire I knew we both felt? My heart pounded in my chest, each beat a drumroll

of anticipation for the moment he decided to end the pretense and take what we both craved.

“Fuck, Xenobia. You’re going to fuckin’ kill me.”

His low growl vibrated through the darkness, stirring something primal within me as the weight of his hard body slid against mine. It sent a jolt of electricity through every nerve ending, sparking alive areas I had only dared explore alone since he left.

Then Adonis’s lips crashed into mine, hungry and desperate. It was a deep and consuming kiss that eclipsed every fantasy I’d conjured from the forbidden pages of books I’d devoured in the library. I pushed my body into his, kissing him back with the same intensity as my fingers dug into his broad shoulders. They were a landscape of taut muscle beneath my fingertips, a testament to the strength that had always protected me.

It was wrong. So fucking wrong. But at that moment, I didn’t care. All I knew was the taste of him, the feel of his hands on my skin as he lifted me, pressing me against the wall.

“We shouldn’t.” Adonis growled against my neck, even as his hands slid under the hem of my satin pajama shorts.

His voice was strained with a restraint that seemed to crackle and fray with each passing second. I refused to let that restraint hold us back, not tonight. Not when every breath could be our last.

“I don’t care.” I gasped, wrapping my legs around his waist. “I need you. Please, Adonis.”

He groaned, his forehead resting against mine. “If your father finds out—”

“He won’t,” I promised, though we both knew it was a lie. “Just for tonight. Just us. When he’s back tomorrow, we can go back to hating each other.”

Adonis’s nightmarishly dark eyes met mine, brooding and intense. Then he kissed me again, and all the darkness in the world fell away. My hands roamed over him, memorizing the hard planes of his chest and the heat radiating from his brown skin. I traced the line of his neck, the curve of his full lips, pulling him back to mine with a desire that bordered on desperation.

“Mmm.”

A groan tore from his throat as he surrendered, his mouth crashing against mine with an intensity that spoke of pent-up longing and raw need. Our kiss was a dance of tongues and teeth, a mingling of breaths that blurred the lines between protector and protected, between right and wrong.

He stumbled forward until we hit the bed, and my back crashed against the sheets. He slipped my satin tank top over my head, leaving me sprawled out in my satin shorts before he pulled off his ripped shirt. His eyes darkened as the belt of his slacks clicked, and his pants slid off. His dick was just as big as I remembered, and it made my mouth water.

Adonis had been my first lover, the man who’d taught me sins of the flesh existed and then abruptly ended it all. But I was a grown woman now and wanted him in ways I couldn’t even begin to understand back then.

“Make me yours again. Even if it’s just for tonight.” I whispered as he descended on me, his lips punishing mine.

His touch was rough, though not unwelcomed, as he ripped my shorts off and tossed them to the floor. At that moment, I knew I had him. The man who had stood by my

side, distant yet always within reach, was now as lost in the tempest of passion as I was. We were two souls caught on the edge of madness—wild, reckless, and utterly free.

Adonis's lips left mine, trailing a path of fire down my neck, pausing to brand his claim on the sensitive flesh where my pulse beat wildly. I arched into him as he continued his descent, each kiss, each nibble sending jolts of electricity through my veins. When he finally nestled between my thighs, the heat of his breath teased over my skin, and I couldn't suppress the shiver that wracked my body.

"Mmm, shit," I whimpered, anticipation coiling tight within the pit of my stomach.

"Shh, just feel." He murmured against the trembling tenderness of my inner thigh.

My body jerked forward, my spine bowing off the bed as his tongue touched my raw flesh, right where I was most exposed—most needy. It was both a discovery and a homecoming. His mouth moved with an expertise that contradicted the emotionless mask he wore daily.

He didn't stop, his lips suckling, pulling sensations from me I didn't know were possible. When two fingers slipped inside, stretching and filling me, I cried out, gripping the sheets for dear life. My world narrowed down to the relentless pleasure he drew from me, the way he worshiped me with his mouth, the steady thrust of his hand. It was too much and not enough all at once.

"Fuck, Adonis, I'm..." The words broke off into a gasp as another wave of pleasure crashed over me, leaving me drenched in its wake.

My thighs trembled as he snaked up my body, his movements predatory yet achingly tender. His eyes locked onto mine, dark with lust and something fiercer, something that said he knew exactly what he was about to take and give.

“Are you sure?” he rasped, poised at my entrance.

“Please,” I whispered, not caring about anything but the need to have him fill the aching emptiness deep inside me.

He didn’t ask for any more permission; he just took me, burying himself deep inside me with a low growl that made my toes curl. His thick erection stretched me in a delicious way, one that made my skin crawl from the tension and pleasure. He groaned as he snapped back and pushed forward. I locked my legs around his waist, urging him deeper. He began to move, his hips rolling in a rhythm that felt as ancient as time. Each thrust nudged me closer to oblivion, his body a perfect counterpoint to my own.

“God, yes.” I panted, meeting him thrust for thrust.

“Fuck.” Adonis panted as his hips moved even faster. “You feel so fuckin’ good, Xenobia.”

He loomed over me, a silent promise etched into every line of his face. As we moved together, I realized that this was more than physical. This was surrender, acceptance. We were two halves of a whole, dancing on the edge of forever.

Adonis’s movements stilled, and he hovered above me, eyes searching mine for an answer to a question he hadn’t asked. The raw need in his gaze was something I’d never seen before, something that told me the man who had always been a fortress was now laying himself bare.

“I’ve always wanted you, Nobi. Always,” he confessed through a rough whisper, his lips brushing mine with every word.

The intensity of his admission sent shivers racing down my spine. “I’ve always

wanted you too.”

His breath fanned hot against my skin as he leaned in closer. “Take me, baby. Fuck me. Move with—me,” he commanded as his voice broke.

Something primal within me ignited. His plea sent a thrill that spiraled through my veins. I arched my back to meet his thrusts, desperate for more. I couldn’t get enough of him. His hands caressed my C-cup breasts, squeezing them roughly as he continued to pound into me. Pain and pleasure swirled together, an intoxicating mix that stole my breath.

“Harder,” I whimpered, pressing my nails into his back. “Don’t stop, Adonis. Fuck this pussy harder. I can take it.”

Adonis obliged, shattering my name between gritted teeth as he pounded into me mercilessly. The world narrowed to the intensity in his eyes, a stormy color that seemed to pull me deeper into the tempest of our passion. Our hands roamed with reckless abandon, mapping the landscape of once-claimed territory, his rough palms igniting fire trails on my skin, my fingers tangling in his dark curls, reeling him closer.

My hips rose to meet his, matching the urgent rhythm he set. Each movement was a discovery, each connection a revelation. The sensation of him filling me completely stole my breath away. It was more than physical. It was elemental.

Sensation after sensation coursed through me until I couldn’t take it any longer.

“Donny,” I whispered, voice trembling as pleasure built, coiling tight within me.

His heavy gaze never left mine, even as his movements grew more urgent, our bodies moving together in a rhythm that sent us both higher. I felt the rush of my release

approaching like a wave ready to crash over us, and I clung to him, desperate to stay connected to him and only him.

“Fuck! Don’t stop! Don’t stop! I’m about t-to—”

My breath caught in my throat as my orgasm hit me hard, carrying me over the edge together.

“Nobi,” he groaned, his voice strained as if he was fighting battles only he could see. Then, as I shattered around him, he succumbed to his own climax, joining me in the exquisite oblivion.

He pulsed within me, each throb making me his in a way that words never could. We were entwined, hearts syncing, breaths mingling, a perfect union of chaos and calm. His lips moved down my neck, biting and sucking, marking me as his possession. We lay there for a moment, panting and spent, and then Adonis pulled out and collapsed next to me on the bed. He was still hard, his dick leaking cum onto the sheets beneath us.

As our breathing slowed, he kissed me softly, a tender contrast to the fervor that had just consumed us. His lips were a soothing balm to the raw energy that still buzzed beneath my skin. He pulled me into the curve of his body, our limbs still entangled, his presence an unspoken vow of protection. The tension between us had always been there, simmering just below the surface. Now that it had boiled over, I wasn’t sure how we’d ever return to normal or if I ever wanted to.

Adonis picked me up in his arms and carried me to the bathroom. The shower hissed to life, steam billowing around us after a few minutes as he pulled me under the hot spray.

I winced. “Ouch!”

“Shit, sorry,” Adonis muttered, adjusting the temperature.

His hands were gentler, so different from the fierce warrior I’d seen earlier. He grabbed a washcloth, carefully cleaning my body from head to toe as if he were in my servitude.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, but my voice shook. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving me shaky and raw. “You were the one who was actually fighting. I should be catering to you.”

Adonis’s lips quirked into a half-smile before he looked down at his arms. “Trust me, Nobi. I’ve had worse.”

I wanted to tell him not to call me that again, but the word sounded different now. Softer. Almost like a caress. We didn’t speak much after that, letting the water wash away the night’s horrors. I traced the scars on Adonis’s hard, tatted chest, wondering how many times he’d nearly died protecting my family, protecting me.

“What the hell are we doing?” I whispered finally, resting my forehead against his shoulder.

Adonis’s arms tightened around me. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I can’t stay away from you anymore, Xenobia. Even if it fuckin’ kills me.”

The water ran cold, but I shivered for a different reason. Reality started creeping back in as we stepped out, wrapping ourselves in towels.

“They’ll try again,” I said, staring at our reflections in the foggy mirror. “The Toussaints. They won’t stop until—”

“I know,” Adonis acknowledged, his voice hard. “But I won’t let them hurt you. I put

that on everything I love.”

I turned to face him, my heart aching. “And who’s going to protect you?”

He didn’t answer; he pulled me close and kissed me softly. But as I clung to him, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were living on borrowed time. How long could we keep this up before everything crashed around us? I closed my eyes, trying to memorize every detail of the moment. Because deep down, I knew the truth. In our world, there were no happy endings.

We made our way back to the bed, and I lay there with my leg draped over his hips. Adonis kissed me again. The kiss was different—deeper, hungrier as if he wanted to memorize the taste of me. He was ready to lose himself in me again, to chase the dawn with the heat of our bodies. And I couldn’t wait to feel his dick nested inside me again. It was where he belonged.

Adonis was a dangerous man. A protector. His body was a shield, his loyalty unbreakable, and it was all for me. At that stolen moment, I knew he was mine unconditionally and indefinitely. No matter what my father might think or what consequences awaited us when dawn broke, Adonis was mine. Always.

“Again,” was all I managed to utter, the word a breathless invitation.

“Again,” he affirmed, his lips curving against mine in a promise.

Why the fuck not? If death were waiting beyond the mansion walls, we’d at least go out with a bang.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Adonis

The next day.

The shadows crept along the hallway walls, dancing in the dim light like restless spirits. I paced, each step echoing my racing thoughts. My phone buzzed again. It was the second time I'd ignored my father's call. I knew I needed to call him back and check in, but I couldn't focus on him. My mind kept drifting back to last night. To Xenobia. To her soft skin under my rough hands, her breathy moans in my ear.

Fuck. I needed to get it together.

I ran a hand over my beard, trying to shake off the memory. "Get your head in the fuckin' game, Adonis," I muttered.

A movement at the top of the stairs caught my eye. There she was, like a vision from my darkest fantasies. Xenobia stood there, head held high and eyes blazing, as usual. My breath caught in my throat.

"I'm going to my studio," she announced, her voice ringing through the silent hall. "And you can't stop me."

Damn. How quickly she went from passionate lover back to bratty-ass princess. That shit gave me whiplash sometimes.

"Like hell you are," I growled. "It's not safe out there, Xenobia. You know that. They got into the garden last night. There's a breach, and we haven't found it yet."

She descended the stairs, each step deliberate. “That’s your job, not mine. I have work to do.”

I clenched my jaw, torn between admiration for her fire and frustration at her stubbornness. A part of me wanted to throw her over my shoulder, carry her to the panic room, and lock her inside. Another part wanted to bend her over my knee and spank that fuckin’ attitude right out of her pretty, privileged ass. Maybe next time. The thought sent a jolt of heat through me.

“This isn’t up for debate,” I said, calming my voice. “You’re staying put until we neutralize the fuckin’ threat. End of story.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t control me, Adonis. I’m not one of your underlings to order around. You work for me.”

Xenobia was infuriating enough to make me want to call her out of her fuckin’ name. I refrained. She was deliciously irresistible like that. I stepped closer, crowding her space. “No,” I agreed, my voice low. “You’re much more dangerous than them.”

Focus, dammit. I was about to form a rebuttal when she sighed.

Then her chin lifted, and her eyes met mine. “Fine. But I’m not sitting around doing nothing. I need to move, to do something.”

A wave of nasty, freaky ass ideas struck me, but I kept them to myself. If it were up to me, I’d have her ass climbing the walls and yelling my name all day and night.

“Meet me in the gym in ten. We’ll do some sparring.”

Her eyes lit up with interest. “Really?”

I nodded, already regretting the suggestion. Close contact, sweaty skin, adrenaline pumping... this was a dangerous game. But if it kept her safe and occupied, I'd play it. As she turned to go, I watched her walk away, my body thrumming with conflicting desires. Protect her. Possess her. Keep her safe. Make her mine.

Fuck, I was in trouble.

I stepped outside, the cool evening air a welcome relief against my skin. My fingers shook slightly as I returned my father's phone call. I expected another update—another reminder that his men circled the waters like sharks, waiting to strike again. They'd retreated to lick their wounds, but word had it my father was on the hunt for an assassin, and I needed to know the truth.

"Son." A gruff voice answered on the third ring. "Why the fuck haven't you been answering my calls?"

"Sorry. I was handling an issue with one of the guards at the warehouse."

"What issue?"

I glanced over my shoulder, gears churning to come up with a lie quickly. "Just had to remind a couple of niggas who the fuck was really in charge now, that's all. It's handled."

"Good. We don't have time for any fucking rifts in the system."

"Are you any closer to coming to an agreement with Don Hawthorne?" I probed.

"Fuck an agreement. It's all or nothing as far as I'm concerned."

"What do you mean?"

A low, evil chuckle crackled through the line. “Let’s just say it won’t be long before the Toussaints run all of New York.”

My stomach twisted as I gritted my teeth. “When’s the next move on the Hawthornes? I want in.”

“You’re right where I want you to be for now, Adonis. All you need to be focused on is preparing to expand our territory.”

“So you plan to move in on the Hawthornes soon?”

“I’ve ordered my men to stand down for now.”

My brows snapped together. “What? Why?”

“Because I put a three million dollar hit on his daughter’s head. I’ll make it an even four if they can take out her father too.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. It was worse than I’d feared. With that kind of price on their heads, I knew the best of the best would be putting in their bids. I ended the call with my mind racing. I headed to the gym, trying to shake off the dread with each forward march. Xenobia was already there, dressed in a black sports bra and matching leggings, bouncing on her toes with eager energy radiating off her.

“Ready to get your ass kicked?” she taunted while pulling her hair up into a high messy bun.

I forced a smirk. “Dream on, princess.”

As I demonstrated a basic takedown, my hands on her hips to guide her stance, electricity crackled between us. Her scent filled my senses. I struggled to keep my

touch clinical and professional.

“Like this?” she inquired, gracefully executing the move.

I nodded, throat tight. “Good. Now, if someone grabs you from behind...”

We moved through various scenarios, my body hyperaware of every point of contact. Her determination was evident in her set jaw and intense gaze. She was a quick study, absorbing and executing each technique with laser focus.

As Xenobia mirrored my movements, her body fluid and determined, I couldn’t help but admire her strength. She wasn’t just some mafia princess—she was a fighter, through and through. Each time our skin brushed, it sent an electric jolt through me, like touching a live wire. I tried to push it down, focus on the task at hand, but damn if it wasn’t getting harder by the second—literally and figuratively.

“You’re holding back,” she accused, eyes flashing. “Don’t treat me like I’m made of glass, Adonis. I can take it.”

I sighed, running a hand over my waves. “Trust me, Nobi, I’m not.”

But she was right. I was holding back—just not in the way she thought. As we circled each other on the mat, memories flooded back. The night of the attack. The fear in her eyes. The blood...

“Why’d you leave?” The question caught me off guard, her voice softer now. “After... you know. I thought...”

I froze, the weight of unspoken words hanging between us. This was the moment I’d been dreading and longing for in equal measure. Would she hate me after she found out the truth about who my father was? Would she banish me from her presence and

cut me out of her life for good?

My heart galloped in my chest as I parted my lips to speak. “I didn’t leave willingly. I was kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped? What? By who?”

“My father.”

“Adonis. None of this makes any sense. Why would your father kidnap you? I mean, you were a grown-ass man at the time.”

“That’s because my father is Cecil Toussaint,” I admitted. The words tasted like ash on my tongue.

Her body went completely still as her mouth fell open. “W—what the fuck?”

I stepped toward her, and she took a few steps back, eyes bulging. “Nobi, please let me explain.”

“Were you in on it?”

“What? No. I would never be.”

“Then how, Adonis? How are you standing here telling me that the man who tried to take my life, the monster who sent men to kill my mother and brother, is your fucking father? What kind of twisted fucking fairy tale is this?”

“Xenobia, I—”

“Does my father know?” I nodded, and she scoffed. “Of course he fucking does!”

Because I don't fucking matter in this house! I never did."

I reached out to grab her, holding her squirming shoulders in place as she tried to break free from my grasp. "That's not true, Xenobia. Please just listen to me! I never knew who my father was until the night of the attack."

Her aggressive body movements froze momentarily. "I-I don't understand."

I sighed heavily. "Do you remember when I came to live here when I was twelve? Do you remember when you found out my mother died shortly after? She was murdered by the same hitmen my father sent that day—the same men who almost killed you. I didn't know your family had secretly harbored me here for all those years, protecting me from him. The night of the attack, my father's men killed your mother for being my mother's best friend and taking me in for so many years. I've lived with this cloak of invisible guilt over me for six fucking years, Nobi. As badly as I wish I could, I can't change who my father is."

"So why are you here? Because you feel guilty for being the reason my fucking brother and mother were killed?" she barked, starting to squirm again.

"Part of it!" I yelled, arching my brows toward my crisp hairline. "The other part is because I couldn't stand the thought of anything fucking happening to you again."

She scoffed before mustering up enough strength to push away from my grasp. I let her go that time. "How am I supposed to believe anything you fucking say when you're the son of the fuckin' enemy?"

"I know you don't know this, but I fought off men by the dozen trying to get to you—trying to get to all of you. Y'all were my family, Nobi. I'd have died to keep you safe. I killed your attacker and held you for a split second before being taken by the other half of my bloodline I never even fuckin' knew existed."

She slowly shook her head. “I’ve prayed for your father’s death every night for the past six years.”

“Me too. I’ll never, ever claim the Toussaint bloodline. That’s on my mother.”

Xenobia fell speechless for a few seconds. “So that’s where you’ve been all this time? Working under your father?”

I dipped my chin. “Yes, all while keeping in secret contact with your father. Who do you think warned him that the Toussaints were planning to attack and kill you? You’re the only reason I’m here, Xenobia. Can’t you see my whole fuckin’ world revolves around you?”

Xenobia’s eyes widened, a mix of shock and something else—hope, maybe—flickering across her face.

“I would always ask what happened to you, why you weren’t at the funeral, why the things in your room had been moved out. My father told me we could never speak of you again.”

“I wanted to reach out,” I continued, my voice rougher than intended. “To tell you the truth so many years ago. But your father... that man’s got a way of making offers you can’t refuse.”

I watched the realization dawn on her face, years of misunderstanding crumbling away. Part of me wanted to reach out to bridge the gap between us. Xenobia’s eyes locked onto mine, searching for every drop of the truth. I could almost see the gears turning in her head, reevaluating every interaction since I’d returned. It was like watching a wall crumble, brick by brick.

“All this time,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “I thought you didn’t care.”

I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to pull her close. “I’ve always cared, Nobi. More than I should. All these years... I’ve watched you. You were never without my protection.”

She took a step toward me, and I instinctively tensed. This was dangerous territory. But damn if I didn't want to throw caution to the wind and close that gap between us.

“Does your father know you’re here?”

“Hell no.”

“How are you doing any of this without his knowledge?”

“My father had been pressing me to oversee a specific part of our territory that would put me close to your mansion. I’d been turning him down for years, but when I found out about his intention to attack your family again, I knew I had to do whatever I had to do to make sure that didn’t happen.”

“So, you’re risking your life just being here?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“For me?”

“All for you.”

Xenobia nodded with a new understanding in her eyes. As she turned to gather her things, I smiled. She wasn’t the fragile girl I’d left behind years ago. This Xenobia was a force to be reckoned with.

I watched her leave, her silhouette framed by the fading light streaming through the

high windows. Pride swelled in my chest, and a fierce protectiveness threatened to overwhelm me. She was strong, sure, but the world out there was brutal. And I'd be damned if I let a mothafucka touch her again.

The mansion's silence pressed on me as I stood guard outside Xenobia's room. Night had fallen, and with it came a new set of dangers. Every creak, every shadow had me on high alert. But if I was being honest, the real threat wasn't out there. It was right here, inside these walls, inside my fucked-up head.

I couldn't stop thinking about her—the way she'd looked at me in the gym, all fire and determination, how her walls crumbled with the knowledge of the truth I'd been harboring for six years, and how she was when we were together and weren't at each other's throats. We were perfect.

A soft click behind me nearly made me jump out of my skin. I spun around, hand already on my piece, only to find Xenobia standing in her doorway. The dim light from her room cast a halo around her, making her look like some kind of angel.

"Adonis," she whispered, her voice low and husky. She didn't say anything else; she held my gaze and stepped back, leaving the door open.

An invitation. A challenge. A fucking minefield.

I knew I should've turned away, continued my patrol, and pretended I hadn't seen. But my legs had other ideas. Before I could stop myself, I crossed the threshold and stepped into the lion's den.

"You shouldn't be inviting strange men into your room, Nobi," I growled, trying to inject some humor into the situation. "Especially not in a house full of killers."

Xenobia's lips curved into a smile that was equally sweet and dangerous. "You're not

strange, Donny. You're you."

I watched Xenobia move toward her bed, her steps slow and deliberate. My throat went dry as she perched on the edge, her eyes never leaving mine. Goddamn, she was beautiful. And deadly. Like a rose with thorns sharp enough to draw blood.

"You gonna stand there all night?" she asked, one eyebrow arched in a challenge.

I took a step closer, then another. My body was on autopilot, drawn to her like a moth to a flame. "This is a bad idea, Xenobia," I muttered, even as I closed the distance between us. "Your father's sleeping down the hall. Besides, you said one night. This makes two. What happens when it becomes three, four, five?"

She tilted her head, those fierce eyes boring into me. "Since when do you care about bad ideas, Guardian?"

I was close enough now to catch the scent of her soap and something darker, more dangerous. My hands clenched at my sides, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her. "I care about keeping you safe," I said, my voice rougher than intended. "And that includes from me."

Xenobia shifted on the bed, her bare leg brushing against mine. A jolt of electricity shot through me, and I had to bite back a groan. She looked up at me, a mix of vulnerability and defiance in her expression.

"What if I don't want to be safe from you?" she whispered. "What if I want to feel you deep inside me again—tonight, tomorrow, or however many other times I'd like?"

Fuck. I was losing the battle, and I knew it. My mind was a war zone, duty and desire locked in mortal combat. I should leave. I needed to leave.

But as Xenobia's soft hand reached for mine, I knew I was well and truly fucked. I sank onto the bed beside her, my heart hammering like a junkie's after a fresh fix. The darkness swallowed us, thick and heavy, hiding our sins from the world outside. But it couldn't hide them from me. Every breath, every slight movement of Xenobia's body next to mine, made my dick swell in my pants.

"We can't," I muttered, more to myself than to her. But my traitorous hand was already reaching out, tracing the lining of her scarred jaw.

Xenobia leaned into my touch, her skin warm and soft under my calloused fingers. "Why not?" she inquired. "Give me one good reason, Adonis."

I could've given her a hundred. Her father. Her brother. My loyalty. My duty. My father's assassins breathing down our necks. But at that moment, with Xenobia so close that I felt the heat radiating off her body, none seemed to matter.

"Because," I said, my voice raw. "Once I start, I won't be able to stop."

She shifted closer, her lips brushing my ear. "Then don't."

That's when I knew Xenobia Hawthorne would be my undoing and my salvation.

I pulled her closer, burying my face in her hair. This was madness—pure, unadulterated insanity. And I couldn't bring myself to stop.

"Xenobia, one night is a mistake, but two makes it real. Think about what you're asking here."

"I don't care anymore, Adonis... We were robbed of what we could have been for years, and I don't want to wait for permission anymore. It's always been you."

My heart simultaneously soared and burned. She was right. I'd done everything asked of me, and she was the only thing that I'd ever had that brought me some semblance of joy, of peace. There was no more running. I planned to bury my dick inside her and find my way back home.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Xenobia

The kitchen echoed with my laughter, a foreign sound that startled even me. Damara's voice crackled through the phone, her latest gossip about the McClendon family's scandal lighting up my world like a firefly in the darkness.

"No way." I gasped, leaning against the cool marble countertop. "He didn't!"

Damara's giggle confirmed it, and I felt a rare lightness bubble up inside me. I was just a girl sharing secrets with her best friend for a moment.

The floorboards creaked behind me, and my spine stiffened. I didn't need to turn to know it was Daddy. It was the first time he'd been back for more than twenty-four hours at a time, and his presence filled the room like a storm cloud, heavy and ominous. I felt his eyes boring into my back, probably wondering what had his usually somber daughter in such high spirits.

"I gotta go," I murmured into the phone, the joy evaporating from my voice.

I quickly hung up and turned, plastering on a neutral expression. My father stood in the doorway, his gaze sharp enough to cut glass. The wrinkles around his brown eyes deepened as he studied me, searching for... what? Did he even know?

"Good morning, Daddy," I said, my voice steady despite the knot forming in my gut.

He grunted in response, moving to the coffee pot with measured steps. The silence stretched between us, thick and suffocating. I busied myself by preparing a light

breakfast of scrambled eggs and buttered toast. I hadn't been in the mood for the sausage gravy and fried potatoes the cooks made. Still, the simple movements were a poor distraction from the tension in the room.

Then, the air went cool, and I turned to see Adonis's towering, six-foot-two frame filling the kitchen's entrance. My traitorous heart skipped a beat, but I kept my eyes fixed on the eggs sizzling in the pan. My father's gaze flickered between us, and I could practically hear the gears turning in his head.

Adonis nodded a silent greeting, his presence adding another layer to the already complex atmosphere. I wondered, not for the first time, what went on behind his piercing eyes. Did he feel the weight of my father's suspicion as intensely as I did?

As I plated the food, my mind wandered to darker places. How long could we keep up this charade? How long before my father's business travels subsided and his overprotective nature turned into something more dangerous? How long before I confronted him about hiding the truth from me for all these years? The eggs suddenly looked unappetizing, a reminder of how quickly things could go from seemingly normal to nightmarish within these walls.

My stomach began a slushy churn, and in an instant, I didn't know how to feel. I couldn't shake that he'd known the truth about Adonis's whereabouts all this time and chose to lie to me about it. I felt less and less like a part of the family and more like an heirloom that needed to be locked away in a vault—only to be seen and not heard.

Damara called back, my Bluetooth ringing in my AirPods as I answered it. If no one were going to carry on a conversation, I'd just talk to someone who brought me joy.

Her voice chirped in my ear, a constant lifeline to normalcy. "Rude to just hang up on me. So anyway, I told Christoper if he thinks he can just—"

“Uh-huh,” I replied, only half-listening as I maneuvered around the kitchen. I poured a cup of coffee while keeping an eye on my father’s brooding figure at the table. Multitasking was my superpower, born from years of walking on eggshells around everyone—everyone except Adonis.

I cleared my throat before tapping the mute button on my phone so that Damara wouldn’t hear me. “Would you like a plate, Daddy? There’s more than enough.”

He grunted again, this time with an accompanying nod.

“You too?” I asked, making brief eye contact with Adonis.

He dipped his chin, and I turned back to the stove, my heart palpitating.

“Did you hear me?” Damara’s voice chimed in my ears, bringing me back to our conversation.

I quickly unmuted the phone. “Sorry, girl. Say it again.”

I slid a plate in front of Papa, then Adonis. Our fingers brushed, sending a jolt through me. I yanked my hand back like I’d been burned.

“You gonna eat that phone for breakfast, Xenobia?” My father’s gruff voice cut through my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn’t see with my back turned to him. “No, Daddy. Just finishing up with Mara.”

As I served myself, I kept the chatter going with Damara as a thin veil of defiance. Letting my father think I was just a typical, phone-obsessed young woman was better than him guessing the truth about the storm brewing in my heart every time Adonis

was near.

I sat down, still yammering into the phone, but I felt my father's eyes boring into me. His gaze flickered between me and Adonis like a pendulum of suspicion. The old man didn't miss a fucking beat. I'd give him that. Every bite he took was calculated like a silent warning that he was always watching and would stay one step ahead. Adonis kept his head down, methodically working through his eggs and toast. But I caught the tension in his bearded jaw, the way his knuckles tightened around his fork. He felt it too.

"Listen, I really gotta go this time, girl," I said, my appetite nonexistent.

"For real?"

"Yeah. I'll call you later."

I pressed the earpiece to disconnect, and the sudden silence was deafening. My father's eyes never left me as I picked at my food, shoveling it into my mouth without tasting anything. I held my breath while trying to chew the food into small enough pieces to swallow without throwing up. My skin crawled under his scrutiny. I wanted to scream, to flip the table, to do anything to break the suffocating tension. But I didn't. I couldn't. That wasn't how things worked in the Hawthorne family. We smiled, ate, and pretended everything was fine while the walls closed in around us.

I risked a glance at Adonis. His eyes met mine for a split second, and at that moment, I saw everything I felt reflected at me: the longing, the fear, the goddamn impossibility of it all. I looked away first, my heart pounding so loud I was sure they both could hear it. This thing between us—fierce and nameless—would get us both killed.

I couldn't take it anymore. I shoved my chair back, the legs bunching up the rug that

covered the hardwood floor. “Well, that was nice,” I muttered, desperate to escape.

But the universe had other plans. My foot caught on the edge of that stupid antique rug my father insisted on keeping. One second, I was upright. The next, the world was tilting sideways. My stomach lurched as I braced for impact. But it never came.

Instead, strong arms wrapped around me, catching me mid-fall. I found myself pressed against Adonis’s chiseled chest, his heart hammering against my ear. Time seemed to stop. His cologne filled my senses, and I wanted to bury my face in it. I felt the heat of his skin through his shirt and the strength in his arms as he held me. For a moment, just a moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like if things were different. If we weren’t who we were.

But we were who we were. And this—whatever this was—between us was a death sentence waiting to happen. My father would sooner kill Adonis than give his blessing for me to marry the son of his enemy.

I pulled away, my legs shaky. “Thanks,” I said, not meeting his eyes. I felt my father’s gaze burning into us, assessing what had unfolded right before his eyes.

Adonis’s voice was low, meant only for me. “Careful, Xenobia. These floors can be treacherous.”

I didn’t know if he was talking about the floor or the minefield we danced through daily. Maybe both. My heart raced, pounding so hard I was sure it would leave my chest. I stepped back, trying to distance myself, but Adonis’s warmth lingered on my skin. The pull toward him was maddening, and I couldn’t shake it.

“I’m fine,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else. But I wasn’t fine. Not even close.

Every fiber of my being screamed to close that gap again, to feel the safety of his arms. But I couldn't. I risked another glance at him, catching the intensity in his eyes before he masked it. God, how I wanted to—

“Xenobia!” My father's voice cut through the air like a whip, making me flinch. “My office. Now.”

The irritation in his tone was clear as day. I'd seen that look before—the narrowed eyes, the tight set of his jaw. It never ended well.

“Coming, sir,” I called back, my voice steadier than I felt.

As I turned to leave, Adonis's hand brushed mine, just for a second. But it was enough to send electricity shooting up my arm. I walked toward my father's office, each step feeling like I was marching to my execution. The weight of unspoken words and forbidden desires pressed down on me, threatening to suffocate me.

I was halfway there when my phone buzzed in my pocket. The sudden vibration made me jump, my nerves already frayed from the tension with Adonis and my father's aggressive summons. My hand trembled as I reached for it. Something in my gut screamed danger, and I'd learned the hard way to trust those instincts. I hesitated, fingers hovering over my pocket. Did I really want to know?

“Fuck it,” I muttered, fishing out the phone. The screen lit up, revealing a message from an unknown number. My heart hammered against my ribs as I swiped to open it.

The words hit me like a punch to the gut: “The sins of The Guardian will be paid in blood. Your days are numbered, Xenobia.”

The blood drained from my face. This was personal. How the fuck had they gotten my number? My knees suddenly turned to water, and I leaned against the wall for

support. The world seemed to tilt on its axis, reality warping around me. I'd known danger all my life, but this felt immediate. Visceral.

"Shit," I whispered. "Shit, shit, shit."

I glanced down the hall toward my father's office as my mind raced. How the hell was I going to tell him about this? And what would it mean for all of us? Did we have a rat in the ranks? Or worse, had Adonis's father found out he was here protecting me? The phone felt like a grenade in my hand with no pin in sight. I wanted to throw it, to pretend I'd never seen the message. But I couldn't. This was my life—our lives. And ignoring it wouldn't make the threat go away.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed off the wall and continued toward the office. Each step felt like walking through molasses, the weight of the threat pressing down on me. I needed a drink—or ten. But first, I had to face my father and somehow find the words to tell him our world was about to come crashing down around us. On the bright side, maybe he wouldn't mention anything about Adonis. I knocked on the large door, my knuckles colliding against the dark wood. My heart was pounding so hard I swear he could probably hear it through the door.

"Come in," his gruff voice called out.

I stepped inside, the familiar scent of cigars and leather hitting me like a punch to the gut. My stomach soured. My father was at his desk, looking every bit the mafia boss he was. His hardened brown eyes narrowed as he took me in.

"Xenobia, is there—" he started to ask, his tone sharp.

I swallowed hard before cutting him off. "Daddy, I... I just got a text. I think it's from the Toussaints."

His face darkened instantly. “Show me,” he demanded, holding out his hand.

As I handed over my phone, my fingers trembled. I watched his expression change as he read, his jaw clenched tight.

“Adonis!” he suddenly bellowed, making me jump. “Get in here, now!”

I heard rapid footsteps in the hall, and then Adonis was there, all coiled tension and alert eyes. His gaze met mine for a split second, and I felt that familiar jolt of electricity.

“What’s happened?” Adonis probed.

My father tossed him my phone. “The Toussaints. They’ve made their next move.”

As Adonis read, I sank into a nearby chair, suddenly exhausted and still queasy. The weight of our family’s legacy, all the blood and violence, it all came crashing down on me at once. I’d never felt so trapped, so utterly nauseous, so completely fucked.

“What do we do now?” I inquired, hating how small my voice sounded.

They exchanged a look that sent chills down my spine. Whatever was coming, I knew it would be worse than before. Much worse.

“We take the war to them,” my father announced. “I’ve been making alliances. We have men at the ready. All I have to do is make the call.”

As I left the office, those words echoed in my head. War. Fuck. I’d lived in a world of shadows and danger my whole life, but this... this felt different, like we were standing on the edge of a cliff, about to plunge into the abyss.

I caught my reflection in a hallway mirror, noticing the haunted look in my eyes. This was my life now—constantly looking over my shoulder, always waiting for the other shoe to drop. And for what? A family name? A legacy built on blood and fear? I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. The walls of our grand house suddenly didn't feel so safe, not even with The Guardian standing across the room.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:52 pm

Adonis

The mahogany door slammed behind me, echoing through the hallway. My blood boiled, but I forced it to ice over. I couldn't let emotion cloud my judgment. Not now. Not with Xenobia's life on the line. My father or one of his assassins had drawn the line in the sand, and it was time to go all in.

I stalked down the corridor, my footsteps silent on the plush carpet. My mind raced, dissecting every word of that fucking text. How did they know her number? That was a private line, only for family and Damara.

A maid scurried past, averting her eyes. I watched her go, suspicion gnawing at my gut. Was it her? Or the groundskeeper I glimpsed through the window, replanting and pruning roses with meticulous care? Hell, it could be any of them. I didn't trust anyone. I leaned against a wall, letting the cool marble seep into my skin.

Breathe, Adonis. Think.

"Everything alright, Cardelo?"

I turned to see Giovanni, Don Hawthorne's right-hand man and the ex-head of security, eyeing me with concern. Or was it caution?

"Fine," I grunted. "Just planning our next move."

He nodded a little too eagerly. "Of course. We're all behind you, one hundred percent."

I forced a smile. “Good to hear. I’ll need everyone’s cooperation.”

As he walked away, I cataloged every detail—the slight hitch in his step and how his hand twitched toward his pocket. Innocent quirks or tells of a guilty conscience? I was too paranoid to let anything slide without question.

I pushed off the wall, heading toward the security room. It was time to review the footage and analyze every grainy frame for a clue. As one foot overtook the other, I felt the weight of eyes on me. Friend or foe, I couldn’t say. I needed to focus. There was a mole in our ranks, a threat that could bring down everything we’d built.

Titus was already reviewing the footage from the last week, working hard to figure out what went wrong with the perimeter’s defenses. He looked up as I entered and nodded when I instructed him to search for a mole.

I stalked through the estate’s winding corridors, needing air and space to clear my head. But as I rounded a corner into the conservatory, I froze.

There she was. Xenobia. Alone. Unguarded.

She stood among the lush greenery, trailing her fingers along a leaf. The early afternoon sun filtered through the glass ceiling. My throat went dry.

She turned, those piercing eyes finding mine. “Donny,” she said, her voice low and husky. “I was secretly hoping you’d find me.”

The air between us crackled with tension. I took a step forward, then caught myself. She was looking at me with such love it burned through my veins.

I swallowed hard, fighting to keep my composure. “Xenobia, we need to talk. About... about the dangers we’re facing.”

My voice came out rougher than I intended, a mix of concern and something darker, more primal. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms. Focus, nigga.

“There are risks,” I continued, forcing each word out. “Getting close to me... it’s not safe for you. I’m a target. That means anyone associated with me becomes one too. When my father took me away, your father never lost contact with me. I became a mole in my father’s operation, knowing I’d have to pay for my sins one day. The Toussaints are after you, but if my father knows I’m here protecting you, his assassins will be out for my blood too,” I confessed.

Xenobia took a step closer, her eyes never leaving mine. “And you think that’s supposed to shake me?” she challenged, her tone laced with that familiar defiance that thrilled and terrified me. “I’m a Hawthorne, Adonis. Danger has been my shadow since the day I was born.”

I shook my head, frustration building up inside me. “This is different. The threat is inside our walls now. And I can’t... fucking you is one thing, but opening the door to this, to us, will destroy us both. You know it too.”

She closed the distance between us, close enough that I could smell the faint scent of vanilla on her skin. “You don’t get to make that decision for me,” Xenobia said softly, her words like steel wrapped in silk. “I choose my own path, my own risks. And I choose to stand by you, come hell, high water, bullets, or brute.”

My breath caught in my throat. Dammit, if she wasn’t impressive in her stubbornness. And it was going to get her killed if she got too close to me.

“You don’t understand,” I growled, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her. “I’m not a good man, Xenobia. The things I’ve done... the blood on my hands... You deserve better than that. Better than me.”

But even as I said the words, I knew they were hollow. Because deep down, in the darkest corners of my soul, I wanted her. Needed her. And that terrified me more than any blood relative or enemy ever could.

“There is nobody better than you, Adonis.”

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding in my chest. Xenobia’s words echoed in my ears. Maybe if I find the mole and neutralize the threat ...

“Come with me,” I said, my voice rougher than intended. “I’ve got something to show you.”

I led her through the winding corridors of the estate, my hand hovering near the small of her back but never quite touching. The air felt thick with tension, or maybe that was just me. My palms were sweating. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been that nervous.

We stopped in front of a heavy wooden door I had installed just days prior across the hall from the panic room. I watched Xenobia’s face, searching for any hint of her thoughts.

“Close your eyes,” I murmured.

She raised a questioning eyebrow, that defiant spark dancing in her gaze. “You know how I feel about you ordering me around.”

I couldn’t stifle the smirk that tugged at my lips. “Humor a nigga, Nobi.”

She sighed dramatically but complied. I pushed open the door, guiding her inside. The scent of fresh paint and canvas hit me, and I prayed to a God I’d long since stopped believing in that she’d like it.

“Alright,” I said softly. “Open ’em.”

Xenobia’s eyes flew open, and she just stood there for a moment, frozen. Then her lips parted in a small ‘o’ of surprise, her gaze darting around the room. Easels stood at the ready; brushes and paints of every color imaginable lined the shelves. A large window looked out over the gardens, flooding the space with natural light.

She gasped. “Adonis,” she whispered. “You did all this... for me?”

Something warm expanded in my chest, melting the ice I’d spent years building around my heart. “Yeah,” I admitted gruffly. “I’d pluck the stars right out of the sky for you if you asked me to. You should know that by now, Nobi. Besides, I figured you needed a safer studio. This is about as good as it’ll get until everything’s sorted.”

She turned to me, her eyes shining with an emotion I couldn’t quite name. It made my throat tight and my skin too hot for my clothes. “I love it. It’s perfect,” Xenobia acknowledged, her blooming smile like the sun breaking through storm clouds.

I shrugged, trying to play it cool, even as relief washed over me. “It’s nothing,” I muttered. “Just thought you might like it, is all.”

But as I watched her move through the room, trailing her fingers over blank canvases with awe, I knew it was so much more than nothing. It was everything. She was everything. I leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, as Xenobia set up her first canvas. My eyes never left her, scanning for threats out of habit. But for once, the constant tension in my muscles eased a bit.

She mixed colors with a practiced hand, humming softly to herself. The sound filled the room, drowning out the usual noise in my head—the endless calculations, the paranoia, the weight of duty.

“You gonna stand there all day like a statue?” Xenobia teased, glancing over her shoulder at me.

I grunted. “It’s my job to watch you.”

“Well, at least make yourself comfortable. There’s a chair over there.”

I hesitated, then grabbed the chair and positioned it where I could see both Xenobia and the door. As I settled in, something unexpected happened. The chaos in my mind faded away. Watching her paint was like... I don’t know, like finding an oasis in the middle of a war zone. Her brush strokes were sure and steady, creating something beautiful out of nothing. It hit me then—that was what she did to my life too.

Shit. I should be finding the mole, protecting her, but here I am, wanting to capture her sunshine and carry it in my back pocket.

I cleared my throat. “So, uh, what are you painting?”

Xenobia’s lips curved into a secretive smile. “You’ll see when it’s finished.”

“Mysterious ass.” I muttered, but I couldn’t help smirking back at her.

As she worked, I found myself relaxing, really relaxing, for the first time in, hell—I couldn’t even remember. It scared me how much peace her presence brought me, how much I craved it. I was so lost in my thoughts that I almost didn’t notice when Xenobia set down her brush and turned to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Your turn,” she said, reaching for my arm.

“What are you—” I started, but then I felt the cool touch of her paintbrush on my skin. I could’ve stopped her. Should’ve, even. But I didn’t. Her touch was light,

almost teasing, as she painted something on my forearm. I watched, transfixed, as the letters took shape.

M-I-N-E.

Fuck.

And then she kissed me, and it was like a dam breaking. All the pent-up desire, all the love I'd tried to ignore—it all came rushing out. I kissed her back, hard and desperate, one hand tangled in her hair while the other pulled her closer. It was exposed and so fuckin' wrong, but it felt more right than anything ever had.

I pulled back, my mind reeling. The taste of her cherry-flavored lip gloss lingered on my lips, a reminder of what I'd just done—what we'd just done. I stared at her, torn between desire and duty. The word she'd painted on my skin seemed to burn, a brand I couldn't ignore. Mine. Was I hers? Could I be?

“Are you sure nothing has changed between us now that you know who my father is?”

She nodded, eyes filled with certainty as they stationed on mine. “I'm positive. Why is that so hard for you to believe?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, feeling the stress cloud my head. “I don't know. I just can't shake the feeling that you'll wake up one day and resent me for everything.”

“Look at me, Adonis.”

I sucked my teeth. “What?”

“I said look at me. You wanna know what your problem is?”

“What’s that?” I inquired, looking her square in the eye.

“You think in order to be loved, you have to be loveable.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

“I think you’re saying you love me.”

“I think I’m saying I am too,” she confessed.

“Say it again.”

She smirked and reached out, her paint-stained fingers intertwining with mine. “I love you, Adonis Cardelo. I don’t care what you’ve done. I don’t care how many mistakes you’ve made. What I feel in my heart for you isn’t your mother’s love, and it damn sure ain’t your father’s. I can’t take away your guilt, but I can promise to love you through it,” she vowed.

My Xenobia. Perhaps it had always been this way. She was mine, and I was hers. Doomed to a fate neither of us could change. We stood there, inches apart, her chest heaving as she looked up at me... waiting.

“I love you too, Xenobia. Always have,” I acknowledged. “Whatever happens, I’ll protect you.”

“We’ll protect each other,” she corrected with a smirk.

“Alright, Nobi. Have it your way.”

And just like that, I caved, giving in to the love that had been between us all along.
Fuck what anybody had to say about it.

Xenobia

It was a quiet, moonlit night at the mansion. The clock mocked me. Its ticking was a constant reminder of Adonis's absence. I paced my room, each step stoking the bile threatening to spew from my throat. Logically, he was scouring information, trying to find the mole, but realistically, I wanted him in bed beside me. The clock flashed an angry one o'clock a.m., and I was tired of waiting.

I paused at the window, tracing a finger along one of my scars. The cool glass reflected a face I barely recognized anymore—eyes too hard, jaw too set. It wasn't me. This wasn't living.

"Fuck it," I muttered, resolve crystallizing. "I'm done waiting."

I carefully eased open my door and slipped into the shadowy hallway, my heart bucking like a wild bronco against my ribcage. The mansion felt different at night, oppressive—like it was trying to swallow me whole, but I wouldn't let it. Not tonight. I crept past paintings of stern-faced Hawthorne patriarchs, their eyes seeming to follow my every move.

At the top of the grand staircase, I hesitated. What if Adonis catches me? What if — No. I squared my shoulders. I knew the risks of sneaking out, but the uncertainty was eating away at me. My period had been a few days late. As much as I wanted to chalk it up to stress, I knew all too well how many times I'd allowed Adonis to spill his seed inside me. Dressed in all black, I moved silently down the stairs, avoiding the creaky floorboards I knew all too well. I descended quickly, each step carrying me closer to freedom. To danger. To knowing. The foyer loomed ahead, moonlight

spilling through stained glass. Almost there. Just a bit further and—

A floorboard creaked behind me.

Shit.

I froze, my heart hammering against my ribs. Slowly, I turned, praying it was just my imagination. But there he was, a dark silhouette cutting through the moonlight, his presence as unmistakable as it was unwelcome.

“Going somewhere, Xenobia?” Adonis’s voice sliced through the silence, sharp enough to draw blood.

I lifted my chin, defiance surging through me. “What’s it to you, Guardian?”

He stepped closer, and I saw the fury etched into his features. But something else was there, too, and my stomach twisted.

“You know damn well what it is to me,” he growled. “Don’t play games.”

I sucked my teeth, the sound hollow even to my ears. “I’m not.”

“Then what are you doing sneaking around so late?”

“I need to go to the store.”

His brows cinched together. “The store? For what?”

“It’s personal.”

“Cut the bullshit, Xenobia, and go back to your room,” he ordered.

“I’m serious, Adonis. I need to make a store run. It’s important.”

“To get what? Why can’t you put in a delivery order?”

“So I can have all the guards looking at my tampons? Is that what you want, Adonis?” I fumed.

Adonis frowned. “Shit, Nobi. That’s T-M-I.”

“Are you happy now? Maybe next time, you’ll take my word for it.”

“C’mon, I’ll take you.”

I paused. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

Reaching the back door, I took a deep breath and slowly opened it, wincing at the slight creak it made at the forty-five-degree angle. We slipped out into the cool night air and headed to the garage, where he quietly started one of the less conspicuous cars and drove toward the gates. As Adonis maneuvered through the dark streets, my mind galloped with thoughts of how I’d purchase a pregnancy test under his watchful eye, what it might reveal, and how the results could change our lives forever.

I huffed while focusing my attention out of the passenger window. “Why the fuck can’t I be useful? How am I supposed to run this shit one day if no one gives me anything to do?”

Adonis’s jaw clenched. “I—”

I rolled my eyes before cutting him off. “That’s what I thought. I’ll be the patriarchal

figurehead, but in reality, useless as a three-dollar bill, and everyone will know it.”

He glanced at me, his eyes softening momentarily, and I felt my determination flicker. Dammit, why did he have to look at me like that?

“Xenobia, please,” he said, his voice low. “I can’t protect you if you—”

“I know you mean well. I swear, I do. But I want to fucking live, Adonis. Can’t you understand that? I need to do something to help,” I said, hearing the tremor in my voice.

He ran a hand down his beard, frustration radiating off him in waves as he stopped at a red light. “So what’s your fuckin’ plan, Xenobia? What happens if you get hurt? Or worse, when a nigga’s got a gun to your head ready to finish what he started?”

I swallowed hard, fighting back the lump in my throat. “Then, at least, I’ll have lived.”

I watched his face, the moonlight casting shadows that made his expression sharper. He took a step closer, and suddenly, I was hyperaware of every inch between us.

“Nobi,” he said, his voice softer. “I get it, alright? But trying to sneak out in the middle of the night for some fuckin’ feminine products ain’t the way.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to ignore how my heart was racing. “Oh yeah? Then what is?”

His eyes searched mine, and he heaved a heavy sigh. “We’ll find something for you to do and learn so that you can help more, alright? It’s not like you don’t know how to shoot a gun or administer basic first aid. You’re not useless, Nobi. You’re the center of our world. My world, at least.”

The intensity in his gaze made me look away. I couldn't deal with it, not now. Not when everything inside me was screaming to run. Not that it would matter. He'd just catch me, lock me in my room, and incinerate the key.

"Whatever," I muttered, folding my arms across my chest.

We arrived at the nearest twenty-four-hour pharmacy, parking a safe distance away to avoid drawing any unwanted attention. I pulled up the hood of a black jacket and hopped out, hoping to blend in with the night's shadows. Once inside the store, I asked Adonis to find me some Ibuprofen while I quickly located the aisle with the feminine products. Luckily, the pregnancy tests shared the same shelves. My eyes scanned all the options, hands trembling as I grabbed one and tucked it underneath my armpit.

With the test hidden underneath the boxes of tampons I knew I probably didn't need, I headed toward the counter, avoiding direct eye contact with the night shift cashier.

Adonis approached me midway. "I got the Ibuprofen."

"Toss it on the counter. I'll be done in a minute," I told him.

He stepped away, allowing me to purchase my goods in peace. After shoving the plastic shopping bag into my purse, we hurried back to the car, and Adonis drove us back to the mansion. My nerves were on ten the entire way home, anticipating what would happen after I took the test.

"I'm going back to bed," I announced as soon as we stepped back into the mansion.

Adonis nodded, and I felt his hand on my lower back as he guided me toward my room. I tried to ignore the warmth that spread from his touch. Back in my room, I locked myself in the bathroom and paced like a caged animal. My mind was a mess,

replaying every moment with him. The way he looked at me, the concern in his voice. It was driving me up a fucking wall.

I sat on the edge of the closed toilet seat, the plastic box feeling as heavy as a boulder in my hands, despite its weightlessness. What would he do if the test was positive? He was already overbearing enough. Adding a baby to the mix would mean I'd never get a chance to breathe. But then again, I was happy to be potentially carrying the heir of someone I loved instead of having to endure some old, wrinkled man climbing on top of me and forcing me to have his babies.

"Fuck, I'm too nervous to take it tonight. Maybe I'll do it in the morning," I mumbled.

I glanced at my phone; it was still early morning, and the first rays of sunlight wouldn't show for hours. Maybe I'll sleep on it.

"No. I have to know now."

My chest inflated with a deep breath as I stood up, my legs turning to mush. The sound of the box ripping open somehow seemed enhanced in the stillness. My eyes pinged from left to right across the unfolded paper, carefully reading the instructions. After all, it was my first time. I followed the steps to a T, trying my best to keep my mind from going down the rabbit hole of thoughts swirling around in my head. After what felt like an eternity of waiting to pee, I placed the test on the edge of the sink and sat on the closed toilet seat, waiting for the longest three minutes of my life. What would I do if it turned up positive? How would I tell Adonis? My father?

There was a knock at the door while the timer on my phone sounded off. I jumped, feeling like a jittery mess.

"Yeah?" I called out.

“You good?” Adonis inquired.

“Yeah,” I lied. “I’m fine. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I drew a lungful of air and stood to my feet, slowly approaching the edge of the sink as my heart hammered away. I closed my eyes and picked up the test. My lids blinked open, and I stared at the results window. Two lines appeared, visible and sharp. Positive.

Fuck.

Pregnant? Me? A baby with Adonis? The son of my family’s enemy?

A part of me fluttered with the excitement of creating a new life with the only man I’d ever loved. Still, there was also an unexpected ache of disappointment and fear—fear of what would happen when our world found out about our child, the protection that would entail, and the responsibility to keep someone other than myself alive.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I muttered as an emotional storm overtook me.

I pushed out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding and flopped back down on the closed toilet seat, my mind spiraling faster than I could process. I couldn’t help but think about the future and all the changes to come. I hadn’t expected motherhood to be the next chapter in my life, but the universe was funny like that sometimes.

I must’ve dozed off at some point because the next thing I knew, I was jolted awake by a commotion outside. Shouts and curses echoed through the halls, sending my heart into overdrive.

I scrambled out of bed, nearly tripping over my feet as I rushed to the door. My hand

hesitated on my stomach for a second before I yanked the door open, curiosity overriding caution.

“Twenty-two-seven-fourteen.” I mumbled the code to the panic room as I descended the staircase.

The sight that greeted me at the bottom made my blood run cold. In the middle of the foyer, there was a bloody mess of... something. It took my brain a moment to process what I saw, and when it did, I felt my stomach lurch. It was a human head. Mutilated, eyes gouged out, with a knife sticking out of its skull. A piece of paper was pinned to it, words scrawled in what looked disturbingly like blood: “ You’ll pay for your sins, Guardian. You’re next.”

“What the fuck?” I whispered, my hand flying to my mouth.

Adonis was there, as always, his face a mask of controlled fury as he barked orders at the security team. His eyes met mine briefly, and I saw a flicker of concern.

“Get everyone inside, now!” he commanded, his voice cutting through the chaos. “Seal all entrances. No one in or out without my say-so.”

I had one job—get to the panic room. Yet, I stood there, frozen, as people rushed around me. The air felt thick and suffocating, and I was overloaded with fear and anger.

“Xenobia.” Adonis’s stern voice snapped me out of my daze. He was suddenly in front of me, his hands gripping my shoulders. “Are you alright?”

I nodded numbly, unable to tear my eyes away from the gruesome display. “The Toussaints... your father again?”

His jaw clenched. “This is his style—brutal and direct.”

“What do we do? And who... who was that?”

Adonis’s gaze hardened, a determination I’d never seen before blazing in them. “One of your dad’s guys. Mine would never go alive. Wash your hands of this shit, Xenobia. We’ll protect you. Your father is almost done finalizing plans, and then we will go on the attack.”

Despite everything, a warmth bloomed in my chest at his words. I wanted to say something, to tell him about his baby growing in my womb, to thank him, but the words caught in my throat. Instead, I just nodded, trying to convey everything I couldn’t say with my silent gaze.

“Come on. Back to bed, Nobi,” he instructed softly, grabbing my hand and pulling me upstairs as my father ran down the stairs and saw the head.

His eyes popped wide as he gripped the railing for balance. One look and I knew his stomach had soured on sight, just like mine.

“Ah fuck,” he said, “It’s Giovanni. Someone clean this fucking mess up. Adonis, get your ass to my fucking office! Now.”

Adonis dipped his chin as he ushered me into my room, leaning down to kiss me on the forehead. “Xenobia, I have to deal with this, but I will be in bed before the sun rises all the way, alright?”

“What time is it?”

He glanced at his gold watch. “Quarter to four.”

I nodded, halfway smiling up at him. “Okay, Adonis, just... be safe,” I said softly, needing him now more than ever.

He nodded stiffly, his eyes dark and stormy. “Always, Nobi. Sleep, alright? I’ll deal with this shit and your father.”

With that, he was gone, leaving me alone in my room, haunted by the image of that severed head and the knowledge that tomorrow would likely bring a whole new level of hell, all with the secret knowledge that I was carrying his baby.

Adonis

Like a statue carved from ice, I stood there as Don's words lashed at me. The old man's face was twisted, veins bulging in his neck as he railed about the security breach. My jaw clenched, muscles twitching as I fought to keep my expression neutral.

"You had one fucking job, Adonis! One job!" Don Hawthorne roared as he slammed his fist on the mahogany desk so hard the crystal decanter rattled. "How the fuck could you let this happen?"

The accusation stung like a fresh wasp puncture, but I didn't flinch. Years of training had honed my self-control to a razor's edge. Still, frustration simmered beneath the surface, threatening to boil over if he kept talking shit.

"With all due respect, Don," I said, my voice low and measured, "I take full responsibility for what happened. But perhaps if Giovanni hadn't insisted on that ill-advised outing—"

"Don't you dare speak ill of the dead by blaming him." Don Hawthorne's fiery brown orbs flashed dangerously. "You are my head of security! You fucked up."

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. "And if he hadn't gone off on some solo fucking mission, he'd still be alive!"

The words hung in the air between us, charged with defiance. I knew I was treading on thin ice but refused to back down. Not when Xenobia's safety was at stake.

Don Hawthorne's face darkened. "Watch yourself, boy. You may be like a son to me, but don't forget your fucking place, alright? That's not all. You somehow allowed them to drop the fucking head in our estate. So what now? Huh? Have you caught the mole? From where I'm sitting, it might as well be fucking you. Your coming here has caused more grief than if I'd just left Giovanni in charge!"

The reminder of my outsider status stung more than I cared to admit. I'd given everything to the Hawthorne family—bled, killed, and deceived for them. Yet, in moments like this, I was acutely aware of the invisible barrier that would always separate us. I wasn't blood. I was a secret friend of the family—a pet.

"Giovanni is dead, if I may remind you. And Don, with all due respect, I'm getting tired of hearing the same shit from you. Take the chip off your shoulder and understand what it's taken for me to protect your family. I'm risking my life every day being here."

He looked like I'd slapped him, slowly rising and placing his hands flat on his desk. "Mind your fuckin' tongue, boy. If you're referring to my daughter, I'll never give you the permission you seek to tarnish her off the strength of who your father is. Her mother, may she rest in peace, would turn over in her grave if I allowed it. Yours too. Marrying my daughter is out of the question. Get the fuck back to work, and don't let me catch you laying a hand on my princess. Mind your fucking place, or it'll be your head my men clean up next."

"My place," I said, struggling to keep the bitterness from my voice, "is doing whatever it fuckin' takes to keep this family safe. Even if that means telling hard truths."

We glared at each other across the desk, neither willing to back down. The clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, each stretching into eternity. His hard fist slammed onto the desk, making me flinch despite myself.

“Enough! I’ve had it with your insubordination, Adonis. You have twenty-four hours to resolve this security breach, or I’ll deal with your ass myself. Do I make myself fuckin’ clear?”

I swallowed hard, tasting bile. Every instinct screamed at me to argue, to make him see reason. But I knew that look in his eyes. There’d be no getting through to his stubborn ass.

“Crystal,” I spat out, my jaw clenched so tight it ached.

I turned on my heel and stalked out of the office, barely resisting the urge to slam the door behind me. My blood boiled, rage simmering just beneath the surface. I wanted to punch something, to scream, to let out all the frustration building inside me. Instead, I took a deep breath, forcing my face into a mask of calm. I couldn’t afford to lose it now. Not when there was so much at stake.

I found Titus waiting in the hallway, his eyes questioning. “Well?”

“We’ve got work to do,” I said snappishly. “Gather the team. We’re locking this place down tighter than Fort fuckin’ Knox.” As we walked, I verbally outlined the plan forming in my mind. “Double the patrols, especially around Xenobia’s quarters. I want every inch of security footage from the past week reviewed. And start vetting the staff again. Someone had to have helped that sick mothafucka get in.”

Titus nodded, his expression grim. “You’re certain we have a mole?”

“I think we can’t rule anything out. I know it’s not our guys, but Don’s gotten soft,” I replied, my mind racing through possibilities. “I trust you to handle the interrogations. You’ve always had a knack for getting people to talk.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across his face. “Consider it done, boss.”

I clasped his shoulder, grateful for his unwavering loyalty. In a world where I could trust so few, Titus was a rare constant. “Good man. Let’s catch these mothafuckas and show Don Hawthorne what real security looks like.”

I pushed open the door to Xenobia’s bedroom, my heart rate slowing for the first time since the shitstorm began. She was there, perched on the window seat, a book forgotten in her lap as she gazed at the sunrise. So much for getting some sleep. The budding sunlight caught the silvery scars on her arms, and something twisted in my chest.

“Adonis,” she called out, her eyes lighting up as she turned. Damn, she was beautiful. And completely mine.

I crossed the room in three strides, drinking in the sight of her. “You okay?” I asked, my voice rough with concern.

She nodded, reaching for my hand. “Better now,” she murmured, and I felt the last of my defenses crumble.

I pulled her close, burying my face in her hair. “I can’t lose you,” I whispered, the words I’d held back all day finally spilling out.

Her fingers traced the line of my jaw, feather light. “You won’t,” she said fiercely. “I’m right here.”

I kissed her desperately and hungrily. She met me with equal dedication, her body arching into mine. We stumbled toward the bed, a tangle of limbs and half-shed clothes. And then there was nothing but her—the taste of her skin, the sound of her breath catching, the feel of her nails raking down my back. For a few blessed moments, I could forget Don Hawthorne’s ultimatum, the breach, and the constant danger surrounding us. There was only Xenobia, warm and alive beneath me, her

heartbeat thundering in time with mine.

“I need to shower. Join me?” I suggested.

The cold air nipped at my damp skin as we emerged from the shower. Wrapped in an oversized bath towel that smelled faintly of fresh detergent, I watched Xenobia shiver.

“You okay?” I inquired, my voice a low rumble, filled with concern as I leaned against the shower door, my arms crossed over my wet chest.

She nodded though her teeth chattered. “Yeah. Just cold.”

In two strides, I closed the distance between us. My hands were gentle but firm as they wrapped her towel around her trembling shoulders, letting the warmth of the dry cotton and my touch seep into her bones. She leaned into me, seeking solace in the safety I provided.

“Here, let’s get you warm,” I murmured, pulling her closer.

The towel slipped, gapping slightly at her chest as my fingers brushed her shoulders, sending sparks skittering across my fingertips. They trailed down, slow and deliberate, tracing the line of her scarred collarbone. My heart hammered in my chest, each beat screaming her name. Whatever was left of my soul was all for her.

“I love you,” I whispered, my hand pausing at the slope of her breast. But then, with a resolve that seemed to snap like a taut wire, I cupped her through the towel. My thumb grazed her nipple, and she sucked in a sharp breath, the sensation spiraling straight to the head of my dick.

My hands found their way to her hair, grasping, pulling her closer as my lips landed

on hers. She moaned into my mouth, the sound vibrating through me. When I pulled back, her breaths were as ragged as my own.

“I love you too. I’ve always loved you. Only you,” Xenobia’s admission tumbled from her lips without hesitation. It felt like the most natural truth I’d ever heard, as if it had been waiting to be acknowledged since we met.

“Look at you,” I whispered as my eyes roamed over her face as if seeing her for the first time. “You’re so fuckin’ gorgeous.”

“Touch me,” she urged, desperate to feel more of me, to break down the walls that had tried to separate us for too long.

I obliged, my fingers resuming their exploration with a newfound fervor. Every brush, every caress was a discovery, charting unknown territory that felt forbidden and inevitable. I watched her, entranced by the intensity in her sultry gaze, the way her lips parted slightly as she focused on controlling her moans so that we wouldn’t get caught.

“Feels so good,” she managed to breathe out, the world narrowing down to the sensations I invoked, hotter than the steam from the shower and more intoxicating than the danger lurking outside the mansion.

For the moment, there was only Xenobia and the fire I ignited within her. I groaned a low, primal sound that seared through my veins as I scooped her into my arms and carried her toward the bed.

I let her sink to the mattress, and I followed, as eager to touch her as she was me. With a swift motion, I pulled her closer, our bodies aligning with an intimacy that had my heart racing at a million beats per minute. We faced each other, nose to nose, the heat of her breath mingling with mine.

Then, I moved again, sliding down her body like a man driven by a hunger that'd been starved for too damn long. My mouth found the sensitive skin of her neck, and she tilted her head back to give me more access, lost in the sensation of my lips on her. My journey continued, kisses trailing lower. When I reached her breasts, a moan escaped her lips before she could contain it. I sucked a nipple into my mouth, teeth grazing gently.

Her hands clenched the sheets as her back arched to press her breast deeper into my mouth. My fingers slipped between her thighs, teasing at the wetness there. I didn't give a fuck if she was on her period or not. A period didn't stop shit but a sentence in my book. I watched her intently, enthralled by every shiver I drew out of her, every hitched breath. When I finally lowered my head, replacing my fingers with my mouth, all I tasted was sweetness. The pressure of my tongue was insistent and rhythmic, driving her toward something bigger than she'd ever felt before.

She purred. "Mmm, fuck."

Xenobia writhed beneath me, each flick of my tongue sending sparks flying, each suck of her clit pulling her closer to oblivion. Her thighs tightened around my neck, guiding me, urging me to take her exactly where she needed to go.

"Please, Adonis, don't stop," she pleaded hoarsely.

I sucked her clit harder, drawing a sound from somewhere deep inside of her as new pleasure pulsed through her nerves. Her hips found a rhythm against my mouth, the heat of my tongue setting off fireworks against her skin. My fingers, buried deep inside of her, curled in a way that made her body shake with pleasure, teetering on the brink of something monumental.

"You're so fuckin' tight, Nobi," I rasped out, my breath hot against her slit.

A moan slipped past her lips. “It’s all for you. All these years, I’ve saved myself for you.”

The sound that tore from my throat was deep and possessive, and it lit a fire in my belly that threatened to devour us both. My eyes consumed her, drinking in every twitch of her eyes and mouth as mine latched onto her clit as my fingers thrust into her with an urgency that told her I was as close to the edge as she was.

“Adonis,” she cried out, her voice laced with desire and a hint of impatience.

Her fingers clawed at the covers, trying to anchor herself in a reality that was quickly slipping away under the waves of pleasure I elicited from her. But I didn’t budge. My movements became relentless, each new spark of pleasure a sensation that pushed her higher and higher until she shattered. Her body convulsed around my fingers as ecstasy blanketed every nerve ending inside her.

“Oooh, fuck! Yes! Yes! Adonis, yes!”

And then, while she was still trembling from the aftershocks of my tongue, I pushed my dick into her, feeling the heat of her body tighten around my girth. Her gasp was music to my ears, and I began to move my hips—slow and sure at first, then faster and harder as she matched me stroke for stroke. Her breath hitched in time with my thrusts, her nails digging into my broad shoulders. How she tasted and felt was better than anything I’d ever known.

Her arms winded around my broad shoulders, pulling me closer. Every movement was a discovery, each gentle thrust a revelation. Heat radiated off my body as I moved above her, my hips rolling in a slow, purposeful rhythm that shook the very core of my being. I lowered my head, capturing one of her nipples between my lips. She arched into me, craving more of my delicate torture. As I sucked and nipped at the sensitive bud, a deep groan escaped from my throat, the vibrations sending sparks

of pleasure straight to my throbbing erection.

“God, Nobi.” I murmured against her skin, my hot breath blowing against her. “You’re so beautiful. I’d die for you, you know that?”

Her hands explored the brawny muscles of my back, tracing the contours of my biceps. Everything was magnified—the sound of our breathing, the slickness of our bodies sliding together, the profound sense of rightness that enveloped me.

“Look at me,” she whispered, pulling my face to meet hers. Our eyes locked, and impulsively, I pressed my lips to hers, tasting the salt of her skin, the faint bitterness of desire on her tongue. The kiss differed from the others, charged with a raw need that left us both gasping.

“I love you so much,” I admitted, the truth of my feelings crashing over me like a tidal wave.

My breath hitched as my body tensed above her. The air in the room seemed to crackle with electricity. Our combined heat became a living thing between us. My strong arms shifted, and before she could catch her breath, I had her legs hoisted over my shoulders, opening her up even more to me.

“Cum for me, Xenobia,” I growled, my voice raw with desire. My fingers returned to her clit, teasing circles that made her squirm. “I’m so close, but I need you there with me, baby.”

My words were a desperate plea tangled with command. Every stroke of my fingers was precise, my knowledge of her body apparent in the way I siphoned pleasure from her.

“Say it,” I growled. “Say you’re mine.”

“Yours,” she said through panting breaths. “Only yours, Adonis.”

It was all I needed to hear. I let go, my dick contracting as I spilled my seed deep within her heat. I let out a guttural sound of release, my body shuddering above her. I made sure she felt every thick inch of me pulsing deep within her. Her hips rose to meet mine, riding the aftershocks of her climax as I filled her up.

The world narrowed down to the space where our bodies were joined, the shared breaths that saw us through the storm of our release. I collapsed onto the bed in a sweaty mess, our labored breaths mingling in the quiet of the night.

“Tomorrow might never come,” I murmured, cradling her against my chest, my heart beating rapidly under her ear. “But right now, this is all that matters.”

“Right now,” Xenobia echoed, tracing the muscle lines on my arm, feeling the strength that had always protected her. “You’re mine.”

“And you’re mine,” I acknowledged, my lips finding her forehead in a kiss so tender it made my heart ache. “No matter what comes, I love you.”

We held each other like that, two souls adrift in a world too dangerous for the love we’d found. But with her in the sanctuary of my arms, life was perfect, even if only for a stolen slice of time.

A few hours later, I woke with the world's weight on my shoulders and Xenobia’s warmth pressed against my side. When my lids lifted to see the sun peeking through the curtains, my mind started plotting out the day’s interrogations.

“Adonis?” Xenobia’s voice was sleep-rough, her hand reaching for me as I slipped out of bed.

“Gotta go, Nobi,” I murmured, kissing her forehead quickly. “Duty calls.”

She caught my wrist. “Kiss me first.” I smiled and leaned down, pressing my lips to hers as she moaned. “I wish you didn’t have to go. Spend the day with me. Make love to me until I can’t feel my legs.”

“I will. When this is over, I promise you can have as much dick as your heart desires. But right now, I have to figure this out. I promise, after all this shit is sorted, it’s you and me. Fuck everybody else.”

She sighed and rolled over. As I dressed, I ran through my mental checklist. The staff was likely already gathered for breakfast, which was the perfect time to start shaking shit up. I’d start with the newer hires and work up to the older guards. Someone knew something, and I was gonna find out what, even if it killed me.

The kitchen was a beehive of nervous energy when I walked in. Conversations died mid-sentence, eyes flicking to me and then away. Good. Let ’em sweat.

“Morning, everyone,” I said, keeping my tone casual as I poured a cup of coffee. “Titus, a word?”

He appeared at my elbow, silent as always. We stepped into the hallway, and I lowered my voice. “I need eyes and ears everywhere today. You let me know anyone who acts out of character or falls out of step.”

Titus gave a barely perceptible nod. “Consider it done.”

I spent the next few hours circling the grounds like a shark, picking off staff members one by one. Some stammered, some glared, some looked ready to piss themselves. But nobody broke. Not yet.

“Where were you between midnight and four o’clock this morning?” I demanded to know from a maid who’d been with the family for years.

She wrung her hands, eyes darting from left to right. “In... in my room, Mr. Cardelo. Sleeping.”

“Anyone who can verify that?”

There was another shake of her head, and my gut twisted. Another dead end, or something more? By lunchtime, the whole house was on edge. I could practically smell the fear, thick as smoke. Good. Let that shit simmer. Someone will crack, eventually.

But all I could think about was Xenobia, alone in her room, vulnerable. My chest ached with the need to go to her and make sure she was safe. But I couldn’t. Not until I’d rooted out the fuckin’ rat. I’d burn the whole fucking place to the ground if that was what it took to keep her safe.

Hours later, I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d been interrogating everyone to no avail. I felt her father’s looming disapproval as if it were a physical brand on my skin. The walls were closing in, and I needed to see Nobi. To touch her. To make sure she was still real. I made my way to her room, my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. When I opened the door, there she was. My Xenobia. My everything.

“Adonis,” she called out, relief flooding her expression.

I crossed the room in two strides and pulled Xenobia into my arms. She fit against me like she was made from my rib, all soft curves and warm skin. I buried my face in her dark curls, inhaling the scent that was uniquely her.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to come sooner, but...”

She pulled back, those fierce eyes searching my face. “Did you find anything?”

I shook my head, frustration gnawing at my gut. “Not yet. But I will.”

Xenobia’s hand came up to cup my cheek, her thumb tracing the scar on my jaw. “Talk to me, Donny. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I closed my eyes for a brief second, leaning into her touch. “If I can’t find this mole...”

Her eyes softened, and for a moment, I saw a glimpse of the vulnerability she usually kept hidden. “You will,” she whispered. “You will because that’s who you are. And when you’re done, come back to me.”

I pulled her close again, my heart racing. “I couldn’t stay away from you, even if I tried,” I growled.

As I held her, my thoughts churned, piecing together the fragments of information I’d gathered. Someone in this house was a traitor. And I was going to find out who. A sharp knock at the door jolted me out of my thoughts. I tensed, instinctively pulling Xenobia closer.

“Boss, it’s Titus,” a muffled voice called out from the other side of the door.

I exhaled, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly. “Enter,” I called out, my voice gruff.

Titus burst in, his eyes wild, chest heaving. “We got ’em, boss,” he panted. “The mole. Caught the mothafucka trying to sneak out through the service entrance.”

My heart raced, a mix of relief and adrenaline flooding my system. “Where?” I

demanded.

“Chained up in the cellar,” Titus replied, a grim smile playing on his lips. “Thought you’d want the first crack at ’em.”

I nodded, my mind already shifting gears. “Good work,” I said, patting Titus on the shoulder as I moved past him.

Xenobia’s hand caught my arm. “Adonis,” she whispered, her eyes wide with concern.

I cupped her face, pressing a quick, hard kiss to her lips. “I’ll be back,” I murmured against her mouth.

As I strode down the hallway, my steps echoing off the marble floors, I felt the familiar icy calm settle over me. This was what I was made for—the hunt, the interrogation, the protection of what was mine. The cellar stairs loomed before me, dark and foreboding. With each downward step, the air grew colder and damper. The scent of fear and desperation hung heavy in the air. My hand ghosted over the gun at my hip, a comforting weight. Whoever waited for me, I was ready. I had to be. For Xenobia, the family, and everything I’d sworn to protect.

The final step creaked under my foot, and I paused, listening to the ragged breathing from the shadows ahead. My jaw clenched, anticipation coiling in my gut like a viper ready to strike.

“Time to talk,” I growled into the darkness, my voice low and dangerous. “And you better start praying to whatever God you believe in that I like what I fuckin’ hear.”

Xenobia

My stomach flip-flopped with a nervous determination as I approached my father's office, hand trembling as it hovered over the doorknob. The polished brass gleamed dully in the low light, revealing my reflection and mocking my hesitation. My heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to break free. I sucked in a shaky breath, bracing myself.

"Get it together, Xenobia," I muttered. "You've faced down killers. You can face your own father."

But this was different in many ways. It wasn't about survival. It was about love. About Adonis and his unborn baby growing inside me. About defying everything I'd been raised to believe. I twisted the knob and pushed the door open before I could change my mind. The hinges creaked ominously as I stepped inside.

His office was shrouded in shadows, lit only by a single desk lamp. The dim glow caught on the edges of antique furniture and glinted off the barrel of the gun that rested on his desk. And there sat Don Vincent Hawthorne—one of the most feared men in New York, who just so happened to be my father. His massive oak desk dwarfed him, yet he filled the room with his presence. Power and danger radiated from him in obvious waves. I suppressed a shiver. What am I doing?

But then I pictured Adonis's handsome face, those big brown eyes, that cocaine-white smile. He looked at me like I was the most priceless thing in the world. The safety I felt in his arms. I aligned my shoulders and raised my chin assertively. I was Xenobia—fucking—Hawthorne. I'd survived numerous assassination attempts. I'd

clawed my way out of the rubble of my old life. And I would fight for this love and our baby with everything I had. I didn't want to hide it anymore.

"Daddy," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "We need to talk."

I approached his desk, my heels clicking against the hardwood floor. Each step felt like I was walking to my own execution, but I kept my gaze locked on his. No weakness. Not now.

"My beautiful Xenobia," he acknowledged, his voice a low rumble. He set down his pen and leaned back in his leather chair, giving me his full attention. "What's on your mind?" he inquired, his tone calm but laced with curiosity as his dark eyes scrutinized me.

I swallowed hard. Fuck, why is this so difficult? I'd rehearsed the words a thousand times in my head, but now that it was time for them to come out, they all seemed to stick in my throat.

"I, uh..." Real smooth, Xenobia. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I wanted to discuss something important with you."

His thick eyebrow arched slightly. "Important enough to interrupt my work?"

I nodded, hoping he couldn't see how my hands were shaking. "Yes. It's about... my future."

He gestured for me to continue, his expression unreadable, almost statue-like. "I'm listening."

"I've made a decision," I said, my voice growing stronger with each word. "About who I want to be with—who I love."

“Oh?” he asked, his gaze narrowing to a slit.

I felt an unnerving chill run down my spine. But I plowed on, my heart racing. This is it—the moment of truth. I took a deep breath, steadying my shaky legs. “First, I want you to know how grateful I am for everything you’ve done to protect me, Daddy. The security, the sacrifices... I know this hasn’t been easy for you.”

His expression softened slightly, but his eyes remained sharp. “Your safety has always been my priority, Xenobia. You know this.”

I nodded as my throat tightened. “I do. And that’s why... I need to talk to you about Adonis.” I saw my father’s jaw clench when his name left my lips. Shit. I rushed on, trying to get the words out before he could interrupt. “He’s been more than just a bodyguard to me. He’s become... important. Very important.”

There was a heavy, deafening silence for a second as my father’s expression shifted from shock to scrutiny. He leaned forward, his fingers steepled under his chin. “Important how, exactly?” His voice was low, dangerous. “What are your intentions with Adonis, Xenobia?”

My heart hammered against my ribs as I opened my mouth to answer, but his hardened gaze pinned me in place, searching for something in my eyes. I felt naked, exposed like he could see right through me, right to the core of my feelings for Adonis. What if he forbade it? What if he sent Adonis away or, worse, had him killed? The thought made my chest ache. But I had to be honest. I owed him that much, at least. I took a deep breath. The scars on my skin seemed to burn, reminding me of everything I’d survived—everything Adonis had protected me from.

“I’m in love with him, Daddy,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper but steady as steel. “I’m in love with Adonis Cardelo.”

My confession hung in the air, heavy and dangerous. I watched my father's face with my heart wedged in my throat. For a moment, he was perfectly still. Then his eyes narrowed, and he leaned back in his chair with a creak of leather.

"Nobi," he said, his voice a mix of concern and authority that made me feel like a little girl again. "You don't understand the consequences of what you're saying. A relationship with Adonis... it's not just dangerous; it's impossible."

I felt my jaw clench. "Why? Because he's Toussaint's son?"

His palm slammed against the desk, making me jump. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"Why didn't you tell me he was Toussaint's son?"

"Because he's been trained to kill, to protect this family at all costs, and I didn't want to compromise you. We all have roles, Xenobia. Do you think he can simply put his duty aside? Do you think his father would hesitate to use this against us? It's maddening that you'd even come to me with this shit. I knew bringing him back here was a fucking mistake. Pick somebody else."

"It wasn't a mistake," I protested, my head high. "Yeah, I know I initially kicked and screamed about it, but bringing Adonis back was the best thing you could've ever done for me. He's someone you know well. Someone who's pledged and proven his loyalty to our family time after time. Who could be a better choice for me?"

"Since you know who his father is, you know why I cannot grant your request, Nobi. There are too many risks."

I swallowed hard, fighting back tears. "I know the risks, Daddy. But Adonis, he makes me feel safe. Whole. Like I'm more than just the scars on my skin or the price

on my head.” I paused to take a deep breath. “He’s not a danger to me in any sense of the word and never has been. But you knew that, didn’t you? How many times did I ask you about him after Mom and Santo died? Huh? How many times, Daddy? You knew all along he was Toussaint’s son, and you still broke my fucking heart.”

His eyes softened for a moment, but his voice remained steady. “Love isn’t enough in our world, Xenobia. It can be a weakness or a vulnerability. And in this case, it could destroy everything we’ve built.”

I felt my heart breaking, but I couldn’t back down. Not now. Not when Adonis’s future—our future—hung in the balance. I gulped down a steadying breath as I hardened my gaze. The shadows in the office seemed to deepen, mirroring the darkness I felt creeping into my heart. But I wouldn’t let it win.

“Daddy, I’m sorry, but you’re wrong,” I said, my voice low but fierce. “Love isn’t our weakness. It’s our strength. The scars I bear? They taught me how to survive. But Adonis? He’s teaching me how to live.”

His eyes flashed dangerously. “Survive? You think you know about survival?” His voice rose, filling the room. “I’ve kept this family alive for decades through blood, bullets, and fire. You have no idea the sacrifices I’ve made!”

I flinched but held my ground. “You’re right, I don’t. But I know what I want. No, what I need.”

My father scoffed. “What you need is to remember who the fuck you are. A Hawthorne. My daughter. The future of this family!”

“And this baby is the future of our family!” I confessed, my palm against my flat stomach.

The silence that followed my confession was deafening. The words hit him like bullets, each one tearing through the fragile hope I'd been nurturing that I wasn't going to mention the baby to him, but I refused to leave without his blessing. I studied my father's face, searching for any sign of understanding. His jaw clenched, and the vein in his temple pulsed. I'd seen that look before—usually right before someone disappeared forever. But I wasn't just anyone. I was his blood, and the baby inside me was his grandchild. That had to count for something, right?

He remained silent, weighing his thoughts carefully. “Y-you're pregnant, Nob?”

I nodded slowly. “Yes. And before you ask, Adonis doesn't know yet. So, he doesn't know that I'm asking you to call off this war, Daddy. He doesn't know I'm asking you to pay for Adonis's freedom if it comes down to it. He doesn't know that I'm asking you to put marriage on the table to join our families and stop the bloodshed.”

The heaviness of my family's legacy and the dangerous world I would inhabit the reigns to one day loomed in the forefront of my mind. I couldn't help but worry about what my pregnancy would mean for my safety and the safety of my unborn child. I could only hope the news of a grandchild would help him find it in his heart to find a way to call off the war with the Toussaints before it was too late.

My father finally spoke up again. “This is not a decision to be taken lightly, Xenobia. You know the life we lead, the dangers we face every day. Are you sure this baby is what you want?”

I nodded firmly. “Yes, Daddy. I've never been more sure about anything in my life. Adonis has always protected me. I love him, and that doesn't make me less loyal to this family. It makes me stronger. I'm ready to face whatever challenges come our way, as long as I have him. Adonis sees me, Daddy. Not as the fragile princess you've tried to safeguard, but for who I really am,” I announced, my voice steadier than I felt.

My father's eyes narrowed, but I saw a flicker of curiosity in his gaze. "And who exactly is that, Xenobia?" he asked, his voice dangerously soft.

I swallowed hard. "Someone who's not afraid to fight for what she wants. Someone who understands the weight of our name but refuses to be crushed under its weight. Someone who plans to afford my heir the same luxuries and safeguards as you've shown me, in addition to an overflowing amount of love."

The silence stretched on as he studied me. All I heard was my heartbeat thundering recklessly in my ears.

Finally, he responded. "You sound like your mother," he said, his voice rough with an emotion somewhere between nostalgia and grief.

I blinked, thrown off guard. He never talked about her. Not since the night she and Santo were killed. I learned then that the grieving process was different for everyone. As the surviving parent, my father completely closed himself off to me, pacifying me with the art studio so that he'd have a reason to ignore me. We didn't celebrate their birthdays or my parents' wedding anniversary. It was almost as if they never existed. But again, everybody had their way of coping. I couldn't judge.

"She was... passionate and defiant, just like you," he described as a ghost of a smile touched his lips. "It was what drew me to her and what got her killed. She was my only love. Your mother, she was everything to me. When she died, it almost broke me."

The words hit me like a slap to the face. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

My father's sad eyes met mine, and for a moment, I saw past the mafia boss to the man beneath. "I see her fire in you, Xenobia. But this world... it snuffs out flames like that. As proud as I am to watch your flames dance, you need to be careful."

I nodded, my throat tight. “I get it, Daddy. I do. This isn’t a fairy tale. It’s reckless and dangerous, and yeah, I know the risks. But Adonis? He’s worth it.”

My voice dropped to barely above a whisper. “I promise I’ll be smart about it. We both will. But I can’t turn off how I feel. And I won’t pretend to be someone I’m not. Not anymore.”

His expression softened just a fraction. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “You’re as stubborn as a goddamn mule, you know that?”

I couldn’t help but crack a smile. “Wonder where I got that from?”

He chuckled, a low rumble that eased some of the tension in the room. “Alright, Nobi. I will start making calls. You have my word that I won’t stand in your way, but I cannot speak for the Toussaints. But know this: If Adonis so much as breathes wrong, if he puts you or my grandchild in danger—”

“He won’t,” I said quickly, cutting him off. “He’d die before he let anything happen to me or our baby.”

My father nodded slowly. “See that he does. And, Xenobia? Be careful. Not just with him, but with your heart. Our dark world isn’t kind to romantics who’d rather paint a canvas than take a life.”

I swallowed the lump caught in my throat, realizing this was as close to a blessing as I’d ever get from him. “I will, Daddy. I promise.”

As I turned to leave, his voice stopped me. “You’re more like me than you know, Nobi. God help us both.”

I didn’t look back, but I smirked as I felt the weight of his words follow me out the

door. The future stretched out before me, dark and uncertain. But for the first time, I wasn't afraid to face it. I gently closed the door behind me, my legs shaky as I leaned against the cool wood. My heart was pounding, but I felt lighter somehow. It was as if I'd finally set down a weight I'd been carrying for years.

"Breathe, Xenobia," I whispered to myself. "Just breathe. It's over now."

I was thankful the hallway was empty. I didn't think I could handle facing anyone. My mind was racing, replaying every word of that conversation with my father. Had I really just stood up to him? Had he actually accepted it?

I pushed off from the door, my heels clicking in step as I approached the grand staircase. Each step felt like a small victory.

"Xenobia?"

I froze, my heart finding its new home in my throat. Adonis . He was standing at the bottom of the staircase with worry etched across his face and dried blood on his knuckles.

"Hey," I managed to call out, trying for a smile.

He took the steps two at a time until he was close enough to reach me. "Are you okay? Did he—"

"You have blood on your hands," I noted, cutting into his question before he could finish.

He swung his head as if to wave off my statement. "What happened when you went to see Don?"

I fell into his arms, burying my face in his bulletproof vest. “I told him,” I mumbled against his crisp, black dress shirt. “About us and that I wanted to be with you.”

Adonis’s hard body went still. “And?”

I pulled back, meeting his eyes. “And... we’re not dead. So that’s gotta count for something, right?” I semi-joked with a half-smirk.

He let out a shaky laugh, cupping my face in his palms. “You’re insane, you know that? Completely fucking insane.”

I shrugged lightheartedly. “Yeah, well, you’re the one who fell for me, so I guess that makes you just as unhinged as me.”

His lips crashed into mine, eager and driven. When we finally came up for air, I saw the realization of what my father’s blessing meant and the fear in his eyes.

“What happens now?” he inquired.

I took a deep breath, still wrestling with the how and when I’d tell him about the baby. “Now? We figure it out. Together.”

Adonis

I returned to the basement, ready for round two of my torture tactics. The dim light cast long shadows across Donovan's face, distorting his features into a bloodied, grotesque mask of fear. I stood over him, my face carefully blank as I assessed the pitiful figure bound to the chair before me. The air hung thick with the stench of his blood, sweat, and desperation.

"You ready to fuckin' talk this time?" I queried, my voice cutting through the suffocating silence.

Donovan flinched, his eyes darting wildly around the room as if searching for an escape that didn't exist. I could almost hear the frantic beating of his heart, a countdown to his inevitable confession.

"I... I didn't have a choice," he stammered, words tumbling out in a desperate rush. "They threatened my family, Adonis. What was I supposed to do?"

I remained silent, letting the weight of his betrayal sink in. My mind was already several steps ahead, piecing together the implications of his actions. The Hawthorne family had been compromised, and I needed to know how deep the rot went.

"Tell me everything," I said, tolerating no argument. "Every fuckin' detail, every whispered conversation. And remember, your life depends on it. So you better not fuckin' lie."

As Donovan spilled his guts, I fought to keep my expression neutral. Inside, a storm

brewed. That fuckin' rat had endangered not just the family but Xenobia. The thought of her in danger made my blood run cold.

I listened intently, filing away each scrap of information for later analysis. The pieces were falling into place, revealing a picture I didn't like at all. My father was making his move, and we'd been caught with our mothafuckin pants down. Donovan's sniveling voice faded into background noise as I formulated our next steps. We needed to shore up our defenses fast. And as for the mole...

I refocused on Donovan, noting the hope that had somehow crept into his eyes. Poor, stupid mothafucka thinks he might leave this room alive.

"Tell me what they know about the security rotations," I demanded, keeping my voice steady despite the churning in my gut. Loyalty to the Hawthornes burned in my veins, but so did the darkness of what I knew I had to do. It was a tug-of-war in my head, and neither side was winning.

Donovan started babbling again. "They know we change guards every four hours, but there's a fifteen-minute overlap. That's their window."

I nodded, filing it away. "And the cameras?"

"There's still a blind spot on the east side, near the old oak. They could slip a whole team through there."

I couldn't shake the unease crawling under my skin as his words sank in. Shit, this is bad. Real bad. With each word, the noose tightened. Not just around Donovan's neck, but around mine too. How the fuck did this happen?

I kept pushing, kept digging. Each revelation was another nail in somebody's fuckin' coffin, but whose? The tension in the room was thick enough to choke on, and I felt

the weight of what was coming, pressing down on me like a boulder. Xenobia's face flashed in my mind, those fierce chocolate brown eyes and the scars that only made her stronger. I'd be damned if I let anything happen to her. So I pressed on, my mind racing ahead, planning our next move even as Donovan continued to talk, sealing his fate with every word.

I stared at him as my mind churned every piece of intel he'd revealed. It was good shit—the kind of information that could turn the tide in our favor if I was quick enough. But the price? Steep as hell. Donovan's life. The dim light cast shadows across his face, making him look more like a corpse than a man. Maybe that was fitting. I felt the familiar chill settle in my bones. The one that always came before...

“You've been helpful to me, Donovan,” I said, my voice low and steady. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

His eyes lit up with hope. I ignored it. “So, we're good, right? I-I can go?” he stammered out his question. I didn't answer. Instead, I reached for the gun at my hip. The metal was cold against my palm. Donovan's face crumpled in disappointment. “No, please... I told you everything!” He sobbed as he looked up at me. “At least protect my wife and kids.”

“You did tell me everything,” I agreed, raising the weapon. “And that's why this has to happen. I will send a guard to relocate your family and pay them a stipend. It's more than what you're worth, but they didn't deserve to have a lying traitor put them at risk.”

My finger tightened on the trigger. One breath. Two. Then—

Pow!

The shot echoed in the small room. Donovan slumped forward, strings cut. I stood

there, gun still raised, the bitter smell of gunpowder filling my nostrils. It was done. Quick. Clean. Necessary. But necessary didn't make it easy. I felt the weight of it settle on me, another ghost to add to my collection.

I holstered my piece while watching Donovan's blood spread into a dark stain on the concrete floor. I'd seen enough death to last me a lifetime, but for some reason, he felt different. Heavier than usual.

"Fuck," I muttered, rubbing the edge of my jaw. The scar there tingled, a phantom pain from another life. Another war.

I paced the room, my mind churning. I briefly closed my eyes, trying to center myself. "Focus, Adonis," I growled. "One step at a—"

Then, the world exploded.

The blast hit like a freight train, slamming me against the wall. My ears rang, vision blurring as dust and debris rained down. For a split second, I was in the middle of a war the Don had started with the McClendons. Body parts were strewn about as the grenade killed half my men.

But this wasn't the McClendons. This was home. And that meant—

"Xenobia," I grunted, pushing myself up. My body moved on autopilot, years of training kicking in. Assess. Plan. Act.

The mansion was under attack. And I had to protect the woman I loved. I burst out of the cellar, my senses on high alert. Once again, the once quiet mansion had transformed into a war zone, this time inside. Alarms blared, their shrill wails mixing with panicked shouts and the distant sound of gunfire.

“Shit,” I muttered, my heart pounding. “Xenobia, where are you?”

I sprinted down the corridor, my mind racing. Xenobia’s room was on the east wing, but if she’d heard the explosion, maybe she’d tried to get to the panic room, or perhaps she was in her art studio... Fuck, that girl never stays put when she’s told.

The air was thick with smoke and the choking smell of explosives. As I rounded a corner, I nearly collided with one of our guards.

“Adonis!” he shouted, eyes wild. “We’re under attack! The Toussaints—”

I nodded while shielding my nose and mouth with the crook of my arm. “I know. You know the drill. Protect Don, kill the intruders,” I cut him off. “Where’s Xenobia?”

He shook his head, looking lost. “I don’t—”

Another explosion rocked the building, and it was closer this time. The lights flickered, plunging us into momentary darkness. When they came back on, the guard was gone, already racing toward the commotion. I pressed on, my jaw clenched tighter than a virgin’s pussy. The shadows seemed to deepen with each step, the once familiar halls now alien and threatening. Every corner could hide an enemy, and every closed door could be a potential trap.

“Come on, Nobi,” I muttered, willing Xenobia to appear. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

As I moved deeper into the mansion, the dread in my gut grew heavier as I reached her bedroom door. My father’s assassins had caught us slipping, and now Xenobia was out there somewhere, probably thinking she could handle this shit on her own. Her room was empty, so where the fuck was she? My mind raced, trying to piece together a plan. Where would Xenobia go? The panic room was the obvious choice,

but knowing her stubborn streak, she might've decided to play hero instead.

"Shit," I hissed, rounding another corner. The weight of my earlier actions pressed down on me, making each step more difficult. Donovan's face flashed in my mind, his eyes wide with terror in those final moments.

I shook my head, trying to focus. "Get it together, Adonis. Find your fuckin' girl."

A sudden crash from down the hall had me sprinting, gun drawn. As I burst through the library door, I saw her—Xenobia, beautiful and fierce, her scarred face set in determination as she faced off against two intruders.

I didn't waste time with words, pulling my gun out and popping them both between the eyes. It was over in seconds. As the last attacker hit the floor, her eyes met mine. Everything else fell away in that moment—the chaos, the danger, even my guilt. There was just Xenobia, her sharp gaze a fusion of relief and determination.

"We need to move," I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

She nodded, understanding passing between us without words. We were in this together now, come hell or high water. "Wherever you go, I'll follow," Xenobia said softly. I stepped forward, and her hand caught my arm. "Wait. There's something I need to tell you first."

"Can it wait, Nobi?" I challenged, grabbing her hand.

I ignored the spark that shot through me at the contact. We had a war to survive first. Everything else could wait.

Xenobia quickly dipped her chin. "Okay."

My mind raced as we moved through the shadows of the mansion. I should've been fighting and defending, but none of it mattered. There was only her.

"You got a plan, or are we just winging it?" she whispered, her breath warm against my ear.

I swallowed hard. "Working on it. The first priority is getting you the hell out of here."

She scoffed before tugging at my arm so that I'd look at her. "No. I'm not running, Adonis."

I turned to face her, frustration and admiration warring inside me. "This isn't a fuckin' video game, Xenobia. You don't get a reset button. My father won't hesitate to—"

"Kill us," she answered, cutting me off. "Which means I stay and fight by your side."

Fuck, she was stubborn. And bold. And beautiful. And entirely out of her depth.

"You don't know what the fuck you're up against," I growled.

Her eyes flashed. "Then teach me."

For a moment, I was tempted. The image of Xenobia, fierce and deadly, by my side like Bonnie and Clyde played on repeat at the forefront of my mind. But no. I couldn't risk her fuckin' life like that.

"We don't have time," I said, pulling her along. "We need to—"

Another explosion rocked the building, and it was closer this time. Dust rained down

from the ceiling. Fuck it.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Time was running out. I had to make a choice.

Staring at Xenobia and seeing the determination in her eyes, I knew I was probably damning us both to early graves, but I couldn't deny her what she wanted. A body was found gunned down in the hall. I grabbed his pistol and handed it to her.

“You remember how to use this?”

She nodded, and I felt my dick harden.

That's my fuckin' girl.

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Xenobia

A donis's father's goons were closing in, their faces twisted with sick glee as if they knew they'd be the victors. My heart pounded, but I couldn't let them take me down. I raised the gun, finger trembling around the trigger.

"Stay the fuck back!" I shouted, my voice steadier than I felt.

One of them lunged, a knife glinting in his meaty fist. Time slowed as I squeezed the trigger.

POW!

The gun kicked in my hand, and blood sprayed as the bullet tore through his throat. He dropped, gurgling and clutching at the gushing wound.

Oh shit. I just killed a man.

My stomach churned, but there was no time to process. More were coming. I steadied my aim, ready to fire again if I had to.

"Xenobia!" Adonis's familiar voice cut through the chaos. He appeared at my side, his weapon drawn. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, unable to tear my eyes from the dying man at my feet. "I... I killed him."

Adonis's hand squeezed my shoulder. "You did what you had to. Stay focused, alright baby?"

A slow clap echoed through the room. The remaining thugs parted as a distinguished older man stepped forward—the head of the Toussaint family himself—Adonis's father. Rage fueled me as I stared him down. His piercing gaze spoke volumes; although he was older, he had an aggressively authoritative presence. He was balding with salt-and-pepper hair, a well-groomed beard, and dressed in an expensive, dark suit.

"Well, well," he snarled. "It seems the little Hawthorne princess has claws, after all."

"I've got teeth too, mothaf—"

Adonis pushed me behind him before I could finish my sentence, squaring off against the much older man whom he faintly resembled. The air crackled with tension.

"Leave her the fuck alone."

"You've made a big fuckin' mistake coming back here, boy," he growled, lips curled into a sneer.

"Nobody's gonna stop me from protecting her. Not even you."

"Turning your back on your family is a death sentence."

"Then it's a good thing I've never considered you my fuckin' family."

He scoffed. "And Don Hawthorne is? You're nothing but a guard dog hired to watch his pampered bitch."

I bristled at the insult, but Adonis remained unnervingly calm. His voice was ice. “Last chance. Leave now, or there won’t be enough left of you to bury.”

My eyes darted between them. Adonis was good, but we were in deep shit. Toussaint’s men flanked him, and what was left of ours stood ahead of us, guns drawn. What the hell was his plan?

The man’s laughter sent chills down my spine. “Big words from a man about to expire.” He raised his hand, signaling his men. “He’s no fucking son to me. Kill them both.”

My heartbeat rang in my ear as panic coursed through me. It was now or never. “Please don’t shoot, I’m pregnant!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Silence fell like a heavy blanket. My ears rang in the sudden quiet, peaceful enough to hear a pin drop. Adonis and his father traded glances before turning their attention to me.

“Xenobia, are you sure?” Adonis inquired softly, his voice filled with emotion.

“It’s true.” My father’s voice boomed behind us. “And it’s time we call a truce.”

We turned to see him flanked by a set of men I’d never seen before. Each was strapped with bullets and had their weapons drawn, ready to fire on my father’s command. The way they moved alongside him was militant, calculated even. Could this have been the business deal he was working on all along?

Adonis stood frozen, eyes wide in shock, while his father’s expression took on a more frustrated look.

My father inched forward, men still at his side. “Cecil, we’ve been at each other’s

throats for years. Blood has been shed on both sides, but now, things are different. My daughter and your son have fallen in love with each other, and soon, there will be a new life—a grandchild that's half your blood and half mine.”

Adonis's father narrowed his eyes. “A grandchild is one thing, but a baby won't erase my son's betrayal.”

“Please, Mr. Toussaint, our families have already suffered too much,” I pleaded while stepping from behind Adonis. “Adonis is the father of my baby, and I love him. I won't let you take him from me.”

My father moved closer. “I understand your doubts. I have mine as well, but think about it, Cecil. Their child will represent a new chapter, a chance for peace between our families. We can end this war today and walk away knowing we called a truce for the sake of the future of our bloodlines.”

“And what fucking assurances do I have that this isn't some ploy? That you won't betray me and shoot me where I stand the moment I order my men to lower their weapons?”

“My word, as a man of my honor. You know the code I live by, even if you weren't the man to instill it in me.” Adonis interjected. “I've proven time and time again that my love is reckless behind this woman, and now that she's carrying my child, I won't hesitate to rip you apart, blood or not.”

“Is that a fuckin' threat, boy?” Toussaint growled.

My father cut in. “It's time we put an end to this senseless violence. Adonis and Xenobia deserve a true shot at happiness, and their child deserves to grow up without knowing the carnage of our war.”

After a drawn-out pause, Toussaint nodded slowly. “The baby can live, but Adonis still has to pay for his betrayal. There will be no mercy,” he proclaimed.

The air exploded with gunfire with the wave of his hand. I ducked behind an overturned table, my heart pounding like a jackhammer. Adonis was a blur of motion, his shots precise and deadly. Bodies dropped, but more goons kept coming.

“Fuck,” I muttered, popping up to squeeze off a few rounds. The sharp smell of gunpowder burned my nostrils.

My father’s militia wasted no time popping off. Toussaint was outnumbered and outgunned. Adonis was holding his own, but I could see the strain on his face. I scrambled to a better position, taking out a thug who’d edged Adonis. He flashed me a quick nod of thanks before diving back into the fight.

Toussaint’s cold voice rang out amid the gunfire. “You can’t win this, Adonis! Traitors of the Toussaint family are shown no mercy.”

Adonis’s reply was lost in another burst of gunfire. I saw him stumble, his left shoulder jerking back. Blood bloomed across his white shirt.

“No!” I screamed as fear and rage tangled in my gut.

But then he stood, motioning for Titus to watch his back while he sprayed bullets into the line of men pushing forward. He dropped several as Titus came from behind. They were brilliant as a unit, following each other’s lead.

Between them and my father’s army, most of Toussaint’s men had fallen, and he was losing ground. He must’ve seen it too.

“That’s enough!” he barked, seemingly satisfied that his son had been hit, even

though he was still breathing.

As quickly as it started, the gunfire tapered off. The Toussaint forces melted away, leaving destruction in their wake. Broken furniture, bullet holes, and blood, so much blood, painted a grim picture of the battle we'd barely survived.

I scrambled to my feet, rushing to Adonis's side. "Say it's over!" I screamed at Toussaint's back. "For our child and our future, say it's over!"

Toussaint turned back to me, assessing my shaky hands as I tried to see how bad Adonis's wounds were. "I will agree to this truce. But know this: Any sign of disloyalty, and I won't fuckin' hesitate to return," he warned before disappearing with what was left of his men in tow.

"Shit, shit, shit," my father muttered as he made his way over to us. "Shit, how bad is it? Is he going to be okay?"

Adonis grimaced, cracking his usual stoic mask. "I've had worse," he grunted, but I could see the uncomfortableness in his eyes. "The bulletproof vest helped."

My father and Titus helped Adonis to his feet, supporting his weight as they stumbled to a nearby bedroom. My heart raced, fear and adrenaline making my hands shake as they eased him onto the bed before leaving the two of us alone.

"Let's get that shirt off," I muttered, fumbling with the buttons. "Fuck, there's so much blood."

Adonis hissed as I peeled the fabric away from his vest. "It's not as bad as it looks, Xenobia," he said, but his voice was strained as he pulled the bullet fragment out.

I grabbed a first aid kit from the nightstand, grateful for Adonis's paranoid

preparedness. As I cleaned his scrapes and cuts, I couldn't help but notice the way his muscles tensed under my pressure. Even brutalized, this man was a work of art.

Adonis's hand suddenly covered mine, stilling my movements. "Xenobia," he said softly, his eyes meeting mine. "I'm sorry."

I blinked, caught off guard. "For what?"

He swallowed hard, his stoic mask crumbling. "I failed you. I was supposed to protect you, and I couldn't—"

"Don't." I cut him off, my throat tight. "You didn't fail me. You saved my life and put life inside me too."

"I can't believe you're pregnant, Nobi."

"I know. I never intended for you to find out like that, but I couldn't hold it in. Not when I knew everything was on the line."

"I bet you feel it now, don't you?"

"Feel what?" I quizzed.

"Important. Standing up to my father the way you did? I hate you for playing the hero, but I've also never loved you more."

My eyes welled up with tears. "I do. I do feel it, but all I care about is you... and our baby," I choked out, tears threatening to spill.

"I never imagined it would happen so fast, but I couldn't be happier. You're the only woman I want to bear my children."

A wave of relief crashed over me as I leaned into him, feeling his warmth and love. “I really did want to tell you first,” I admitted.

Adonis eyed me with a stern yet tender expression as he shook his head, his voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know the first thing about being a good father. What if I’m not strong enough to protect our child? Not fast enough. What if—”

I pressed my hand to his cheek, forcing him to look at me. “There is no one I trust more than you to look after me and this baby, Adonis. No one.”

I held Adonis’s gaze, my thumb tracing the scar on his chest. His vulnerability hit me hard, laying bare the feelings he had to hide around his men. Around my father. This was the man who’d faced down death a hundred times, who’d stood between me and danger without flinching. To see him doubt himself like that fucking hurt.

“Don’t talk about my bodyguard like that,” I said, my voice low and fierce. “You’re the strongest person I know. And I’m not some delicate flower that needs protecting. And yet, you do it anyway. Selflessly. You stand in the line of fire so I don’t have to, and I love you for that.”

Adonis’s eyes widened, and I saw a flicker of something there—a mixture of hope and surprise.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I continued, pressing my lips to his heart. “You and me, we’re a team now. Whatever shit your father or anyone else throws at us, we face it side by side.”

A ghost of a smile touched Adonis’s lips. “You sound like a proper mafia princess now,” he murmured.

I snorted. “Fuck that. I’m my own woman. But I’m choosing to stand with you.”

Adonis's hand slowly came up, fingers tangling in my hair. The tension in the room shifted, electricity crackling between us. I leaned in, my breath catching as our foreheads touched.

"Xenobia," he whispered, his voice rough. "I—I love you. You and our baby are my top priority now. I'll protect you both with every breath left in me," he promised.

"I love you too."

Our bond, forged in the heat of battle, felt unbreakable now. As long as we had each other, we could face whatever the world—or the mafia—threw at us.

Adonis

The shadows in Don Hawthorne's office seemed to writhe and twist, matching the churning in my gut as I stood before his massive desk. Outside, the muffled sounds of my crew disposing of bodies and scrubbing away evidence echoed through the mansion. The copper tang of blood still hung in the air, a grim reminder of the night's carnage.

I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms. Fuck. This is it. The moment of truth. Would he see me as family, worthy of being the father of his first grandchild, or just another expendable soldier? My heart raced, but I kept my face a mask of cool indifference. Show no weakness.

His eyes bore into me, unreadable as stone. His gravelly voice sent a chill down my spine when he finally spoke. "Adonis, my boy. You've proven your loyalty time and again."

I nodded stiffly, not daring to hope. "I live to serve the Hawthorne family, sir."

He leaned back, hands steepled. "And now you wish to truly become family... to claim my Xenobia as your own, seeing as you've already claimed her womb."

Shit. Here it comes. I braced myself for his wrath, for banishment, for a bullet between the eyes. But instead, a wry smile touched his lips. "You have my blessing."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. Was this some cruel joke? But no, his eyes held no malice, only a weary resignation.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you, Don,” I managed, my voice rough. “I swear I’ll protect her and our unborn child with my life.”

He waved a hand. “I know you will. That’s the only reason why I’m entrusting them to you. Our family needs strength now more than ever.”

Relief flooded through me, followed quickly by a surge of fierce protectiveness over Xenobia. My Xenobia. Knowing that she was carrying my seed meant I wouldn’t hesitate to tear the world apart to make the world a safer place for her and our child.

“I won’t let you down,” I vowed, meaning every word.

He nodded, his expression grave. “See that you don’t. Now go. There’s still a lot of work to be done.”

I turned to leave, my mind already racing with plans. But as I reached the door, his voice stopped me cold.

“And Adonis? Remember, blood is thicker than water. But love can be the deadliest bond of all.”

A shiver ran down my spine as I tried to process the message behind his cryptic words, which echoed in my head. He was right. Love was a weakness, a chink in my armor. But for Xenobia and my heir, I’d risk it all and bear any burden.

The weight of her father’s blessing settled on my shoulders like a bulletproof vest—heavy but necessary. I stood a little straighter; my jaw clenched as I turned back, meeting his steely gaze with a nod.

“I’m not done yet, son. There’s another matter, Adonis.” His voice cut through my thoughts. “Our family’s security has clearly been compromised.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Interrogate everyone. And I mean everyone,” he confirmed, eyes narrowed to slits.

“Trust only those you’ve personally vetted. We can’t afford another breach.”

Fuck. This is gonna be messy. But I nodded, already cataloging potential threats in my mind. The staff was clean, but Don Hawthorne had men outside the ranks, off the books, that would need to come in and undergo questioning.

“Consider it done,” I said, my voice low and determined.

He leaned back, shadows deepening the lines on his brown face. “This task is not for the faint of heart. You understand what I’m asking?”

Of course, I did. It meant sleepless nights, bloodied knuckles, and the constant paranoia of not knowing who the fuck to trust. But I’d do it.

“I won’t let you down,” I promised, my hand instinctively reaching for the gun at my hip. “I’ll make sure anyone who’s betrayed us will wish they’d never been fuckin’ born.”

He nodded, a glimmer of approval in his eyes as he handed me a list of his men.

“Good. Now go. Time is of the essence.”

The weight of responsibility was crushing. Who to question first? Who could I trust to help besides Titus? I was about to leave when Xenobia’s father’s hand landed on my shoulder. It caught me off guard, I’d admit. He wasn’t exactly the touchy-feely type.

“Adonis,” he said, his voice softer than I’d ever heard it before. “You’ve done more than I ever thought. I was wrong to be so hard on you. I trust you with this... and

with my daughter.”

Something tightened in my chest. All these years, busting my ass to belong, to prove I was more than just some stray they’d picked up due to loyalty, and now...

“Thank you, sir,” I acknowledged with the dip of my chin. “I won’t let you down.”

As I prowled forward, my head spun. Worthy. Trusted. I felt like I’d finally found my place in the Hawthorne family. But I couldn’t dwell on it. I had a job to do and someone I needed to see.

I found myself outside Xenobia’s studio, somehow knowing where she’d be. The scent of fresh paint hit me like a punch to the gut as I pushed the door open. The place was a mess with canvases everywhere, splashes of color like blood spatter on the walls. And there she was, in the middle of it all—my beautiful angel.

“Xenobia,” I called out, voice echoing against the windows.

She turned, her eyes meeting mine with that fierce defiance I’d come to expect. But there was something else there too—a vulnerability that made my chest ache in the most beautiful way. She wasn’t even showing and was already glowing in my eyes.

“Adonis,” she greeted me. “Come in.”

“You were amazing tonight, Xenobia,” I said with a smile, watching her hand move about her canvas. “I spoke to your father. You were right to talk to him. He’s given his blessing for us to be together.”

She laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “And what if I want you to be my husband?”

My heart stopped for a second. “Xenobia, I... Will you... would you marry me?”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. “Really, Donny? That’s the best you can do?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Alright, Nobi. I’ll do better. Ring and all, but... is that a yes?”

She smiled then, a genuine smile that lit up her whole face. “Yes, you idiot. But I expect a proper proposal. And a big fucking ring.”

I closed the distance between us, my heart pounding so hard I thought it might burst outta my chest. Xenobia’s eyes locked onto mine, a storm of emotions swirling in their depths. She was beautiful, even with paint smeared across her cheek and that defiant tilt to her chin.

“You drive a nigga crazy, you know that?” I murmured, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. My fingers lingered on her skin, and I felt her shiver of lust pool to my dick.

“Good,” she whispered, her breath warm against my palm. “Someone needs to keep you on your toes.”

I chuckled, low and rough. “Trust me, Nobi, you do that and then some.”

The air between us felt electric, charged with all the things we couldn’t say, but fuck, I wanted to. I wanted to tell her how she consumed my every thought and how I’d do anything for her, but she already knew.

Instead, I leaned in, my lips brushing against her ear. “I want you,” I growled, feeling her pulse quicken beneath my touch. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

Xenobia's hands fisted in my shirt, pulling me closer. "Then take me," she whispered, her voice hoarse with need. "I'm yours, Adonis. I've always been yours."

That was all it took. I crushed my mouth to hers, pouring every ounce of longing, every forbidden desire into the kiss. She met me with equal fervor, her body molding against mine like she was made for me. I couldn't get enough of her. My hands roamed her body, greedy and possessive, yet careful not to grip too tight. Xenobia was tough as nails, but I'd never forgive myself if I left a mark on her skin. I had to be gentle with her for the next nine months.

As we stumbled toward her easel, paint splashed onto us. The cool liquid against my heated skin shocked me, making me growl. Xenobia just laughed, a wild, carefree sound that clenched my heart.

Xenobia purred. "Looks like you're my new canvas," she teased, dragging her paint-covered fingers down my chest.

I grabbed her wrist, bringing her hand to my mouth. "Two can play that game, princess," I murmured, nipping at her fingertips.

We fell into a frenzy of touches and colors, paint smearing across our bodies as I stripped down quickly. The contrast was beautiful—the tenderness in my touch at war with the near-obsessive need to claim Xenobia and mark her as mine.

"Fuck, Xenobia," I groaned, burying my face in her neck. "You're everything. You know that?"

She arched against me, her nails digging into my spine. "Show me," she demanded, her voice breathy but fierce. "Show me I'm yours."

I growled, bending her over the nearby table, pulling her leggings down, and ripping

her lace panties off with them as she braced herself by gripping the edge of the table. I didn't have time to warm her up, but something told me she was already dripping.

I licked the palm of my hand and stroked my dick. "I'm going to fuck you so hard, woman," I growled. "You'll never forget who you belong to."

"Fuck me," she begged, her hips already grinding against mine.

I slid in from behind, and we both moaned at the sensation. Her walls were tight. Wet heat surrounded me. It was like coming home after a long exile.

My hips pumped into hers with a mindless need. This pussy was mine. She was mine. My woman. My Xenobia. My womb. My baby. I claimed it all.

Her screams echoed throughout the room, bouncing off the windows and back into my ears. Each one spurred me onward, bucking harder, faster.

"Fuck this pussy, baby." She squealed with a gasp as her nails dug into the table, letting her orgasm break over us both. She shuddered around me, milking me for every drop.

Panting, I leaned against her, allowing myself a mere second of weakness as I held her close. "I've waited my whole fucking life for you."

She pushed back against my dick, begging me to keep fucking her, but I had another plan. I pulled out to finger fuck her pussy, spreading her wetness around until I found the hole I wanted to claim, slowly working my finger into her tight asshole as she gasped.

She moaned. "Adonis! What are you—"

“Shh, Nobi. Trust me.” I smirked.

Pushing my thumb deeper into her asshole, she sighed with pleasure, relaxing her body. I slowly finger fucked her pussy at the same time, making Xenobia leak for me. I eased the tip of my dick back inside her pussy, as my thumb worked her asshole. She squirmed with anticipation.

“Oooh shit!” She squealed, gripping the edge of the table.

I fucked her ruthlessly, making sure she felt every inch of me. Her tight pussy constricted around me, gripping my dick in a vicelike hold that drove me insane.

“Tell me how much you love this dick,” I growled as I fucked her hard and fast.

Xenobia moaned wantonly, gasping for air between her purrs of pleasure. “Adonis, God, yes! Fuck me! I love how you fuck this pussy.”

I obliged, pounding into her mercilessly as she bucked back against me. Pulling out with a wet, sucking sound, I smacked her ass hard enough to leave my handprint on her skin before dipping back inside her, eliciting an even louder scream from my beautiful bride-to-be.

“You’re mine. Aren’t you? You belong to me now,” I grunted out between thrusts.

“Yes! Yes! Fuck me senseless, Adonis. Make me yours,” Xenobia begged, her eyes clouded over with lust and desire.

Hearing her beg only spurred me on until I found myself nearing the edge. I grabbed her hips, angling her just right as I pumped into her repeatedly, emptying my seed deep inside her. As my orgasm rocked through me, I felt her muscles contract around me, milking every last drop from me as she enjoyed her own climax. Collapsing over

her paint and sweat-soaked body, we both panted for air. The only sounds in the room were our harsh breathing and the creaking of the table underneath our weight.

“That...” She gasped out, trying to catch her next breath. “Was... incredible.”

I grinned, watching my cum slide down her thighs as my dick eased out of her. “That it was.”

She sighed with contentment. “So, we’re really doing this, huh?”

“Doing what?”

“The whole marriage thing.”

“Mm-hmm, we’re doing it.”

She looked up at me, vulnerability shining in her eyes. “You know what they’ll say, right?”

I chuckled, the sound dark. “Yes, Nobi, I know what they’ll say. And one by one, I’ll cut their lying, deceitful tongues from their mouths until no one has anything left to fuckin’ say.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me, Guardian.”

I stared into her beautiful eyes, loving how she looked at me. “I won’t let anything happen to you or our baby, Xenobia. I put that on my life.”

A range of emotions flickered across her face before she finally nodded and murmured, “I believe you.”

The news of her pregnancy had hit me like a tsunami, but to my surprise, I couldn't help but feel joy knowing my baby was growing inside her.

"I do want to marry you, Nobi," I declared, my voice sincere. "Right here, right now. No rings, no ceremony—just our love for each other. I want to make you mine permanently."

Her eyes ballooned. "Now? Are you sure?" she quizzed, her voice shaking with intensity.

I nodded, my eyes stationed on hers. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you and our baby."

She nodded with tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. "Yes! Let's do it. Let's get married today."

Within an hour, we called a priest to the Hawthorne mansion. The garden was bathed in the moon's silvery glow, and the stars twinkled in the night sky as silent witnesses to our union that was anything but traditional. Since our decision was so quick, there were no elaborate decorations, flowers, tuxes, white gowns, or rings. It was a painless yet heartfelt union. The only thing we needed was the pure, unconditional love we shared. Xenobia and I stood together with our fingers laced as the priest began the ceremony with a prayer. Surrounded by the calming beauty of the garden and grounds, we prepared to exchange our vows.

"Xenobia, you can go first," the priest acknowledged.

She drew in a deep breath. The air was filled with the scent of freshly planted perennials, and a cold breeze rustled the scarce leaves around our feet.

"Adonis, from the moment you entered my life when I was nine, you've been my

protector. You've shown me an unconditional love that has seen me through the darkest of times. Tonight, with God and the stars above as my witness, I stand before you, ready to give my complete self over to you. As your wife, I vow to stand by your side, to support and defend you at all costs. From this day forward, I vow to love you with every beat of my heart, in this life and the next."

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it before speaking from the heart. "Nobi, you're the reason I strive to be the best version of myself when I wake up every morning. You've been my invisible anchor, guiding light in the middle of a storm, and the most important person in my life for many years. You're the reason I breathe, and tonight, I stand before you, not just as your sworn protector, but as a man who is utterly committed to you and our unborn baby," I said, reaching out to gently touch her stomach. "You're my world, and I'm yours, forever."

In that enchanted moment, surrounded by the beauty of the moonlight and our love, Xenobia became my wife. The dangers of our dark world may have still loomed large, but together, we were ready to face whatever came our way. As we embraced and kissed for the first time as husband and wife, I knew our bond was indestructible.

I slowly pulled my lips away from hers, seeing the twinkle of joy in her eyes. "I love you, Mrs. Cardelo."

"And I love you, Mr. Cardelo."

Eight and a half months later.

It was a warm summer night, and the mansion was quiet. I was nine months pregnant and resting in my bedroom. The baby was due any day, and my anticipation of her arrival was apparent. I was over getting very little sleep, the swollen feet, and the extra water weight. Adonis was stationed just outside the door, ever vigilant as always.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my abdomen. I gasped, clutching my round belly as the pain intensified. Immediately, I knew it was time. I drew in a sharp breath before calling out for Adonis. He rushed in, eyes ballooned with worry.

“Baby, it’s time. It’s happening,” I confirmed, my voice strained but sure.

Without wasting another second, he called for additional guards to prepare the car and grab my hospital bag as he helped me to my feet. Adonis supported me as we made our way to the car.

My father, alerted by the commotion, quickly joined us, reassuring me that I’d have a safe delivery. We all knew the risks involved, but the sole focus was to get me to the hospital in one piece.

Adonis never let go of my hand as we rode through the city streets. “It’s gonna be okay, Nobi. You’re doing perfect, baby,” he confirmed, offering words of comfort. “Just remember to breathe, okay?”

The contractions started to come faster as we approached the hospital. “Oh, fuck. It

hurts so bad. I don't think I can do this," I whimpered, bracing for the next blow.

"Just hold on, baby. We're almost there."

We arrived at the emergency room doors, and the staff quickly took over, guiding me to the labor and delivery area. Adonis remained glued to my side, never letting go of my hand. He leaned in to kiss my forehead.

"I'm right here, baby. I got you. Anything you need, I got you," Adonis promised.

Hours passed, and my labor only intensified. But I was a fighter, determined to push through the agonizing pain naturally, without an epidural.

Sweat drenched my forehead as I groaned in torment. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, my cervix had dilated to ten centimeters, and it was time to push. After four hard pushes, the sweet cries of our baby girl filled the room. Tears of joy and solace streamed down my face, mingling with the sweat as I cradled my daughter for the first time.

Looking at her for the first time was like looking at an angel on Earth. Adonis had planted a tiny piece of heaven inside my womb with ten perfect pale fingers and toes and a head full of straight, jet-black hair. Her little features mirrored mine.

Adonis, now a proud father, hovered over me, looking down at her with a twinkle of awe in his eyes. "You did it, Nobi," he whispered, his voice choking with emotion. "Our baby girl is here, and she's perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better gift."

I gazed up at him, my heart bursting with glee and thankfulness before I tore my teary gaze back down to the tiny beauty nestled in my arms. Together, we marveled at the tiny wonder we'd brought into the world.

"Happy birthday, Ziamora Skye," I whispered, snuggling against her for skin-to-skin

contact.

Adonis had picked out her name. It meant beautiful warrior, which he said reminded him of me. He reached out to gently stroke his daughter's tiny hand, and I knew he'd also fallen in love with her. A smile hooked one side of my lips. I hadn't felt this fulfilled since I painted my first canvas.

The bond Adonis and I shared was unbreakable. Despite the threats that lurked around every corner and the turbulent days ahead, I was grateful to have him by my side, ready and willing to protect our precious baby girl and take on our enemies as the head of our family and as only The Guardian could.

He kissed my forehead. "I love you, Nobi."

"I love you too."

THE END