



Prophet (Dixie Reapers MC #20)

Author: *Harley Wylde*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Ares – My life hasn't always been kittens and rainbows. I spent years as a captive, so when someone breaks into the compound and threatens my little siblings, I go with the kidnappers instead. I've survived being enslaved before, but the little ones wouldn't make it. I can only hope the club will find me in time.

Prophet – I've been patiently waiting for Ares to not only be old enough for me to date her, but also for her to be ready. But I waited too f**king long, and now she's been taken. The bastard who has her is going to pay, and once she's back in my arms, I'm never letting her go again.

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Ares

Fear settled over the Dixie Reapers compound, seeping through the walls and into each and every home. The women and children were either on lockdown or high alert if they left the safety of gates. Joker's wife might be a sweetheart, but her family were monsters of the worst sort. With the threat of human traffickers hanging over our heads, the tension around the club had been off-the-charts.

I knew Dad worried about me the most. The club President might not be my birth father, but some bonds were even stronger than sharing the same DNA. He'd saved me from traffickers before, then he'd adopted me. Now I had an amazing stepmother and three adorable little siblings -- Junie, Judd, and Marnie. But with the Lathems lurking in the shadows, I knew Dad felt torn between his duty to the club and watching over his eldest child.

The sun shone in my eyes as I stepped out of the house. Foster and Owen were in the driveway, both leaning against their bikes. What the hell did they want? Both were sons of patched members and had grown up here. Unfortunately, Foster didn't seem to take after either of his parents and had a tendency to cause trouble -- especially if women were involved. How the hell he'd been approved as a Prospect was beyond me.

"Hey, Ares." His voice held a cocky undertone that always set my teeth on edge. He pushed off from his bike and sauntered closer. If ever there was a human who had the swagger of a rooster, it would be Foster. It made me want to knock him on his ass. "Do you have a minute?"

“Spit it out.” I stopped, crossing my arms.

“Thing is --” Foster began, but Owen cut him off, his words tumbling out in a rush.

“Some of our friends wanted to party. Guys we knew in high school. Foster ran his mouth like always.”

Foster shrugged. “They wanted us to bring some girls, and I know two of them have a crush on you. I told them you’d be there. I thought...”

I held up a hand, stopping him. “Thought? Thinking isn’t your strong suit. In fact, I’m not sure you ever think.”

I saw anger flare in his eyes for a moment, then he sighed and pinched the back of his neck with one of his massive hands. “Sorry, Ares.”

“Fix it,” I demanded. “Now. Make sure those shitheads know I won’t be there. Make it clear I’m not interested in them and never will be. I know you struggle with the word no, but it’s past time you learned what it means, Foster. This shit is getting ridiculous. Not to mention, why the hell would I go to a party with you right now? With everything going on, the last place I need to be is outside the compound at a party.”

“Sure, sure, we’ll handle it,” Owen said quickly. I didn’t know why he hadn’t dropped Foster by now. I knew they’d grown up together and were close. Wasn’t he tired of constantly being dragged into messes by his friend?

“Damn right you will,” I shot back, locking eyes with each of them. “Because if my dad finds out, it’ll be the least of your worries compared to what I’ll do to you myself. But just saying, how do you think Savior will react when he finds out you offered up his daughter as entertainment?”

Owen paled. “It’s not like that. They just wanted to hang with you. You know we’d never do something like that, Ares.”

“No, I know you wouldn’t, but your buddy is another matter. He seems to have a bit of trouble distinguishing between right and wrong sometimes. First, he had the pregnancy scare with his high school girlfriend. Then he latched onto Leigha like a damn tick to the point she ran off to the Reckless Kings to escape him. At what point are you going to stop going along with him and force him to grow the fuck up?”

Owen winced. He knew I was right. I saw the fury etched on Foster’s face, but I didn’t care. Enough was enough. We had so much going on around here. His bullshit was the last thing I needed to worry about.

They got on their bikes and took off, both heading for the front gates. I ran my hand over my face and wondered if I’d done the right thing. Should I have told Foster’s dad? He was a bit old for me to tattle on him, but I couldn’t think of another way to get that jackass under control. It wasn’t that he was a bad guy. He seriously just didn’t realize some of the things he did were wrong.

I eyed the fence line and wondered if the Lathems were watching even now. They’d wanted Cleo. Not only was she married, but she’d also hidden a heart condition from everyone. Her family no longer saw her as an option, which made the club think someone else was on their radar. Possibly someone here at the compound.

I’d already lived a life in slavery. My mind drifted to those years...

The cold concrete pressed against me as I huddled in a corner, making myself as small as possible. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to pretend I was somewhere safe. I willed myself to disappear from the hell I’d tumbled into.

Heavy footsteps approached, and I fought not to cry or whimper. A meaty hand

gripped my arm and my eyes opened. I stared at the man, hoping I wouldn't throw up on him. I already knew what would happen if I did that.

“Look at this one,” he said, a leer on his lips. “I bet she screams real nice.”

My heart hammered in my chest, and I knew what would happen next. He yanked me from the containment cell and dragged me to one of the rooms down the hall. A dingy mattress atop a metal frame was the only thing in the space. As the door shut and the lock clicked into place, I felt my skin crawl and wondered if this would be the time they managed to break me .

I blinked and came back to the present, the fear still thrumming in my veins. When Savior hauled me out of that nightmare, I'd vowed to live my life to the fullest and never look back. Except there were times I couldn't help the thoughts creeping into my mind. Like now.

I was younger then. Small and scared. Hell, the thought of someone like that getting their hands on me again still terrified me. In the years I'd been with the Dixie Reapers, I'd become strong. Sometimes even defiant, much to my dad's horror. I didn't want to become a victim ever again, so the thought of human traffickers watching the club made me want to run far away.

I stopped beside my car, wondering if I really wanted to leave the compound. I'd told Dessa I'd go to the store and get the things she needed, but...

The roar of a Harley Davidson drew my attention to the road, and I saw Prophet pulling to a stop in front of the house. He watched me, and I knew what he saw... the lingering fear from my flashback. Without a word, he turned off the engine and got off his bike. He came closer and laced our fingers together. Gently, he took my keys from me and popped the locks on my car, then led me to the passenger side and helped me in. I held his gaze as he buckled me, then shut the door.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said.

“Yeah, I do. Don’t argue with me, Ares. Who knows when those people will make their move? I don’t want you going anywhere alone. Hell, your dad already told all the women and kids to go places in groups of three or more and take either a Prospect or brother with them. And here you are, ready to race off on an errand all by yourself. What kind of example does that set for everyone else?”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. “I know. I’m sorry. My mind is a total mess right now.”

He reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face with a gentleness that belied his brute strength. The contact was brief, almost reverent, and wholly unexpected. My breath hitched, but I didn’t pull away. Trust wasn’t given easily, not in my world, but Prophet had earned every ounce of mine. He’d already saved my life once before.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Dessa needed some things from the grocery for Junie and Judd. I offered to get them.” My stepmother got around just fine, but she couldn’t walk. It was easier for me to run to the store than for her to lift herself into a vehicle, take her wheelchair apart, then do the reverse when she got to where she was going. So I always offered if I knew she really didn’t want to go.

Until now, I hadn’t realized how scared I was to leave the compound. The memories of my past were coming more frequently these days. Haunting me in my sleep, even while I was awake. I’d kept it to myself so far. Everyone had enough to worry about without me adding to the problem.

There were times I felt useless. I didn’t know how to help my family... the club. It

wasn't that they expected me to protect them, or myself really, but I wanted to be of some use to them. The Dixie Reapers had given me so much. For now, I'd help Dessa with the kids. It was all I could really do. But I'd wait for an opportunity, and when it came, I'd take it. I felt like I owed all of them, especially Savior.

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Ares

Times had changed. The Dixie Reapers' clubhouse no longer boasted loud parties and naked women. Well, the naked women were gone, at any rate. Music pulsed from the speakers as everyone took a much-needed break. My dad had been in Church off and on since this mess started, and more often than not, the members hung out in the clubhouse discussing the issue at hand. Except right now, the doors were open to anyone.

I sat at the bar with a soda. Portia sat on one side of me and Venom's youngest, Dawson, was on my other side. Patched members lined the bar on either side of them.

"Pass me a beer, Ares," Bull shouted from farther down. I reached over the counter into the ice chest, then slid the longneck down the bar top. I caught a smirk from my father as he watched.

"Hey, Pres. Think your girl has a future as a bartender," Bull said. He chuckled and twisted the top off. "She's got good aim."

"Better than Foster's aim last week," I shot back, a playful jab at his son's appalling shooting during target practice. He snorted and took a swallow of his beer, while Foster shot me a glare.

This place was my home. Dad and the Dixie Reapers had been my salvation, pulling me from the abyss with hands as rough as the life they led. Even though I couldn't be a patched member, I was a Reaper's kid. My dad had given me permission to get the club colors inked on my shoulder blade. It was a super small one compared to the

ones the guys here had. I'd seen quite a few with the colors covering their entire backs. In addition, I'd gotten a phoenix rising from the ashes inked on the outside of my right thigh -- a mirror of my own rebirth.

Foster might be mad at me right now, but I knew he'd get over it. In a lot of ways, he was like a brother to me. All of the kids here close to my age felt like family. Although, Foster, Owen, and Dawson were all older than me. Not that I could tell when it came to Foster.

Cowboy's son, Jackson, entered the clubhouse, his cowboy boots thudding against the wood floor as he came closer. He put his arms around me and hugged me from behind.

"You smell like horses and dirt."

"Mom always said it was the best scent in the world."

I couldn't help but laugh a little. Yeah, I could see his mother saying that. "Well, it's better than sweat, I guess. Preparing for your next rodeo?"

"I was planning to head out in the morning, but with everything going on..."

I tipped my head back to look up at him. "You should go. If you put your life on hold every time something bad happens around here, you'll never get to do the one thing you love most."

He kissed the top of my head. "Yeah, I know. You're awfully smart for someone so young."

"You're only six years older than me, Jackson. It's not like you're ancient."

“In rodeo years, I’m over a decade older than you.”

I really did laugh that time. “Is that like dog years or something?”

“Close enough. Hand me a beer. I’m going to go with Akira. She’s in the corner with her nose in a book again.”

I reached over for another longneck and passed it to him. He patted my shoulder before wandering off. I watched him, noticing he hadn’t lied. Akira, Wraith’s daughter, really did have a book in front of her face. From the cover, no one would realize she was reading smut. If her parents had any idea of the types of books she bought, they’d both have a fit.

I sipped on my soda and just soaked up the atmosphere. My friends and family were all talking or laughing. Despite everything going on outside the club gates, they seemed at peace in this particular moment. Happy. I hoped things could stay like this. I didn’t want anyone here to suffer the way I had.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Tank said, approaching with a smile on his face. “Ares Black, quiet as a church mouse.”

I smirked, nudging him with my elbow. “Just soaking it all in. Some days, I don’t remember how blessed I am, until we’re all together like this. Family. Friendship. As long as we have those, we can weather any storm.”

“Damn straight.” He clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. “We’re always in your corner, Ares.”

“Same here,” I replied. It wasn’t just words -- it was a promise. We were the Dixie Reapers, and we protected our own with the ferocity of a mother bear defending her cubs. I might not be a member of the club itself, but as the President’s daughter, these

people were still my family, and I'd die to keep them safe.

I glanced at my watch and stood. Joker wanted Cleo to feel welcome here, and while I wasn't quite ready to be friends with the woman, I also knew what it was like to be the outsider. I'd promised to head over and play a board game. Instead of driving, I decided to walk. The fresh air would be nice, and it would give me time to get my thoughts in order. It felt like utter chaos inside my head these days.

Ridley and Isabella were already there when I arrived. I fell into step behind them as they entered Joker's home. Ridley had a few board games tucked under her arm. At least they'd come prepared, because I doubted Joker had any. I'd already given them a few of the ones we had at home that I thought might be fun.

"Hey, Cleo," I said.

"Good to see you guys." Her voice sounded hollow, and it looked like she hadn't been sleeping well.

Isabella walked over to her first, giving her a hug. "How are you holding up?"

"Counting down the minutes," she said.

Ridley clapped her hands together, the sound sharp in the quiet room. "We're here to take your mind off things. Right, Ares?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we brought some board games. Thought we could all use a distraction."

"Thanks," she murmured.

We settled around her kitchen table. Before we'd even had a chance to set up the

game, someone knocked on the door. Joker went to answer. Ridley started to set up one of the games, and Isabella and I helped. I noticed Cleo kept glancing toward the door.

He returned with an envelope and handed it to Cleo. “For you.”

“Who’s it from?” she asked. She ripped open the envelope and as she read the contents of the paper inside, she paled a bit.

“Everything all right?” Isabella asked.

“Fine,” she said. Did anyone else notice the tremor in her voice or the way her hands trembled? “Just a reminder about my appointment.”

“Ah, can’t forget that,” Ridley said.

“Let’s focus on the game,” Cleo suggested.

I rolled the dice and gave a little shout of excitement, hoping to make things seem as normal as possible. “All right!”

Everyone took their turns rolling the dice and moving their tokens. When it went around to Cleo, she stared at the board, almost as if she wasn’t fully present. I glanced at Ridley and Isabella, and realized they’d noticed it too. Cleo must have a lot on her mind between the issues with her family and her heart problem.

“Your move, Cleo,” Ridley prompted.

“Right,” she mumbled.

We played for quite a while, until the sky started to darken. I didn’t know if this had

distracted Cleo or not, but it had kept me from focusing on things for a while. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed this until now. I helped clean up the games, then we told Joker and Cleo goodbye.

Ridley offered me a ride, but I waved her off. The walk would do me some good. I paused at the clubhouse and stared at my car. It didn't make sense to leave it here overnight, but at the same time, I'd prefer to get home on my own two feet than by driving there. I decided to leave it and kept walking.

A sudden chill prickled my skin, a whisper of danger that tightened my muscles. A feeling of unease skittered down my spine, and I wondered if trouble was drawing closer than any of us realized.

When I got home, there was a wrongness I felt all the way to my core. I slowly approached the house, keeping an eye on my surroundings, just the way Dad had taught me. I twisted the knob on the front door and pushed it open.

"Mom? Are you here?" I called out. Nothing. Not so much as a whisper of sound. I eased farther into the house, wondering if I should call Dad. Dessa's car was outside, which meant she had to be here. She hadn't ridden with him to the clubhouse earlier, even though she'd been there with the kids.

"Junie, Judd, Marnie!" I shouted.

No one answered, and I couldn't find anyone at home. I went back outside, wondering if maybe they went to a neighbor's house. Before I'd made it to the end of the driveway, I felt the cold kiss of metal against my neck.

"Move and those little children will be the ones we take," said a cold voice near my ear. I knew this man had to have broken into the compound. If he wasn't one of Cleo's relatives, then he was working for them. I didn't know how I knew, but I did.

My breath hitched, the instinct to fight warring with the need to keep Junie, Marnie, and Judd safe. I didn't know where they were, or if this man had already hurt them. If I did what he said, maybe he'd leave them alone.

"Go with us quietly, or those little ones will be coming with us instead," he said.

"Take me," I choked out, my words barely above a whisper. "But let them live. Please don't hurt them."

I knew without a doubt my three siblings wouldn't survive the horrors I'd faced before. All of them were babies, not a single one older than seven years old.

"Smart girl." He shoved me forward. My world narrowed to the pounding of my heart and the conviction that I would do anything for my family. As we approached the fence, I saw where they'd cut their way into the compound. With everything going on, it was no wonder no one had noticed. Normally, security was incredibly tight here, especially with all the trouble over the years. But I doubted Wire was monitoring the cameras since he was busy trying to determine the Lathems' next move.

"This is going to sting," he said. I didn't get a chance to process what was happening before I felt a prick of a needle in my neck, and then my body became dead weight. I couldn't move, even though I was still awake. The world spun a bit, and I couldn't even open my mouth to scream.

The man hefted me over his shoulder and stepped through the cut fence line. It wasn't long before I'd been tossed into the back of a van.

I'm sorry, Dad, but this was the only way .

* * *

The metal of the cage was cold against my skin, a stark contrast to the adrenaline that burned through my veins. I'd been shoved into the small, confined space so violently that my breath hitched in my throat, the impact rattling my bones and leaving me momentarily winded. The acrid stench of fear and sweat hung heavy in the air as I forced myself onto shaky legs, my heart thumping wildly in my chest. At least I was able to move again.

The van ride hadn't been pleasant, and it had taken what felt like forever before I was able to move again. I didn't have any concept of time right now. Had a half hour passed since they'd put me in here? An hour? Longer?

"Quiet down," one of the men yelled, his eyes glinting with malice through the bars. They didn't see us as people. To them, we were just cargo, products for their sick trade. I glanced around, taking in the sight of other victims huddled in the corners of their own cages, their faces etched with despair. My gut twisted at the realization of what awaited us, old memories clawing their way to the surface. Not again .

"Please," a soft voice whimpered from a cage nearby. "I want to go home."

The plea sliced through me, a painful reminder of my own stolen innocence years ago. I suppressed the urge to reach out, to offer comfort. Instead, I remained still, my gaze fixed on the concrete floor. Survival meant keeping distance between myself and the others. I couldn't save them. I needed all the strength I could muster so I wouldn't break this time.

As silence fell over us, punctuated only by the occasional sob or shuffling feet, dread settled in my stomach like a lead weight. What would happen to Junie, Marnie, and Judd if I didn't make it back? What about Dad and Dessa? Would everyone blame themselves for what happened to me? I had no doubt the club would tear down heaven and hell to find me, but time wasn't on our side. The warehouse wasn't set up for long-term storage, which meant they were going to sell us fast, and then they'd be

in the wind.

“Stay strong, Ares,” I whispered to myself. My will to fight, to survive, was rooted deep within me. But even the fiercest warrior felt fear, and mine was a roaring inferno threatening to consume me.

The stale air made bile rise up my throat and I swallowed it down. I couldn’t show even a hint of weakness. The darkness seemed to swallow everything around me. The glow of a computer screen illuminated the men holding us hostage. Were they selling us online? Or in person? Not that either option was good.

“Stream’s going live in five,” one of them said, a ghoulish excitement in his voice. “Bids are already piling up.”

I shivered. Shit. They were auctioning us online, which meant they were on the dark web. I’d heard Wire and Lavender talk about it before. A hidden network filled with humanity’s dregs. They’d trade lives like stocks. Girls like us were reduced to thumbnails on a screen, and depraved men and women would bid outrageous amounts to see who would be taking us home.

My heart hammered against my ribs, each beat a stark reminder of the stakes. I had to escape, to return to those who were waiting, praying for my safety. Even if they hadn’t noticed I was missing yet, it wouldn’t be long before they did. My phone had been tossed before they’d dumped me in the van, which meant Wire wouldn’t be able to track me.

The men continued to set up their equipment, oblivious -- or indifferent -- to the terror they sowed. More screens flickered to life, revealing an online auction room, a digital Colosseum where twisted individuals raised their bids with the click of a mouse. I closed my eyes, trying to shut out the sight, but the sounds of their operation, the clicking of keyboards, and the muttered confirmations of received

payments invaded my senses.

“Looks like this batch is gonna fetch a high price,” another voice crooned, greed lacing every syllable.

I steeled myself, refusing to be broken by their words. I wouldn’t be a passive victim. I would fight, endure, survive.

“The bitch from the motorcycle club will draw a lot of bidders. Already got a bunch checking out her listing,” one of them said. “The interest on her is really damn high. We struck gold with that one!”

My stomach knotted, and I closed my eyes, hoping Wire would find me before it was too late.

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Prophet

Nights blended into a single, elongated nightmare. Sleep was a stranger, elusive and unwelcome, as I paced the length of the clubhouse floor. I kept glancing at Wire, where he worked diligently on his keyboard to try and find Ares. She'd been missing for more than twenty-four hours when Wire had found a record of her being sold. They'd auctioned her online before we had a chance to raid the warehouse. She'd slipped through our fingers so easily.

It felt like my heart had shattered at my feet. Why hadn't I made my move sooner? If I'd claimed her, she'd have been home with me. At first, I'd had to wait because she wasn't old enough. Even still, the Pres had given permission for me to spend time with her. Strictly platonic. We occasionally would hold hands, or hug, but nothing more than that. I'd take her to movies, or out shopping. Sometimes we'd just hang out around the compound.

The minute she turned eighteen, I should have made her mine. Instead, I'd wanted to wait and make sure it was what she wanted, and maybe come up with a romantic gesture. Look where that fucking got me! Come back to me, Ares .

What if it was too late when we finally tracked her down? What if the bastard who bought her broke her beyond repair, or killed her? I wasn't sure I'd survive if either of those things happened. I'd have to be strong for her, give her a shoulder to cry on, or whatever she needed.

Night after night, I stared into the darkness, wondering where she was and if she was doing okay. As the days passed and we didn't seem to get any closer to finding her, it

felt more and more hopeless. I'd never felt so weak in my entire life!

In my mind, I saw her abduction again and again. Where was I when it happened? Why hadn't I been with her? I had to wonder if they targeted her because she'd been alone. She'd gone to Joker's house for a game night, and then she'd vanished. Other than the footage Wire found of a man carrying her through a cut piece of fencing, we had nothing to go on.

Every tick of the clock weighed on my conscience. Was Ares watching the time pass? Had the bastard who bought her already ripped her apart? What horrors had she faced since she'd been taken?

"Hold on for me, Ares. As soon as I know where you are, I'm coming for you!" Didn't matter what time of night or day it was, or how far I had to go. I'd travel to the ends of the earth to bring her back.

Everyone had gathered in the clubhouse where Wire was doing his best to find Ares using his hacking skills. His fingers flew over the keys, and someone kept him stocked with drinks and snacks. The moment he took a break, all he'd do was stare at his laptop. I didn't know how the man remained upright, but I was grateful for everything he was doing for Ares.

"I found something," Wire shouted, his fingers moving even faster than before.

"What do we know?" Savior asked. "Where is my daughter?"

Bull leaned in over Wire's shoulder. With the big man in the way, no else could see a fucking thing.

"Georgia," Bull said. "Some bigwig with a taste for young girls bought her. Wire is trying to hack into his camera feeds right now. Place looks like it has every room

wired.”

Georgia was closer than I’d thought she’d be. Still not as nearby as I’d have liked.

“Damn it.” Joker paced. I could tell he felt responsible for this mess.

“If there’s a camera in whatever place they’re holding her, I’ll find it,” Wire said, not even pausing in his typing.

The clubhouse thrummed with the pulse of urgency, every brother’s attention riveted on the mission at hand. The weight of their collective focus was like a physical force.

“Come on, come on,” Joker muttered. I knew this had to be hurting him. He no doubt felt responsible to some degree, since his wife’s family had orchestrated Ares’ abduction and sale.

Minutes dragged by, each one an eternity, stretching until they were thin and taut enough to snap. The sharp click of keys filled the room.

“Got something!” Wire shouted. All of us descended on him.

On the screen, pixels shifted, revealing the grainy image of a mansion, its walls a silent testament to the secrets they kept. Wire’s hands flew over the controls, coaxing the feed to reveal its hidden truths. It looked like the bastard had several set up. Wire flicked through them one at a time.

“Come on, baby,” Wire whispered, his voice a mixture of technician and sorcerer calling forth images from the digital ether.

“Anything?” Savior asked.

“Wait...” Wire’s words trailed off as he shifted to another feed, giving us a glimpse of pure hell.

“Is that --” Bull began, but no one finished the sentence. We didn’t need to.

Our silence was a shared language, spoken in the glances we exchanged, the set of our shoulders, the tightening of our fists. The image on the screen held us captive. We’d finally found her. I only hoped she hadn’t been completely broken.

Seeing her on the screen, and realizing what she’d been through, made it feel like my mind was going to break. I didn’t know if she’d be able to come back from this. She’d survived it once, but twice?

“Get the location,” Joker said. He eyed Savior, and I knew he had to be waiting for the Pres to lose his shit.

I glanced at Savior. That might be the woman I loved on the screen, but it was his daughter. His face had turned nearly purple as the rage built inside him. He stared at his daughter and the signs of the abuse she’d suffered.

With a loud roar, he picked up a chair and threw it across the room. The wood shattered on impact. He lifted another and smashed it as well. Flicker and Saint grabbed him.

“Easy, brother,” Saint murmured, his hold tightening. They dragged him toward the door, away from the screen that continued to display a nightmare we’d all be reliving for a long time to come.

“Let me go!” Savior roared.

I knew exactly how he felt. I wanted to tear this place apart, beat every bastard who’d

had a hand in Ares being sold, and then set the entire fucking world on fire and raze everything to the ground.

“Shh, we got you,” Flicker coaxed, his tone soft, a counterpoint to the chaos. “We’re going to get her back, Savior. Right now, we need you to cool down and think about this logically.”

They took him outside before he could demolish the entire clubhouse. Not that any of us would blame him.

“Almost got it,” Wire said, his fingers a blur. “Found the exact coordinates!”

“Prophet.” Joker turned to me. I held his gaze, letting him see everything I was feeling in that moment. “We’re bringing her home.”

“Like hell we are.” No. There would be no we in this. I would bring her home. Ares was mine, and I was going to be the one to rescue her from that hell, no matter the cost. I didn’t care if I fucking died in the process. As long as she was no longer with that wretched man and could have a chance at living a normal life again, then I’d pay any cost.

I stared at the screen and watched Ares, her form small and broken as she huddled in the corner, knees hugged tightly to her chest. Her once vibrant eyes had lost their flame, replaced by a haunting emptiness that dug its claws into my soul. Blood smeared across her skin, and bruises had already formed on every visible part of her body. They hadn’t even allowed her to keep her clothes in the dank cell where they’d dumped her after doing God knew what to her.

“Close it, Wire!” Joker barked.

“Trying!” Wire’s fingers danced frantically across the keyboard, but it was too late.

I'd already seen it all and realized what had been done to my precious girl. When I got my hands on the man who'd hurt her, I'd send him straight to hell.

"Prophet, man," Joker said, reaching out, but I shrugged off his hand.

Wire's fingers halted their frenetic dance across the keyboard, and he turned slowly, a slip of paper clutched in his grasp.

"The mansion's south of Atlanta. Only building within fifty miles. Heavily fortified."

"Let me see," Joker demanded, snatching the paper from him. "Prophet..."

Before he could say anything more, I took note of the address, then turned and walked away. I knew they'd send brothers after me, a guarantee that I wouldn't do something stupid as well as backup for getting Ares safely out of that place. I wasn't waiting on them. I got on my bike and, without even going home to pack, I left the compound and hit the road. I had a lot of miles to cover if I wanted to get Ares back tonight.

It didn't take long for Warden and Foster to catch up to me. I didn't know if they'd volunteered or were assigned the task of saving Ares. Since there were only two, I had a feeling we'd end up with help from other clubs. Since Ares was being held in Georgia, the Devil's Fury would likely be there. If the Reckless Kings sent someone, I wondered if Logan would join us. He'd decided to prospect for their club after his sister, Leigha, got claimed by Cyclops.

Other than stopping for gas, I didn't take any breaks on the way. I stopped for gas one last time before making the final haul to the location. I parked my bike after filling the tank, needing to get my mind off Ares and more on how I'd save her. Warden and Foster stopped beside me and got off their bikes.

“Got a text from Wire,” Warden said. “He sent details about the place we need to break into, as well as who would be coming to help.”

“So who are we expecting?” I asked, “And how fucking long before they get here?”

“Devil’s Fury is sending Frost and Ripper. And the Devil’s Boneyard sent Magnus and Gator. In fact, I’m betting they’re already here somewhere,” Warden said. “I’ve made sure Wire is tracking me through my phone, so he knows where we are every step of the way. I’m sure he’s updating those coming to help us.”

My phone chimed and I realized it was Magnus reaching out. Look to your left .

I glanced down the street and saw the two men waiting for us. We made our way over and I checked my phone when it vibrated. Wire had sent images of the place we’d be breaking into. Fence had to be more than seven feet. Looked like guards were patrolling inside. Heavily armed.

“There’s cameras too,” Magnus said, leaning over to look at my phone screen.

“Don’t forget the fucking dogs,” Gator muttered.

“I don’t suppose any of the hackers offered assistance with the cameras?” I asked.

“Think they’re working on it. For now, we need to figure out where the Devil’s Fury are. There’s no fucking way we beat them here,” Magnus said.

“Anyone have the number for either Frost or Ripper?” I asked.

“Nope.” Both men shook their heads. I glanced at Foster, and he held up a finger.

“Give me a sec. I’ll reach out to Logan. I’m sure he knows how to reach them.” I

watched him send a text, and it wasn't long before we got a response. Foster showed me the numbers and I sent a text to both.

Where the fuck are you? I want Ares out of that place now !

Magnus snorted. "I'm sure that's going to go over well. Even if the hackers can take out the cameras or screw with the feed, we're going to need more firepower to get through all the damn guards. And no offense, but I'm not shooting any dogs. Doolittle would have my ass."

"No shit," Gator said. "Too bad he didn't volunteer for this little trip. I bet he could have charmed them or something. Man has a way with animals."

My phone dinged with a text. We're getting supplies .

What the fuck kind of supplies did they need? I leaned against the brick wall behind me and stared at the image on my phone again. I scrolled through the next three he sent me. I felt a little out of my depth, but there was no fucking way I'd back down. I'd get her out there no matter what.

"There's a café not too far from here. Why don't we walk over?" Magnus asked.

"So I'm supposed to what? Eat a fucking waffle or something while my woman is in there being tortured?" I asked, fury filling me.

"No." Magnus put his hand on my shoulder. "You're going to get some coffee while we wait on reinforcements. Then we're going to come up with a plan so we don't all get killed trying to get her out of there. I know you want to rip the place apart with your bare hands. I get it. But that's not going to help Ares."

"Fine. I'll give them a half hour. If those fuckers don't show up by then, I'll go in

alone if I have to.”

How the fuck could they ask me to wait? Did they not understand what she was suffering at the hands of that asshole? Knowing she was so close yet out of reach was driving me crazy. The sooner I had her in my arms, the better.

Hold on, Ares. I'll be there soon .

We found the café and got a table in a quiet corner. I had to admit the walk had been good for me. My muscles had started to stiffen up from riding for hours with so few breaks. No one batted an eye at a bunch of bikers coming inside the cafe, which made me wonder if there was a club in the area. Had anyone bothered to check? The last thing I needed was to piss off a bunch of bikers who might try to stop me from getting my woman back.

After we'd ordered, the Devil's Fury showed up, and they weren't alone. I saw five big bastards come in wearing cuts I wasn't familiar with -- Wild & Reckless MC. Were they local? Why hadn't I heard of them before?

Ripper sat and motioned to the Wild & Reckless men. “These are the locals. Stopped to get permission to be here and explained the situation. Although the place we're infiltrating isn't technically part of this town. It's got its own fucking zip code if you can believe that shit.”

One of them held out his hand and I noticed his cut said he was the President. “Name's Highlander. We're a small club. Including Prospects, there's only seven of us right now, but we're all ex-military.”

One of the men nudged him. “Almost all. Shaker, our Treasurer, is former FBI. As you can probably tell from Highlander's name and slight accent, he's originally from Scotland. The rest of us were born in the US. I'm Wings, the Road Captain.”

“We left the Prospects back at the clubhouse,” another man said. His cut said he was their Secretary. As I looked at each of them, I realized all of their officers had come today.

“Are you here to help or throw us out?” I asked.

“Oh, we’re definitely here to help.” Highlander gave me a smile that chilled me to the bone. “I won’t tolerate the likes of that bastard lurking anywhere near my town. Fifty miles is too fucking close for comfort. Considering why you’re here, I have to wonder if he might be responsible for some of the local girls going missing.”

“Our club is relatively new,” Wings said. “We’ve been riding together for a while but decided to make it official two years ago. Settled down in this place.”

“Anyone have a plan in mind?” I asked.

“We may have something.” Wings and Highlander shared a look. They settled in and disclosed what info they had on the man who held Ares captive. As the minutes passed, I felt both anxious over what she might be suffering, and relieved that it appeared I’d have her back soon.

But it seemed we needed to wait until dark to retrieve her... I only hoped she could hold on that long.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:38 am

Ares

Consciousness crept back to me like a thief, slow and unwelcome. I had no idea how much time had passed. Every time my owner entered the room, the pain became so bad I couldn't handle it. More than once, I'd passed out only to awaken alone and in the dark. Had it only been days since I'd been brought here? Weeks? I didn't even know where here was. I'd been drugged before my owner came to claim me and had no way of knowing if I even remained in Alabama.

The chill of the concrete floor seeped through my skin, a stark contrast to the heat of the pain throbbing in my head. No matter how hard I strained to see my surroundings, the darkness held on stubbornly, offering only shadows cast by a flickering light somewhere above me. I tried to lift my hands to my face, to wipe away the grogginess, but they wouldn't move. Panic clawed at my throat as I felt the bite of rope digging into my wrists.

"Damnit," I hissed under my breath, twisting my arms in an attempt to assess how much give I had. Not much. The familiar burn of abraded skin began to flare as I worked against my bindings, memories of a past I had fought so hard to overcome flashing in my mind. Until now, my owner hadn't tied me up like this. Was this a new way of torturing me?

"Think, Ares, think," I muttered to myself, forcing my breathing to slow, to keep the terror at bay. They'd gotten to me once when I was just a kid, but I wasn't that helpless child anymore. I'd already survived hell before, and the Dixie Reapers had made sure I knew how to protect myself. Maybe someone should have taught me how to escape ropes.

The rough hemp of the rope seemed to mock me, tightening its grip as I struggled. Each movement sent fresh waves of agony down my arms, but surrender wasn't in my blood. With each twist, with each pull, I poured all my fear and fury into the fight against my restraints. I appeared to be in my usual room. More of a cage really, even if it didn't have bars to contain me.

"Come on," I encouraged myself, the words barely a whisper, drowned out by the pounding in my skull. "You've survived worse."

I shifted, trying to find some leverage, any weakness in the knots that bound me. But the ropes were relentless, unyielding. My heart hammered in my chest. I needed to get out, to get back to my family. They'd be looking for me, Prophet especially. His face flashed in my mind's eye, stern yet caring, and I clung to the image like a lifeline. If anyone would come for me, I knew it would be him. All he needed was a direction, and he'd track me down. Of that, I had no doubt.

The entire club would turn the world upside down if they had to. I just had to hold on, to survive until then. Because this was not where my story ended. Not in some dimly lit room at the hands of monsters who thought they could use me however they pleased. Whatever it took, I had to stay alive.

The door creaked open with a groan that seemed to echo my dread. A tall, thin man slithered into the room. Dressed all in black, he blended with the shadows. He had a chilling presence -- his eyes, those cold chips of ice, found mine in the gloom and held them captive. The first few times someone had come in here, I'd been blindfolded. The others, it had been pitch-black and I hadn't been able to see more than shadows. Not that it had stopped the bastard from doing what he wanted.

"Ah, Ares," he cooed. A shiver raced down my spine. The tone of his voice alone was enough to tell me if there had ever been any humanity in this man, it was long gone. And his voice... I'd never forget it for as long as I lived. "You look..."

uncomfortable.”

I squirmed under his gaze, the raw fear skittering through me. But I wasn't about to let him see me crack, not even as his lips curled into a satisfied smirk at my predicament. Sick bastard was loving this. I tried not to think of all the things he'd done to me already. Part of me wanted to curl up and hide, but I knew it wouldn't do any good.

“Bet you're feeling all tied up right about now,” he taunted, pacing in front of me like a vulture ready to feast on carrion. I bit my tongue so I wouldn't make a smartass remark. I had a feeling doing so would be really bad for me right now. “But don't worry, my dear. You'll get used to it.”

I fixed my eyes on a crack in the nearby wall. My jaw clenched so hard it ached, but the pain was good -- it reminded me I was still here, still fighting. I refused to give this man what he wanted. I wouldn't beg for my freedom or my life. Wouldn't yield to whatever sadistic plans he had for me. I'd fight. If I didn't, I'd never be able to look my family in the eye again.

“Looking away won't save you,” he whispered, leaning close enough for me to feel his breath.

I forced myself to meet his gaze, to show him the fire he hadn't extinguished. “You don't scare me,” I lied through gritted teeth, the words tasting like ash.

“Brave words for someone in your... predicament.” His voice made my skin crawl.

As he stepped back, his shadow seemed to stretch across the room, imprinting itself onto the walls, the ceiling, the very air around me. I wondered if he'd designed this room so that very thing would happen, making the trapped person feel as if he surrounded them.

Despite my fear, I also felt determined. I would survive this. Because somewhere out there, Prophet and the Dixie Reapers were tearing the world apart to find me. For them, for myself, I would endure. I had to. There wasn't another option. I knew it would destroy my family and Prophet if I didn't live long enough for them to save me.

"Go ahead," I said, summoning every ounce of defiance I could muster. "Do your worst. You'll see. I won't break that easily. I haven't yet, have I?"

His cruel smile never wavered as he turned to leave, but I caught the flicker of annoyance in his eyes. It was small, almost imperceptible, but it was there -- a crack in his armor. And that was all I needed.

With each second that ticked by in his absence, the ember of resolve within me began to fade. I knew I needed to fight back, but I didn't know how much more I could endure. I had no idea how long I'd been gone. Had several days passed since I'd been kidnapped? Weeks? There was no telling how long I'd been unconscious. I knew from experience they could keep me knocked out for weeks if that's what they wanted.

The room dipped in and out of focus until the man returned, bringing with him a rolling cart full of items meant to torture me. They clattered ominously as he pushed the cart closer to me.

"Let's begin," he whispered. I could hear the delight in his voice, the pure glee that he'd make me scream. I knew I needed to hold out, but at the same time, if I never screamed, would he lose his patience and kill me? It wasn't like I was dealing with a sane man.

I braced myself, clenching my teeth so hard I feared they might crack. The cold touch of steel traced the exposed skin of my arm, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. My

breath hitched, but I refused to voice the pain I felt.

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Another slash, sharp and precise, bit into my flesh. My body jolted involuntarily, straining against the rough ropes. Pain splintered through me, branching out to every nerve ending. But beneath it all, simmering like molten lava, was the anger -- an inferno threatening to erupt. How dare he do this to me? How many others had there been? Was I the only captive here right now? Or did he have a stable of us like my previous Master?

"Beautiful," he murmured, studying the cuts that painted my skin like grotesque art.

I ground my teeth, swallowing the bile that rose in my throat. My thoughts spun, a maelstrom of fear and fury.

"Is this all you've got?" My voice trembled with the effort to remain defiant.

My Master paused, his head tilting in that unnerving way of his, as if considering a particularly interesting specimen under a microscope.

"Patience, Ares," he cooed. "We're only just getting started."

Fuck. Me . I was no longer confident I could last without giving him what he wanted. While I'd become stronger in some ways since being adopted by Savior, I'd grown weak in others. The old Ares would have retreated from the pain, disappearing into her own mind. The new version of me didn't remember how to do it.

The next onslaught came without warning. This time he'd grabbed a whip off the cart. Blows rained down, each one a brutal crescendo that left me reeling. Tears slipped down my cheeks, and I hated that I was giving him one of the things I knew

he wanted, but I couldn't help it. What would Prophet think when he saw me like this? Stripped bare. Cut. Beaten. I doubted the man was going to stop here. No, he had more planned for me. I could see it in his eyes.

"Still holding on?" Master taunted, his breath hot against my ear. "You're more resilient than I gave you credit for."

His tongue flicked out to lick the shell of my ear and I fought hard not to throw up. I could see his hard cock outlined in his pants and knew he was getting off on this. If I were lucky, my pain would be enough to make him come. And if I wasn't... I didn't even want to think of what would happen to me.

"Stronger than you'll ever be," I managed to choke out, my voice barely above a whisper.

He laughed then, a sound devoid of any humanity, and continued his cruel work. I retreated within myself, building walls around my mind to shield it from the relentless assault. It had been so long I was out of practice. The walls would crack, and he'd reach me. Then I'd rebuild, stronger than the last time.

I heard the clink of his belt and knew what would happen next. I closed my eyes and forced myself to slip away. It was the only way I'd survive what he did next.

* * *

In the suffocating stillness of the dimly lit room, I lay sprawled on the cold floor, every breath a battle, every heartbeat a rebellion. Master had left, confident he'd broken me. He didn't know me -- not truly. He saw someone to own, to crush. He didn't know I'd been through this before, and I had a reason to survive this time.

He'd left me unbound, and for good reason. I didn't think I would be able to easily sit

up, much less try to escape. My blood dripped onto the floor. Every part of me ached, and I fought back tears. I'd never voluntarily been with anyone before, and I'd been looking forward to Prophet claiming me in every way possible.

Now I felt dirty again. Unworthy of someone like Prophet. I knew he wouldn't turn away from me. He wasn't that type. If anything, he'd probably blame himself for what happened to me. I didn't know how he'd make this his fault, but he would. It was just the sort of man he was, and I loved him for it.

I'd been so frustrated with him for a while. Until the day he'd saved me. I'd opened myself up to exploring the possibility of a future relationship with him at that point. We'd grown closer, even though he was always respectful, mindful of the fact I hadn't been eighteen until recently.

I groaned and struggled to sit upright. Leaning against the wall, every breath felt like it might destroy me. I gingerly touched my ribs, wondering if he'd broken any. I winced and looked down, seeing the bruises covering my body.

Drawing my knees up to my chest, I wrapped my arms around them and dropped my head. How many more times would the Master come to visit me?

I lifted my head, resolve filling me. No matter how much it hurt, I had to push through. I managed to stand, swaying as dizziness threatened to claim me. The world tilted and spun, but I willed it to steady. I wouldn't succumb to weakness -- not now.

Cautious steps took me to the door, my limbs protesting with the echo of recent torment. Yet, as I reached for the handle, a new kind of fear gripped me. The unknown lay beyond. What if something worse was on the other side?

I thought of my dad. Dessa and the kids. I needed to survive. To escape. I turned the handle and stepped into the abyss, ready to face whatever hell awaited me in the quest

for my freedom. Or so I thought.

The corridor stretched before me, an unending tunnel of dim light and deeper shadows. Each step was tentative, as I feared I'd give myself away and be discovered. My mouth went dry and I licked my lips. I needed to keep quiet and keep moving. No matter what I saw or heard, I couldn't stop.

My eyes flicked from one closed door to another, seeking signs of life -- or rather, the lack of it. I heard a few whimpers, and wondered if they belonged to women like me. Stolen from their families, sold by monsters.

A shiver ran down my spine as I sidestepped a patch of light. For all I knew, someone was watching me, waiting in the darkness. Maybe they were enjoying my attempt at an escape, laughing at my pathetic effort to free myself.

In the darkness, my fingers found the cool metal of a doorknob, hope surging momentarily before I turned it and met resistance. Locked. A stifled groan escaped my throat as I leaned against the unyielding wood, the weight of despair momentarily crushing. I should have known. Why else would he have left me untied and in an unlocked room? He'd known I wouldn't get far.

The urge to panic was like a living thing inside me, clawing at my resolve.

With every shallow breath, I fought to quell the terror threatening to overwhelm me. I pressed my ear against the door, straining to hear anything beyond the thudding of my own pulse. Silence. Perhaps it was a cruel trick of hope, but silence was an invitation I had to accept.

I stepped back, surveying the hallway for anything, anything that could aid in my escape. My gaze fell upon a heavy-looking vase perched on a pedestal. Without a second thought, I grasped it, the weight reassuring in my hands. If I couldn't unlock

the door, maybe I could break through it somehow -- or at least cause enough noise to summon an opportunity out of the ensuing chaos. I didn't know how many women were held captive down here – or how many men they might send to check on any disturbance, but that was a gamble I was willing to take. I'd bash whoever came through over the head with the vase.

“Prophet,” I whispered, “I’m still fighting. Please come get me.” My legs gave out and I collapsed on the floor, leaning my head back against the wall to wait. Closing my eyes, I wondered how close the club was to finding me. Had Wire managed to locate me with his hacking skills? Was the club outside this place right now, just waiting to bust in and get me out of here?

Or was I lost? Would my captors find me and punish me?

My heart ached and tears slipped down my cheeks.

The door opened and I looked up, seeing my Master and another man. The stronger of the two lifted me over his shoulder and carried me back to my prison. The light in Master's eyes was enough warning to know this would be a long night full of pain and suffering. Closing my eyes again, I had to wonder if I really could survive until the club rescued me... or if this man was the one who would finally break me.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:38 am

Prophet

The air in the room was heavy, thick with the stench of oil and leather. I stood in the middle of the Wild & Reckless MC clubhouse, surrounded by my brothers-in-arms -- Foster and Warden -- as well as our allies from the Devil's Boneyard and the Devil's Fury. Our new friends, the Wild & Reckless MC, had been a great help to us, and I hoped the friendship would carry forward after this was over.

"We've got enough firepower to start a small war," Magnum said, his hands running over the cache of weapons that lay sprawled across the table.

Gator nodded, his eyes cold as ice. "And we'll bring hell to their doorstep. I can't stand sick fucks like that bastard."

I felt the weight of the guns in my hands, the grip familiar and strangely comforting. There were no heroes here, just men ready to descend into the abyss. The Wild & Reckless guys -- Highlander, Wings, and Poker -- stood at the edge, their expressions grim. Their other two brothers were in the background, ready if we needed them.

"Highlander has a plan," I said, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me.

The room fell silent, all eyes on the tall Scotsman. Highlander was built like a tank, his presence commanding attention without a word. He laid out the map, his finger tracing the route we would take to infiltrate the asshole's stronghold.

"Precision," Highlander emphasized. "That's how we do it. No room for mistakes."

Wings stepped forward. “We’ll cover your back and help with the cleanup.”

Poker gave a curt nod. “You get in, you get out. We’ll handle the rest.”

I stared at the map and the layout of the mansion. Although, we had no way of knowing if it was entirely accurate. Shade had managed to find it and sent it over to Magnum. It was better than nothing. It was most likely they were holding Ares in the basement, but the place had so many rooms she could be anywhere on any floor.

“Let’s do this,” I said, ready to have Ares in my arms, safe and sound.

There was a chorus of agreement. I looked at each man, brothers forged in violence and necessity, and knew that no matter what, we’d stand together. Even though we weren’t all part of the same club, today we shared the same mission.

We armed ourselves, each weapon a promise of vengeance, each bullet a whisper of justice. As I checked my own gear, I thought of Ares, and rage coursed through me, burning away any doubt.

We moved as one, a dark tide rolling toward an uncertain dawn. Fear clung to us, a constant companion, but it didn’t rule us. Tonight, we were the hunters and not the hunted. We’d show that asshole what it meant to suffer.

The cold steel of the knife slid against my palm as I strapped it to my thigh, a silent promise of violence. My hands didn’t shake. They couldn’t afford to as I loaded my gun. Every bullet that snicked into place in the magazine was a promise of retribution. Poker handed me another 9mm, its weight familiar and oddly comforting in my palm.

“Watch your back,” he said, his eyes dark with the same fury that fed my pulse.

“Always do,” I replied, the words terse and low.

We stepped out of the clubhouse and got onto our bikes. I felt the engine roar to life beneath me. The throttle twisted under my grip, a surge of power coursing through the machine like adrenaline. I shot forward, the world blurring into streaks of color and light as I wove through traffic, heading out of town and toward the mansion. The wind lashed at me like a living thing, but I welcomed its icy caress -- it sharpened my senses, kept me tethered to the moment.

I could almost hear her voice over the rush of air, a siren’s call urging me on, faster, ever faster. Ares needed me. That single thought cleaved through the haze of fear. I would tear apart anyone who stood between us, rend flesh from bone if I had to. There was no room for doubt, no space for hesitation. Only the mission, only her.

Each mile devoured by the wheels on my bike brought me closer to her. I would finally put an end to this nightmare and save the woman I loved.

Tonight, I’d go into that fucking house, and I’d do whatever it took to get Ares back where she belonged -- safe in my arms. I’d make sure the threat that cast its shadow over her was extinguished, forever silenced. I’d worry about what came next once I had her out of that place.

The rumble of my bike’s engine died as I coasted to a halt, the mansion’s imposing silhouette looming ahead. A chill prickled my skin -- not from the night air, but from the malice that seemed to seep from the estate’s very walls. I let the silence settle over me, eyes scanning for any sign of movement.

Security was tight. Cameras perched like predatory birds. Guards prowled the perimeter with a military precision that spoke of the man’s paranoia. This was it -- the fortress where Ares was trapped. A fortress I intended to breach.

“Stay sharp,” I muttered under my breath, a silent mantra to keep focused. I slid off my motorcycle, crouching low in the shadows, my hands steady despite the inferno of fear threatening to consume me. Not for myself, but for Ares. If I failed, I knew she’d end up dying in this place.

A flicker of motion caught my eye -- Wings and Gator, positioned across the lawn, gave the signal. Distraction was key, and those two had promised to cause a big ruckus. I watched as they lobbed a couple of well-placed rocks, the guards shifting like agitated hounds toward the source of the noise. It seemed almost too easy.

Slinking forward, I moved like a ghost, my boots barely kissing the earth beneath them. The darkness was a friend, an ally that embraced me as one of its own. Each step took me deeper into enemy territory, every shadow a potential threat.

A guard rounded the corner, his flashlight cutting a swath through the night. My grip tightened on the knife strapped to my thigh. There was no room for mercy, not here, not tonight. As he edged closer, oblivious to his impending doom, I struck. The blade found its home, swift and silent. It slid into his neck with ease, and he crumpled without a sound.

I dragged the body into the darkness, my heart pounding. I needed to move faster. Every moment that ticked by was another second she suffered, and I would not -- could not -- fail her.

My progress through the mansion was a dance with death, each step measured, each breath calculated. I avoided the light, sticking to the blackness that pooled in the corners and crevices. More guards met the same fate as the first, their lifeblood a testament to the lengths I’d go to save her. Not just her. I knew this man had tormented other women before Ares. This was revenge for all of them.

With every inch gained, fear filled me. Was Ares still all right? Had she managed to

survive without losing her mind? She needed me, and I would tear this place apart, stone by stone, if that's what it took to free her from the clutches of the monster who dared claim her as his property. She was mine. Had been mine for over a year now, even if I hadn't been able to officially make her mine.

I was coming for her, and hell itself wouldn't stop me.

I made it to the door I hoped would lead me to Ares. My fingers worked deftly, coaxing the tumblers into submission. The adrenaline in my veins sharpened my focus to a razor's edge. A soft click, barely audible over the hammering of my heart, signaled success. The door yielded, swinging open with a reluctant groan.

Beyond lay a dimly lit hallway, oppressive and lined with doors like silent sentinels. Whimpers leaked from the cracks, the soft sounds of shattered spirits. They were the cries of the damned, and they fueled my resolve. Ares was somewhere here, her pain a phantom ache in my own chest. I stepped over the threshold, the shadows embracing me like an old friend.

I couldn't save them all, but I would get my woman out of this hell no matter what it took. The rest of the men with me would have to take care of the other women.

A man emerged -- a hulking beast who looked more like a devil than a human. The guard was monstrous, a towering mass of muscle and malice. I tensed. As the club's Enforcer, I'd faced down death more times than I cared to count, but each time was a roll of the dice with the reaper. Would I be lucky this time too, or would this be my last fight?

With no room for hesitation, I summoned the training that had been drilled into me. I twisted away from his lumbering grasp, my body operating on instinct. His size was his downfall. Power meant nothing without the grace to direct it. And grace was something I had in spades when the stakes were life and death.

A feint to the left, and he took the bait. Like a viper, I struck -- my blade striking his side, his stomach, and finally slicing across his neck. And as he fell, I felt a surge of grim satisfaction. This was for Ares, for every tear she shed, for every scream muffled by these walls. And I wasn't finished yet.

I stepped over the inert behemoth. Ahead, another door beckoned -- the door I hoped would lead me to her, to the end of this nightmare. I moved forward, my breaths shallow. A tomb-like silence hung heavy around me. The dim light flickered, casting sinister shadows. Through each door I passed, I heard the muffled sounds of despair.

I paused by the last door. The cries behind this door were familiar to me. Ares. I didn't know what I'd find on the other side, but I knew she was inside. The sounds of her agony ripped into me and I steeled myself. Drawing in a breath, I kicked the door, shattering it on impact.

The man who'd purchased Ares stood before me, his twisted grin a sickening slash across his face. Wire had texted me an image of him, one he'd taken from a still off the cameras inside the house. But even without it, the evil rolling off this man would have been enough to tell me who the fuck he was. Our gazes locked -- two predators fighting for dominance. The air was charged with the electricity of impending violence.

"Prophet," he oozed, his voice slick as oil. "You are Prophet, right? Ares talks about you so much, when she thinks no one is listening. So good of you to join us."

"End of the line, asshole." My words were ice, my gaze locked onto him with unwavering intensity.

He laughed, a sound that scraped against my nerves like barbed wire. I didn't dare stop to look at Ares. If I did, I might break. First, I needed to deal with this bastard. I could use my gun and end him quickly, but what would be the fun in that? He needed

to suffer for all he'd done to Ares, not to mention the other women.

I gripped the knife tighter and charged at him. He danced to the side, but I'd anticipated his move and slashed the blade along his ribs. The man snarled, eyes narrowing. He swung his fist at me, but I kept out of range. The two of us circled one another. We each wanted to destroy the other.

I landed a few more blows, the blood flowing from the man's wounds. I watched the crimson drops splatter on the floor and knew it wasn't enough. Pulling one of the guns from the holster behind my back, I took aim and shot both of his knees, forcing him to the ground. He cried out as he collapsed, his face going pale. Now that I knew he wouldn't be able to escape, or fight back, it was time to make him pay.

I approached, kneeling down. His eyes went wide with fear, as if he suddenly realized his life was over.

"Don't worry. You won't die right away." I smiled, flashing my teeth. "I'll make sure you suffer first. Although..."

I still couldn't look at Ares. I knew she was there. Not only did I hear her, but I could feel her presence in the room. Holding my hand out to her, I beckoned her closer. If anyone deserved to get revenge on this man, it was her. I'd once thought she'd been forged from iron, but I had to wonder if she still felt as strong as she had before. How much damage had this man done to her? Not only physically, but emotionally and mentally as well.

I felt her hand close around mine, and when I finally looked her way, I wished like hell I hadn't. I didn't know how she was standing, or how the fuck she'd survived. The woman was stronger than anyone I knew, even though I didn't think she realized it. All I had was my bike, and it wouldn't be an easy ride for her to get the fuck out of here, but I'd need her to pull through. For Ares' sake, we needed to put as much

distance as we could between this house of horrors and her.

“Ares, is there anything you want to do or say to him before I continue?” I asked.

“He stripped me naked. You should do the same to him.” Her voice was barely a whisper and I heard the ragged pain behind her words.

I didn’t want to hear the answer, but at the same time, I needed to. “Did he touch you? Did he...”

“Yeah. He raped me.”

I closed my eyes and fought for control. Using my knife, I shredded his clothes. The pathetic dick hanging between his legs wasn’t anything to brag about. It didn’t even look big enough for me to slice it off. I tapped the head of his cock with the flat side of my knife and he flinched.

“Is this why you hurt women? None of them want you without being forced?” I asked. “Ares, can you pick the locks on the doors in the hall?”

“With the right tools,” she said.

I handed her my lockpicks. “Go free the women and tell them if anyone wants vengeance to come in here.”

I stood and gripped a handful of the man’s hair and hauled him over to a wall with leather cuffs hanging from it. I fastened them onto his wrists and wondered what those women would do to him. Glancing around the room, I noticed a locked cabinet.

Ares returned, two young women following behind her. None of them had on clothes. I made sure not to look anywhere other than their faces.

“Ares, go unlock the cabinet. Maybe there’s something in there they want to use on this sorry excuse of a man,” I said. She made her way to the cabinet and used the lockpicks to open it. Once it swung open, I let out a whistle. Various sex toys were inside, including floggers and strap-ons. I eyed Ares, wondering if he’d used those on her. She gave a subtle shake of her head and relief flooded me. One less trauma to overcome.

“Ladies, I’m going to hand him over to you, with only one caveat.” I handed the revolver to one of them. “When you’re done making him suffer, make sure he’s dead.”

The younger of the two tipped her head to the side and stared at the man. “If I shoot him in the dick, will he bleed out?”

“Guess it depends on if you can hit a target that small.” I heard Ares snicker behind me, and the sound filled me with joy. She might be badly beaten, and she’d suffered in the worst way, but at least she hadn’t been completely broken.

I looked at Ares again, and I wished like hell I hadn’t. I wasn’t one to cry, but the sight of her battered body was enough to make my eyes sting with unshed tears. My heart shattered at the sight of her. I swept her into my arms, her body trembling against mine.

“Shh, baby girl, I’ve got you. You’re safe now. You’re going home,” I murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Her arms wrapped weakly around my neck, holding on as if she feared the world would rip us apart. But nothing would take her from me again. Nothing.

“Take me away from here, Prophet. Please,” she pleaded, her voice cracking with the weight of her ordeal.

Once we'd walked out of the mansion, I paused only long enough to remove my cut and pull off my T-shirt. I tugged the shirt over her head before sliding my cut on once more. It wasn't ideal, but at least it covered her.

"Do you think you can ride?" I asked.

"If it meant leaving this place, I could walk without stopping for the next week."

"Come on." I took her hand and led her to my bike. I swung my leg over the seat, and she settled behind me, pressing against my back.

I didn't wait to speak to anyone or thank them for their help. Right now, she was my priority, and I had a feeling they all understood. I rode, not stopping until we'd gotten far enough away that I hoped Ares would feel safe. I pulled into the parking lot of a cheap motel and got a room. I didn't know if we'd stay until morning, but she needed a chance to get cleaned up, and I needed to buy some clothes for both of us.

The place didn't even offer toiletries, and the towels looked questionable. Yeah, we sure the fuck wouldn't be here long. I just needed a place to keep her while I got what we needed. She couldn't very well go into a store like this. If I hadn't wanted to get as far as I could from the place where I'd found her, I wouldn't have even made her ride on my bike in her current state of undress. Maybe if I hadn't reacted the moment I saw her on Wire's screen, I'd have taken the time to get her a change of clothes and shoved them into my saddlebags.

"I need you to wait here while I grab some supplies. We'll get back on the road after we've both showered and changed."

She looked up at me, tears slipping down her cheeks. "I worried you wouldn't make it in time. I didn't know how much longer I could hold on."

I cupped her cheek. “I will always come for you, Ares. Always.”

She nodded and wiped the tears away. “Hurry back. This place gives me the creeps.”

I kissed her forehead, then rinsed off my hands and face, making sure I didn’t have any blood spatter on me. Once I thought I didn’t look like I’d just committed murder, I headed to the nearest store that would have the basics we needed. I bought a package of panties for her, a shirt, and pair of leggings, then grabbed a cheap pair of tennis shoes and some socks. All I needed was a shirt for now. I’d buy more things when we got to our final destination, which I’d already decided wouldn’t be the Dixie Reapers compound. She wasn’t ready.

Once I got back to the motel, I helped her wash and dress. I tugged on my new shirt, forgoing a shower for the time being. It was more important to get out of here right now.

“If you could go anywhere while you heal, where would you go?” I asked.

“The beach.” She smiled a little. “But I also want to go home to Alabama.”

“Then we’ll find a place along the Gulf.” I used an app on my phone to locate a home we could rent by the month and made the payment. The owner sent the info for accessing the house, and I checked out the quickest route to get there.

“Only time I’m stopping is if you need food or need to pee. You all right with that?” I asked.

She nodded. “Just... Don’t leave me.”

I leaned down, pausing a moment before my lips brushed over hers. It was technically our first kiss, and not the way I’d wanted it to happen. But it felt like we both needed

this. “I should have said this before now. You’re mine, Ares. I’m not going to ask anyone for permission. You’ve been mine for the last year.”

She leaned into me, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I know. I’d planned to ask what was taking you so long.”

“Stupidity.”

She laughed softly. “Take me to our temporary home, Prophet.”

I’d take her anywhere she wanted to go. No matter how far or impossible, I’d find a way.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:38 am

Ares

The roar of the engine settled into a purr as Prophet cut the ignition, and we coasted to a stop in front of the beach house. The air was thick with salt and promise, but it felt like a world away from the one I'd been living in -- a world of darkness and pain.

"Here we are, Ares," Prophet said softly, his voice a balm to the chaos churning inside me. He didn't know, couldn't know, how my insides were a twisting mass of snakes. A silent scream echoed in my head.

"Looks quiet," I managed to say, forcing what I hoped was a reassuring smile as I stepped off the bike. My shoes crunched on the crushed shells, the sound too loud for such a peaceful night.

Prophet slung an arm around my shoulders, ushering me toward the house -- our temporary sanctuary. His touch was meant to comfort, but it felt like a lifeline. Agony, fear, and rage burned inside me. I wanted to cry, scream, and hit something. I leaned into him, needing his strength because mine was long gone.

"Let's check the place out," he said, and there was a lightness in his tone that told me he was trying for both our sakes. The shadows in his eyes told a different story. I knew he was worried about me.

We walked through the house, and I noted the exits, the locks on the windows, the way the furniture could be used as barricades. I froze, realizing what I was doing. I was safe now. Not to mention, Prophet was beside me. He wouldn't let anyone get to me. He watched me, his gaze both warm and concerned.

“Need anything?” he asked once we’d finished our inspection. “There’s a store not far from here. We could stock up. I only got you the one outfit earlier.”

“Sure.” Shopping. Such a normal thing to do, yet it felt like we were talking about scaling a mountain without ropes. I wasn’t sure I was prepared yet for normal .

Prophet’s hand found mine, our fingers lacing together. We walked to his bike, and I climbed on behind him, feeling the rumble of the motorcycle beneath us as we took the short trip to the store. I knew we wouldn’t be able to buy a lot since we didn’t have a vehicle with four wheels and more space. Even still, he’d been right about us needing certain things.

The fluorescent lights of the store were too bright. I wanted to shrink from them and hide, but I forced myself to remain by his side. I followed Prophet down the aisles, my gaze skittering over the racks of clothes. I could feel others watching me, hear them whispering. I knew how I looked, and what they must think. If they’d bothered to ask, I’d have told them Prophet would never harm me. Of course, I doubted they’d listen. They’d just see a big, tough biker and draw their own conclusions.

Prophet picked out two pair of jeans and a handful of shirts for himself, glancing back at me every now and then, a question in his eyes that I answered with nods and half-smiles. It was clear he worried about me, and I loved him for it, but even his silent Are you okay? was starting to wear me out. I didn’t want to pretend I was fine when I wasn’t.

After he got the items he needed, he led me to the women’s section. He found a modest swimsuit for me, as well as some comfortable outfits and a casual dress. By the time he’d gathered enough to last us several days, I had to wonder how he was getting it back to the house. He must have realized the same thing because he grabbed a duffle bag and bungee cords.

The aisles seemed to stretch into infinity, a mundane gauntlet that I stumbled through. My hands trembled as I reached for a pair of flip-flops. Prophet's hand steadied mine, his touch grounding even as everything else spun out of control.

"Let's get you home," he murmured, his voice low and laced with concern.

I nodded, unable to find words, my throat constricted by a fear that refused to ease its grip. The normality of shopping felt suffocating, and wrong.

Prophet quickly paid for our things, then shoved them into the bag. When we got to his motorcycle, he strapped it to the back fender. We'd still need more things, and laundry detergent. At least the house had a washer and dryer. I climbed onto the bike behind him, putting my arms around his waist. There had been a time I'd loved riding with him. Right now, I felt too exposed. Every little sound or shadow made me jump.

Back at the house, my feet dragged across the threshold, each step heavier than the last. Prophet's presence was the only thing keeping the tide of panic at bay.

"Stay with me," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the roaring in my ears.

"Always," he vowed, his arms folding around me as if he could shield me from the horrors etched into my soul.

He made a call, his words a low rumble that I clung to. "Yeah, delivery."

He rattled off an order for basic food items and drinks. It would be enough to hold us for now. It wasn't like he could carry a case of water and a week's worth of groceries on his bike anyway. Delivery was the only option.

Hours passed, marked only by the arrival of boxes and bags at the doorstep. Prophet brought them inside, but never strayed more than a few feet from where I sat, curled

on the couch. I tracked his movements, my breath hitching whenever he moved out of my line of sight.

“Can’t lose you again,” I confessed, the words spilling out raw and edged with desperation. Because not being with him made me feel like I might lose myself. He was the glue holding me together right now.

“You won’t,” he assured me, settling beside me with an arm draped protectively over my shoulders.

I leaned into his warmth, the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear having a calming effect on me. It reminded me we were both alive, and we were together. And this time, he didn’t seem like he’d let me go. I could only imagine how much our lives would change when we got back home. Right now, he was my anchor. The one constant in this fucked-up world I knew would never change.

The phone in Prophet’s hand glowed. His thumbs danced across the screen, and though I couldn’t see the words he typed, the tension in his shoulders told me enough. He was reaching out, casting a lifeline back to the club -- to my father. Or possibly Wire. Either way, they would know I was safe. I was glad my dad wouldn’t have to worry anymore. This had to have been hard on him.

“Done,” he murmured, slipping the device into his pocket. His eyes found mine, a storm of emotions swirling within their depths. “Savior knows you’re safe.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. I knew he’d needed to let the club know I was alive, yet the thought of returning, of facing the questions and the pitying stares, splintered something inside me. I couldn’t face them yet.

“Hey,” Prophet said softly, pulling me close. Despite his strength, his voice and touch were gentle. I focused on the rhythm of his heartbeat. It was steady, reliable --

everything I needed right now.

“I just... I can’t go back yet.” The truth tasted bitter on my tongue. How could I return to them, fractured and shadowed by memories that refused to fade, and new nightmares I hadn’t had time to process?

“Then we stay here for as long as it takes,” he replied, his voice a rumble that resonated within me. “I already booked the place for a month. If it looks like you need it longer, I’ll see if it’s open again next month. If not, we’ll find another place.”

I wanted to be brave. I knew the club had to be more than a little concerned about me. If I could get strong enough, we could go home. But right now...

“Prophet,” I started, my voice barely audible, “I’m so scared.”

“Shh,” he soothed, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Fear is just a sign we’ve got something worth fighting for. And, Ares, I’ll fight with you, every step of the way. I’m confident the men who stayed behind at the mansion made sure that evil bastard was dead. They wouldn’t have left until they confirmed he wasn’t breathing.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. I wondered if those women had made him suffer horribly. As much as I wanted to know, I didn’t ask. Prophet could have most likely found out if he’d checked with the other men who had been there. I hadn’t even paid attention to which of the Dixie Reapers had been with him. It made me feel guilty. They’d helped save me too, and I hadn’t bothered to thank any of them.

“You seem to be stuck in your head,” he said. “Why don’t we take a short walk on the beach? If it’s too much, we’ll turn around and come right back.”

“All right.” It wasn’t like I could hide in the house the entire time we were here. The sooner I tried to find some semblance of normalcy, the better.

The sand was a warm cushion beneath my bare feet as I walked alongside Prophet, the rhythmic wash of waves a soothing sound. The beach stretched out before us. The sun had already set, and I didn't see another soul out here. Stopping at the edge of the water, I closed my eyes and tipped my head back. The soft sound of the ocean sliding across the sand, then retreating once more, eased some of the tension I'd been carrying. This place was peaceful.

Unlike my mind. Inside, I still felt like I was screaming, begging for someone to find me, to get out of that hellish place. Even now, if I blocked out the sounds around me, I could almost hear that man's voice, as he told me all the things he'd do to me. Hear the slide of his zipper before he violated me. A shiver raked my spine and I wanted to go inside and take the hottest shower, scrubbing my skin until I finally felt clean. Except, experience told me, soap and water wouldn't help in that regard.

There would be nightmares. I'd had them before. I doubted this time would be any different. Reliving the moments when that bastard cut me, whipped me, used his fists on me... The feeling of him forcing his way into my body. None of it would go away overnight.

I'd be okay. I wasn't right now. Far from it. But I could be, with enough time... and with Prophet by my side.

"Look," Prophet murmured, nudging me gently with his elbow.

I followed his gaze to the neighboring beach house where two familiar figures lounged on the deck. Dr. Myron, with his gentle eyes and ready smile, sat beside Dr. Sykes, whose sharp intellect often hid behind a facade of humor. The Dixie Reapers' trusted healers, unexpected in this place of retreat.

"Hey, Ares," Dr. Myron called, waving us over. "Small world, huh?"

“Seems like it,” I replied, the words catching slightly in my throat.

“Are you okay?” Dr. Sykes asked, his tone careful. I wondered if they’d heard what happened to me. Or was he asking more because of my cuts and bruises?

I glanced at Prophet, seeking reassurance in his steady presence. He nodded, as if giving me permission to not be okay.

“Been better,” I admitted, the weight of my confession threatening to drag me under.

Dr. Sykes rose from his seat, closing the distance between us with a few measured steps. His gaze studied me, and something told me he saw far more than I’d wanted him to.

“If you need to talk, we’re here,” he said, his voice low and even. “But we won’t push you. Just know the offer is there.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them back, refusing to cry.

“I think I’m going to grab a beer and join Dr. Myron,” Prophet said. “I think the two of you may need a little privacy.”

It seemed he understood there were things I needed to confess that I didn’t want to say to him. He’d always been perceptive, especially where I was concerned.

I sat across from Dr. Sykes, hoping this was the right decision. I kept Prophet within view, which settled my nerves a bit. I’d known Dr. Myron and Dr. Sykes for years, and knew neither of them would hurt me, but panic flared inside me if I couldn’t see Prophet. I wondered if I had PTSD or something from my recent ordeal.

“Start wherever you want,” Dr. Sykes encouraged. “This isn’t an official session, so I’m not keeping notes, recording, or anything else. It’s just you and me having a conversation.”

“Wherever” felt like standing at the edge of a chasm, peering into the abyss. I took a deep breath. The smell of the sand and water calmed my mind a little. Should I start with being kidnapped? Talk about what it was like to be sold, yet again?

“It’s like... I feel hollow and at the same time I’m full of pain and anger. I’m not sure that makes any sense. I have no idea how to describe everything going inside my head right now.”

“Trauma can feel like a living thing,” Dr. Sykes interjected softly. “It has teeth and claws, and it’s hungry. But you’re not alone in this fight, Ares. Prophet loves you, and so do your family and friends. You have a support system if you choose to use it.”

I knew he was right, which was part of why I felt so guilty hiding in Gulf Shores when I knew my family had to be waiting for me. I wasn’t the only one hurting right now. No doubt, Dad had blamed himself for me being taken from the compound. That was just the sort of man he was.

“Will I ever be whole again?” The question slipped out before I could think better of it.

“That’s the goal,” Dr. Sykes said with a reassuring nod. “But ‘whole’ doesn’t mean unchanged. It means accepting the scars and finding strength in them. You went through something similar before, Ares, but it doesn’t mean you’re going to feel the same things or heal the same way. Let’s start with why this time was different.”

“I have people who care about me,” I said. “They’re worried and were probably

scared they'd never see me again. There's a man who loves me enough to kill to protect me."

Dr. Sykes nodded. "You're right on all counts, but is that all?"

I shook my head. "No, I wasn't the same as I was the first time. I knew what was going to happen to some extent since I'd lived through it before, but this time, I chose to go with them."

He froze for a moment and I knew I'd taken him by surprise. Did no one realize how the men had managed to take me from the compound? It hadn't occurred to me until now that they'd thought I'd been taken against my will.

"Yeah, I went willingly," I said. "Surprised?"

"A little. Can you tell me why?"

"Junie, Judd, and Marnie. The man who caught me outside the house threatened to take them instead. I knew they'd die if they had to go through being sold and owned by pedophiles. What other reason would adults buy children on the dark web?"

He leaned back, relaxing his posture. "So you were protecting your family by sacrificing yourself."

"I did, and while I worried I'd be broken beyond repair this time, I knew it was better for me to go with them than to let my little brother and sisters face those monsters."

"You've been through counseling before, so you know this is all confidential. However, I think your family needs to know why this happened. It might help give them closure and blame themselves a little less."

“Or it could make them feel even worse,” I countered.

“I’m not going to tell you what you should or shouldn’t do. And I’m not going to force you to talk about anything. I’m here to listen, and to help.”

I knew all that. Like he’d said, this wasn’t my first time going to counseling. At the same time, I wasn’t sure I was ready to talk. Glancing at Prophet, I felt my stomach clench. We had the chance to be together, and I knew I needed to work through everything I’d gone through. It was the only way we’d be able to move forward.

Taking a break, I started slow... I told Dr. Sykes about the trip in the van, being locked up in the cage, and what happened after I’d been sold and met my owner for the first time. The entire sordid tale spilled from my lips, and at some point, I realized tears were falling down my cheeks. He listened, not stopping me or interjecting. Patiently, he waited until I reached a point where I couldn’t continue.

“Do you need to be tested, Ares? Not just for an STD, but also for pregnancy.”

I shook my head. “He wore condoms.”

“For peace of mind, would you like to be tested? Dr. Myron could draw your blood and get a local lab to process it. If things were to progress with Prophet, can you say with any certainty you wouldn’t infect him with something, or if you were to find out you’re pregnant, would you be positive it was his child?”

I hated his questions, but he was right. “I’ll let Dr. Myron draw some blood. I think it’s too soon to tell anything, though. At least, as far as a pregnancy goes.”

He nodded. “I’ll ask him to expedite the results. We should know something in three to five days. In the meantime, you know where we are if you need us. And if you’re right, he can always test you again when the time is right.”

“Thank you. For everything.”

He smiled and we stood, then joined Prophet and Dr. Myron. The four of us talked a bit longer before Prophet and I returned to the home we’d been renting.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:38 am

Ares

The darkness clung to the corners of the room despite the moonlight coming through the windows. I lay there, my back flush against the cool sheets, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Since my talk with Dr. Sykes a few days ago, I'd had trouble sleeping. My thoughts were chaotic and never seemed to shut off. The silence around me felt oppressive, and I shifted restlessly.

If I'm not going to sleep, I might as well get some water .

Getting out of bed, I slipped down the hall and into the living room. Something outside the living room windows drew my attention. I stepped out onto the deck, breathing in the cooler night air and closing my eyes.

The moon hung low and heavy in the sky, casting a silver glow over the beach, painting the world in monochrome shades. I leaned on the railing, seeking solace in the rhythmic crash of waves on the shore, the scent of salt in the air. I scanned the beach, and that's when I saw them -- two shadows down on the sand, moving together in an intimate dance. My cheeks warmed when I realized it was Dr. Myron and Dr. Sykes, unaware of my gaze from above.

A sharp twist of embarrassment knotted in my stomach. This wasn't meant for my eyes -- this private moment. Backing away, I crept across the deck. The sounds of their grunts and groans reached my ears, spurring me to move faster.

With the image of their embrace seared into my memory, I retreated to the safety of the darkened interior of the house. Right before I reached the door, my foot caught on

the edge of an unnoticed chair, and it scraped against the deck. There was no way they hadn't heard me. I froze, feeling the blood drain from my face. I glanced at the beach, seeing both men staring at me.

I stood there, flustered. Shit .

They stood, wrapped towels around their waists, and headed in my direction. My heart pounded and I wondered how angry they'd be. Their presence loomed over me as they stepped onto the deck.

"Sorry," I managed to mutter, though the word felt inadequate, hollow in the wake of my clumsy interruption. "I... I didn't mean to -- just needed some air, and... I'm sorry."

My cheeks flamed hotter. I'd never been so embarrassed in my life.

"Hey, it's okay," Dr. Sykes said gently, his voice cutting through my panic. He and Dr. Myron shared a look that spoke volumes of their bond -- a silent conversation passing between them before they turned their attention back to me.

"We understand, Ares. No harm done." Dr. Myron's eyes were kind. He had every right to be furious with me, and instead he was trying to console me.

"Thanks," I whispered, the word barely more than a breath. "Can I... can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course, Ares," Dr. Sykes said. "You can tell us anything."

I twisted my fingers together, the knuckles white. Talking about this, laying bare the fears gnawing at me, felt like peeling back the layers of my skin.

“It’s Prophet,” I started. “I mean, it’s not him, not really. It’s me. We’re getting closer, and there’s stuff we haven’t done yet... because I’m scared.”

Neither man said anything for a few minutes, almost as if they were weighing my words and trying to find the best answer they could give. Knowing them, that’s exactly what they were doing.

“Scared?” Dr. Myron prompted softly, giving me the nudge I needed to keep going.

“Ever since... since what happened, both recently and when I was younger, being intimate... I’ve never felt comfortable doing that with anyone. I can’t say I’m a virgin because of my past, but I’ve never willingly had sex with someone. I want to -- with him -- I really do, but... What if I freak out? What if I can’t trust my body not to remember... not to go back to that place?”

I felt their gazes on me, but I couldn’t look up. I stared at the wooden planks under our feet. They didn’t say anything and I wondered if I hadn’t conveyed my emotions very well. Everything in my head felt jumbled.

“Every time I think about being with him, really being with him, my heart starts racing, and I feel like I’m suffocating. It’s stupid, right? Prophet would never hurt me. But what if I panic? What if all those old wounds open up again, and I can’t --”

“Hey,” Dr. Sykes interrupted, his voice a soft command that forced my eyes to his. “It’s not stupid. Your fears are real, and they matter. You matter.”

Dr. Myron nodded in agreement, his eyes reflecting the moonlight. “This is about survival, Ares. You’ve been through hell, but you’re here, you’re fighting. That takes courage. More than most people have. And if anyone would be understanding and give you the time and space you need, it’s Prophet.”

“Courage,” I echoed. I didn’t feel courageous. Far from it.

“Prophet cares about you,” Dr. Sykes added. “He’ll understand. He’ll never push for more than you’re willing to give.”

“Will I ever be ready?” Perhaps that’s what worried me the most. How could I say I’d be with him the rest of my life if I didn’t know what sort of relationship I’d be able to give him? It wasn’t fair to him.

“Only you can answer that,” Dr. Myron said. “But don’t rush yourself. Healing takes time.”

“Time,” I murmured. No. I felt like the longer I waited, the worse it would become. Maybe this was like ripping off a bandage. “Thank you. Both for listening, and for not getting mad at me for...”

“It wasn’t intentional, Ares. Besides, we were out in the open. No one to blame but ourselves. Sometimes we like the thrill of possibly getting caught.” Dr. Sykes smiled a little. “I’m sorry we made you uncomfortable.”

“Prophet... How do I tell him?” The question came out jagged, spiked with anxiety. “How can I make him understand without pushing him away?”

“Communication,” Dr. Sykes advised, his eyes locking onto mine. “Open, honest communication. Prophet cares for you deeply. He’ll want to understand, to be there for you. But he can’t do that if you don’t let him in.”

I nodded, but the idea of talking to him about this stuff terrified me.

“Take it one step at a time,” Dr. Myron added, his hand reaching out as if to offer a lifeline. “There’s no rush. And remember, we’re here for you too. You’re not alone in

this.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say. “I’ll try.”

Turning away from them, my feet carried me across the wooden planks to the door. I turned the knob and went inside, wondering if I had the courage to have a real relationship with Prophet, the kind my parents shared, and countless others at the compound. Making my way to his bedroom, I paused outside the door. He hadn’t shut it, and I could see him sprawled on the bed, one arm flung over his eyes, the sheet down around his waist.

The moonlight caressed his bare chest, and I had to admit he looked beautiful. My cheeks warmed at the thought. Could I really use that word for someone like him? My fingers twitched as I wondered what it would feel like to run my hands over him. A mixture of curiosity and fear filled me.

Swallowing hard, I took one step, then another, drawing closer to his bed.

“Prophet,” I whispered. I moved even closer, until my knees brushed the side of the bed. Watching him sleep, I couldn’t resist any longer. Reaching out, I lightly ran my fingers over his hair. My hand trembled, and part of me wanted to run away. But the other part...

* * *

Prophet

I felt her before I saw her, the slight shift in the air, the scent of her skin. Her presence filled the room.

“Prophet...” Her voice was little more than a whisper, and I heard her drawing even

closer. When she reached out and brushed her fingers through my hair, I felt the way her hand shook and knew this was a huge step for her. I didn't want to scare her away, but I couldn't pretend to be asleep any longer.

"Come here," I murmured, tugging gently.

She resisted for a heartbeat, then yielded, climbing into bed next to me. I pulled the sheet over her and held her close to my side.

"Are you all right?"

She was silent for a moment. I wondered if she was going to answer, but I gave her time. I didn't want to push. "I've felt so broken. Useless. Like I'm not even really a woman anymore. All the progress I made went away in an instant. At the end, I wasn't sure I'd last long enough for you to find me. He was so close to breaking me."

"Hey, look at me." I cupped her chin, turning her face toward mine. "You're one of the strongest people I know. Don't let this shake you. I'll do whatever it takes for you to feel like yourself again."

I saw tears mist her eyes and wondered if she'd cried any of the times we'd been apart. Had she been holding back all this time? Didn't she know how much I loved her, and that I'd do anything for her?

"None of us are perfect, Ares. Everyone has a battle they're facing. You're still you. Even if it doesn't seem like it."

"Thanks, Prophet," she whispered.

My heart was a heavy thud against my ribs, each beat a reminder of how much I needed her. "Ares, I love you."

A tear slid down her cheek, and I wiped it away. She was my everything, and I thought I'd proven that to her over the past year, but maybe I hadn't. She'd been too young, and then... I'd been an idiot and tried to wait for the perfect time. I knew better. The right time wasn't something that came around by itself. We had to create those moments.

Her eyes flickered with a fragile hope. "Can we... maybe just kiss? See what I can... handle?"

A rush of heat surged through me, desire knotting in my gut, fierce and insistent. My body's reaction was immediate, a carnal response I gritted my teeth against. Could I keep myself in check? For her, I had to.

"Only if you're sure," I managed to say, my voice rough with the effort it took to remain still, to not scare her with the intensity of my need. If things were different, I'd have pinned her to the bed, kissed her breathless, and gotten both of us naked as quick as possible. But that wasn't what she needed from me.

Her nod was almost imperceptible, but it was enough.

Leaning in, our lips met in a tentative brush. A shiver ran through me, from my lips down to my cock, as the taste of her filled my senses. It was like finding water in a desert, precious and life-giving.

My breath caught as her fingertips traced my tattoos, mine exploring the curve of her jaw. The connection was electric, a current that sang through my veins. I'd never wanted anyone as much as I did Ares. Since the moment I'd decided she'd be mine, I hadn't touched another woman. It had been more than a year since I'd last had sex.

My tongue traced the seam of her lips, begging entrance, and she parted for me with an eager shudder. The kiss deepened, our mouths moving in unison. Her lips were

soft, yet firm, parting under mine, welcoming me. Her breath mingled with mine in a sweet exchange. I couldn't help but let my hands wander down her back, feeling the gentle curve of her spine, pulling her closer. Our bodies pressed against each other.

Her fingers tangled in my hair, urging me on, and I gave in to the desire I'd been holding back. Our tongues met in a tangle of desire and need. It felt so right holding her like this in my arms after everything we'd been through.

Ares' heartbeat raced against my chest as our kiss grew more urgent. Her nails dug lightly into my skin, sending pleasure coursing through me. Her scent invaded my senses, making me hunger for more of her. I could feel the heat rising between us. It was intoxicating and addictive at once.

I pulled back from the kiss. She looked up at me with eyes full of longing and need, blinking slowly as she tried to catch her breath. "This... this is okay?"

Was it okay? More than. I was worried about how she felt and if I'd pushed her too far, and yet it seemed she wasn't quite finished yet. At the first sign she was going to dark place in her mind, I'd stop.

"Can I?" I murmured against her lips, asking for permission that I wasn't sure I deserved.

"Please," she breathed, and it was all the consent I needed.

My hand trembled as it slipped beneath the soft cotton of her pajamas, skin on skin igniting sparks. But as I touched her, something changed. Her body tensed, the easy rhythm of her breath hitching in her chest.

I froze, pulling back instantly. This was Ares -- my sweet Ares -- and I'd die before I caused her an ounce of fear.

“Sorry,” she whispered, a crack in her voice. My heart felt like it had just shattered. I’d moved too fast.

“Shh, no apologies needed.” I moved away, putting space between us. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

She curled toward me. I wrapped my arms around her, feeling the tremor in her small frame. She nestled into me, her head against my chest. I wondered if she could hear my heart -- feel it -- It only beat for her. When I’d told her I loved her, had she understood the depths of my feelings? They hadn’t been empty words.

“Stay with me,” she murmured, and in that moment, I knew there was nowhere else I’d rather be.

Prophet

The world outside was a palette of blues and grays, the ocean churning as if it shared my unrest. But the kitchen was warm with morning light, and Ares moved around it with ease, a plate of scrambled eggs in one hand, toast in the other. I watched her, noting the more relaxed look on her face, the way her eyes seemed to shine brighter than they had been.

“Breakfast’s ready,” she said, setting down the food in front of me on the small table that overlooked the beach.

“You didn’t have to cook,” I said.

“Yeah, I did. It was something I needed.”

I couldn’t argue with her. If making breakfast made her feel better, then she could cook as much as she wanted. I took a bite of the eggs and gave her a wink. Her cheeks flushed, but I saw the spark of pleasure in her eyes.

She seemed better this morning. Not quite her old self, but she’d definitely taken a big step in healing from her ordeal. I hadn’t dared ask the details of what happened to her. The simple fact he’d tortured and raped her was enough to give me nightmares.

Dr. Myron had called yesterday to let me know her lab results were in. He’d given her the all clear, but she hadn’t seemed to be in the right frame of mind at the time to hear the news. As much as I wanted to blurt it out right now, I worried it would cause her to retreat again. Still... she needed to know.

I cleared my throat. “Um, Dr. Myron got your labs back.”

She froze, her hand gripping her fork tighter. “And?”

“All clear.”

The tension drained from her and she flashed me a quick smile. “Good. I figured as much, but hearing it...”

“Why don’t we go out today?” It had been a while since we’d done anything more than hang around the house or walk on the beach.

“Out?” She paused, her brow furrowing. Had I asked too much too soon?

“Yeah. I thought we could explore a bit. Maybe play some mini golf or visit the tourist shops. I know this isn’t exactly a vacation, or at least it wasn’t intended as one. Doesn’t mean we can’t have fun while we’re here. Unless you aren’t ready.”

She shook her head. “No. I need to leave the house more, and I know it. As long as you’re with me, I’ll be fine.”

“Then as soon as we finish eating and get cleaned up and changed, we can head out. The main strip is only a few blocks away, if you’d prefer to walk?” There were also bicycles in the shed, but I wasn’t about to ride one. Only two wheels I wanted under me was my Harley.

We finished eating, and I rinsed the dishes before loading them into the dishwasher. I didn’t hear the shower running when I went to check on Ares and found her in the bedroom she’d been using. She dug through the clothes we’d bought since we’d arrived in Gulf Shores. There weren’t a lot, but I’d picked up a few more things for us shortly after we got here.

“You care if I shower first?” I asked. She paused, her back tensing. “Ares? Everything all right?”

She gave a jerky nod. “Fine. I just...”

I entered the room and put my arms around her, giving her a quick hug. The fact her cheeks were flushed made me wonder what she’d been thinking about.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” I asked.

“It’s more of an ask,” she mumbled. “Never mind. I’m not ready.”

What the hell was she talking about? “If there’s something you want or need, tell me. How am I supposed to help you if you hide stuff like that from me?”

She turned to face me, her cheeks flushing even more. “The only naked men I’ve seen were the ones who’ve hurt me. After seeing you shirtless last night, and touching you, it made me wonder what the rest of you looked like. But as much as I want to see, I’m scared too.”

My cock started to harden at the thought of stripping my clothes off and having her soft hands touch me in other places. It twitched, and I knew if I didn’t get my mind off those sorts of thoughts, I might damn well come in my pants. It had been far too long since I’d had sex with anyone or had a hand touching me that wasn’t my own.

“Want to do this in baby steps?” I asked. I waited for her consent, then slowly tugged my shirt over my head.

She stared at my chest and reached out to touch me. Her fingertips lightly grazed my skin, and when she ran them over one of my nipples, I sucked in a breath and clenched my teeth. My dick got even harder and was now throbbing. No one had ever

discovered that little secret about me... my nipples were even more sensitive than the head of my cock.

“Have you ever watched porn?” I asked.

“A few times, mostly because I couldn’t fathom anyone enjoying sex.” She winced. “Although, a few of the movies were a little too much for me. Are there really things that go in your butt with tails attached?”

I coughed to cover my laugh. “Yeah, there are.”

Her nose scrunched in the most adorable way, and I could tell she didn’t understand why someone would be into that sort of thing. Although, now that she’d brought it up, I suddenly wanted to see her with a fox tail and a pair of ears. Jesus. I’d watched one too many anime movies. I blamed Royal. He’d gotten me hooked on the damn things. Some of them were essentially animated porn.

“Um. Probably not a good idea for me to remove anything else,” I said.

“Why?”

I glanced down where my cock was pressing against my pants. She gasped and I looked up, seeing her eyes go wide. At the same time, there didn’t seem to be any fear in her gaze. “Do you want me to take my jeans off? I have on underwear.”

She nodded. “Wait. Is that all right? I don’t want you to do anything you don’t really want to do.”

“Ares, if our situation was different, I’d already be balls-deep inside you, making every inch of you mine. You have no idea how much I’ve wanted you, still want you.” I swallowed hard. “But I can control myself. I’m not going to pounce on you

suddenly.”

She reached for me, her hands trembling. She opened the button on my jeans, then slid down the zipper. I let her tug the denim over my hips and down my thighs. I wasn't sure if it was my own heartbeat or hers I could hear. With the gentlest touch ever, she reached out and traced a line down my cock. Even through the fabric of my boxer briefs, I felt the heat of her touch.

“Fuck! You have no idea how good that feels.” She placed her entire hand over me, cupping both my cock and balls. I damn near exploded. “Ares, sweetheart... I think you better stop.”

“Why?” she asked.

I ground my teeth together. “Because I'm really fucking close to coming.”

She gave my cock a squeeze. Shit ! I stumbled back a few steps, then bolted to the bathroom, nearly falling from my pants getting stuck around my knees. I couldn't even bother closing the door. Kicking off my pants and shoving my underwear to my ankles, I gripped my cock, tightening my hold around the base.

It pulsed in my hand, the head turning purple and pre-cum leaking from the tip. I was too damn close. There was no holding back right now. Bracing one hand on the vanity and stroking my dick with the other, I got myself off in less than fifteen seconds. Nothing to be proud of. Over my ragged breaths, I heard a sound in the hallway. Turning my head, I saw Ares... watching me.

Closing my eyes, I wondered how badly I just fucked up. Way to go, asshole. You just had to push her for more, then scarred her for life by jerking off in plain sight .

Not my best moment.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Ares. You shouldn’t have seen me like this.”

“I feel strange,” she murmured.

I glanced over at her and saw her nipples were hard and poking through the fabric of her pajamas. She pressed her thighs together, shifting from foot to foot.

“This is probably not a good question to ask right now, but have you ever made yourself come?” I asked. She slowly shook her head. “Do you sometimes touch yourself intimately?”

“Never,” she said.

My next question could either get her one step closer to being whole again or send her a million miles back. It was a gamble, and I wasn’t sure it was one I should take.

“Do you want to try?”

Her gaze dropped to my cock, which still hadn’t gone completely limp. “Like what you did just now?”

“Something like that. Do you not know how?” I asked.

“Is it like they do in those porn movies?”

“Jesus. You’re killing me.” I shook my head. “None of that stuff is realistic, but if you were curious about anything you saw or want to try it, then there’s no reason you can’t.”

“I don’t even know how to start.”

I was going to hell. Straight to fucking hell. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.

“Close your eyes.” She did as I said, and I kicked off my underwear before moving closer. I tugged her into the bathroom, and she came willingly. Standing behind her, I positioned her in front of the mirror over the sink. “Imagine you’re the star in a porn movie. Your lover is behind you. The heat of his body pressing against yours. It’s one of those cliché ones about the shy virgin, so you aren’t ready to undress.”

A little whimper escaped her lips and I saw the way her cheeks flushed and her lips parted. Looked like she was enjoying this. Maybe it was a good start to building a different sort of relationship with her and replacing her nightmares with happier memories.

I took her hands and placed them over her breasts. “Using his palms, he teases your nipples in slow circles, letting the fabric of your shirt scrape against them.”

She felt stiff as I tried to help her move in the way I’d said, then she suddenly dropped them to her sides. “C-Can you do it?”

Every muscle in my body tensed. Was she serious right now? What if doing this hurt her more? It was one thing for her to touch herself, and another for me to do it. “Are you sure?”

She nodded and leaned into me. My dick started to harden again, and I hoped it didn’t freak her out. I gave her breasts a light squeeze, testing the waters, so to speak. I didn’t get any indication I was scaring her, so I rubbed my palms across her nipples the way I’d described.

“Does that feel good?” I asked.

“I... I feel weird.”

“Good weird or bad weird?”

“Good, I think. I like the way it feels when you touch me like that, but I’m starting to tingle between my legs.”

She was going to kill me. Seriously. The innocent way she talked about being turned-on made me want to yank her panties off, bend her over, and fuck her in front of the mirror. I wanted to see every expression she made, hear every cry of pleasure. I pinched one of her nipples, and she gave a little yelp, but I noticed she was arching her back and shoving her breasts into my hands.

“I can’t do any more, Ares. I want to, but... I’m worried I won’t be able to control myself. I refuse to do anything that might hurt or scare you.” I dropped my hands from her breasts and stepped away from her. “If you still want to do this later, then we’ll see how far you can go before it’s too much. Right now, I think I need to shower so we can leave.”

She wouldn’t meet my gaze as she scurried from the bathroom. I hoped like fuck I hadn’t made her feel like I didn’t want her. At the same time, I wasn’t sure how to explain how dangerous this was without terrifying her.

Way to go, Prophet. You just treated that damaged girl like she was your own personal toy .

Sometimes, I really hated myself.

* * *

Ares

I still felt embarrassed over what we'd done earlier. No matter how many shops we went into, or fun things we tried, I couldn't get my mind off Prophet running from me so he could get himself off. That alone made him so different from every man who'd ever touched me. They would have forced their way into my body, made demands of me, and left me bleeding and wishing I were dead.

Feeling his hands on me had been a little scary, but also thrilling. I already knew I wanted to try again. Sex wasn't wrong if it was between two people who wanted it, right? Clearly, Prophet wanted me in that way, and I thought I wanted him too.

I shook the thoughts from my head as we stopped at a park. Prophet found a picnic table and carried over the bag of food we'd just picked up from a nearby deli. A breeze made the leaves of the trees rustle, and I watched the families and couples enjoying their time together.

We ate our food in silence, and I sipped my lemonade. It felt peaceful here. I didn't know how I'd feel once we went back home, but in Gulf Shores, I felt like I was healing one day at a time. After we finished, Prophet threw our trash away, and held out his hand to me.

"Ready to lose at mini golf?" he teased, drawing me to my feet with a tug on my hand.

"You wish," I shot back, and the challenge in his eyes made something inside me flutter to life. I'd missed this. We'd once bantered this way frequently. Did it mean I was slowly becoming the Ares I'd been before the Lathems took me? I hoped so.

The mini golf place wasn't far. Prophet paid for our game, and I lost. Not that it mattered. Doing something fun with him was the important thing. Afterward, we went to a few more stores before heading back to the house.

We changed into our swimsuits and walked down to the water. I still felt self-conscious, but I'd discovered people weren't staring at me the way I'd thought they were. Everyone minded their own business, and I managed to relax and enjoy myself.

Prophet chased me into the shallows, and I turned to face him, my heart pounding in a way that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with the excitement I felt when I was with this man. He smiled, and it held a world of promises. I knew he'd wait, however long it took, before I was ready to completely be his. I didn't know how I'd gotten lucky enough for someone like him to want me.

He charged at me, and I squealed, running off. It didn't take him long to catch me, his arms going around my waist.

"Gotcha!" He spun me around, then lifted me and dropped me into the water.

"Hey!" I protested, slinging my wet hair out of my face. "No fair!"

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, I realized I'd been having fun and hadn't thought about the suffering I'd experienced. Right now, I wasn't the Ares who'd been kidnapped and held captive. I was just... the woman who loved Prophet.

"Thank you," I whispered as we walked back to the house, leaving wet footprints in the sand.

"For what?" Prophet asked.

"For this," I said, gesturing at the fading light, the beach, the ocean. "For today. Everything."

He squeezed my hand, and I knew without looking that he was smiling. "Anytime, Ares. Anytime."

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Prophet

“Prophet?” Her voice trembled, and I wondered what she was going to ask. “Can we... can we go to the bedroom?”

I’d worried I’d gone too far earlier. Now it seemed like she wanted more. Was she pushing her boundaries, trying to see what she could handle before she broke? I’d give her whatever she needed, but I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of her trying things she wasn’t quite ready for yet.

“Only if you’re sure.” Did she even know what she was asking for? Or was I reading too much into her request?

She nodded and stood. I switched off the TV and took her hand, lacing our fingers together. Leading her to the bedroom I’d been using, I fought the urge to ask once more if this was really what she wanted. If she changed her mind, she knew she could tell me. I’d told her often enough I wouldn’t take more than she wanted to give, and that we’d go at her pace.

The room was dim, the moonlight filtering through the windows. I hadn’t bothered to make the bed this morning and the covers were tossed to the end of the mattress. I turned to face her, reaching up to cup her cheek. I brushed my thumb over her bottom lip.

“Ares, you can still walk away.”

“Kiss me,” she said, sounding desperate. I didn’t know what was driving her right

now, but I wouldn't tell her no. She could have whatever she wanted.

I nodded and leaned in slowly, my lips brushing against hers gently. The kiss was soft, tentative, and she closed her eyes as we explored each other's mouths. I felt her shudder slightly as I deepened the kiss, sliding my tongue against hers. Her hands went to my chest, then she eased one up to my neck, pulling me closer. Her small frame pressed against mine as if she needed the contact as much as I did.

I moved us over to the bed, sitting down with her in my lap. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and I groaned at the feel of her soft skin against mine. The moment it felt like she was starting to panic, I'd stop. It amazed me she'd made this much progress already. As much as I wanted this moment to never end, I didn't want her to feel pressured to be intimate.

"Still okay?" I murmured, trailing my lips down her neck, sucking lightly on the sensitive skin there before moving to her collarbone. She smelled like strawberries and vanilla.

"Prophet," she moaned, arching into my touch. "I'm fine. Please don't stop."

I saw the desire in her eyes, and grinned. Her fingers dug into my hair as I placed featherlight kisses along her ribcage, making my way toward her breasts. My right hand cupped one of them through the thin fabric of her tank top, finding the nipple already hard beneath it. She gasped as I rolled it between my fingers teasingly before pulling away to remove her top entirely.

I froze, wondering if I'd taken things too far. The flush on her cheeks, and the warmth in her eyes were reassuring. I tried really fucking hard to ignore her beautiful breasts. My mouth practically watered with the need to taste her.

"I'll let you know if it's too much." She bit her bottom lip. "But I really want this,

Prophet.”

“You know my name. When are you going to call me Hunter?”

“Hunter,” she said softly.

She was absolutely stunning. Her small breasts with their pink nipples stood proudly against my touch as I ran my tongue along them and then teased one with my teeth for a moment before sucking hard enough to make a soft noise escape from her throat. A shudder racked her body, and she gave a soft cry.

Ares moaned softly as my lips met hers again, my tongue teasing her bottom lip before sliding inside her mouth. She opened up for me, as if she needed the connection just as much as I did. Her hands raked through my hair, pulling me closer. I held her tightly, feeling an urgency I’d never experienced before.

We broke apart, both of us in desperate need of air.

“More,” she whispered.

It was a demand I couldn’t ignore. I trailed kisses down her jaw and neck until I reached the hollow of her throat. She arched into my touch, gasping softly when I sucked on her skin. She whimpered softly, the sound of her need filling the room.

“Do you really want this?” I asked between breaths. “Because I’ll stop if it’s too much.”

She nodded. Her lips parted and her breath came out in little pants.

“Prove it,” I murmured before stripping off my shirt and tossing it aside. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen me without a shirt on, but the appreciation in her eyes still made

me feel like a fucking king.

I tossed her onto the bed and settled over her, wondering how I'd gotten so lucky.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered against her skin, before returning to kissing my way down her body. My tongue danced around her belly button before I moved over the soft skin of her hips and into the waistband of her panties.

Slowly, I eased them down her legs, giving her ample time to stop me. When she just stared at me with complete trust, I removed them completely and let them drop to the floor.

I pressed a soft kiss to her inner thigh. "I love you so much, Ares."

She gasped when I parted the lips of her pussy and teased her with my tongue. She tasted like paradise, sweet and sour all at once. My fingers found her entrance, slipping inside and finding how wet she was. She was ready for me, more than ready. But I knew she'd never experienced pleasure before. I wanted her to come before I took things any further.

Ares's hips bucked. "More! I can handle more. I'm not scared, Hunter. I know it's you, and I want this so much."

I added another finger, and she took it all, moaning softly. She looked like a fucking goddess. My other hand found her mouth, feeling her warmth on my fingers as I brought them to her lips. She didn't pull away and sucked gently, eyes meeting mine.

"Oh fuck," I groaned, feeling a mix of emotions washing over me. Pure lust, fear at what we were doing, and love for this woman beneath me. She kept surprising me, in the best of ways.

I positioned myself at her entrance, my cock hard against her pussy as I pushed inside. She gasped as I started to thrust slowly, watching her face for any signs of distress. Her skin was flushed and sweaty. I took my time, savoring the moment, and trying to draw out the pleasure for her.

She cried out softly when I changed the angle, the head of my cock rubbing inside her in a different spot. Her nails scratched lightly at my back as she lifted her hips, taking me in deeper. I felt her tighten around me, then the heat of her release as she cried out my name.

I devoured her lips with mine, my strokes becoming erratic as I neared my own climax. I broke the kiss and watched the emotions playing over her face.

“You feel so good, Hunter. Don’t stop.” She met me thrust for thrust, her hips undulating with each stroke. Our kisses were heated and sensual, with just the right amount of bruise to them.

I took her harder, no longer holding back. As I pounded into her, she clung to me, making the sweetest sounds. I couldn’t last another second and I groaned as I came inside her, filling her up. We hadn’t discussed kids, but she was mine and I knew she wanted a family. The thought of her round with my child made my cock twitch inside her.

Pulling out, I fell to the bed beside her and tugged her into my arms. “Still doing okay?”

“I’m fine, Hunter. That was perfect.”

“I didn’t trigger any past memories or cause you any pain?” I asked.

She lightly touched my chin. “No, you didn’t. I love you. More than anything in the

world, and I'm so glad I'm yours."

I kissed her softly. "I'm never letting you go, Ares. You're mine now and forever."

I held her close and listened as her breathing eventually slowed and she fell asleep. I'd taken a gamble, and this could have backfired in the worst way. My woman was so strong and amazing. I'd never met anyone like her before.

When she was ready, we'd go home. Until then, we'd enjoy our time at the beach. If she had any setbacks, or panicked, we could always pay a visit to the doctors next door. They'd decided to extend their vacation until we left, in case Ares needed them. I really owed them for this.

"Hunter," she whispered. I looked down and noticed her eyes were still closed.

"Sleep," I murmured.

She nestled closer, her warmth seeping into me. She looked peaceful, and I hoped she wouldn't have any nightmares. I wish there were a magic pill she could take that would wipe away all the ugliness in her past. Since there wasn't, I'd do my best to help her in whatever way I could.

Prophet

Days melded into each other, a blend of salt and sun, as we found solace in the beach and one another. We swam until our limbs grew heavy, basked in the sunlight until our skin turned shades darker, and strolled through the nearby town, hand in hand, as if we were just any other couple seeking summer's simple joys.

I could feel the sand clinging to my toes, grains rough against the soles of my feet. I felt at peace here, and I thought Ares did too. I knew we couldn't stay forever. The days had turned into weeks, and then months. We'd been here far longer than I'd anticipated. There were times I'd wondered if Ares would ever be ready to go home. The club knew why we were gone, and they supported the both of us. Although, Savior probably wouldn't be happy to hear I'd claimed his daughter. He'd known it was coming, but I still should have given him a heads-up or asked his permission.

My gaze settled on a vendor nearby, an old man with stooped shoulders and wrinkled hands. He sold oysters, their shells gritty and raw, plucked from the depths of the sea that morning. An inexplicable urge took hold of me, a need to gift Ares something symbolic of our time here.

"Hey," I called out to her, nodding toward the stall. "What do you think about taking a bit of the ocean back home with us?"

I'd already been in touch with Wire, letting him know we'd be returning soon. It was time. I knew Ares felt apprehensive about it.

Ares approached, her stride confident. I'd never thought I'd see the sight again.

Warmth filled me as I watched her. She inspected the oysters, turning one over in her palm, her fingers tracing the rugged lines.

“Sure,” she said with a half-smile.

I picked up an oyster, its surface mottled and slightly iridescent, and handed the vendor some bills.

“Here,” I said, offering the oyster to Ares. Her hand brushed against mine as she took it, and the jolt of contact sent shivers up my spine. Since the first time she’d given herself to me, we’d been intimate countless times. In fact, I had a hard time keeping my hands off her.

“Thanks, Prophet,” she murmured, looking at the oyster as if it was a treasure. She had no idea I intended to do something with it later. It wasn’t like she could take an unopened oyster home. The thing wouldn’t last more than week, even if she put it in water.

“If you’re only getting the one, I’m going to assume you don’t plan to eat it. Do you want me to open it?” the vendor asked. “Some have a pearl inside.”

“That would be great,” I said. Ares handed it back to him, and he sliced it open.

He’d been right. There really was a pearl inside. A pretty pink one. Rather large at that. He gave the empty shell back to Ares and leaned in to whisper to me.

“You could take it to the local jeweler. He can shine it up and put it in a ring or necklace for your wife.”

Wife. I liked the sound of that. I glanced at Ares. Maybe I could turn the pearl into an engagement ring.

“Thank you,” I told him, sliding the pearl into my pocket.

“Isn’t that mine?” Ares asked as we walked off.

“I’ll give it back later.”

We continued our walk and returned to the house a short while later. I convinced Ares to shower and take a nap, and while she dozed, I quietly left the house. I knew which jeweler the vendor meant. I’d seen their shop in town.

I entered the small store, the bell jingling over the door.

“Can I help you?” asked the jeweler, a middle-aged man with a balding head and friendly eyes.

“I need a ring made,” I said, voice low, my usual confidence faltering at the admission of my intentions. She’d agreed to be mine, but in our world, that didn’t always mean marriage. What if she didn’t accept an engagement ring from me?

“Let’s see what we’re working with,” he responded, professional interest replacing any surprise at my appearance -- tattooed arms and all.

I drew the pearl from my pocket, feeling its slightly bumpy surface one last time before placing it on the counter. It didn’t look very impressive on top of the glass cabinet housing diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones.

“An engagement ring,” I clarified, knowing full well the stakes. If this went wrong, if Ares said no, I wasn’t sure how I’d come back from it. Regardless, she was mine, and I was hers.

“Unique,” I added, almost as an afterthought.

The jeweler picked up the pearl, eyes narrowing as he examined it closely. The longer he studied it, the more nervous I became.

“We can do unique,” he finally said, a note of respect in his voice -- I wasn’t sure if it was for the pearl or the task, or maybe for the love behind my request.

“Thank you,” I said.

The jeweler leaned in, studying the pearl some more. My nervousness spiked again, as I worried something was wrong.

“Remarkable,” he finally whispered. “Could make something... exceptional.”

“Show me,” I said, eager to see what he envisioned for the ring I’d give Ares.

He sketched rapidly on a pad, lines flowing into curves, the design taking shape before my eyes. He added etchings of flowers, which I assumed he planned to engrave on the band.

“Like this,” he said, holding the drawing up. “A band that echoes the pearl’s strength and purity.”

I stared at the design. It resembled Ares. Her soft side, and her strength. “Perfect. Let’s do it.”

“Give me a few days,” the jeweler said, his own excitement a mirror to mine.

“Thank you,” I managed, the weight of the moment settling over me. This ring -- it was a vow, a pledge to face whatever hell might come, together.

I returned to the house, slipping back in before Ares woke. She’d never know I’d

been gone, or what I'd been up to. Not until the time was right.

* * *

Days slipped by, and I kept myself busy. Ares laughed more, her guard lowering with every sunset we watched bleed into the horizon. And yet, I could feel the tension coiling within me. It was time. The ring was supposed to be ready today, which meant I'd be proposing to the woman I loved.

"Is it ready?" I asked the jeweler. His nod was all the confirmation I needed. He unveiled the ring, and it was like gazing upon a reflection of Ares herself. The pink pearl sat nestled among tendrils of silver, strong yet delicate. I couldn't have imagined a more perfect ring for her.

"Beautiful," I whispered. I lifted it from the box, admiring it from every angle.

"May it bring you both joy," he said, and I could see the glint of respect in his eyes. "If it's not too bold of me to say so, I don't get many bikers in here. I'm glad to see a hardened man such as yourself still has a softer side when it comes to the woman you love."

"Thank you," I replied. Perhaps I should have felt offended by the way he viewed men like me, but I understood where he was coming from. Not everyone in a leather cut had the same values as the Dixie Reapers.

I left the shop with the ring burning a hole in my pocket. What if the scars of Ares' past were too deep? What if my love wasn't enough to eclipse the darkness that still lingered in her eyes every now and then? She'd healed, and was doing so much better than before, but I wasn't sure she was entirely whole, and I knew she might never be.

But her smile had brightened, and her laughter sounded full of joy. She'd been

carefree most days this month. She'd been to hell, but perhaps she'd finally made it back to me. It had been a while since she'd had a nightmare.

I prayed to every known god that when I asked her to marry me, she'd say yes.

I pulled to a stop in the driveway of the beach house and turned off the engine. Making my way up to the deck, movement on the beach caught my attention. I saw Ares, staring out across the water. I removed my boots and socks, rolled up my jeans, and walked down the steps, my feet sinking into the sand with every step I took.

"Come on," I urged gently, reaching for her hand. Our fingers laced together, fitting as perfectly as I hoped our lives would.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she asked.

"More than you know," I answered, my throat tight as we walked. I knew she'd meant the water, but I'd meant her. Before we made our way back to the house, I paused.

"Prophet?" Her voice, tinged with curiosity, pulled me from my thoughts.

"It's nothing," I lied, squeezing her hand a little tighter. "Just enjoying the moment."

The salty breeze, the cries of the gulls, the endless blue -- it all faded into the background. Only Ares and the ring burning in my pocket mattered. This was it. The perfect moment.

My heart hammered against my ribcage, every beat a drumroll to the moment I had been steeling myself for.

"Let's stop for a second," I said.

She turned toward me, a question in her gaze. “Prophet, are you sure you’re all right?”

I steadied my breath, reaching into the pocket of my jeans. I dropped to one knee, opened the jewelry box, and showed her the ring inside.

“Ares, you’ve walked through hell and came out the other side with a fire that burns so bright, it puts the sun to shame. Your strength has always amazed me. You amaze me. There are so many reasons to love you. You’ve faced everything head-on, never backing down or giving up. Ares... Will you join me on the adventure of a lifetime? Will you be my wife?”

Tears gathered in her eyes and her lips trembled. I worried she was about to reject me, but she let out a soft sob before dropping to her knees in front of me. Her hand shook as she held it out. “Of course, I’ll marry you. I love you, Hunter.”

I slid the ring onto her finger and brushed my lips against hers. I drew back and smoothed her hair from her face. Ares’ hand trembled as she admired the ring on her finger.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

I cupped her face in my hands. “Not nearly as beautiful as you.”

Her eyes misted again and she threw her arms around my neck. “I love you so much, Hunter.”

Ares admired the ring again. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. I never thought...”

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “You deserve all the happiness in the world, Ares. And I intend to spend my life giving it to you. I know in our world marriage

isn't really necessary. But this was something I wanted to give you. I want you to be mine in every way possible."

She smiled warmly. "I don't need anything except you."

I kissed her again, then we returned to the house, hand in hand. She led me to the bedroom and slid the cut off my shoulders. After gently putting it aside, she worked on the rest of my clothes, removing them one item at a time.

I groaned as her fingers teased down my spine, her nails raking against my skin. I growled, unable to control myself any longer.

"Ares," I breathed in her ear, "I want you so damn bad."

"Good," she murmured low. "Because I want you too."

Her lips met mine, and we fell into a ravenous kiss. It was rough and messy, but it felt like coming home. I pulled at her clothes until she was bare, before pushing her against the wall. Our bodies fit together like two halves of the same whole.

She led me to the bed, and pushed me down onto the mattress, tasting every inch of my skin. I couldn't believe this woman was now mine. My Ares... She'd become so bold since our first time together, and I looked forward to what our future would hold.

She straddled my hips and braced her hands on my chest. Reaching between us, I lined my cock up with her pussy, and she slowly took me into her body.

Ares moaned as she rocked against me. I gripped her hips and surged upward, controlling her motions. She tossed her head back, her hips undulating as she rode me.

Within minutes, she came, her pussy gripping my cock as the heat of her release triggered my own orgasm. I thrust up into her, taking what I wanted. My balls drew up, and I urged her to ride me faster as I came inside her.

We lay entwined afterward, breathing hard, our chests rising and falling in tandem. Ares smiled at me. “Do you have any idea how happy you make me?”

“Hopefully it’s at least as half as happy as you make me .” I kissed her again, then held her close, wanting the moment to last forever.

“We should go back,” she murmured. “It’s time I faced everyone.”

“If you’re ready, then we can pack tonight and head out in the morning. I’ll let the owners of the house know, as well as the doctors next door.” I didn’t know how the club had managed to convince them to stay this long, but I knew they had to have had a hand in it. Both men had been a big help in getting Ares back on her feet.

She pressed her lips together. “There’s something I need to confess.”

I leaned up on my elbow and looked down at her. “What is it? Whatever you have to say, you know I won’t be mad, right? You make it seem like you’ve committed some horrible sin.”

She took a breath and slowly let it out before holding my gaze. “I’m pregnant, Hunter. I asked Dr. Myron to do a pregnancy test, and he confirmed the results yesterday. I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

I placed my hand on her belly, and marveled at the fact our child was growing inside her. “You’ve made me the happiest of men, Ares.”

She reached up and placed her hand on my cheek. “You’re the one who makes me

happy, Hunter. I will love you until the day I die.”

I hoped that wasn't going to happen for a long, long time. The day she'd disappeared from the compound, I'd nearly lost my mind. All the time it took to track her down had felt like agony. I knew I wouldn't be able to survive without her. She was my entire world, and if she were to leave me, I'd have no reason to keep living.

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Ares

We were home. Passing through the gates of the Dixie Reapers compound, I felt anxious over seeing my family again, and terrified people would look at me differently. Logically, I knew they would, but I didn't feel like the same person I'd been before. Too much had happened.

My heart hammered against my ribs. I could feel the eyes on us before I even swung my leg over the bike, the weight of their stares pressing down on me. The scents and sounds of the compound should have felt familiar, relaxing even, but today it was anything but.

"Easy, Ares," Prophet murmured as he steadied me with his large hands. His touch was meant to be reassuring, but it couldn't chase away the coiling tension in my gut. I'd thought I was ready to come back. What if I was wrong?

We walked side by side toward the clubhouse, boots crunching on the gravel. I knew every face that turned our way. Yet now, their gazes bored into me, sharp and probing, sending shivers skittering across my skin.

"Prophet." The voice cut through the murmurs around us. My father, Savior, stood framed in the doorway of the clubhouse, arms crossed over his broad chest. His stern expression was one I knew all too well -- the one that spelled trouble.

"Pres," Prophet said, his voice respectful but firm. He released my hand to stand alone, facing down the President of the Dixie Reapers.

“Good to see Ares home safe,” Savior said, his tone flat, eyes drilling into Prophet’s. “But you took your sweet time getting back here. Care to explain why?”

I wanted to speak up, to defend Prophet, but the words tangled up in my throat. Fear kept them locked tight, fear of what admitting the truth might bring upon us both. I hadn’t reached out to my family even once while we’d been gone. I knew Prophet had been in contact, which made me curious why my dad was acting like this. He’d known I wasn’t in any sort of shape to be here until now. Unless he hadn’t trusted the things Prophet had told him.

“Needed to make sure she was okay,” Prophet replied. “Wasn’t going to rush her after --”

“Enough!” Savior snapped, cutting him off. The air and my pulse raced. Why was my dad so angry?

“I assure you --” Prophet started again, but a hard look from Savior silenced him.

“Assurances don’t mean squat to me, boy. Actions do.” Savior’s gaze flicked to me then, and the unasked questions in his steely gray eyes set my blood to ice. Somehow, he knew things had changed between me and Prophet. He’d seemed okay with Prophet claiming me once I became of age, but now I had to wonder if he was really all right with it. It didn’t seem like he was.

The compound felt like it was closing in around us. I wanted to hide behind Prophet or beg him to take me somewhere else. This was too much too soon.

“Let’s go inside,” I finally managed to say, the shakiness of my voice belying my emotions. “We can talk there.”

Savior held Prophet’s gaze for a beat longer, then nodded once, sharply, and turned

back into the clubhouse. Prophet reached for me, his touch a lifeline. Together, we followed my father into the belly of the beast, where our fate waited. It had never occurred to me Savior might disapprove of our relationship. What if he tried to tear us apart?

The three of us sat at a table in the corner. I scooted my chair closer to Prophet's, which had my dad's eyes narrowing.

"You know how I feel about Ares," Prophet said. "I love her, and I haven't made it a secret. Everyone here is aware of my feelings. I'm not sure why you're so angry, Pres."

"You never once let me talk to my daughter while the two of you were gone. When you said she needed some time, I thought you'd be gone a week, maybe two. Not over two fucking months!" He slammed his fist on the table. "Do you have any idea what it's been like? Dessa and the kids keep asking about her, and want to know when she's coming home, and all I could do was tell them I don't know."

"That's my fault, not his," I said. "Even after I told him I was ready to come home, I nearly changed my mind once we got here. Even now..."

I held up my hand, showing him how badly I was shaking. My dad closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. This wasn't like him. He'd never acted this way, except for the time I got caught texting Dylan. He'd nearly blown up then.

"I need you to calm down, Pres," Prophet said, his voice low and easy. "It's not good for her to be stressed out like this. And it's definitely not good for the baby."

A hush fell over the place. My dad's face started to turn purple, I wondered how many pieces of broken furniture would be left in his wake. He didn't lose his temper often, but when he did, he went all out.

Tempest stood and came closer, his gaze locked onto Prophet. “Do you really think you played fair? She had no choice but to rely on you. It was just the two of you all that time, which meant it was inevitable she’d grow even closer to you, and now she’s pregnant? I thought she needed to heal. If you fucking took advantage of her...”

Tempest let the threat hang in the air, and I knew without a doubt if Prophet had truly harmed me, no one here would hesitate to lay him out. Especially Tempest. He might not always like the women who came here and ended up being old ladies, but I was the daughter of not only a patched member, but the club’s President. Tempest had always been overly protective of me. Same with the other kids.

“Shut it, Tempest,” Royal said, standing and moving closer. “Prophet has been by her side for over a year. He’s taken care of her, and I’m sure the two got close long before this happened. If you ask me, it was inevitable. Hell, I doubt I’m the only one who thinks that. Pretty sure most of us figured he’d claim her and they’d live happily ever after. Just without all the extra bullshit she’s had to endure.”

My dad slowly stood, bracing his hands on the table. “You go after my girl, take her someplace where none of us can see her, and bring her home pregnant? Are you fucking kidding me?”

The air crackled with the kind of tension that spelled trouble in big neon letters. I needed to get my dad to calm down, except I didn’t know how. Fumbling with the phone in my pocket, I sent a text to my mom. Dad is about to lose it in the clubhouse .

I saw she read the message, but she didn’t respond. I hoped that meant she was on her way, although I knew she couldn’t get here quickly. Her wheelchair made it difficult for her to hop in the car. It wasn’t impossible. Just harder than it was for people with working legs. Even all these years later, she had trouble transferring. Dad always helped her when he was around.

The clubhouse doors swung open a few minutes later, and I stared with wide eyes as I watched Wire and Lavender come in, with my mom clinging to Wire's back like a monkey. I bit my lips, trying to stifle the laugh that bubbled up.

"Savior, so help me, if you scare our daughter off when we haven't seen her in months, you're going to sleep outside," she said as Wire eased her down into the chair beside my dad.

"What the fuck, Dessa?" He narrowed his eyes at Wire, but the hacker just shrugged and took a step back. Lavender came over to me and patted my shoulder. I reached up to take her hand, grateful for the support.

"Our daughter sent a text that you were about to lose your shit," she said.

My dad stared at her. "Did you just cuss?"

"It seemed appropriate. Besides, it's not like I never say bad words."

My dad glared at me before turning back to Mom. "Did she also tell you that she's pregnant?"

Mom paled, and I knew she'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. I glanced at Prophet who gave my hand a squeeze.

"It's mine," Prophet said. "And no, I didn't take advantage of her. I asked her repeatedly if she was sure. The last thing I'd ever do is hurt Ares. I also asked her to marry me."

The color came back to Mom's face, and she gave us a smile. "Well, in that case, this is good news, isn't it? The two of you have been close since before Ares turned eighteen. I was honestly surprised you didn't try to claim her the second she was of

legal age.”

“Will you stop?” Dad growled as he looked at Prophet again. “I gave you permission to hang out with Ares, and to date her when she was ready. No one said a fucking thing about you knocking her up. Considering the amount of trust I gave you when it comes to my daughter, couldn’t you have at least attempted to play things by the book? My permission didn’t extend quite that far.”

“Dad, you do realize he’s not the only one to blame, right? It’s not like he forced me to have sex with him.”

Dad held up a hand. “No. Just... no. I don’t want to hear that word in relation to you. Ever. When you give me grandchildren, I’d like to think the stork dropped them off. If I think about the real reason you have kids, I may murder that boy sitting next to you.”

I rolled my eyes, all the tension draining from me. “Dad, seriously? First of all, he’s not a boy. And secondly, should I ask where Junie came from? Because I doubt she was grown in a cabbage patch or delivered by a bird.”

“That’s different.”

No, it really wasn’t. I got it, though. I was his little girl, and he didn’t want to think about me doing naughty things with a man. Didn’t matter if that guy happened to be an officer in the club and one of his most trusted men. When it came to me, no one would ever be good enough.

“He helped me heal, Dad. You have no idea what I went through, and I really don’t want to tell you. I felt so broken I wasn’t sure I’d ever be the same Ares you once knew. Prophet helped me put the pieces back together and helped make me strong again.”

Prophet leaned in and kissed my temple. “No, sweetheart. You were already strong. All you needed was a reminder.”

“Are you taking Ares to your house?” Mom asked. “You haven’t been there in two months. Does it need to be aired out? Fridge cleaned?”

“I took care of it already,” Lavender said. “Once we knew they were heading back, I went over to make sure everything would be ready for them. We might have hacked into his shopping apps to figure out what sort of items they’d been buying.”

I felt Prophet tense next to me and I leaned into him. The amused look Lavender shot me told me she’d realized something had been missing off the list -- condoms.

“Dr. Myron and Dr. Sykes were vacationing in the house next to ours,” I said. “Dr. Myron already checked me over, ran some blood tests, and he’s the one who confirmed my pregnancy. And Dr. Sykes gave me unofficial counseling during the two months we were there.”

My dad sighed. “Fine. I can see I’m outnumbered. But you need to come by the house if not tonight, then tomorrow. The kids need to see you. They’ve been worried.”

“Pres, I know you aren’t happy about this, but please know Ares is everything to me. Her and our child. I’d walk through fire for them, go straight to hell and fight the devil, or die if that’s what it took to keep them safe.”

My dad stared at him for the longest time. I wanted to chime in that I didn’t like that last part about him dying for me. If he did that, what would be the point of me living? Placing a hand over my still flat belly, I realized I’d have to push through the pain because I now had someone depending on me.

“Words are cheap, boy,” Dad finally responded, his voice low and controlled. “Love isn’t worth a damn without action to back it up. I realize you care for my daughter, and you put a lot on the line to go rescue her. Even took care of her for two months. But your job doesn’t end there. Two months compared to a lifetime? That’s nothing.”

“Then watch me,” Prophet challenged, his jaw set. “Watch how I protect what is mine. You’ve known me a long time now, Pres. You know I’m not a man who bends or breaks. I’ll stand by Ares, today, tomorrow... forever.”

Wire sighed. “Pres, I think it’s time to stand down on this one. You did your job by raising Ares and protecting her. Now it’s his turn. Got to let her go.”

Lavender elbowed him. “Will I have to remind you of those words when it’s Livvy’s turn?”

Wire glared at his woman. “I will examine every inch of that man’s life, and if he’s found lacking in any way, I’ll fucking crush him before he gets a chance to make a move on our girl.”

She shook her head and laughed softly. “All right, Papa Bear. Take it easy. Besides, you aren’t the only one who plans to thoroughly check out the guys she brings home. Don’t forget, your wife is rather skilled with a computer too.”

Wire tugged her against his side, his arm going around her waist. “Never said you weren’t.”

“Then let our actions speak for us,” Prophet said. “We’ve already faced a lot. Whatever comes our way, we’ll handle it together. Ares isn’t someone who will stand in my shadow. Her place is beside me.”

Mom smiled. “I knew I liked him. Come on, Savior. Take me home, and let these two

get settled in. Ares, I'll gather some of your things and have someone drop them off within the hour. You can come pack the rest tomorrow."

Prophet

Our return home hadn't gone quite the way I'd thought it would. I'd expected Savior to hug his daughter and give her a warm welcome. Instead, he'd been pissed at me, which had upset Ares. I'd do whatever it took to make her feel safe again. I worried all the progress we'd made was about to go down the drain.

"Let's go home, Ares," I murmured, giving her hand a squeeze.

The farther we got from the clubhouse and Savior, the less tense Ares became. I drove us straight to the house and let her go inside while I unstrapped the duffle from the bike and carried it to the bedroom. We'd washed everything before we packed it, so all we needed to do was put them up.

I hoped this house would be a sanctuary for her. It had been in the past. Even if the rest of the compound put her on edge right now, I needed this space to be a place she could stay without feeling as if she was being judged.

Ares stood in the living room. Everything remained the same as it had been the last time she came over. I winced when I realized it was exactly the same, which meant I'd need to change the bed and wash the sheets. Lavender may have stopped by, but I doubted she'd gone quite that far. Dusting, mopping, cleaning counters, and stocking the fridge had probably been more along the lines of what she'd taken care of. Once Ares had gone missing, I hadn't really thought about general housekeeping things. Besides, I'd liked the fact my bed smelled like her. Not that we'd shared it before, but she'd taken a nap here more than once.

“Safe,” she whispered, looking around the house. My heart ached for her. If her dad wasn’t the club president, I’d go back and kick his ass. Did he have any idea the damage he’d done to his daughter today? Fucking asshole!

“Always,” I said. “No one will ever hurt you in this house, Ares. It’s our place. Yours and mine.”

I gently led her to the couch and made her sit. Handing her the remote, I went to the bedroom and quickly stripped the bed and remade it, I went to toss the sheets into the washer before I joined Ares again. Taking a seat next to her, I pulled her against me. A motorcycle drove past the house, and she immediately tensed, her gaze shooting over to the front door. I hated that she felt so unwelcome. Yeah, I definitely needed to hand Savior’s ass to him. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Another engine came by the house, but this time, it sounded like they were pulling into the driveway. If I wasn’t mistaken, it was one of the club trucks. What the fuck was it now? I hoped it was only the clothes Dessa said she’d send over for Ares, but after the welcome we’d received, I couldn’t be sure.

“Stay here,” I said, standing and heading to the door.

When I opened the door and saw Sam on the other side, I relaxed. If anyone here would be supportive of Ares, it would be him. While his daughter hadn’t gone through quite the same thing, she’d been a victim just like Ares.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said. “Just dropping off a box of stuff for Ares.”

“Thank you,” she said softly from where she sat in the living room. I wasn’t sure he heard her, until he flashed a smile in her direction.

“Where do you want me to put it?” he asked. “Or would it be better if I didn’t come

inside?”

“It’s okay,” Ares said, her voice still so low I could barely hear her.

I motioned for him to come inside, and he carried the box to the hall. I told him which room was mine, and he placed it inside the door. He gave Ares a little wave as he left the house, and I shut the door behind him, twisting the lock. I’d never really locked the doors here before, but I thought it was best for Ares.

“You don’t have to deal with that stuff right now. We can just relax tonight.”

She shook her head. “Better to get it out of the way.”

I held her hand on the way to the bedroom, then opened the box to see what Dessa had sent over. On top lay a picture of Ares with her family. She quickly looked away and I realized it was too soon to put the photo out. Instead, I tucked it in my bedside table drawer.

We worked in silence, sorting her items and putting them into the dresser or closet. When Lavender had checked my fridge, she’d apparently come in here too. I hadn’t had a drawer emptied before, or the closet organized in a way that would leave room for Ares’ items. But both were ready for her. I really did owe Lavender and Wire a lot.

Right after we put away the last of her things, Ares looked around the room, her hands trembling. I lifted her into my arms and she buried her face against me. Carrying her to the living room, I sat with her on the couch again, giving her the remote. I didn’t care what we watched. She could put on whatever would make her feel less stressed over being here.

She cuddled closer, and I wondered if the situation with Savior was going to cause

more of a setback in her recovery than I'd thought. Not that she didn't like being close to me even when she was having an amazing day. This time it felt more like she needed me to comfort her. Much like she had in those first days we'd been in Gulf Shores.

I didn't know if she was actually watching the TV or not, but I let the movie play. She'd chosen a romantic comedy, and I figured she needed something lighthearted like that. As long as we were spending time together, I didn't really care what we watched.

I shifted my hand so I could trace lazy circles over her arm. At the beach house, I'd discovered doing things like this seemed to help her. It would pull her from whatever dark thoughts were haunting her. She leaned in closer, practically gluing herself to my side, and I used my other hand to trace patterns on her thigh.

She sighed and closed her eyes.

"Better?" I asked.

"Getting there," she whispered. "You seem to always know exactly what I need, even before I do."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. While I liked knowing I could offer that to her, I hated the fact she needed me to. If I could go back and change things, I'd have stopped her from going home that day. Maybe if I'd been there when she left Joker's house, I could have walked her home, and I'd have noticed the cut in the fence. It would have allowed us to take the Lathems down then and there. Or I could have invited her over to my place.

But I couldn't time travel, and I couldn't erase the things that happened to Ares. All I could do was be here for her, give her my support, and make sure she knew she

wasn't alone, no matter how bad things got.

"Thank you," she said. "For everything. Saving me. Giving me time to process what happened to me. Just... thanks for being you."

"That's not something you should say thank you for. I love you, Ares. Everything I've done is because you're my other half, the one person in this world who means the most to me. Seeing you happy makes me happy. So don't make me out to be some angel or some shit. I was being selfish and nothing more."

She smiled a little and turned her face into me, breathing me in. "Can we stay like this a while longer?"

"I don't have any plans. You?"

"No."

"Then I guess you have your answer." I watched the movie she'd put on, and when it was time to start the next one, I realized she'd fallen asleep.

I went ahead and watched a second movie to make sure she was actually sleeping. When she didn't budge the entire time, even though I'd put on one of her favorites, I knew it was time to turn off the lights and head to bed.

I stood and lifted her into my arms, carrying her to the bed. After I placed her on the bed, I stripped off her leggings, managed to somehow remove her bra without waking her up, and left her to sleep in her T-shirt and panties. I smoothed her hair back from her face, then kissed her forehead.

"I'll be right back."

I quickly went back to the living room to shut off the TV, turned off any lights we'd switched on, and double-checked the doors and windows. Even though the compound was safer than your average neighborhood, we'd all learned just how easily it was for someone to distract us and sneak inside. I hadn't said anything to Ares, but I'd noticed some of the fence had been replaced with a brick one while we'd been gone. I wondered if Savior was going to do the entire compound like that. From a distance, it had looked like there were spikes along the top of the bricks. I still didn't think that would be enough to keep anyone out.

I'd have asked Savior about it if he hadn't been such a dick when we got here. Plenty of time to check-in with Saint tomorrow. I knew he'd tell me what was going on, without the extra drama. Although, I hoped Dessa had made her point tonight. If anyone could make Savior back down, it was her.

Returning to the bedroom, I stripped down to my underwear, then slid under the covers, pulling Ares into my arms.

"Thank you," she whispered. I didn't know what the hell she was thanking me for now. I just kissed her on the forehead again, and hoped she had a good night's sleep. Her breathing evened out, and her body relaxed against mine.

I stayed up, keeping watch over her for a while longer, making sure she wasn't going to have any nightmares. With the stress she'd endured today, anything was possible. She hadn't had one in weeks, but... I knew she wasn't completely over what happened to her. Hell, she might never get completely over it. All we could do was take it one day at a time.

When she rolled away from me, I eased out of bed. Pausing, I waited to make sure she wouldn't wake up. She continued to sleep, so I grabbed my phone and slipped from the room. I went to the kitchen, where I paced as I called Savior. It was late, and he'd probably be pissed I was calling, but I didn't care right now. There were things

that needed to be said.

“This is Savior,” he said when the call connected.

“I need you to listen and not talk. Think you can do that, Pres?”

He sighed. “What do you want, Prophet? I already got an earful from Dessa.”

“Do you have any idea what you did today? Between me and the doctors, we’d gotten her to a good place. She wasn’t as anxious, stopped having nightmares, and she no longer jumped at every little thing. I didn’t worry as much about her suddenly wandering off in a dark direction in her mind. Until now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“The shit you pulled when we got here. That was the last thing Ares needed. I know you were mad she’d been gone for so long and hadn’t bothered to reach out to you or accept your calls when you tried to reach her. I get it. But none of that was an excuse for you to be a dick today.”

Savior growled. “Watch it! I can still kick your ass out of here.”

“Yeah, you can. And guess what, your daughter would go with me.”

“Are you threatening me, you little shit?” I could tell he was getting twice as pissed as earlier. I needed to bring him back down, but honestly, he wasn’t going to like hearing what I had to say.

“Look, Pres. My priority is your daughter. What she needed today was for you to welcome her with a hug, maybe a few of our brothers or their women coming to greet her in a peaceful and calm environment. Instead, you picked a fucking fight.” It was

quiet for a little too long. I glanced at the phone to see if the call had dropped, or if he'd hung up. "Pres?"

"I'm here. And you're right. Is Ares okay?" he asked.

"She wasn't in the best shape when I brought her home, but I think she's doing okay right now. The sound of motorcycles passing made her tense up again. I think she worried you would come to the house. Or that someone else would decide to make her feel unwelcome in her own home."

"Ouch. That fucking hurt," he muttered.

"Good. It was meant to."

"I'll keep my distance until you tell me Ares is ready to see me," he said. "It's going to fucking kill me, but I want what's best for her. As much as I hate to admit it, I think that's you."

"Thanks for saying that, Pres. Means a lot."

"Go take care of our girl. And let me know if there's anything she needs. Looks like I have a lot to make up for."

We ended the call and I went back to bed. Ares hadn't budged, and I curled my body around hers. I hoped things would be better for her tomorrow. If she wanted to hole up in the house for a few days, then I'd let her. Eventually, I'd have to give her a nudge to venture out around the compound at the very least. There were plenty of people here I knew would be happy she was back.

Maybe I needed to call Lavender tomorrow and see if she'd get in touch with some of Ares' friends and have them stop by. I didn't know what else to do to prove to her she

belonged here, and people were on her side.

“Love you, Ares. And so many others do too. You’re going to be okay.” I kissed her shoulder. “We’ve got your back.”

She mumbled something in her sleep, and I hoped she’d heard me... I’d rip the moon from the sky and give it to her, if that was what she wanted.

Ares

The moment we pulled up to my dad's house, I wondered if I'd made the right choice. Anticipation had been building ever since we'd decided to come home, and now it twisted into a tight knot of anxiety in my stomach. It had been a few days since we'd come back home. Our welcome had been far from what I'd hoped for, but I'd thought maybe things were better now. It had been three days since my dad blew up at Prophet. Maybe we shouldn't have come here. Was I trying to do too much too soon?

"Ready?" Prophet's voice was soft, reminding me he was here and I wasn't alone.

I nodded, unable to find my voice. My fingers clenched and unclenched at my sides as I took a step toward the front door. I could feel my entire body starting to shake as I scanned the area and realized I was standing in the exact spot I'd been in when the kidnapper came up behind me.

"Hey," Prophet said gently, reaching out to touch my shoulder. "Take your time. If you can't handle this, then I'll ask them to come to our place. Until I can install a ramp for your mom, I can always help her into the house if your dad doesn't come with her."

I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I'd lived in this house with my family, made happy memories. If I let the Lathems take all that away from me, then they won. It didn't matter that I'd been freed. Part of me would be caged for as long as they controlled my thoughts, actions, and emotions.

Stepping onto the porch, I paused, my heart pounding so loud I could hear it echoing in my ears. Prophet stood close behind me, near enough I could feel the heat of his body. I raised my hand, hesitating as it hovered over the doorbell. A shiver ran down my spine. I could do this!

“Whatever happens,” I whispered, more to myself than to him, “we’ll face it together, right?”

I had no idea if I’d fall apart when I got inside, or if things would be better. Was this the PTSD Dr. Sykes had mentioned?

“Always,” he replied, his voice a firm promise.

With a shaky exhale that did nothing to calm my racing heart, I pressed the doorbell. Before now, I’d have just entered without even knocking. But this wasn’t my home anymore.

The door swung open, and the familiar face of my father, Savior, filled the doorway. Surprise etched his rugged features for a fleeting second before his expression settled into something unreadable. I managed a tremulous smile, but it felt like it might shatter at any moment.

“Hey, Dad,” I murmured.

“Girl, you’re a sight.” He didn’t make single move, and I noticed he seemed more tense than usual.

It felt like my feet had cemented to the porch. A cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck, and nausea welled inside me. I couldn’t bring myself to go into the house. Even though the kidnapper had caught me outside, I had no way of knowing if they’d gone into the house at some point. I wondered if Prophet had made me close my eyes

and carried me inside, if I'd have been fine if I hadn't seen the area where it had happened.

"Prophet, I..."

Prophet's arm wrapped around me, his presence a solid reassurance. "Easy. I've got you, Ares. You going to be all right?"

"Trying to be," I admitted. My dad stood silently, observing us.

"Let's take this slow," Prophet said. "We can stay here like this until you're ready. Just squeeze my hand when you think you can go inside."

"Damn it, Ares! What's wrong with you?" My dad sounded more hurt than angry. I knew he had to be frustrated with me. "Can't you see I'm here for you? Look at me!"

I swallowed hard, my lips parting as I tried to force the words out. Tears burned my eyes, and my chest felt like it was tight. "P-Please..."

It felt like I was drowning and couldn't get any oxygen. The world spun, and I leaned back into Prophet, not sure my legs would hold me up.

"Savior, she's not -- It's not what you think." Prophet glanced at me, pain etched across his face, before locking eyes with my father. "She needs space. It's not about you or her not wanting to be here."

My dad's jaw clenched, his body rigid. Prophet stood his ground. His hold on me was gentle, even as he faced off against his President.

"Prophet --"

He held up a hand. "Give her a moment. Let her breathe."

"I... I don't know if..." I couldn't even get the words out. It wasn't that I didn't want to see my dad and the rest of my family. I'd missed them.

"You're okay, Ares. I'm right here." Prophet squeezed my waist.

"Enough!" The word burst from Dad like a gunshot. I flinched, bracing for the anger I knew so well, the disappointment I feared. But as his stern gaze met mine, something shifted in his hardened features. The lines around his eyes softened, the set of his mouth loosened with an emotion I hadn't expected -- regret. The fire in his eyes dimmed, replaced by a dawning realization that cut through his fury like a knife.

"Shit," he muttered, the word rough and low. He raked a hand through his beard. "Ares... I didn't... I'm sorry."

The simple apology hung between us. It was an olive branch, a small gesture, and yet I knew what it cost my dad to say those words. He wasn't one to say sorry very easily. I watched the man who had taken me in when I had nowhere else to go, who had saved me. In that moment, I saw not just my father, not just the President of the Dixie Reapers, but a man wrestling with his own demons -- fighting to be better for the daughter he claimed as his own.

Dad took a step forward, his gaze locked on mine. I read the silent plea for forgiveness, and the hope he hadn't made things worse for me.

"Let's talk inside," he said.

I nodded, a tentative acceptance, and allowed Prophet to guide me into the house. As long as I had him with me, I knew I'd be okay. I just had to get over my initial fear of being here.

“I’m so sorry, Ares.” My dad’s voice broke. “I guess I hoped when you came back, things would go back to normal. I know you’re struggling to find your way here as Prophet’s woman now and not just my daughter, but I’m having a hard time too. I want you here, back in your room, and to see you smile the way you used to.”

“Time.” I swallowed hard. “I need more time.”

He nodded. “All right. I’ve been too scared to hug you, so let me know that will be okay.”

“Where’s Dessa and the kids?” Prophet asked.

“I asked them to give me some time with Ares first. If the children had seen her like this, it might have scared them.”

It had been the right thing to do. Even now, I wasn’t sure how much longer I could stand being in this house. And going outside would be even worse.

“I think I need Dr. Sykes,” I said. “I thought I was better, but I was wrong. I need his help getting through this.”

Prophet squeezed my hand. “Then you’ll have it. You’re not alone, Ares. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I thought I was finished with counseling, but I think I need more sessions. Official ones this time,” I said.

“Okay.” He kissed the top of my head. “We’ll get you whatever help you need.”

He laced his fingers with mine. My hand trembled as I reached for my phone and called Dr. Sykes’ number. He’d made sure I’d be able to reach him at any time of

day. Even though he hadn't charged me for therapy, I had a feeling the club made sure he'd been compensated. I'd found it odd they'd extended their stay until I was ready to return home. How had they been able to keep their practices closed for that long without some sort of payment? The call connected on the third ring.

"Dr. Sykes speaking."

"It's Ares. I need to see you. Regular appointments. I'm not over everything like I'd thought I was. I'm not only having a hard time, but it's causing problems with my family too." I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry. "I feel like I'm going to destroy everything important to me because of how screwed up I am."

"We'll set something up. We can meet as often as you need to. I'll have my assistant call you back in a little while and figure out what days and times will be best for you. Do you need to see me right now? Do you feel like this is an emergency?" he asked.

"No, I think I can wait." I ended the call, and slowly exhaled the way he'd taught me to do. I leaned into Prophet. "Thank you."

"Anything for you," he replied.

"The two of you should go home," Savior said. "I'll let Dessa know she should take the kids to your place if they want to visit."

I felt like my dad was dismissing me, and it broke my heart. Prophet led me to the door, glancing over his shoulder once, before taking me outside. I closed my eyes, thinking it might be better if I didn't see the place where I'd been abducted. Prophet lifted me into his arms and carried me to his bike. He eased me down onto the back of it and leaned in to kiss my temple.

"Keep your eyes closed a little longer," he said.

I nodded and felt him get onto the motorcycle in front of me. I placed my hands on his waist and pressed my forehead to his leather-covered back. It wasn't until he stopped at our house that I finally looked up. If I'd known I would panic like that, I wouldn't have offered to go to my dad's house. It wasn't that I didn't want to see him, or the rest of the family. I just couldn't handle going to that house right now. I worried I'd never be able to.

"We're home, honey," he said, patting my thigh. "You want me to run a hot bath for you?"

"Dr. Myron said it couldn't be too hot. But yes, that sounds nice."

I got off the bike and waited for him, then we went into the house together. I went straight to the bedroom and took off my shoes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I waited for him to run the bath. I could have easily done it myself, but Prophet seemed to like doing things like this for me. When I'd tried to tell him I could do it on my own, he'd glowered at me and done it anyway.

"You want any help?" he asked.

"I think I want to be alone." I reached out a hand to him. "I'm sorry. It's just... today has been a lot, and there are things I need to process."

"Mind if I stay in here in case you need me? All you'll have to do is call out to me."

I gave him a brief smile. "I'd appreciate it."

Before I got cleaned up, there was one other thing I needed to do. Call Dessa. She'd been a mother to me, and also a good friend. I pulled out my phone and quickly selected her name off my contacts list.

“Ares?” she asked the moment the call connected. “Are you okay?”

“No, but I think I will be, eventually.” I pressed my lips together. “None of this is your fault, and I’m sorry I can’t come to the house to see you.”

“Oh, honey.” I heard her sigh. “I did blame myself the day you disappeared. If I’d been more vigilant, or talked to you on your way home...”

“No, and I’m glad you and the kids weren’t there when it happened.”

“I had been. Junie forgot a toy at Delphine’s house. She’d been over there playing with Jae, and you know how she gets about her favorite things. I wasn’t gone for very long, and I knew I shouldn’t have wheeled my way over there with the children, but...”

I understood. “Junie was crying and you felt like you might lose your mind before anyone else got home to help?”

“Exactly. Your dad read me the riot act once he got home. And I’ve felt like complete crap about everything.”

“No, Mom. If you’d been there, then you and the kids would have been in danger. In fact, they may have taken Junie, Judd, and Marnie instead of me. You know they wouldn’t have survived.” I swallowed hard. “I was strong enough to handle it, or so I thought. If I had to make the choice again, I’d still sacrifice myself for them.”

Prophet reached out to squeeze my hand.

“I love you, Ares. You know that, right?” Dessa asked.

“I know, Mom. Love you too. I need to go, but I hope you can come to our house to

visit.”

We didn’t make definite plans, but I still felt better after speaking to her for a moment. I hung up the call and headed into the bathroom. I partially closed the door and quickly stripped out of my clothes. Easing down into the tub, I leaned back and closed my eyes. It would have been nice if it could have been hotter, but this was better than nothing. If only the water temperature were all I had to worry about... When would I feel normal again?

* * *

Prophet

I hung my head and stared at the floor. She’d been doing so well before we’d returned home. I worried this wasn’t something we could easily fix. While I wouldn’t go so far as to say that she’d been as happy as she’d been at the beach, she hadn’t freaked out until she got to Savior’s house today.

It made me wonder if there was something we could do specifically for his house or that area of the compound that could help Ares. If not, did I need to consider the fact we might need to move? Living outside the compound wouldn’t be safe. Too many chances something would go wrong and she’d be put in danger again. I’d been a Dixie Reaper for so long it was a part of who I was.

If it did come down to it, I didn’t think Savior or the other officers would make a fuss over me leaving. I could always declare myself a Nomad if I didn’t want to leave the club entirely. Or I’d have to consider possibly moving out of this area and patching into another club.

I glanced at the bathroom door and knew I’d do whatever Ares needed me to. If that meant we left this place, then that’s exactly what would happen. I knew this had to be

hard on her. She'd smiled more, laughed, and even been playful toward the end of our stay in Gulf Shores. Now it almost felt like we were back to the beginning in her healing process. Would it have been better to come here after I got her out of that hellhole? Had I only messed up by taking her somewhere else? I'd done what I thought was best, and she hadn't seemed ready to go home.

"Ares, you all right in there?" I called out, thinking it was a little too quiet. She didn't answer and my stomach knotted. "Ares?"

Still nothing. I got up and went to check on her, only to see she'd fallen asleep in the tub. Thankfully, she hadn't slipped beneath the water and drowned. It looked like I'd have to keep a better eye on her for now. I drained the water, grabbed a towel, and lifted her from the tub. There was no way to dry her without laying her on the bed, so I'd change the sheets later. Good thing I'd started using a waterproof mattress pad after I'd spilled one too many beers while watching TV in bed.

All right. So, maybe I hadn't only been watching TV those times. I'd been in love with an underage young woman. My hand was the only way I was going to get any relief, or I'd have walked around with blue balls.

I managed to pull her nightgown over her head and decided not to worry about panties. Tugging the sheet over her, I kissed her brow and left her to get some rest. The visit to her dad's house must have been too stressful for her body to handle.

"Love you, Ares," I whispered before I shut the bedroom door.

I went into the kitchen and wrote a note letting her know I would be at the clubhouse in case she woke up before I returned. Leaving it in the center of the table, I went out to my bike and decided to see if Savior was in his office. It looked like we needed to have a more in-depth conversation about his daughter, before things got any worse.

Prophet

My boots echoed through the empty clubhouse, each step a heavy beat in the quiet before the storm. I was going to confront Savior. I couldn't think of any other way to handle this. I didn't know if his emotions kept getting the best of him, if something else was going on that was causing him to be moodier than usual, or if he just really had no damn clue how to deal with his daughter now. Either way, something needed to change. I'd thought we'd had an understanding, but clearly not.

I paused by his office door, my hand hovering over the worn metal handle. Inhaling deeply, I opened the door.

Savior didn't look up, not yet aware that I'd entered his private sanctum. Either that, or the bastard was ignoring me on purpose. He looked exhausted even though it hadn't been more than an hour since I'd been at his house. Did this thing with Ares weigh on him that much?

"Prophet," he finally acknowledged, without looking up.

"Savior," I replied. "We need to talk. Again."

Closing the door behind me to shut out the world, I watched as his gaze slowly lifted, meeting mine. There was a challenge in his stare, a silent demand for me to speak my piece and get the fuck out. I could see this was going to go over well.

"It's about Ares," I said, then paused. I didn't know how to phrase what I needed to say.

“Go on,” he prompted.

The next words needed to be spoken, no matter how much we both wished they could remain unvoiced. He needed to know what his daughter had been through. It sucked, and I didn’t want to give him those nightmares, but I thought he might better understand Ares.

I let the silence linger a moment, then decided to dive in. Standing here wasn’t going to get this resolved any faster. “She’s been through hell, man. You know it. I know it. But it’s more than just knowing. It’s about facing the ugly truth of it.”

Savior’s eyes narrowed, a silent command to continue. Was he really prepared to hear what I had to say? I glanced around his office, wondering if everything in here was about to be destroyed.

“Every night, she fought demons in her sleep. Nightmares about what she endured. She’s gotten better. But the Ares I saw this morning is closer to what she was like when I first found her. The extent of her trauma... it’s not just physical scars. Those wounds run deeper, carving into her very soul. She may have survived trafficking before, but this time was different.”

“What the hell aren’t you saying? Just spit it the fuck out,” he demanded.

Speaking the words out loud nearly ripped my heart in half. I knew Ares didn’t want her father hearing what she’d been through. It felt like I was betraying her, but I needed him to understand the extent of what she suffered.

“The man who bought her took pleasure in breaking her down. He tied her up. Beat her. Cut her. Starved her. And... he raped her. When I found them, he was in the room with her. Fucker taunted me. He was so certain he was safe, that I wouldn’t be able to touch him.”

Savior's hands fisted on top of the desk. "And did you kill the bastard?"

"No. I left him alive, then handed him off to some of the women he'd been abusing. The club who helped get Ares out of there let me know the man was dead. The women hadn't been able to finish him off, so their club took care of it. He's buried in about ten different graves spread all over the state." He still looked pissed as hell, but hopefully he wouldn't destroy his office. "In case you're curious, the Wild & Reckless crew are taking care of the other women. I didn't really ask for updates, and Ares hasn't seemed curious. She was kept separate from them, so it's not like they bonded."

Savior still didn't say anything, but I'd noticed his face started to turn a startling shade of purple. If he erupted in here, there'd be no saving the office or anything in it. The man looked seconds away from ripping apart or smashing everything in sight.

"Creating a safe environment for Ares -- it's critical," I said. "She needs to feel secure, not just when we're around, but in every corner of this place she calls home."

I hoped he understood what I meant. Being at his house this morning sent her spiraling. It was where she'd been abducted. I was a fucking idiot for not considering that before I took her over there. It didn't even occur to me she might have an issue with being in that location.

"Prophet, I --" He sighed. "What do I need to do? I want my daughter back in my life. She's here but not here, if you know what I mean. And I'm sure that's at least somewhat my fault."

Now was my chance. "Speaking of... Something going on with you, Pres? You've been acting a bit out of character since we came back. I get that you're pissed I asked her to marry me without discussing it with you first, and that she's pregnant. But it seems like something more is happening."

“You’re right. And it’s something for me to worry about, not you or Ares. I’ll try to do better.”

That wasn’t going to cut it. If there really was a problem, then I wanted to help. He wasn’t just my club President anymore. “You do realize you’re going to be my father-in-law, right?”

“I just have some health shit going on. Turns out I’m diabetic, and I can turn it around with the right diet but I feel like I’m fucking starving all the time. It makes me grumpier than usual. I’ve been lashing out at everyone for no damn good reason for weeks. Dessa threatened to hit me with a skillet if I didn’t stop.” He ran a hand down his face. “I’m fine. Or I will be. I go back next month for more blood work. They’ll tell me then if what I’m doing is actually working, or if I need medication. One way or another, it will resolve itself.”

“Fine. But if you need someone to talk to, or need help with anything, let me know. As for Ares... I think being in front of your house took her back to the day she was abducted. I’m not sure what to do, in all honesty. I’ve wondered if we’ll eventually have to leave this place in order for her not regress. She was doing so much better until we returned from Gulf Shores. She’s stronger than anyone I know, but even the strongest steel can fracture.”

“All right.” He leaned forward. “We need to come up with a way to give her that safe space. If that means I need to tear down my house and rebuild it elsewhere, then so be it.”

“Let’s not get quite that extreme. Why don’t we start with a makeover for the outside? Change enough stuff that the house doesn’t look the same, and maybe that will keep her from panicking.”

“Want to help me come up with a plan?” he asked. “Or do you need to get back to

Ares?”

I hesitated only for a moment. “She was taking a nap and I left a note telling her I’d be at the clubhouse. She can either find me here, or call me if she needs something, so I can stay for a bit.”

“Let me grab a pen and pad of paper. Let’s head to a table in the main area and discuss this over a beer.”

I went out to the bar and grabbed two cold longnecks before claiming a table. There weren’t many brothers in here right now. None of them came over, even though Tank gave me a nod. I enjoyed coming to the clubhouse more these days. The club whores who used to hang around had been a troublesome bunch, and I for one was glad they were gone.

Savior joined me at the table and slapped the pad and pen down. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Well, think about what the outside of your house looks like. Not just the house either but the yard, driveway, all of it. She didn’t even make it to the door before she tensed up.”

“Go on,” he said, picking up the pen.

“What about putting in a garden? You have the backyard for the little ones to play. No reason you can’t landscape alongside the driveway and up across the front of the house. Add some flowers or shrubs. Whatever.”

“A garden full of green. Maybe a koi pond too. The sound of water can soothe the soul, and the kids would love feeding the fish.” He wrote down the ideas then did a rough sketch.

“Exactly,” I said. “Maybe some flowers. Something to add color to the place. Make it cheerful.”

He nodded and added more to the sketch, along with putting more into his notes. I hadn’t realized before the Pres actually knew a few things about this shit. He even listed types of plants he’d want to use.

“Maybe put up a different style of fence around the backyard?” I suggested. “Or put in a wood one instead of chain link? That would change the look of the place too.”

“All right.” Savior stood abruptly, his chair scraping back against the floor. “Let’s do this. For Ares.”

I rose with him, wondering if he literally meant he was starting the project right this second. I mean, if he was motivated, then why not? It just seemed a bit abrupt.

“Let’s give her a place that will help her heal,” I said. “I’m assuming you want to start right now.”

“No time like the present. I’ll call a few others. At the very least, we can dig out the grass in the areas I plan to put the garden, and I can get one of those pond inserts. As long as I know the dimensions, we could dig the hole for it.”

“What’s going on?” Tank asked, coming over.

Savior showed him the sketch and list. “Going to change up the outside of my house. Ares froze up when she came by earlier. Prophet said she was probably reminded of her abduction. But if the place looks completely different...”

Tank nodded. “Good idea. Should probably paint the outside a different color too, unless you just really love the color it is.”

“Better ask Dessa before you go that far,” I said. “Hell, you need to show her all this before you start digging up the yard. It’s her place too.”

“She won’t care. If it’s for Ares, she’ll tell me to do whatever is needed. She loves that girl like her own.” Savior headed out the door and over to his bike. “I’ll still run this by her. Meet me at the house in a few minutes. If you see anyone you can convince to volunteer for this, bring them with you.”

Savior rode off and I shook my head. “Do you think he realizes this isn’t getting finished in just day or two?”

Tank snorted. “Not likely. If he could, he’d have it done before dinner.”

“You’re not wrong.” I went over to my bike. “Want to lend a hand?”

“I’m too old for this shit. But I’ll round up some youngsters.”

I stared at him for a moment. “By youngsters...”

“Foster needs to make amends for some shit. And where Foster goes, so does Owen.”

I frowned. Had I missed something while I’d been gone. “What did Foster do this time?”

“Oh, shit. She never said anything?”

“Who? Ares?” I got off the bike. “What the fuck did he say or do?”

Tank held up a hand. “Easy. It was before the Lathems got her. Foster tried to lure her out of here, saying his buddies wanted her to hang out with them. She got pissed at him, which is understandable. Sometimes I wonder what exactly is in that boy’s head

other than air.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I couldn't be entirely pissed off about it. For one, Foster was known for saying and doing the wrong thing, especially when it came to women. He'd gotten in trouble so many times I'd lost track.

“When the hell is he going to grow up?” I asked.

“No idea. That's between him and his dad. I stay out of it. Unless he comes near my girls. Then he'll be going home with my boot print on his ass, and possibly his face.”

I snorted. “Yeah, even Foster can't be that stupid, right?”

Tank shrugged. “I wouldn't bet on it.”

“All right. I'm going to Savior's place. If Ares comes here looking for me...”

He waved me off. “I'm heading out, but I'll let someone inside know. You could always text her.”

“Yeah, I may do that. See you later, Tank.” I got back on my bike and drove over to Savior's house. I noticed he'd roped Saint, Flicker, and Royal into this project as they were all standing in the yard talking to him while looking at the paper in his hand.

Saint waved at me as I walked over. “You help him come up with this?”

“Somewhat. I made a few vague suggestions, and he just ran with it,” I said. “But I think this will be good for Ares.”

“I'm really fucking glad my woman would rather me buy her a new motorcycle than put in a garden,” Flicker said. “Otherwise, this might give Pepper ideas.”

“I already know I’ll be asked to make the yard as pretty as Savior’s,” Saint said. “But if that’s what Sofia wants, then it’s what she’ll get. But I may force the Prospects to do it.”

“I brought two cans of white spray paint,” Royal said. “Had some in the garage. I thought we could use it to mark off the areas Savior wants dug up.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Let’s see what we can get done. I don’t want to be away from Ares too much longer, though.”

Savior slapped me on the back. “Go on home to her. I have enough help for now. Just keep her away from this area as much as possible until it’s done. I want it to be a surprise.”

“All right, Pres. Keep me posted and let me know if you need me.”

I got on my bike and watched them for a moment. Dessa wheeled out onto the porch and gave me a wave, as well as a forced smile. Anyone could see she felt like shit over Ares being abducted. I hoped the two of them would be able to find peace again. Neither deserved this shit.

I waved back, then headed home. There were times I really loved being part of the Dixie Reapers. Of course, like any family, we didn’t get along one hundred percent of the time. Still, we usually overcame our issues. Our bond was tighter than blood. We were family by choice.

Ares

I hadn't been to the clubhouse in a while. For some reason, Prophet had said I wasn't allowed anywhere near my dad's house, and not because I'd freaked out. I had to wonder what was going on. At least I could come here when I wanted to visit with everyone. Now that the club whores were gone, the place was open to the women too.

And as an added bonus, there was a ramp here, so Mom could hang out with everyone whenever she wanted. Now that the place was family friendly all day every day, the kids were also able to come inside. Although, most of them didn't except the smaller ones who came with their parents. The teens, however, were another matter. It made them feel grown-up to be in here unsupervised.

I couldn't drink since I was pregnant, so a Prospect had given me a bottle of water. I accepted it and took in everyone either sitting at tables having conversations, or dancing to the beat of whatever song played through the speakers. I'd only half paid attention to it. Being in here still left me feeling a little overwhelmed. Not because anything bad happened to me in this place, but I was still adjusting once more to being in crowded spaces. At the beach, we'd only been around crowds in restaurants or out in the open. This was... different. For one, the only windows were at the front of the room, which left the place rather dreary even when the sun was at its highest peak.

I wondered if it was the darker atmosphere that bothered me. After being locked up in a room with no windows, a place like this made me feel like I was still confined. I knew I could get up and walk out whenever I wanted, but my body still had a fearful response to places like this.

Part of me wished Mom was here. I hadn't had a chance to spend a lot of time with her since my return. The little ones needed her, and she really did struggle to leave the house some days. Prophet's house wasn't close enough for her to wheel herself over there. I needed to call her more often at the very least.

Wraith's woman Rin plopped down on the stool next to mine. She was quite a bit older than me, but I'd heard she was around my age when Wraith claimed her. I'd always thought she was rather beautiful, even with the scars covering her body.

"Hey." She flashed me a quick smile.

"Rin," I acknowledged. We'd spoken often over the years I'd been here, but I wouldn't have considered her one of my friends. I didn't have anything against her. I'd just mostly hung out with those closer to my age.

She reached out, her hand warm and steady as it enveloped mine. "You looked slightly freaked out, and I thought you could use someone to talk to."

I forced a smile. "It shows, huh?"

She shrugged shoulder. "I know you've been through this before. Different story, same kind of hell. And you know my past wasn't the greatest. I just wanted you to know I'm here for you. Don't feel rushed to be the same Ares you were before. In all honesty, you'll never be her again. I'm not saying you won't heal, because you will, but the experiences you had will make you stronger -- eventually."

"Thanks, Rin. I appreciate it." I really did too. There were several women here who'd survived sexual assault and more. Rin was only one of them. The men here had a tendency to take in the broken birds and mend their wings. And yeah, I'd just called the two of us fucking birds. Maybe they'd given me more than water. I sniffed the contents of the bottle. Nope. Not vodka, just straight-up water. Maybe the stress was

affecting me more than I'd realized.

“Wraith didn't let me drown in my nightmares. Didn't look at me like I was something dirty. We didn't have the smoothest start to our relationship, but he loves me and I love him. I can see you have that with Prophet, but I know there are times you need a woman who will understand. I just wanted to remind you that you have several here who would be willing to listen or hold you while you cry or scream about the unfairness of it all. We've been there, done that.”

“Seems impossible some days,” I admitted. “Living a normal life again. You'd think I'd be able to shrug this off after going through it before. I don't know why this time it's hitting me harder. And Mom... I can tell she feels guilty even when she shouldn't. It makes me wonder if our relationship will ever go back to what it was before.”

“As far as Dessa is concerned, she's a grown woman and has to deal with her issues. You have enough on your plate. Focus on getting better. Maybe you didn't properly process everything before because of your age,” she suggested. “But you're seeing Dr. Sykes, right?”

“Yeah. I had counseling with him before, but this time it feels like he's digging deeper. Guess I need it since I'm such a basket case some days.”

She squeezed my hand. “Don't think that way.”

I held her gaze and realized there were times she still felt the pain of what she went through. It resonated with me, and perhaps that more than anything else reminded me I really did have plenty of people to help me through this.

“Thank you,” I said. “Really.”

“Anytime,” Rin said with a small smile, releasing my hand. “We’re all in this together, remember? That’s what makes us stronger.”

“Family. I get it.” I looked across the room where my dad sat with Saint, Tank, and Venom. I could tell there something going on with him, but no one had said anything. But maybe... “Hey, Rin. Do you know what’s up with my dad lately? He’s been quick to anger and even got mad at me over stuff I couldn’t control. You know that’s not like him.”

“Wow, okay then.” She blew out a breath. “I see they’re keeping you in the dark.”

I jerk my head around to stare at her. “What? Is something really wrong with him?”

She lifted her hands. “No. I mean, it’s not life-threatening as long as he does what he’s supposed to, and I think he’s trying. Honestly, I thought you’d know already. Didn’t Prophet...”

“Oh my God! Why haven’t they said anything to me?” I stared at my dad again, trying to see if I could figure out what illness he had. Was it cancer? A bad heart? A tumor? My mind started spinning with one horrible scenario after another. And Prophet had kept it from me? Did he think I was so fragile I couldn’t handle it?

“Easy, Ares.” Rin placed her hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I think we need some backup. Just breathe in and out, slowly.”

I felt her waving at someone, even though I didn’t see who. Next thing I knew, Lavender and Mara were standing with us. I did a double take as it registered Mara was really here. It was a rare thing to find her at a gathering like this. She’d been with Rocky since long before I came here, and yet, she mostly stayed in her house. I’d always thought she was just too shy, but maybe it was more that she preferred the peace and quiet. She seemed at ease right now.

“What’s up?” Lavender asked.

“They haven’t told Ares about Savior, and now she’s panicking,” Rin said. “I shouldn’t have said anything, but she was worrying about the way he’s been acting.”

Lavender sighed. “Let’s get to a table.”

I followed them to an empty table on the opposite side of the room from my dad. Once I’d sat down, Lavender took the chair beside me with Rin on my other side. Mara sat across from me.

“You know he probably wanted to protect you, right?” Mara asked. “It’s why he didn’t say anything. You’ve been through a lot, and he most likely didn’t want to burden you with anything else.”

“Burden? I’m his daughter! How could he not tell me if there’s something wrong?” I asked.

“It’s not as awful as you probably think.” Lavender nudged my bottle of water closer to me and I took a swallow. “He’s been diagnosed with diabetes. They’re giving him time to correct it by changing his diet and lifestyle a bit. If the next test still says he’s diabetic, they’ll put him on meds most likely.”

“I don’t know anything about diabetes,” I said.

“He’s had to cut out carbs, sugar, increase his protein intake. He also has to lay off the beer. He can still enjoy one, just not several a day. I think the change in what he can eat, and the stress over checking labels for carb and sugar content, has stressed him to the point he’s a bit snippy. Dessa said he’s always complaining he feels like he’s going to starve to death, so that’s not helping matters either.” Lavender glanced at him, then back at me. “Maybe you should talk to him about it?”

I shook my head. "I'll wait and see if they bring it up first. At least I now understand why he's been acting out of character. Thank you for telling me."

"Do you know how far along you are?" Lavender asked, changing the subject.

"Um. Dr. Myron did a blood test to confirm the pregnancy, but we haven't really narrowed down when it happened. I go see Dr. Myron again in a few weeks. Maybe he can tell me more then."

Mara reached over to lightly touch my ring. "Interesting choice of engagement ring. Is there a story behind it?"

I nodded. "We were staying at a house on the beach in Gulf Shores. One of the vendors nearby sold oysters. Prophet bought one, had the guy cut it open, and there was a pink pearl inside. He took it to a jeweler and had it made into a ring. The day I decided it was time to come home, he proposed to me."

"It's unique, and beautiful," Rin said. "An unpolished pearl has a rougher, bumpy exterior. I bet the pearl reminded Prophet of you, and everything you'd been through."

"He said something along those lines. I guess I'm supposed to be the finished pearl once I'm done dealing with what happened." It had been rather sweet of him, but then, he'd always been kind to me. Even when he sounded gruff, he was usually forcing me to do something that was for my own good.

"Since you've been gone, and you've had some... trouble... readjusting, you probably haven't heard." Lavender leaned in closer. "Joker and Cleo have a son now. I think they've been keeping their distance in case their presence bothers you. They took in a little boy named Caspian. He's a cutie."

“None of this is Cleo’s fault. Her family did this to me, not her. She had a bad heart, right? Did that get resolved?”

Rin nodded. “Yeah. She got a transplant, and while she’s not running a marathon anytime soon, she’s definitely much improved.”

“I heard Joker still sticks to her like glue, though,” Mara said.

“You’d see it for yourself if you came out of your house more often,” Lavender said. “But you’ve always been quiet and preferred being home.”

“I know. Sometimes all this is a bit much for me,” Mara said, waving her hand at the people gathered in the clubhouse. “Although, it’s much better now those women are gone. They always made me feel uneasy, and with all the trouble they kept causing, I didn’t understand why they were here.”

“Um, because men think with their dicks?” Rin asked.

I’d just taken a swallow of water and spewed it all over the table. “True, but I can’t believe you said that.”

They laughed and Lavender handed me a napkin. I used it to clean myself up, then mopped up the water on the table. They’d always treated me like a child before. I guess getting engaged and being pregnant changed things. I wasn’t just one of the kids now. I was going to be one of them. An old lady.

Of course, now that I thought about it...

“Why am I the only one at the table without a property cut?” I asked.

“Oh, shit.” Lavender put her hand over her mouth. “I didn’t even realize it. I bet

Savior hasn't ordered it yet."

"But you know where they get them, right?" Mara asked Lavender.

"I do, but... That request should really come from an officer or their old lady. And Wire is awesome, but he's just the club hacker. It's not like he has an official title around here."

"I always thought he was a bit like God -- he could see you anytime he wanted and track you too."

Lavender threw back her head and laughed. "That's fucking perfect! I'm so telling him that."

"No!" Rin looked appalled. "He already thinks he's the most amazing thing on earth. Can you imagine the size of his ego if he knows someone thinks he's a god?"

"You make a good point," Lavender said.

Prophet came over, squatting beside my chair. "Looks like you're having fun now. Do you need anything?"

"She needs her property cut," Lavender said. "Did you not ask Savior to get her one?"

Prophet winced. "Actually, I didn't. With everything going on, it didn't seem like the right time. Everyone knows I've claimed her, that we're engaged, and expecting a baby. The cut is important, and I know that, but... it's not the most important thing."

"I guess things are a little different now," Mara said. "Before, it was the only way to keep the club whores away from our men, or at least it stood as a warning those guys

were taken. Now we don't have to deal with those women."

"Not to mention Ares was part of this club already," Prophet said.

"Fine. But I'd like to have mine before my stomach is too big for me to wear it properly." I leaned in to kiss him. "Deal?"

"I can manage that." He smiled and stood. "Let me know when you're ready to head home. I don't want to cut your time short since you seem to be enjoying yourself, but I also don't want you to overdo it."

"I know." I watched him walk off and realized the women were smirking at me. "What?"

"I'm deciding if he has you wrapped around his finger, or it's the other way around," Rin said.

"I think it's a bit of both." Lavender smacked her hand on the table. "And I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. I'm going to ask a Prospect to make us some fries. Anything else for the table?"

"Loaded potato skins," Rin said. "But tell them to put the sour cream on the side this time. Last time they loaded the tops of them and I couldn't handle it."

"All right. Back in a minute," Lavender said.

She hadn't been gone more than a few seconds before someone dropped into her seat. I stared at Foster, wondering what the hell he was up to. Nothing good ever happened when he was around. How the hell had someone like Bull had a kid like this one?

"Are you lost?" I asked.

“I needed to apologize to you,” he said.

Mara sighed. “Child, you might as well print off apology cards and just hand them out on a daily basis. You’re at my house enough I feel like you’re my kid, but when are you going to grow the hell up? If Owen fucked up as much as you do, Rocky would have buried him somewhere already.”

Foster winced. “I know. And actually, I’m more scared of Mom than Dad, but don’t tell him I said that.”

“You act or run your mouth before your brain has the time to tell you that you shouldn’t do whatever it is you’re jumping into,” I said. “It’s exhausting, and often insulting, to a lot of us. You ran Leigha off all the way to the Reckless Kings.”

“And I learned my lesson. If a woman says no, or tries to politely turn me down, then I know she’s really not interested and isn’t just playing hard to get.” He leaned in closer, giving me puppy eyes. “I’m really sorry, Ares. I didn’t get to apologize because of what happened, and then you were gone for two months. If there’s ever anything I can do to make it up to you, or to prove I’m trying to change, then tell me.”

Lavender was back and smacked him on the top of his head. “You can start by getting your ass out of my seat. Then bring our food to the table and some fresh drinks.”

He shot up out of his chair and took a hasty step back. “You got it!”

Rin looked amused as she watched him run off. “Don’t think I’ve seen him move that fast before.”

“He knows I can erase his entire existence if he makes me mad,” Lavender said. “I already had his license revoked once. I fixed it two days later, but he learned his

lesson when he got pulled over for speeding.”

I stayed another hour, enjoying my time with the ladies. For the first time since I’d come back home, I felt like I belonged here. These women were incredible, and I owed them so much. They’d given me the one thing I’d been missing -- confidence, and hearing that it was okay to not be okay. I hoped one day I could be like them and give advice to those younger than me.

I definitely want to be like Lavender when I grow up . Well, minus the hacking because I wasn’t that great with computers.

Right when I was about to ask Prophet if we could go home, the doors opened, and Mom wheeled her way into the clubhouse. She glanced around the room, and the moment she spotted me, she came over. The women scooted their chairs to make space for her. She pulled up next to me, and before she said a word, she pulled me in for a hug.

“You looked like you could use one of these,” she said. “And I definitely did.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Your dad texted that you were here. I asked Delphine to watch the kids long enough for me to come see you.” She squeezed my hand. “I’ve missed you, Ares.”

“Same here. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to come visit at the house. It’s just been too hard,” I said.

“And I’m sure they don’t blame you for that,” Rin said. “Right, Dess?”

Mom nodded. “Right. You’re the victim in all this, Ares. Or rather, the survivor. My strong, beautiful girl.”

“All right, Mom. Enough or I’m going to think you’ve been drinking.” I laid my head on her shoulder. “But I’m really glad you came tonight.”

“Me too. So, catch me up on the all the gossip.”

Lavender told her about me calling Wire a god, and before I knew it, I’d been sucked in to another hour of conversation. But spending time with everyone like this made me truly feel like I was back where I belonged.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:38 am

Ares

Five Months Later

The morning light seeped through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the room. A profound sense of peace settled over me as my hand instinctively found its way to the gentle swell of my belly. So much had happened since I'd returned home, but I was in a better place now. I saw Dr. Sykes once a week, or more often if I needed to, and I felt like I was truly a part of the club again.

"Hey, darlin'," Prophet's voice rumbled from the doorway.

I turned toward him, my heart skipping a beat at how sexy he looked with a half smile on his lips, and his eyes lighting up. He came closer, and I admired his ink as he sat on the edge of the bed, leaning in to kiss me on the forehead. He was also so gentle with me, even though I'd seen him beat the shit out of people multiple times. Even though he had that darker, rough side, I knew he'd never be that way with me.

"How are my girls?" he asked.

"We don't know for certain yet. Remember, Dr. Myron said the baby wasn't in the best position. It's possible it's a boy."

He scooted closer and put his arm around me. "Yeah, but I'm hoping for a cute daughter who takes after her mom."

"Why? So you can run off the boys like Foster? And considering the age differences

around here...”

He growled. “Don’t even joke about that! I’d be fine if she wants to fall for Atlas. He’s the most levelheaded kid I’ve seen around here. Out of the boys anyway.”

“He’s not even old enough to drive yet. He could change a lot the older he gets,” I said. “I bet Foster wasn’t so bad when he was smaller.”

“Fine. She can have a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend. Wait. No, she could end up with someone like a club whore. Shit.”

I couldn’t help but giggle at him. “You’re too much. Come on. We’re going to be late.”

“Every morning I wake up next to you, I realize this is the closest to heaven that I’ll ever be. I love you so much, Ares.”

“I love you too, Hunter. Can you believe we’re going to be parents?”

He grinned. “Can you believe your dad is going to be a grandpa?”

“Yes, and you love reminding him of that every day. One day you’ll go missing, and I’ll discover he fed you to the giant koi in his pond.”

Dad had really outdone himself. Prophet had told me about the original plan for the house, but Dad had gone above and beyond. He’d ended up moving the pond farther to the side of the house and tripling the size of it. There was a bench beside it, so I could go and watch the fish whenever I wanted. Junie and Judd loved to sit there too, but Marnie was scared of the water.

He’d created a beautiful garden, even though he’d used part of the lot beside the house. One he’d intended to give to someone in the future. The club had convinced

him to use it to create a safe space for me, and I loved all of them for it.

“Is Jackson back yet?” I asked. He’d left for a rodeo shortly after I returned, and he hadn’t been back since. It worried me because he should have been home months ago.

“No, but I wouldn’t worry too much. You know if something had gone wrong, Cowboy would have said something. Man seems chill as ever, so I think Jackson is okay.”

I hoped so. With his sister gone, the two of us had grown close before my abduction. I thought of him like an older brother.

I got out of bed and Prophet helped me into the shower. While I rinsed off, he got our things together. The club had set up a picnic near the clubhouse, and I couldn’t wait to go. It was near enough to the playground for the little ones to have fun, close enough to the clubhouse in case the men needed more beer or anyone needed a bathroom, and the pavilion provided ample shade. Although the weather would have normally been much too cold for something like this, we’d had an odd heatwave recently. Instead of the usual forty-degree temps, it was nearly seventy outside this week.

I put on one of my maternity dresses and slipped on my canvas flats. Prophet had already stored the potato salad I’d made and tossed a clean blanket in the back of the car. He helped me into the passenger seat, then drove us over to the picnic area. Before being pregnant, I’d have enjoyed the walk. But these days, my ankles were swelling and I felt like I’d swallowed a watermelon. Walking wasn’t my favorite thing to do right now.

By the time we pulled up and parked, it looked like half the club was already present and accounted for. I could hear the squeals of the little ones on the playground. I saw Lavender, Mara, Ridley, Isabella, Darian, and several others already setting up the

picnic tables. When I got closer, I stopped in my tracks.

“Um, Prophet. Why is there an armchair here?” I asked.

“Because your dad wanted to make sure you’d have a comfortable place to sit. He said the wood bench wouldn’t be good for you.”

I sighed. Yeah, sounded like something he’d do. I would sit at the table to eat, but it looked like I’d be holding court in the only padded chair here. Some days my family was so damn embarrassing. Did he really have to go that extra mile in this particular instance?

“I’ll carry the potato salad over to the food table. Find a place to sit that gives you easy access to get up and down,” he said, kissing my cheek.

I took the end seat at the nearest table, and Darian came to sit beside me. She looked like she had something on her mind, so I waited for her to speak first.

I gave her a nudge with my elbow. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Just... my son being his usual self. He hasn’t caused you any other problems, has he?”

My brow furrowed. “No. He’s actually not spoken to me much since I returned. Why? Did something happen?”

“I’m probably seeing issues where there aren’t any. Bull thinks I’m overreacting. If you happen to see or hear anything, let me know? I just have this feeling he’s in trouble again.”

It wasn’t like I’d be the one Foster would confess to. If anything... “You should ask Owen. Those two are really close.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I’ll see if he knows anything. For now... How are you doing? Feeling all right?”

“Yeah. I’ve finally settled back into life here, and things with Prophet are going really well.” I smiled. “I’m not quite as broken as I was before.”

She patted my shoulder. “I’m glad. If you ever need anything, let me know. You have your mom, of course, and a lot of others but... just know you can call or stop by anytime you want.”

“Thanks, Darian.”

Of course, now that she’d brought up Foster, I scanned the area looking for him. What the hell had he gotten himself into now? I really wished, not only for his sake but for everyone’s, that he’d grow the hell up. How Bull and Darian had a kid like him was beyond me. He wasn’t anything like either of his parents.

By the time everyone else arrived, I was beyond starving. I ate my food, enjoyed good conversation, then moved over to the padded chair. A few of the ladies had packed folding chairs and joined me, so at least I didn’t feel quite so alone. I was still the only one with a living room chair at a picnic, but I was rather grateful for it right now.

I’d finally found a way to be at peace again. To feel like part of this big family once more. It wasn’t just thanks to Dr. Sykes and Prophet, but to all the amazing people in my life. Now that Dad had gotten his blood sugar issues under control, he was back to his usual self. Everything that had felt like it was upside down, was now right side up once more.

“What’s that smile for?” Ridley asked.

“I’m just happy. We have a really amazing life here, don’t we?”

She nodded. "We do. Can't imagine living anywhere else. These men might be rough around the edges, and willing to kill if it's needed, but they would walk through fire for us. That's not easy to find in this world these days. They're a special breed."

"And all ours," I said.

I might have walked through hell -- twice -- but I'd come out the other side much stronger. I couldn't wait for what came next in our lives. The thought of being a mom scared me, but I also wanted to hold my little baby in my arms. My life was about as perfect as it could get.

"When's the wedding?" Ridley asked.

"Actually, I decided to let Lavender use her skills to marry us before the baby arrives. Preacher offered to give us an actual wedding ceremony when I feel up to it." I placed my hand over my baby bump. "But I don't think I need one. I already have everything I could ever want."

"Spoken like a true old lady," Ridley said. "You're going to do just fine, Ares. And we're all here whenever you need us."

"I know." I smiled. "Thank you. I love all of you so much."

Ridley hugged me. "We love you too."

One chapter of my life was slowly coming to a close, but the next one would be even better.