



The Merciless (The Vengeance Duology #2)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Climb from the Ashes

Go straight for the heart.

And hope you Survive.

Angel De Santos had seen a lot of blood. A lot of deaths. Yet seven days on the forsaken island were enough to leave him stunned. Terrified.

Not for himself. But for the girl who wouldn't open her eyes.

When secrets unload themselves like gunshots, he's forced to take a step back.

Breathe.

Because this play has been going on for far too long.

Raylene Walker was at the last step of her plan. Was going to do every single thing in her power to leave the underworld victorious.

But when an unexpected player enters the field, she's forced to play a game she'd never trained for.

A game that shakes her very foundation.

Because the player belongs to a past she shares with Angel De Santos.

Is someone who is aiming straight for her heart.

And have been waiting a long, long time.

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Watch how you talk of the dead. They have a way of coming back to haunt you.

Luke's words had struck true.

Because even as he tugged his torn suit over his shoulders and winced at the movement, Ray's face flashed back in his mind. She never did disappear these hours. These minutes.

It was terrible.

And haunting in its own way.

She wasn't dead, he reminded himself time and time again. Even now, as Angel De Santos stared at his reflection in the mirror of his hospital bathroom, he had to repeat the same thought to himself.

She's. Alive.

He tugged the suit on with a soft sigh. The bullet in his hand was removed, leaving behind an ugly scar that was carefully wrapped with a clean cloth. It came with a fair warning from the nurse to not move around much. An advice he was probably going to forget very soon. He saw his tired brown eyes, the mess of his hair, and ran an unhelpful hand through those strands. The suit had become dusty and torn from the edges but it was all he had.

It was all he needed.

Maya and Alessandro Larsen had left the night before, leaving behind their child and Verana Smith. A terrible decision, considering the new, angry bruise on Kyle Larsen's cheek and Vera's triumphant look.

He sighed and looked down at his hands, blinking at the way his vision blurred at the edges at their sight.

He'd had barely three hours of sleep last night, each hour lost to thoughts of how they would go ahead from this.

How he would convince the world without Noah Hassan.

How he would proceed without Raylene Walker.

Angel shook his head now, and took a step away from the mirror, turning on his heels to stride out the bathroom doors.

Mia Andrews, his step-sister, was still working on searching for Akash Smith – the man he was going to tear apart. And the others were just as busy getting things ready to leave and getting some damage control done. And he should've probably gone to Kyle. Probably should've spoken to him about where to go and how to proceed.

But Angel only veered in the opposite direction and landed on the reception desk with a charming smile on his face. The man sitting on the other end barely looked up when he spoke,

“Hi. I'm looking for someone—”

“We're not allowed to share information about anyone in this hospital.” The man responded robotically, “Please let me know if I can help you with anything—”

“I would look up if I were you.”

The man’s head snapped up at the dangerous undertone hidden within Angel De Santos’s smile. His eyes only widened as he recognized who he was and he stumbled off his seat, sudden beads of sweat appearing on his forehead as he took a step back.

“I’m looking for Raylene Walker.” Angel said smoothly. The man nodded briskly and shot forward to the computer .

“Room number 5, she’s in intensive care. She’s in dire condition, please be...”

Angel had already walked away after hearing the room number. The smile dropped from his face as he walked past people in white coats hurriedly, unable to keep his heart from beating wildly in his chest. His eyes darted around in search of the room, almost losing hope because it wasn’t anywhere—

Room 5.

Angel breathed out, saw the tinted windows of the room, and forced himself to still.

To calm.

He tipped his chin, his hands flexing at his sides as he looked at the room number one more time. Saw that it was still the same and placed an unshaking hand on the cold, metal handle.

He’d seen people around her door, but none of them dared interrupt when he pushed the handle down and pulled the door open.

He didn’t really know what he was expecting walking into her room. Maybe it was her up in her bed with a small smile on her face as she explained that it was all a joke.

But it wasn't the smell of the fruity candles and the sounds of an IV drip.

Wasn't the pale, asleep face surrounded by waves of her blue-black hair.

Angel's breath caught as he stepped into the room and the door shut automatically behind him. The sound of the heartbeat monitor was forgotten as he walked ahead silently and stared down at her.

He couldn't see. Couldn't hear. Could barely breathe .

There were a few small red scratches on the side of her face and her head was wrapped in a clean white bandaged. Her hands were laid beside her, all pale and too small. Angel's mind seemed to freeze when he saw her chest move up and down.

Silent.

The ball of dread, the lump in his throat only grew at the sight of a heartbeat monitor beeping rhythmically on the other side of her bed.

When had it all gone wrong?

Angel shut his eyes, the pain washing over him like a wave. He took a second, just a moment of heart the beep of the monitors and then...

Then he opened his eyes and looked down at Raylene Walker.

"I can do this the corny way, or the torturous way." He said and stared at her shut eyelids. Saw the wind hustle in softly and brush the strands of her hair. Angel let loose a breath and took a step closer,

"But since you're not awake, let's do it the obvious way."

He didn't know why, but he waited. It was foolish. Hoping.

But he did it anyway.

His hands shook terribly at his side, a sudden sense of nausea filling his chest as he turned in search of a chair. Found one right behind him, and pulled it ahead without making a single sound. Angel unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt and pushed the cloth apart as he sat close to her bed. Stopped his urge to take her hand in his and instead focused on her pale face. On the necklace that hung forward from his neck.

"The first day I met you, Raylene Walker, oh I can just see you squirming in your sleep..." a small dry chuckle. "You wouldn't believe what I was thinking."

He blinked at her, watching her unmoving, pale face. Unable to recognize her without her smile, without her words, "I'd come to kill you, but I hadn't been expecting...well you. And don't get me wrong here," he blinked, "I really did hate your guts."

The sounds of birds chirping echoed through the room as he continued softly, "And if you'd asked me that day if I gave a shit about Raylene Walker in a coma, I would've said—" his eyes crinkled, "You know what I would've said."

So, what changed? He imagined her asking. Angel leaned forward and extended his hand in her direction. He grit his teeth once before continuing,

"I'm going to hold your hand now," he whispered and laced her cold fingers with his. Shook violently at the lifelessness of her palm, "If you have a problem, wake up and fight me on it."

His head turned to look at her, his elbows digging in the side of her bed as he leaned closer. He didn't really mean to, but his head slumped forward of its own accord and

rested carefully on the very edge of her pillow. He was all but a breath away from her, but this proximity. This nearness. It brought back the memories of that night back into his mind.

And a terrible part of him cursed himself for not closing that distance that night.

Maybe if he had, they wouldn't be here now.

"Your heart's beating." Angel rasped and heard the beep, beep, beep, in response. Fought a deadly sound that dared to tear from his throat as he continued with his eyes shut, "What else do you need to be awake Ray?"

He could hear her breathing, could feel the bed shift with the way her chest moved up and down with the action .

Angel's finger tightened on hers, forcing and failing to get her to do something.

And suddenly he couldn't take it anymore.

Maybe it was because she couldn't hear him. Or because he'd been holding this in for the past five days. But his facade, his agony just shattered.

"I hate you, Raylene Walker," he finally rasped, past that black flame in his chest and the lump in his throat, "I despise your smiles, I detest your glares. I hate the way you make me want to tear down the entire world for you." A breath, "I hate that you were there that night and I couldn't protect you from this. I hate, I hate—"

I hate you.

She didn't reply. She didn't move. She didn't speak. And a part of Angel wondered how one person could leave such a bruising imprint on his heart within the span of

one fucking week.

You have me in the palm of your hand, Raylene Walker.

How can you not be awake for it?

“I’m going after Akash tomorrow.” He said roughly and after a moment’s thought, ran a gentle hand over the top of her head. Her hair was soft under his touch and ruffled with his actions while his other hand loosened its hold on her fingers, “I’m giving you until tonight to wake and come with me.”

No response.

He grit his teeth and brushed her forehead softly again, his hands shaking now, “A few hours, that’s all you get alright, Storm?” he murmured. Her heartbeat monitor responded with another beep and Angel removed his hand from her forehead, his eyes hardening as he balled them into tight fists, and moved to get up from his seat .

“And after I bury Akash and his allies,” he continued softly, “I’ll come back for you.” He took a breath, “That is if, Kyle doesn’t replace you already.”

His eyes strayed to her, not a hair out of place, not a flicker of movement and despite his mind begging to shut down at the thoughts, he clawed his way through,

“That fucking asshole.” He breathed, “He doesn’t know our introduction was unique.”

She didn’t say a thing.

“Don’t make me deal with another mediator Storm, it’s going to be such a hassle.”

Wake up already.

Angel sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his eyes darting up to the clock in her room. The clock struck noon and he let out a soft breath, the thought of Ray waking the hell up giving him enough hope to last for the next few hours.

“Twelve hours.” He murmured, “Twelve hours is all you get before I leave this godforsaken island, Ray.” His lips tipped with a soft smile, “Whether you’re awake when I take you or not, is upto you.”

He took a step back, and slowly let go of her hand reluctantly before tucking them back in the pockets of his trousers roughly.

“Don’t let me down, Storm.”

* *

His walk out was devoid of any sound.

Any people.

The people guarding Ray’s door jerked at his presence but didn’t stop to stare. Wouldn’t when Angel turned his back to all of them and started walking towards the lobby of the hospital .

And as far as he knew, there was nothing in this entire world that could stop him from hunting Akash Smith down. He’d taken away his business, had disgraced him.

Had hurt Ray.

Click, clack came the sound of heels, loud enough for him to snap his head up in

surprise.

Christina Morris ran in his direction, still clutching at the hem of her ruined gown as she ran expertly in his direction. He took a few steps forward before she reached him and placed a hand on his shoulder,

“Mia—” she started before her eyes cut to the lobby behind him and she paused abruptly. His brow arched as Christina took a step back and looked up at him seriously, “How is she?” she asked, not a catch in her voice.

Angel shook his head and shrugged, turning away from her, “She’s in a coma.” He replied tightly, “Nothing’s changed.”

Christina’s hazel eyes flared, “ Everything has changed. The chances of surviving a medically induced coma are far higher than a natural one. She’s fine.”

“What about Mia?” Angel deflected, unable to return her conviction despite the spirits with which he’d left Ray’s room. Christina barely blinked at his question and laced her hands together before responding,

“She did it. The vial worked.”

Angel’s eyes flared, a hot rage curling through him. Her shoulders straightened as he took a step forward and forced himself to breathe past his excitement, “Get everyone together. I don’t give a shit about what Kyle has to say. We better be on a flight out tonight.”

Twelve hours .

Christina nodded again and nudged her chin in the direction of the exit of the hallway, “We should get back to the house to get everything.”

And everyone, she didn't add.

Angel looked past her shoulder and back at her again, "Send Mia and Jack with me," he said, lowering his voice from any prying eyes,

"You and Luke can handle Kyle. They'll have to stay here for Ray. And if not Kyle, Vera would be here."

"Don't," he said and implored her to understand the gravity of his words, "Let Kyle get a whiff of this."

This is mine.

Christina inclined her head in understanding, an equal amount of rage shining in her stance as she stepped back, "Miranda and Martin," she said before walking away and Angel nodded in response, his fingers balling into tight fists at her words,

"Don't worry about it." He responded calmly and turned to move out the doors before she could continue speaking. He heard the click-clack of her heels echo away, and let loose an exhale. His blood was thrumming with anticipation at the thought of facing Akash again. It wasn't going to be easy, and was probably going to end in more bloodshed, but at this point...

He couldn't bring himself to care.

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Convincing his stepmother to get off this wretched island required a lot more than soft pleas and words. No, it required all three of them begging with their hands laced to get her out of here.

“Ma please,” Mia Andrews cried for what seemed like the fifth time. And if Miranda Andrews didn’t budge this time, he was going to lose his shit. He loved his stepmother, but even this seemed like hell now,

“Look,” Miranda said, standing firm with her hands crossed, “As long as Martin stays on this island. I stay with him.”

Angel finally let loose an exhausted sigh and just turned away when Miranda’s head snapped in his direction, her eyes softening at the white bandage that was wrapped around his hand, “You can’t just whisk me off at any sign of trouble. I’m a part—”

“Miranda.”

Martin De Santos’s voice was like bricks rubbing together, raw with ages of butchered hatred. Angel almost flinched in surprise but caught himself in time as his father strode in. He was wearing a clean-cut suit, impersonating a powerful man as he walked past Angel and placed his hands on his wife’s shoulders,

“Let’s get out of here.” He said in a gentle voice. In a voice, he’d never heard him use. Angel fought the rush of rage that rose up his spine when Miranda weakened at his words,

“But—” she started when Martin cut her off just as softly,

“We have business to attend to. I need you with me. ”

While his stepsister mimed gagging beside him, Angel took a step back, away from the man he hadn't been able to recognize for a while now.

Martin was like a shadow in his life, more so ever since he'd taken over every single aspect of the business, of the gang.

It was tedious for a fifteen-year-old back then, but he'd proven himself well.

And had earned to do as he wished in the future.

That didn't include watching his father turn into a man he was not.

So he turned on his heels, making sure to keep his face blank as he made to walk out the open doors of Miranda's room when Martin's voice thundered behind him,

“I would change, Angel,”

It had been, what? At least five years since he'd heard his name from his father's tongue. Somehow he wasn't even fucking surprised anymore. Angel couldn't help the light chuckle at his words though, and he turned over her shoulder, sparing him the bare minimum,

“I was busy surviving a bomb,” he said just as easily and smiled at the gleam in his father's eyes, “And while you spared your suit from getting ruined, I've been busy making up for your mess.”

Martin's nostrils flared in annoyance, and he took a dangerous step forward, but Angel shook his head,

“It was you who lost Akash Smith last night.” He said and turned away from him again, not deigning him enough attention, “ Your people who couldn’t grab one guy, and I mean...” he laughed, “I’m used to it. But isn’t it time you started, oh I don’t know,” he looked at his best friend and snapped his fingers, “What’s the word I’m looking for? ”

Jack Davis made a show of thinking deeply, his blonde hair swaying as he tipped his chin in thought, “Improving?”

Angel smiled, “That’s it!” he said with fake cheer and didn’t have to turn to see the rage pour off Martin in waves, “ Improving.”

He left it at that, a carrot dangling for the fucking ass to bite onto as he stepped out of the room. Jack was behind him in an instant, making his alliance crystal clear as he left without a word of goodbye.

There had been a time when Martin had become too involved in his business and had tried to sway his inner group. Luke Hawthorne had laughed in his face, while Christina and Jack had blatantly ignored his embarrassing words. It had left Angel smug sure but had initiated an odd sense of confidence in his people. His friends.

“God, he’s still an asshole,” Jack Davis spat from beside him and Angel shrugged in response, the smile falling off his face as they moved across the empty hallway, “Why do people like him?”

Angel scoffed, hell if he knew. Jack wasn’t talking about people who belonged to their world. No, he was talking about the outsiders, the people who had no idea what went outside the facade the Santos had maintained over generations. And everyone Martin met, and talked to, came out of the conversation looking absolutely mesmerized with him.

Pity that the people who mattered knew he was a spineless coward.

“He shows them what they want to see.” Angel responded briskly and paused before his door. Soon, he’d be out of here. Soon, he would be on a plane away from the ruined island and wouldn’t have to deal with the Larsens for a while. The thought comforted him as he twisted the knob of his door and pushed it open.

The room was cold despite the closed windows when he stepped in .

Deserted and looking awfully dreary. Jack stepped past him and threw the curtains open. They moved with a clacking sound, one that made Angel cringe as Jack let out a satisfied hum and turned on his heels.

The sun was setting behind him, its orange hues already submerged within in the dark waters that washed upon the shore. It was evening already, had taken them longer than he’d expected to get here and talk to Miranda.

“We leave in five hours.” Jack said, and Angel looked back at him.

He was still dressed in that suit of his, looking anything but exhausted as he heaved a breath, “Get what you need, and I’ll come get you when we need to leave. Maybe get some sleep till then as well.”

Angel nodded in response and crossed his arms, “What are you going to do?” he asked, feeling a bit guilty that he hadn’t asked how they all were feeling. Jack’s eyes settled on his, a knowing smile crossing his lips as he scratched the back of his neck,

“The bomb wasn’t as close to us as it was for you,” he started, answering a question Angel hadn’t had the heart to ask, “But it took its toll. I was still further away than the others. Luke and Christina were a few feet away from it and got thrown back so hard that they—” he inhaled a sharp breath, “Tina couldn’t hear anything for a good five

minutes when I reached her.”

Angel shook violently at the images his mind conjured up. He saw the raw pain, fear cross Jack’s sudden solemn eyes as he looked away from Angel to gaze out the window. It had always been him and Christina. Always. Between the two of them, there was no place for anyone else. Angel didn’t know the details of their relationship but knew enough to know that Jack cared for her more than he did his own life.

And the same feeling was reciprocated .

“Mia was closer to it than any of us. She was coming to check on you after she got Martin,” Jack spat out his name venomously. Angel’s jaw ticked. He’d felt a bit betrayed too when she’d gotten Martin on the ground with his people, but knew it was the right thing to do in the end.

“She suffered a concussion, and glass shards had almost penetrated her arms by the end of it, but she made it out.” He continued, lacking the sense of raw pain he had when he was talking about Christina. Angel’s eyes softened in understanding.

Because it had been hard.

Had been... difficult for all of them to accept Mia when she’d come in the first time.

Hell, Angel didn’t know if he could trust her. But then she’d taken a bullet for him, and that was that. She’d become a part of their family. He knew Jack was still tentative considering her, and knew Luke wasn’t a big fan either. But that’s where Christina had come in and placed all her trust in her. Had managed to convince all of them to give her a chance. That somehow allowed him to let go of any prejudice he’d held in his heart about her.

Because it wasn’t her fault.

Just as it wasn't his.

"I'm sorry." Angel's voice came out raw, his mind still reeling from the injuries they'd sustained. And how he wasn't there.

"'Bout what?" Jack laughed and stepped ahead, the mist in his eyes clearing as he placed a hand on Angel's shoulder, "We're all alright. You have nothing to worry about here."

Angel opened his mouth to respond but Jack simply held up a firm hand, not listening to another word, "I'm out of here. Get some sleep and I'll see you in a bit. "

He heeded Jack's words as he stepped out of his room and closed the door behind him. The first thing Angel did was step into the bathroom and take a hot shower. Time went quicker after that. Maybe it was because he was exhausted by the time he got out and lay on the bed long enough to pass out. Or because the coolness of the room was refreshing in a way.

Or because his mind couldn't keep up with the day's events anymore.

* *

"Keep your father happy."

Her voice. So soft. So, loving. Enough for him to nod, for him to breathe his acceptance.

The sky was dark when his eyes finally fluttered open.

Angel never did have nightmares about his mother's death. He didn't know if it was a blessing or curse, but when he did see her in his dreams, she only repeated those same

words over and over again. Reminding him, directing him as she always had.

Because what had been her path, was now his.

The glass shard of his necklace that was now digging into the flesh of his cheek was a painful reminder of that fact.

Angel stirred him awake. He was laying on his stomach with his hands stretched upwards when he blinked his eyes open by a centimeter. He groaned softly, not moving an inch and desperately enjoying the moment of silence his mind had granted him. Despite the memories of his mother fresh in his mind and the red glass pressing into his skin, Angel hadn't felt this relaxed in a while. Not since he'd spent that one night looking after Ray. The thought jarred him awake, but his eyes remained blissfully shut. He remembered that night, it was just a few days ago, but thinking back on it now. It was like a series of images replaying in his mind .

“Hands up Ray.” He had said, making sure to keep his tone gentle as she had swayed and groaned softly. Gods, he'd loved that sound. Angel had laughed silently, but had kept her upright with a hand braced on her shoulder , “Come on Storm. I'm just putting this sweater on you.”

And for the first time, she'd listened to him. Had laced her hands around his neck when he had picked her up and placed her carefully on the bed. Had whispered inaudible words that he hadn't understood when he'd stood back up. And looking down at her then, a part of him had melted, and he'd placed a shaking hand on her forehead, removing those blue-black locks from her hair.

“Go to sleep, Storm.” And had continued almost hastily. Almost as if he were saving himself from himself. From her, “You're allowed to be like this only for tonight. Then you're going to go back to hating me.”

“You have to.”

Angel breathed out now, forcing himself to step out of his thoughts as they twisted in his mind. As the image of her asleep on the bed was replaced by the image of her on the hospital bed. With her skin deathly pale and the only sign of life coming from that wretched beeping of the heart monitor.

The wind howled desperately through the open windows, snapping Angel out of his reverie. Angel blinked his eyes open and stretched on his comforter, trying to blink the laziness from his eyes—

Open windows?

Angel stilled in his place. Someone was here.

He knew with enough experience that if someone was here, that if anyone was looking at assassinating him, they'd do it the moment he moved. So, Angel remained rooted to his spot, with his eyes fluttering shut .

He relaxed, focused on keeping his breathing in check as he sorted through the sounds echoing in his room.

Wind whistling. The curtains hissing.

The bed rustling softly under him.

The quiet, but noticeable sound of footsteps muffled by the carpet in his room.

That's it. Angel bid his time. Waiting for the steps to near him slowly. Oh, so softly, and just when he was sure the person was standing right over his body, Angel moved.

The movement was smooth, was practiced when Angel twisted on his bed and got up with a hand held up to defend himself and grabbed the wrist of the opposite person. He heard the soft hiss that escaped their lips before he rushed ahead without making a single sound. There was a knife twisted in his free hand when he pushed until the person's back was touching the cold wall of his room. He caged the shorter, smaller body with his own, and twisted their wrists right above their head, making sure to keep his hold tight enough to hurt as he poised the metal edge of his knife right above their throbbing pulse.

Because god, he didn't take well for killing someone in their sleep.

"Tick tock," Angel clicked his tongue dangerously and slammed the wrists against the wall again. The figure let lose another surprised breath as he whispered, "There goes the clock. Are you going to tell me who you are?"

He didn't bother pushing the body further, not when they'd moved in such ease. He still towered over the figure though, and couldn't get rid of the terrible feeling climbing up his spine when he drawled slowly, running the tip of his knife against the cheek of the slumped figure before him,

"Tick fucking tock," he echoed, "You're going to die— "

"I've always hated ultimatums."

Angel froze.

His entire body stilled, his blood running cold all over as the figure angled her face upwards and he saw it. Heard it. Felt it.

"Why is it that you end up giving me one every single time anyway?"

And that was when he realized that the terrible feeling climbing up his spine wasn't dread. Wasn't fear or rage.

Was hope.

His heart stalled.

His mind shuttered.

Because that was her voice. Those were her words. That fruit was her scent. And now, she was standing before him as though she hadn't been announced dead to the world. He dropped her hands abruptly, the knife following in tow.

A strangled sound left his throat when moonlight poured through the open windows of the room. He couldn't take it, this rush of anger, of relief, of –

“Twelve hours, right?” she said.

“Ray,” His voice came out hoarse. Too hoarse. Too quiet. And she shook before him, so close, yet too far away to believe that she was fucking real. Angel stepped back, despite himself, and she let loose a breath before.

Raylene Walker moved as well, her waves of blue-black hair swaying behind her as she stepped away from him to stand in the moonlight, leaning against the side of his large window.

And he saw her. Her face not pale. Her hands not cold. Her eyes not shut. Ray opened her mouth and closed it again, not saying or doing anything and he just stared .

Couldn't do anything else.

But it was enough for her to shake before him. Once, just once. That same shiver passed through him, his entire body shuddered, hoping that this wasn't a dream. Ray took a step forward, obviously breathing. Obviously alive.

“Wow,” she started, her hands on her hips as she tilted her head in his direction, blue black hair swaying

“The last time someone looked at me like that...” she paused and laughed shortly and his heart just, well, died, “Let's just say that was a good weekend.”

Angel took a moment to register the words.

To register her.

What the fuck did she just say?

“No, please continue,” Ray teased, a full-blown grin on her face now as he scoffed at her, “You're doing so well.”

“ So well? ” Angel snapped, taken aback by the obvious humor in her words, “You were in a fucking coma, how would you like for me to react?”

“In my opinion—”

“Oh. My. God.”

Ray cackled again, “This is great.”

“I'm not liking you very much now.”

Thud, thud.

“Angel!”

Ray’s head snapped in the direction of his door as he froze at Jack’s voice, “Come on, we need to leave!”

Angel was about to respond when a second voice joined him,

“Leaving? That’s not happening,” came Kyle’s snappy, muffled response and Angel was going to do something when Ray cursed softly before

him, drawing his attention.

Too fast, everything was happening too fast.

“What’s going on?”

Verana?

“What the fuck?” Angel heard Jack yell, “Why are you both here? How are you here?”

“Shit.” Angel’s head volleyed back at her soft murmur as she crossed the room and paced before him, gnawing on her lip. His brows furrowed,

“What?” Angel started when Jack’s groan filled the hallway out the door,

“Whatever. I’ll wait for you downstairs!” he called out, “You can deal with them yourself,”

“Excuse me,”

“Fuucck—”

Angel couldn't really keep track of it all anymore. Not when Kyle suddenly unlocked his room and threw the doors open,

“Something's wrong,” he was saying when he stormed in, “Our people are suddenly disappearing out of now—”

And not when he froze.

Angel didn't know what he was expecting when Kyle spotted Ray in his room. But it wasn't him dropping his phone on the ground and his eyes widening in surprise. Wasn't expecting that surprise only flared like fire behind his cracked glasses.

“Ray?”

Ray's answer was a soft movement. One that had Angel baffled for a second when she angled herself to stand in between him and Kyle, something dangerous on her face .

A sudden silence descended upon them as Angel tried to sort through Kyle's previous words.

People are suddenly disappearing?

“Aren't you supposed to be in a coma?” Kyle managed to wheeze out as Ray shifted her leg back in a defensive position, angling her body so it covered his . The boy shook before them, his eyes darting between Angel and Ray, and going dark at their proximity. At this entire situation, “Why in hell would you—”

A gasp.

“Oh, you bitch,”

Well, that took a turn.

Angel whirled on him, surprised and annoyed as Kyle advanced on Ray, “It’s been you all along hasn’t it? It’s no wonder David Pierce has gone M.I.A and–”

“Oh, do shut up,” Ray drawled, and Kyle reared back as if he were struck, “I really hate it when you use your brain in useless situations.”

Tak, tak, tak.

“It was you.” Kyle snapped, so furious that Angel could see the vein popping in his skull, “It’s always been you.”

Angel’s brows furrowed, a ball of dread gnawing his gut as he took a cautious step forward. Ray was silent in between them, her shoulder pushed back as she faced Kyle’s wrath. Angel couldn’t make sense of it but had connected it to the disappearing people. To the fake coma?

Angel looked back and was startled out of his reverie when he saw Kyle move ahead, his hand going behind his back to whip out a gun. Angel jerked forward and haphazardly grabbed a hold of Ray’s wrist and hauled her back against his chest .

“I’m taking you and your entire fucking image down.” Kyle was rambling as Ray remained quiet and still against him. Angel grit his teeth and extended an unwavering hand,

“Calm the fuck down,” he snarled over her shoulder, “You’re shooting a defenseless person– god fucking damn it Ray ,” he snapped as Ray removed a pistol from the waistband of her jeans and pointed it in Kyle’s direction. The other boy barked a

laugh but strode forward, his hands not shaking once as he snarled,

“ Your name is Raylene Walker, isn’t it? Or was that also a fucking lie –”

Tak, tak, tak.

He didn’t see her. He only heard the familiar click and light panting before his reality fractured.

Bang!

Angel flinched back, pulling Ray with him.

He saw Kyle jerk forward, his entire body arching as the bullet made home right in his back. With a gasp on his tongue, Kyle coughed and braced a shaking hand on his abdomen. His green eyes shot up to his and Angel breathed out harshly. Disturbed and so terribly afraid when the Larsen fell on his knees and hands. And as he fell, Angel’s eyes rose to find a familiar figure standing in the doorway.

He couldn’t help a surprised sound as Kyle let out a string of gurgling sounds before falling face flat on the floor. The dark, short hair swayed up ahead as those striking dark eyes blinked, just once. He saw Ray jump away from him, surprised to see Verana Smith breathing heavily as she stepped through the doorway with her gun smoking from its end.

That’s it. This was it. He was going to lose his fucking mind .

“Fuck ‘em, right?” Verana panted and Ray looked at her like she was insane. Verana only sighed at her reaction, “I’m on your side. Can you believe it now ?”

She pointed at Kyle’s unconscious body.

Ray rubbed her brows together and Angel didn't really know what to do. He wanted to scoff, wanted to say he was going to rip out Akash's throat when all the pieces of the puzzle knit together. And holy shit.

"What did he mean by, it's you?" Angel asked and watched her shoulders bunch up. Her head turned over her shoulder as Verana whistled and stepped over Kyle's slumped, bleeding body,

"I can't believe you ruined your plans because of him."

Ray's head snapped in Vera's direction, and he saw the ice in them. Saw Vera take a step back as she laughed out loud, "Calm down. I'm just guessing you were out to get the Santos as well.

What?

"You need to leave."

Ray's words were aimed at him. Were firm when she turned to face him. His eyes darted around her face, trying and failing to catch a glimpse of something he knew. But this was all too new. Too unexpected.

The ground seemed to sway beneath him as Ray shook her head at whatever she saw on his face,

"Go Angel," Ray said in a low voice, and his eyes flared, "I'll find you."

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Angel snapped ahead and grabbed a hold of her hand, keeping his hold light enough for her to move away even as he hauled her closer. Ray moved without a complaint,

her face sealed off any emotions .

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“ Leave.”

She snapped instead, and Angel flinched back, his eyes not leaving hers once. She seemed to shake violently before him, back to the same, dangerous girl he’d seen the night he’d talked to for the first time,

“Get on your jet, and don’t change your location. Take everyone. ”

Angel’s brows furrowed in confusion, his breath coming out harshly as she continued, noting his losing temper, “I’ll know where to find you. And I will, I swear to you.”

That’s where you’ll get your answers, she seemed to implore through her wide gaze, that’s where we’ll be able to talk.

“I promise.”

And he knew he didn’t really have an option anymore.

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His eyes opened just barely. A wave of agonizing pain washed over him before he could understand where he was. Kyle Larsen squinted in the dark and let out a muted groan. The wind hustled in with a loud howl, and he turned his head, wanting to feel it brush his skin.

His eyes were only barely open when he saw the curtains flutter. His vision blurred for a second. And suddenly, it was clear.

Because there, sitting on the windowsill with a gun in her hands, sat Raylene Walker.

Kyle screamed, but it was muffled by the oxygen mask on his face. Shit, shit, shit, he couldn't help but swear as his fingers twitched uselessly. Here, he was a prey. He was a dead man. Because Raylene was looking at him with murder in her eyes.

"Shh," she whispered, and a tear seeped out of the corner of his eyes, "Quiet Kyle. Let's not ruin this."

It was the first time he'd ever regretted waking up.

* *

Her phone vibrated in the pocket of her jeans for the fifth time in the past fucking hour. Ray silenced it and adjusted the sunglasses on her head before stepping out of the bustling airport. The sun shone down on her face, all warm. So different, so much better than that cold, cursed island. And with half of her deeds completed, there was some time she could spend in peace—

Ring !

Ray growled out loud this time, scaring the people who were walking beside her as she suddenly dropped her hands to her sides. She didn't care, just fished her phone out of her pocket and answered the call aggressively,

“Yes,” she began before the person on the other end could speak, “He’s alive. Yes, I interrogated him and found no problems. No, I didn’t fucking leave him, he’s on a flight here right about now. And for the last time Sorin, he’s ALIVE!”

She panted as she finished her rant and looked up to find the crowd of people steering clear of her, their glances half terrified. Ray sighed as Sorin Ardelean cleared his throat from the other end,

“Thanks for that.” He said, “But that’s now what I– oh shit,” the voice cut off abruptly and Ray’s brows furrowed as a series of muffled yells echoed from her phone, “...Ray? Ray, you there?”

“Yes–”

“Get the hell here now.” Sorin snarled and grunted, “Your boyfriend’s here and he’s about to kill Akash.”

God damn it.

Ray huffed but hung up immediately, rushing ahead to find a taxi. Her brunette wig swayed roughly against her shoulders as she extended a hand to call for the first taxi she saw. She was dead to the world, to everyone except the very handful of people who knew. That was why when a taxi finally screeched to a stop before her, she increased the pitch of her voice and made it unrecognizable.

“Hi,” she said and the man who lowered the window visibly flinched at the voice. She didn’t blame him. She did too. Ray attempted a small smile and lowered her sunglasses to reveal a pair of blue contacts. She was wearing a white crop top that hugged her body sleekly over beige, baggy denims .

It was the perfect outfit for the summer of the city, especially when she wanted to pose as a rich city girl. The man seemed to notice as she recited her address and saw him nod his head vigorously. Ray let out a breath of relief and pulled the door open.

The car ride to her place was meant to be silent. Was meant to pass by in a moment’s breeze with her worrying about Angel not killing Akash before she got there. But then she’d sighed deeply, and the older man had looked at her from the rearview mirror in slight concern,

“You alright Miss?” he asked, a hint of accent hidden in his words as he brushed a lock of grey hair off his forehead and placed his hand back on the steering wheel. His deep voice was enough to jar her out of her thoughts enough for her to go erect and stare straight ahead,

“Yes,” she replied in a smooth voice, schooling her emotions back into nonchalance, “Why do you ask?”

She hadn’t expected the man to bark out an amused laugh at her words. But he did, and her brows scrunched nonetheless, “Is something funny?” she asked, forcing the bite out of her voice. The man shook his head, his shoulders shaking as he drove,

“Miss, I have a daughter your age. Even she can’t change her expressions as quick as you did,” he said in a loving voice, his eyes straying to a picture hanging up ahead. Ray’s gaze softened as she eased back in her seat,

“I’m afraid I have a bit of practice.”

“Ah,” the man said, a bit solemnly for her taste, “That’s not good. You must not let anything cut you off from this world.”

“And if this world isn’t good enough to be in?”

The man’s eyes widened, and he rubbed his beard in thought, “Well, that’s a big question for a young lady,” he said ,

“I think my wife would have a good answer for it.” Ray saw him look at the photo again and took a closer look. There were two women in the picture, one slightly older with darker skin. One that mirrored her daughters. Their smiles were wide and happy. Were the exact same. Ray couldn’t help her own quirk of lips.

God, she missed her mom.

“She would’ve said something like how this world can’t really survive without good.” He continued and Ray looked at him with a small smile, “The balance thing you know.”

“And what would you say?”

The man hummed again, “I’ve been in this world for what forty years now– don’t look at me like that! I’m not that old.” He said in mock offense, but Ray kept her brow arched, not believing him for a second.

The man sighed and amended, “Fine. Fifty years now.”

Ray laughed then, a small sound that ran with the wind. When she looked back up, she saw the man’s small eyes crinkled at the edges, and a small grin lifted his lips,

“And I would say, if you can still laugh despite everything,” he said in a gentle tone

that settled deep within Ray's heart, "Then the world's doing a fine a job after all."

Ray laughed again and was about to respond when he pulled into the familiar neighborhood and stopped before a house, she hadn't been able to visit in years. He must've seen the longing and despair in her eyes, because just as he parked the vehicle in front of the large building, he turned over his shoulder and shot her a knowing smile,

"Make room for the world that understands you, Miss," he said, and Ray turned to look back at him, unable to hide the sheen in her gaze as h e

nodded his head and tipped an invisible hat, "The ones who don't aren't worth it."

She grinned softly at that and returned his gesture before reaching into her bag to remove her wallet, "How much?" she asked, maintaining her fake pitch after all. She'd almost lost it before but had managed to disguise it as a lower tone. She removed the two bills when he clicked his tongue and crossed his arms,

"You can do better than that Miss," he said, and Ray scoffed before looking up to find his eyes twinkling with mischief, "I did provide therapy as well."

Ray shook her head but pulled out two more bills and handed them to him firmly, keeping her facade up as she removed the sunglass off her head and placed it in the bag, "Thank you, sir," she teased and laughed as he dipped his chin.

"Your name?" she asked, and the man grinned as if no one had asked him the question before,

"Zahir miss." He said and Ray nodded, "And yours?"

Ray subdued a grin as she opened the doors to the taxi and stepped out, "You're

better off not knowing my name Mr. Zahir.” She said faintly and closed the door. She didn’t see the man tip his head but did hear his faint laughter as he reversed the taxi and disappeared onto the street once again. Ray breathed out. Waited for two seconds.

Three. Four.

And started walking to her right. The building she actually had to go into was the one they’d passed already. She knew she was being paranoid, but couldn’t risk it. Not when everyone was assembled here . Not when this was their sanctuary. She wasn’t going to put any of them at risk .

When she finally walked into the large building, her shoes barely hissed as she walked carefully on the marble floor. Her gaze strayed to the guard standing erect on one end, and a wave of nostalgia washed over her. She fought to keep the grin off her face when she saw the woman rush forward to stop her. Ray only hid a grin and said in a low voice without looking up,

“There’s an afterlife too you know, Ciera.”

The woman stilled, her hand stopping midair. Ciera Wilson, their guard for ages now, was quick to school her expressions back to nonchalance but couldn’t hide the relieved gleam in her eyes. Good enough, Ray thought but didn’t stop to talk, just strode ahead with a hand in the air until she reached the elevator and stepped in.

Ray only let her smile drop when the doors shut and pressed the top floor button. She let out a breath and removed the lens holder from her bag before sliding the blue contacts out from her eyes and placing them in the container.

The building dinged just as she placed her sunglasses back on her eyes and watched the doors whoosh open. Ray breathed out, unable to conceal her excitement at the

thought of being back here again. At the thought of winning.

Just like everything though, the thought was short-lived.

“...you ass – ”

Ray jumped at the muffled voice that echoed through the corridor and blinked as a series of thuds and crashes followed the words. Her expression dropped to disdain, her hold on her purse tightening as she all but ran in the direction of the door of the penthouse.

The key was in her hand when she reached the door and was about to open it when a thud slammed against the door .

Ray jumped, a shiver raking down her spine before she stuck the key in the lock and sent one last prayer up to the universe,

“God give me strength.” She managed to whisper before pulling the door open.

And gasped as she took the mess inside.

“Man, let him go!” a familiar voice screeched just as Ray groaned and ran inside, making sure to close the door. She ripped her wig off as she jumped over the glass shards on the floor and the broken couch in the living room.

“ You tell me where she is – ”

“Oh my fucking God...she’s coming you dickhead – ”

Ray was breathing harshly when she ran towards the room on the far end of the house and screeched to a halt when—

Oh fuck.

Ray stilled. A gasp stuck in her throat when she saw Angel De Santos's hands on Akash Smith's neck as he shoved him against the wall, looking absolutely murderous . And despite all the others being in the room, despite her friends, his friends, failing to stop him, she couldn't look away.

Him. And only ever fucking him.

When had it all gone so wrong?

His arm, his injured arm shook, and it all came rushing back. Him jumping in the way. The bullet. The war. The coma. His words. A hot bolt of rage shot through her chest.

Akash's face was turning blue when his eyes finally snapped to hers and widened.

"There," he managed to wheeze out before Ray's thread of patience just... snapped .

"HEY!"

Angel let go of Akash so fast that the other boy fell on the floor loudly and began coughing immediately. Ray was breathing harshly when she saw Christina's head whip in her direction and heard Luke's gasp.

"So it's true..." She heard Mia murmur but didn't really give a shit.

Her eyes shot to Akash, who was scrambling on the wall to get up as Myra went to his side and pulled him up. She glanced back at Angel, making sure to keep her glare intact when he turned.

Almost weakened when she saw his amber eyes flare in relief. When the locks of his dark hair swayed with the wind. When she saw the bruise on his cheek.

Her eyes narrowed, “What the fuck are you doing?” she snapped and saw Angel arch a brow, completely unfazed as he faced her and tugged at the cuff of his sleeves,

“Trying to get some information around here,” he replied just as venomously.

“By wreaking havoc in my house?”

“My house actually.” Akash rasped silently but shut up when Ray shot him a deadly glare. Her ruffled hair slipped over her shoulder as she took a step forward.

“Well, you weren’t here. So, I thought I’d get acquainted.” He continued icily, “You did fake being in a coma. Who knows what else you’re hiding?”

A hell of a lot.

“Out.” She snapped without breaking her gaze from Angel’s. And when none of them moved, her voice dropped an octave,

“Everyone fucking out. ”

One by one, following Akash and Sorin, the girls filed out of the room behind her. The only ones left were Angel and his people. His group. They didn’t move an inch. Her brow arched, her heart wild in her chest.

“How do you want to do this, Raven?”

Angel’s dark eyes flashed. But his lips parted with a low,

“Go.”

And the others filed out with scathing glares in her direction. Raylene didn't give a shit. All she cared about right now was that look in Angel's eyes. The way he was pulling back the sleeves of his shirt as if he was preparing for war.

Good. She'd been preparing for the same since the night of the massacre.

Since his confession.

Angel De Santos was slow death. Was absolute torture when he took a step forward and started first in a dark, dark voice.

“You lied to me.”

Raylene Walker didn't flinch.

“How long?” he asked when she didn't reply. His expression was thunderous, all dark hair and lethal eyes when he stepped forward, “How long have you been lying? Why have you been lying?”

“People see what they want to.” Ray said finally, tipping her chin to face him, “People believe what they want to. It's not my fault no one stopped to question me.” But she didn't care about this . Didn't want to explain this.

All she wanted was to clear that image of him jumping in her way that day.

All she wanted was...clarity.

Was him close and utterly gone. Away from her .

“You—” Angel started but Raylene was done. She wanted answers. And for the first time in months, she let herself show that rage she’d hidden.

“You hate me.” She sneered, dangerous enough to stop him in his tracks, “You said so yourself. You despise my presence. Then why,” she took a step forward, jabbed her fist against his hammering heart,

“ Why did you jump in the way?”

Why did you take a fucking bullet?

Her eyes snapped up. And watched as his face transformed to absolute outrage. Absolute agony and anger,

“ Why did I jump in the way?” his voice rose, shaking now. His chest moved, all ragged and done, when he took a step forward,

“You, were going to get yourself killed.”

“And?”

“And?” he barked back, his quiet rage fracturing, “What did you want me to do? Watch?”

“Yes!” she yelled back, “You interfered. You—” got fucking hurt, “You ruined my plans. Destroyed everything!”

Destroyed my heart.

“Ask me if I care!”

Angel was far closer than he'd been before, his amber eyes flaring dangerously as he got right into her face. He was sizing her up, but she returned the gesture with equal brute force. Even forced herself to stop her hands from shaking as she rubbed her brows harshly.

Angel saw the movement and moved ahead to grab her wrist and haul her hand away from her face. Ray glared up at him, her fingers balling into fists.

"No," he said, shaking his head, " Ask me why, Raylene. "

Ray's shoulders shook, her heart pounding harshly in her chest when she looked up at him, shaking and shivering with the hot fire running through her veins,

"You've always wanted me dead ." Ray managed to snarl back, unable to get the image of him down beside her out of her mind. Unable to stop hearing that bang over and over again, "You've always wanted me gone—"

"As have you." He snapped back, "Ray." He said, but she kept her gaze averted, her jaw ticking, " Raylene Walker."

"Look at me."

Ray's eyes snapped to his, a storm surging in her expression when she saw the same mirror on his devastatingly beautiful face.

"And listen to what I say very carefully." The rage, the fury in his words made her still in his hold, "I might despise you. I might hate the way my mind sways when you're near me. I might despise your heart-wrenching smiles and honest-to-hell rage,"

God. Fucking god.

“But if you thought for a single second that I was going to stand and watch you get shot, you need to reassess every single thing I’ve said to you this past week, Raylene Walker.”

He shook. Shuddered. Shattered.

“Because I sure as hell didn’t want you gone.”

Raylene didn’t think. She didn’t want this. She hated this. She just crumbled.

“What about me?” she yelled back, and watched his eyes dart across her face, but she only clutched at her chest, “You think I wanted to see you get shot because of me? You think I wanted you dead?” her voice fractured at the words, the pain from before rushing back .

She took a step back.

And Angel took a step forward.

“There was no way you were getting hurt on my watch.” His snarled, all angry and hers,

“Not then. Not now. Not ever.”

Just once and amidst that rage, that anger they’d forgotten their proximity. They’d forgotten who they’d become to one another. But he hauled her closer, hating their distance just as much she hated it. Despising the way their hearts hammered as if—

As if this was—

“I lost you once, Storm.” Angel breathed, so close that she had to grit her teeth from

letting the tears flood her eyes, “I’ve known you one fucking week, but the thought of not seeing you smiling, you glaring, you hating me again was—”

Death.

It was death.

Ray’s entire body caved towards him, hauled in by his arm, by the angry look in his eyes.

“You hate me?” she whispered.

Angel’s gaze flickered to hers, darting around, imploring, leaving her raw. His eyes were in absolute agony when he glanced up and said,

“What do you think, Storm?”

Her gaze flickered, and she knew he was watching her. Was waiting. Stupid, stupid boy.

Ray didn’t answer his question.

Just inhaled one sharply and wove a hand around his neck and up into the mess of his hair to pull him closer .

Close enough that she could make out his coffee scent. Close enough that she felt him go still.

And she ached to close that distance. Wanted to haul him close.

But Angel’s eyes were depthless darkness when he looked at her and held her with

such force that she broke.

“You do this, I’m never letting you go, Raylene Walker.”

Ray’s voice was a whisper when she stared back and felt his body shudder against hers,

“You keep your promise, and then we’ll see.”

“Fuck you, Raylene Walker.”

Ray blinked.

And Angel, the boy who’d gotten in the way of a bullet for her, who’d handled her drunk ass, who’d made promises without even knowing her, just twisted his hands around her body and haphazardly brought his lips down to hers.

It happened so fast, so quick that she wasn’t sure if there was air in her lungs. If there was enough blood in her heart to keep her alive.

Because Angel De Santos kissed and killed at the same time.

Ray’s response was quick. Was sharp and messy just like him. Her eyes fell shut, her chest rising as his free hand grasped the side of her neck and pulled her closer.

Angel kissed her frantically.

Explosively.

Like he couldn’t get enough.

And she hadn't felt anything like this .

He moved his lips against hers with enough grip, with enough friction that a gasp left her throat, half moan half insane .

Angel breathed out, his chest rumbling with a faint sound of satisfaction as she raised her free hand and wrapped it behind his neck to pull him closer. Deeper.

And Angel, he moved them backward until her back touched the wall of the closed room. Didn't stop kissing her.

This. This was what she'd been afraid of. What she'd been thinking of doing for days now.

And it was going to completely cause havoc on her plans, but as Angel moved closer. As he deepened the kiss and raised his hand to the back of her head to grasp strands of her hair and pull her closer, she couldn't really care. Couldn't breathe. Didn't want to. And this was so stupid. It was so beautifully stupid.

But maybe she wanted stupid.

"Fuck you , Raylene Walker, " he rasped when he pulled away by a millimeter. Ray groaned when he ran his hand through the mess of her hair, "For making a mess of me."

He bit her lips and let go, stinging and easing at the same time.

"For destroying me with one glance."

Her back arched but Angel only sucked all her air out of her by sealing their lips and letting go.

“For becoming a drug I’d never quit.”

Ray barely had time to gasp for air but didn’t care when he laced his hand around her waist and pulled her flush against him.

This time when he pulled away, that anger hadn’t dulled. It hadn’t disappeared. It had simply morphed into something far more dangerous. Something more foreign and familiar at the same time.

It terrified her .

But that wasn’t going to stop him from getting him to keep his promise.

“I’m not going to stop.”

“Angel–” she began but he...

He did something completely different.

The world seemed to blur around her as he let go of her hand and the back of her head to wrap a careful but shaking hand around her neck, her cheek, her face to pull her closer.

A soft sound left her throat, but Angel’s eyes were darting all across her face, as if busy looking and memorizing every inch of her face. As if searching for any remnants of any injuries.

“Angel,” she tried again but he didn’t hear it.

No, he just hauled her into a tight embrace. Her hands froze against his chest, a gasp leaving her when she felt him shake. He burrowed his face in the crook of her neck,

and she couldn't breathe, couldn't think as she shook in his arms.

No one had done this. No one had gathered her in their arms like this.

"You're actually alive." He managed to croak out and she couldn't help a soft chuckle. Had to stop herself from crying out loud, "This better not be a fucking dream."

"Nightmare you mean," she said with a wet chuckle, and he closed his eyes, breathing her in.

"Nothing with you in is a nightmare, Storm," he said quietly and felt her shudder in his arms, "It hasn't been for a while."

Those words. Ray took a moment. Enough for him to go to tighten his hold on her and for her hand to suddenly wrap around his neck .

She heard him breathe out in relief as she tucked her face in his chest and rose on the tip of her toes to pull him closer. To breathe him in.

Coffee, cologne, and him. Only ever him.

"It hasn't been for a while, huh?" she said lightly and laughed when his hold on her tightened,

"Don't ruin this, Walker."

"I won't." she replied and laughed again, "But seriously, I was dead for only one night."

"Christ, I despise you." He said but his words were muffled in her shoulder. Ray

grinned into his chest,

“No, you don’t.” she sang.

“No, I don’t.”

And that was that.

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That was not that.

Definitely, painfully not.

Because now she was standing with her hands on her hips and staring at the rest of the people sitting in her living room. The same people who were looking up at her for explanations. Ray scoffed at the look Akash shot her and crossed her arms,

“Get up you ass,” she snapped and saw his eyes roll before he flopped back on the ground, “You’re involved in this too.”

“Whatever,” he muttered, and it was Sorin who decided to speak up in his heed,

“It was you who decided to bring them in.”

Ray scoffed again and was about to respond when she heard Luke Hawthorne clear his throat from across the room, looking exhausted,

“Wait.” He began tiredly and turned to Angel, who was merrily standing in the doorway of the room with his arms crossed, “Wasn’t he the spy?”

“Or the bad guy?” Jack Davis added and rubbed his brows when none of them responded. Ray clicked her tongue but eyed the crowd, the room for what seemed like the first time. The living room of the penthouse was a large place, one that now had a ripped couch and a broken island kitchen. The sun was beginning to set, casting the room with a faint purple hue as Ray looked at the rest of them. Angel was standing to her side, far away as he leaned against the doorway and looked at her discretely .

She didn't really know what to do with him yet.

Akash was lying on the floor, already asleep with dark bruises on his neck, dangerously close to broken glass. Myra Jelani, who was sitting closest to him, clicked her tongue and pulled him away by his ear, her pink highlights spilling over her shoulder. Irene Sinaga who was also sitting cross-legged beside Myra, eyed Akash in disdain with a straight back and tipped chin. Ray hadn't seen them all in a while and had no doubt the others would get here soon but till then—

A groan reverberated through the room, attracting all their attention. Ray turned to see Mia Andrews push herself on the non-broken counter on the opposite end of her torn couch. The red head was eyeing them curiously over the top of Christina's head. Christina Morris was standing right in front of her, with her lower back poised against the same countertop when she shared a glance with Jack. The boy was also standing tall, despite the faint bruises that covered his face. Luke, on the other hand, simply looked exhausted by the entire situation when Irene decided to break their silence,

“You seriously don't recognize him yet?”

Even Akash stirred from his sleep for long enough to extend his hand in her direction and whack her head gently. Irene gasped in surprise and shot him a dirty look before turning to look at Jack,

“Recognize who?” he shot back, and Ray couldn't help a muted groan at their exchange. This wasn't how she wanted this conversation to go.

“Him,” Irene snapped back and pointed at the boy standing beside the main door. Sorin yawned as their eyes whirled on them and leaned back against the wall. His silver necklace swayed with the movement, but his black eyes shot up to them,

“What? ”

Jack blinked and Ray sighed again.

“Let’s just say all of us aren’t enemies.” She began a bit gently and immediately regretted it as Angel barked a laugh from beside her. Her glare shot to him, and he put his hands up in mock surrender, still grinning that shit-eating grin.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, not having heard her statement as he stared at Sorin for long enough to make the latter uncomfortable. Ray tapped her foot against the floor impatiently,

“Seriously?” she asked, “There isn’t anything about him that reminds you of someone?”

God, when was he going to get here?

Mia hummed and placed her hands on Christina’s shoulder to lean forward and peer curiously at Sorin, “His eye color is a tad uncanny,” she began and turned to Luke, “Isn’t it?”

Luke nodded in thought, his brows furrowing as his blue eyes scrutinized Sorin, “There’s something off about him.”

Sorin’s eyes widened, and he turned the pleading look in Ray’s direction, “End this.” He said in a faint voice and Ray groaned, putting her face in her hands. She didn’t respond, just fished her phone out of her pocket and dialed the number. It rang as she pressed it to her ear and looked around to find everyone’s eyes on her.

It rang again. And this time, everyone heard a ringtone muffle in the hallway.

Ray's brow arched, her patience torn to shreds as she waited for him to open the damned doors. But this was him she was talking about. So why would he do anything that wasn't dramatic? Her phone clicked and Ray forced herself to calm down as he chuckled from the other end ,

“Miss me?”

“ Just get in.” She hissed through gritted teeth and hung up.

“Who—”

But the door lock turned, and the handle dropped before the white, large door opened with a loud whoosh. Ray blinked at the dramatic entrance, almost thought she was imagining smoke when—

Wait. That was smoke...

“Oh my god,” she heard Sorin groan from the doorway as the others coughed at the smoke that filled the doorway.

Angel had crossed their distance when the door opened and was standing next to her with his fingers wrapped around her elbow when she heard his voice echo from the door,

“ Miss me?”

The room silenced. Even Angel's hand on her elbow froze, his mouth dropping as Ray pursed her lips in distaste.

“ No,” she heard Christina whisper as the smoke cleared.

The first thing she saw was the glint of his silver rings. Then she saw his dark locks peep through the wisps of smoke and couldn't help a small smile at that atrocious grin on his face. His black eyes glinted with mischief when Angel took a step away from her and let out a sharp breath.

Because how could Noah Hassan be alive?

Ray shook her head again when Luke choked on his saliva and Jack gasped loudly,

“No way,” he was saying when Noah whirled in his direction smoothly,

“ Yes – ”

“Close the door. ”

Myra snapped from the floor before he could continue, and the smoke finally dissipated with the wind. Ray coughed at the smell but still saw Noah glare down at Myra,

“ Hi Noah, it's so nice to see you, Noah,” he said in a fake pitch as he whirled on his feet to shut the doors loudly. Ray flinched at the sound, but Noah continued, “ Thank you for getting fake shot Noah,”

Myra waved a hand in the air and looked back down at Akash's sleeping figure. Noah followed her line of sight and snorted,

“And that asshole,” he remarked, back to his original voice, “Did he have to shoot me thrice? That shit hurts you know?”

Akash grumbled something incoherent in his sleep in response.

Noah rolled his eyes but looked over his shoulder at Sorin, his eyes softening into something familiar. Ray smiled at the expression as Angel let out a choked sound beside her. I guess he figured it out, Ray thought as Sorin took a few steps forward and pulled Noah into a tight embrace.

It took a moment for the rest of them to piece it together.

“You’re telling me,” Angel started from beside her, “That Ardelean was planted by you?” he asked and Ray rolled her eyes. So, he still hadn’t figured it out.

“I knew you were going to frame someone from the Lions to gain their trust, so I planted one of my men.” she said, her eyes bored, “And his name isn’t Ardelean, you moron.”

His brow rose in question, and she sighed, “It’s Hassan. Sorin Hassan.”

“Hassan?!” Jack screeched from across the room and looked at them both. The twins grinned back at him, “Like Hassan—”

“Yes him. Sorin is Noah’s twin,” she said, and Angel looked at her once before looking away. She didn’t know how none of them had figured it out earlier. When you looked at the two together now, standing side by side, their resemblance seemed obvious. They didn’t have the same face structure, because while Sorin’s was round and subtly beautiful, Noah was cut throat and edgy. Their eyes however were the same black that glittered against the purple hues that were now cast on them.

Angel breathed out next to her, attracting her attention. But being this close to him, realizing that what she had done with him...she didn’t know what to do. He must’ve noticed the soft change in her features or her single step away from him because Angel simply rolled his shoulders and slunk closer like a fox.

Ray resisted the urge to shoot him a glare as he deadpanned,

“Shit.”

“Shit is right.”

And things couldn't probably get worse for them, but this was her. This was her house, her plan. Of course, things were going to get worse.

As if on cue the doorbell rang out of nowhere, the loud ring surprising them all. Ray saw all their postures shift and felt Angel lurk even closer as his hand hovered over her elbow as if he would grab her and run. The sudden image of him jumping in the way slipped into the back of her mind long enough to startle her. Ray flinched and she barely saw Angel's concerned glance when Noah turned on his heels and opened the door again.

The relief that blew through her lungs was nothing compared to the sheer joy she felt when Ira ran in through the doors and threw her hands around Ray's shoulders.

Her actions were surprising but not unwanted .

Enough for her to shake once before returning the gesture with enough power. Ira laughed into her shoulder, looking vibrant like she never had before when she pulled back an inch and opened her mouth to say something. But her eyes cut to Ray's side, widening as she caught Angel standing beside her.

Ray arched a brow as Ira jumped away from her and right into Angel's arms. Ray saw Angel's surprise, saw his arms flail around her when his eyes rose to her in question. She crossed her arms and gave him a subtle nod, not knowing if she should be jealous or happy. Angel grinned at her actions though, and simply wrapped both his hands around Ira's head in a brotherly embrace, crushing her to his chest.

“Good to see you kid,” Angel said with that grin and looked up to Ray when he continued, “Guess you have a family now, huh?”

She gritted her teeth and turned away, unable to hide that sheen in her eyes when she saw the rest of them pour in.

“Oh, come on,” Jack groaned when Cameron and a very uninjured Neera Griffin strode through the doors with the little kid at their back.

Ray let him be, for now, noting how he seemed to blend further in the shadows behind Sorin. He must be afraid of her still because his grey eyes seemed to shutter when he saw her, his frizzy hair ruffling as he shifted to stand behind Sorin. Ray let out a sigh and was about to say something when the change in the atmosphere prickled the back of her neck.

Her head snapped back ahead, noticing how everyone was now standing in a huge circle, all looking at her with the same look in their eyes. Luke and Jack had shifted backward on cue, but Ray didn't spare them a glance .

Just looked straight ahead at the people she'd managed to gather. People she'd managed to befriend, to convince. People who'd risked their lives for her.

A sudden wave of nostalgia washed over her. Followed by a rush of holy shit.

“Five years,” Came Neera's soft voice, a tone she hadn't heard in ages. Ray choked back a sob as Akash extended his hands above his head in a stretch and mumbled,

“Six months,”

Myra shuffled forward, her hand hooked through Irene's as she shot Ray a bright grin,

“10 days,”

Irene rolled her eyes, but it was Cameron who signed from beside Neera,

“15 hours,”

And finally, Noah looked down at his watch and squinted,

“20 minutes,”

“And 5 seconds,” Sorin whispered, “Four, three, two—”

One.

They all moved so fast that all their movements were a simple, crazy blur.

One that Ray lost herself in as they formed a large huddle, their hands bracing one another, their laughter combining with tears and cries.

Ray had her eyes shut when Akash wrapped his hands around her shoulders and pulled her closer to his chest, Myra right behind him. Irene’s soft touch warmed her back as the rest of them shifted together, shifted closer .

Ray let out a wet laugh as she turned and delivered a bone-crushing hug to the girl. Neera and Myra joined their huddle, all four of them sighing and laughing together as the boys embraced one another behind them.

“So much time,” Ray whispered loud of them for all of them to hear. Irene’s hold on her tightened, her hands shaking as Ray burrowed her face in the girl’s shoulder, chuckled,

“But Noah still can’t see shit without his glasses .”

“Wow.”

And began laughing all over again.

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He'd never seen her this happy. This relieved and free.

The sight was beautiful enough to render him speechless.

And he would've said something about it. Truthfully wanted to pull her in an embrace and kiss her until she couldn't breathe anymore, but Ray had been pointedly avoiding him ever since they'd got out of the room. Angel understood a part of his mind was having the same thoughts she was, but he couldn't forget it.

He just couldn't.

Maybe that's why it annoyed him even more when she specifically took the seat furthest from him on the floor, squished between Myra and Neera, who were sitting on her sides. The only trump card he might have over them was the information he'd gained before the ceremony, but he might have to wait to reveal it. Because judging by the tentative look in all their eyes, they had far more secrets left to fill.

Starting with the young boy who was now sitting beside Sorin, his back iron rod straight as he eyed Ray suspiciously. He seemed Ira's age and they might've been friends, but Angel might've ruined that plan of his. In his defense, the boy had been staring at Ira for a while before catching Angel's eyes.

What was he to do?

Not glare at him for long enough to make him uncomfortable?

Ira was blissfully unaware beside him, munching on the chips Ray had dug out for

her from one of the kitchen cabinets .

They were all sitting on the floor, thanks to him and the havoc he'd raised all across her living room.

And the sofa he'd somehow managed to destroy.

“You’re going to pay for it.”

Angel whirled to face Akash, who had followed his line of sight. He sat beside Myra, his arms crossed as he glared at him. It was weird. He'd spent years building a concrete relationship with each of them.

Starting with Noah and their time in Las Vegas.

Ending with the godforsaken rivalry with Akash Smith.

Now, however, Angel only arched a brow and dismissed Akash by turning to look at Ray instead, who was staring down at her hands.

“Are you going to start explaining?”

Ray shot him a dirty look in response but balled her hands into fists and inhaled deeply. Angel leaned back on his arms, his shoulder brushing Luke's in the process. The four of them were sitting on both his sides, with Luke and Jack on one end and Christina and Mia on the other. All of them looked terribly constipated by this entire situation.

He couldn't really blame them.

“Where do you want me to start?” Ray asked, a bit quietly as she lifted her chin to

look directly at him. Angel straightened, catching the note of rare seriousness in her voice when she said the words. Everyone in the room remained silent, waiting for Angel's response. Because in the end, this was a conversation that belonged to them.

“Start with how you know the people I've known for years now.”

Ray's nod was nothing short of understanding, but she still shared a secret glance with Akash. The boy only matched her look with a soft dip of his chin .

“I've known most of them all my life.”

Angel blinked, but not before Cameron caught his surprise.

“We've known each other since before we met you.” He signed and Angel arched a brow, “You've been in this world longer than either of us.”

“Everyone except me of course,” Noah interjected expertly and shared a grin with Angel, “I've been a part of this world since the very beginning.”

“When did you and Ray—”

“It began as a business thing.” Sorin spoke up, “Noah was the face of the Hassans, and I handled his shadows. No one except the people in this room knows about us being twins.”

“It's a great advantage.” Noah continued easily, “Ray came to us—” his gaze cut to Ray's. She had her head tilted in his direction though, gauging his reaction. Angel turned to face her, waiting patiently.

“I've known Myra and Irene since middle school.” Ray began softly, not breaking their stare, “Akash found Cameron and Neera. I went after Noah and Sorin after I—”

Ray gulped and Angel watched as Neera slowly laced her fingers through hers in a show of support. It seemed to do the trick as Ray went erect and began,

“I’d been involved with this side of business long before the Lions recruited me,” she said, her voice low as she spoke, “And in doing so, I once made the mistake of making enemies I couldn’t handle back then. It resulted in...” a pause, a brief inhale, “Someone important to me died because of that mistake. And well,” she looked up at all of them. Till then Angel hadn’t noticed her head dropping. Was lost in the echo of her words. But those honey eyes, they seemed to jar him awake ,

“I haven’t forgotten or forgiven them since.”

Sudden chills erupted on Angel’s arm. This story, this tale, it was too familiar to his, something he could resonate with on a far deeper level than she would ever understand. But she must’ve seen something in his gaze because the conviction in her voice only strengthened. Her eyes turned sharp when she turned to the rest of his friends,

“All this information, all that we share, it cannot get out of this room.”

Luke straightened beside him, but it was Christina who laced her hands and leaned forward, her white bangs curving around her face as she returned her fierce gaze,

“What do we get in return?”

Angel arched a brow and turned to Ray with a light smirk. One that immediately dropped at her answer,

“Your lives.”

A blatant threat. A sign of dismissal that Angel had never faced before. Because no

one had ever dared, had never crossed the line. Ray stepped over it and wiped it clean as if it never existed. He saw the murder shine bright in her eyes,

“It doesn’t matter to me who you are, or what you are to any of us here or one another,” her voice was brimming with dark undertone , “But if you cross me. If you endanger anyone sitting in this room here, there will not be a place on earth where you can hide from me.” A tip of the chin, a glance to look down upon them all, “I’ve bought this world now. I own it. I hope you can remember that.”

Angel couldn’t help the light smirk, not understanding the mix of emotions stirring in his chest. Not believing that the displeasure from hearing her words had turned into something new .

Something he couldn’t contain. Something that nearly resembled pride.

And he really couldn’t help poking the bear.

“Careful Ray,” he purred as though they were back to the beginning. Ray’s head turned to his slowly, something familiar lighting in her eyes, “We never did stand for blatant threatening.”

“And I don’t stand for blatant betrayal.”

Angel’s smirk was going to break his face.

God, he liked this girl. A lot.

“I hope you come to trust this world once again, Raylene,” Christina began softly from beside them, completely unfazed by their conversation, “Because we will not betray you.”

Ray opened her mouth, but Jack cut through,

“Not if you have a good enough reason.”

Ray’s eyes became cold. Unresponsive.

“I aim to destroy the very foundation of this side of the world,” Ray said, arching a brow as she confirmed his deepest fears, “I’m going rip the Lions into shreds.”

She looked at Jack, a small smile twisting her lips, “Is that a good enough reason?”

Angel put a hand on his face, covering his grin as he turned to look at Luke who matched his glance haughtily. So much. There was so much she didn’t know about them. About him. Luke’s bronze hair shifted as he shook his head subtly.

Not now.

When he turned his head back to Ray, his brow arched at the look of suspicion in her eyes .

He gave her a light smirk in response, agitating her further as Jack waved his hand and motioned for her to go on.

“Remind me,” came Noah’s light words from beside Ray. Angel turned to him, still unable to believe that Noah was alive while the other boy looked at them in distaste, “Why are we involving them?”

He frowned. This was starting to get annoying.

Ray sighed, “For starters, Akash got himself stabbed by a tracking device.” She said and Akash let out an outrageous sound, offended but unable to deny it, “And they

ended up here.”

No one mentioned the shot he’d taken for Ray that day. She didn’t. Akash didn’t.

He could only assume it was because they hadn’t discussed them yet.

“And there’ve been other factors,” Ray added, albeit a bit painfully. Angel had to bite his lip from grinning as she looked at anywhere but him, “But now they’re here.” She rolled her eyes, “Might as well get it out.”

“Whatever.” Came Irene’s murmur before Ray rolled her uninjured shoulder and began once again,

“I got within the Lion’s line of sight. I got these people,” She pointed at all of them, “places where they could rise to become key figures. And by doing so I could secure their downfall in the future years. I had to get the Lions in a vulnerable position and not attract any attention to myself.”

She scratched the back of her neck, looking a bit uncomfortable as she continued, “The attack on the Ravens last year was my play,” Angel’s brows furrowed, “It was a way to get Martin to propose the alliance.”

Something wasn’t adding up –

“You’re not looking at tearing down the Lions only, are you?” Angel deadpanned and Ray shrugged ,

“Two birds with one stone.” She murmured and Angel crossed his arms, pursing his lips as she avoided his gaze and continued,

“And when you came after me, it was the perfect opportunity to make the alliance

official. After that, it was just a matter of pushing a block to begin the domino effect.”

And it clicked.

Il Senza Nome.

Holy shit.

“But then the event digressed,” Sorin added tightly, and Angel turned to him, not speaking out loud just yet, “June’s death, the ambush, it all came from nowhere.”

Even Ray looked deep in thought at his words, “It didn’t harm our plans, but it was an unwanted surprise.” She spoke. Angel suddenly recalled June Kincaid, the way her lifeless body was sprawled on the ground. Ray’s show, Maya’s rage . But he didn’t offer his condolences. Not after she’d trusted him to keep her connection to their family a secret.

Ray turned to him then, matching his gaze to show a flicker of gratitude.

“I knew the Ravens would do everything in their power to secure the alliance after Martin acted like an idiot,” she said and Angel sighed, defeated by her words. She shot him a sympathetic smile, “So I planted Sorin. You could blame him and gain a higher favor with the Lions, making my job all the more easier.” A glance at Sorin, who shrugged, “I just had to make sure the moment was perfect for you to spill it.”

“And you got that moment after the ambush at the hotel.” Angel murmured and Ray’s shoulders bunched up,

“That’s the thing,” she said, “That ambush wasn’t planned by me. ”

His brow arched, “Really? And here I thought getting hurt was your way of proving your undying loyalty to the Larsens.”

She shot him an unamused look,

“June’s death, hell her coming there, the ambush, none of it was planned by me.” She said, and her gaze flickered to Ira, who straightened beside him, “It worked in our favor, but then Ira told me about them being the Nameless group, and—” she inhaled sharply and shook her head. Angel watched her, the pieces of the puzzle not fitting together in his mind.

“So, they’re still out there. The vigilante group who’s trying to tear everyone down?” Jack said, thoroughly confused as Ray shared an amused glance with Myra, “And if you were the one who was behind the attack last year—”

Angel saw Mia shoot Jack a withering glance,

“They are the Nameless, you moron.”

And confirmed. Angel blinked calmly as Jack’s head whipped to face them and Mia grumbled from beside Christina, “How’d you make it till now?”

“So, the people who were behind June’s death, the ones who hired Ira,” Jack turned to look at her. The younger girl had her mouth open in surprise, her chips forgotten as she stared at Ray’s face, “They’re not you?”

Ray opened her mouth to reply when Ira shot forward and started hastily in Italian, “You were...are you—” were the only words he seemed to understand as she streamlined and rambled.

Angel blinked his surprise, unable to understand the incoherent string of her Italian

words. He shook his head when Ray shot her a rueful smile and she continued rambling quickly,

“Wait, wait,” he began, making Ira pause beside him as he turned to her, “Slow down. You’re going to give me a whiplash.”

Ira’s face dropped into a deadpan. She pointed at Ray, “ Il Senza Nome ,” she said as if she were talking to a child and pointed at herself,

“Surprised.”

Angel narrowed his gaze, “I don’t like your attitude right now, kid,”

She clicked her tongue but turned away from him with a flick of her hair. Angel scoffed and crossed his arms, shifting away from her. Ray grinned a bit from up ahead, the action lighting up her face as she replied to Ira,

“Imagine my surprise when I got to know that someone was using our name to kill me,” she scoffed and turned to Neera, who sat with her shoulder tensed, staring steely at Luke, “A part of me thought one of my friends had gone rogue.”

Friends , Angel noted, not people. Not gang. Friends.

He breathed out. This friendship, these people, had all known each other for far too long, had been planning this for too long. Just as he had been. They’d just been stealthier. Better.

“So, what was their job?” Luke asked, pointing at the rest of them, “While you were cushioning up to Lions, what were they meant to do?”

“To this very minute,” Neera examined her nails as she spoke softly, “No one knows

what's actually happened on the island." Her hard gaze flickered to Angel's, those dark blue colors shifting as she clicked her tongue, "People only know something's happened. They know Raylene's in a coma. They know Maya Larsen is hurt. And Kyle Larsen is missing. Their people have disappeared, and their businesses have shut down."

Angel shook at the simplicity of her words. They'd meant to erase the Lions from the chart, from the map. Simply gone. But that didn't explain the withering glare everyone around Ray shot him .

He scowled, shifting back on his arms as he turned his confused eyes to Ray, who sighed.

"What?" he snapped finally when none of them said anything.

"Ray should've been dead to the world by now." Neera said agonizingly, and Angel froze at her words. She should be what now? He breathed in as Ray put her face in her hands, opening his mouth and closing it in an attempt to understand what she was trying to say.

"If you hadn't jumped in the way," Akash drawled, as Cameron, even Cameron shook his head as if he were a meddlesome child, "Then the plan would've been foolproof. Kyle would be scrambling around instead of lying half dead in the hospital because he discovered you, and you," he shot Ray a glare, "In a room together. Obviously. Fucking. Alive."

Angel rubbed his brows as he tried to understand the situation, "So you're blaming me for jumping in the bullet's way when I thought she was going to actually die?" he asked, his tone thinning with impatience, "And now you expect me to do what? Apologize?"

“Enough.” Ray murmured, finally lifting her head but not quite meeting his eyes as she turned a scolding glare on Akash, “Kyle isn’t half dead. He’s on his way here with Vera right now.”

“Vera,” Sorin muttered softly as Noah leaned forward, looking at Ray as if they weren’t sitting right there.

“That’s the other thing.” He started, “How come that psychopath’s helping us?”

Ray shrugged as Christina interrupted their conversation, “Wait so, Verana isn’t with you?” she asked, and turned to Akash, “Isn’t she your cousin?”

Akash nodded, his handsome face going slack with understanding ,

“She is. But she was too crazy to join us.” he said indignantly.

Luke let loose an annoyed sound at his words but Akash only deadpanned in response, “She chose the Lions way before.”

His eyes cleared, something like clarity flickering through them as he turned to Ray, “But this, she just—”

Ray shook her head, “She shot Kyle without hesitation.” She murmured and lifted her gaze to Luke and then back to Akash, “Split second after he saw that I was alive.”

“When we could’ve killed you in the hospital itself.” Neera murmured.

“Okay, this is getting uncomfortable and dark very fast.” Jack said, looking exhausted by all the information they’d been bombarded by, “I get it now. You were behind the fires,” a nod from Ray and Neera, “And you staged that entire thing at the announcement party, but no information of Akash being the one behind it had gone

out yet. You,” he pointed at Ray, “Are in a coma. While the entire world is now slowly believing that the Lions are becoming weak.”

He heaved a deep breath as Luke patted him on the back. Ray shrugged in acceptance and Angel was about to say something when Mia hummed from beside him and nudged her chin in the direction of the kid who was shifting away and away from Ray,

“Explain the boy.”

Ray turned over her shoulder, her eyes going wide in realization. Angel saw Sorin turn slightly and place a comforting hand on the young boy’s shoulder, angling his body so he was visible to everyone.

The boy only shrunk in the hoodie he was wearing, but not before Angel noticed the faint scars on the side of his face .

Two dents, one over his cheekbone and the other right where a dimple could be. He had skin a tint darker than Angel’s, shining brightly with the purple hue from the night sky as those wary grey eyes peered at them all.

“That’s Micah Diaz,” Ray stated and turned away from him as the boy flinched at the sound of his name. Angel felt a pang of remorse for the kid as Ray plowed forth, “He was also working for the people who used our names to stage that ambush.”

“With Ira then,” Angel mumbled at turned to look at Ira, who was staring at Micah with a guarded look in her eyes.

“According to Ira, he worked as an,” She turned to the kid, blinking at him to continue.

“Assassin.”

Angel blinked at the quiet word. His gaze narrowed, this situation getting dire by the second. Even Ray looked a bit pissed at his admission, her anger aimed at the people hiding in the shadows,

“They’re hiring children to do their job.” She snarled softly, the fire in her gaze flaring as she turned to Ira, obviously thinking of something that had her rearing back in a slight panic. Ray shook her head before him, “Who knows? Might be training them as well.”

“We need to get ahead of them,” Irene said, her voice iron as she stared to her side, looking at the window. At the shifting clouds outside, “Before they can get ahead of us.”

After we’ve been through so much, she didn’t have to continue.

“Where did we fit into all this?” Angel asked softly, showing his resolve as Ray turned to him, her gaze going soft as she played with her fingers in her lap, “Were you planning on making us invisible as well? ”

Ray breathed out, “It was the same plan. We picked out the Larsen’s people one by one. Over the years I was able to scout and remove some people without causing any suspicion. Anyone who worked for them remained unhappy, so that wasn’t all that difficult.”

She looked up at him, a set to her jaw, “But with you, with your people, they didn’t want to leave. So, I had to go for a different tactic.”

He clenched his teeth at the shift in her gaze,

“Hence the alliance. It would make it easier for me to remove you alongside the Lions.”

He kept his head up, wanting to question her further. But she must’ve seen it in his eyes, because out of nowhere she shook her head, getting up on her feet stealthily as she said in a dry voice,

“I think that’s about enough explanations for today,” she said, a rasp to her tone as the others got up as well. Angel didn’t notice Akash stretch, didn’t see Myra and Irene groan out loud. Hell, didn’t even notice his own friends as they got to their feet. Angel just followed their actions, his eyes hell-bent on Ray as she looked everywhere else,

“You all can stay here. I think I’m going to go for a walk. I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

“Be careful.” Came Irene’s unhurried response as Ray turned on her heels and grabbed what looked like a ruined wig and a beige purse. He pursed his lips as he saw her nod in Ira’s direction once before she placed her hand on the doorknob.

“I will.” He heard her voice. Heard a slight tremor in her words as she pulled open the door with more force than necessary and walked right out. Angel’s lips parted, a sudden silence settling in his mind as he watched the door close, heard the soft click, and gone .

She was just gone.

Angel scrunched his brow. Hadn’t even noticed Jack’s words beside him before he wrenched himself out of his reverie and stalked right toward the door to pull it open.

“ Oh-kay,” he heard Jack’s voice somewhere in the roar of his mind but ripped the

door open and strode right out, slamming it behind him with force. He barely blinked as he saw the elevator go down and grit his teeth, his hands clenching at his side as he waited for it to come for him.

They'd been running for a while now. In circles. In a path. Across one another.

No more.

Not anymore.

* *

So, what changed?

She'd seen those words shine in his eyes. He might as well have been screaming them at her. The thought unnerved her, made her jittery and jumpy. Maybe that's why she'd run out the doors without any more explanations.

And maybe that's why she was still fucking running.

This was such a bad idea considering how half the world knew she was in a coma and thought she was already dead. And the fact that she was running at night, with nothing but a knife taped to her thigh.

And the fact that she'd thrown her wig in the trash the minute she'd stepped out of the building.

Ray groaned out, throwing her head back before letting out a wail. Another bad idea. But today was filled with bad ideas .

And maybe by following those she could stop feeling a certain someone's hands on

her waist, twisted in her hair, pulling her closer until her entire body was flush with his. Until he covered her lips with his own and—

Tap, tap, tap.

Ray blinked out of her daze, her pace slowing as she heard footsteps near her at a deathly speed.

She risked a soft glance over her shoulder and almost froze on the spot. Because right under the night dark sky, Angel De Santos was running towards her with the most serious expression on his face.

“Holy shit,” she whispered and increased her pace, turning over her shoulder to confirm— and yep, that was him. Ray scrunched her brows, and yelled out,

“ You can’t run after a girl at night like that!”

“Stop running then.” Came his unfazed, loud response.

Ray tsked and turned on her heels, running backward now as she saw him near her. His eyes widened from the distance, his pace increasing as a worry set over his brows,

“Hey!” he called out, “Quit doing that!”

She rolled her eyes in response but continued running backward, wanting him to get near her faster. To get to her quicker. And Angel. The boy she’d known for a few days, ran like hell .

That amber sheen darkened with the night sky, the dark locks of his hair falling atop his forehead as he ran faster. Ray couldn’t help the small bubble of laughter, couldn’t

help the unbelievable grin that spread across her lips at the sight of him. Her heart was racing now, probably from having run this far.

Probably at the way he was looking so damned serious .

Maybe that's why she stopped paying attention to the way she was running. And maybe that was why she didn't notice her laces tear open. The world tilted for her out of nowhere, a surprised breath leaving her lips as she stepped on the laces and fell back. Her arms flailed back, a small yelp on her tongue as she braced herself for the impact.

Except it didn't come.

Because warm, large hands suddenly caught at her waist and her hand, and suddenly, Angel was breathing down on her, his eyes wide in concern as he looked at her, "Are you okay—" he began but only cut off as her hands twisted in the fabric of his t-shirt and they went stumbling down on the concrete ground.

Apparently, gravity waited for no one.

Fucking gravity.

Ray's mind spun, a curse leaving her lips as she shut her eyes and felt a large hand cover the back of her head before she slammed upon the concrete ground. The impact came with a hot slap of pain. It rushed down her spine, making her back arch as a groan left her lips. Angel hovered atop her, grunting in surprise but still holding the back of her head.

"You idiot," he huffed and shifted so he was face-to-face with her. Ray's eyes shot open, going wide at their proximity as he looked around for any other injuries, murmuring in Spanish under his breath.

Did she say fucking gravity?

She'd probably meant I. Fucking. Love. Gravity.

Cause god, he looked beautiful this close.

And looking at him like this, she couldn't really help the amused chuckle that left her lips .

Those amber eyes shot up to hers, narrowing in a familiar glare as his fingers twisted in her hair,

"This is funny?" he drawled in a low voice, a hint of accent betraying his words. Ray chuckled again, her entire body shuddering with the movement as he shook his head. Rose to his elbow and glared down at her.

"I can't believe this is how we went down," she spluttered and lolled her head on the ground as another jerk of laughter left her lips, "Good catch."

"Dios," he murmured and got off her, not making a sound as he got to his feet. But when she stared back at him, she could see his face was averted from hers, trying and failing to hide a small grin. Ray's smile extended.

"Are you smiling?" she sang quietly as she sat up beside him. Angel's shoulders shook as she placed a hand against the back of his neck.

It was warm and cold at the same time, the brush of his soft against her fingers as she teased,

"Come on Santos, stop trying to kid yourself--"

His head turned, a subtle but sleek smile on his face as he timed their proximity perfectly. Ray's breath staggered, her heart stopping for a second before speeding up again.

Her stomach felt as though it were in knots, a terrible sense of paranoia and something utterly different seizing her bones as Angel leaned in closer. His eyes remained terribly focused on hers as his hand wrapped around the back of her neck.

As his thumb grazed her jaw and he pulled her closer.

The world seemed to silence when he closed that distance.

And seemed to scream when he kissed her. Ray's breath left her, her strength failing as she fell back and Angel leaned closer. He silenced her breathless gasps and held her close as his lips just moved and slid .

Had anyone ever felt such gravity towards one another? Had anyone felt this much breathless relief in such a gesture?

She did.

Her body arched upwards, and Ray opened her mouth into the kiss, unable to help herself as she wrapped her hands around the back of his neck. Twisted it in the knots of his hair.

Angel held her now, both his hands around her waist as he pulled her to sit atop him, her body flush against his. She felt his groan rumble through his chest and heard it leave his lips as she returned the gesture.

"Thought you'd avoid me forever." Angel murmured against her lips when she pulled back slightly, trying to catch her breath.

“It was a few minutes.” She whispered.

“Seemed like decades.”

Ray couldn't help the soft breathless laugh that left her lips.

He watched her as if noting her every expression, her every moment. And filled that silence with words she didn't want to hear yet,

“We need to talk, Storm.” He said and tugged a strand of her hair behind her ear, his touch soft. Ray almost melted into it but relented by the conviction in his eyes.

“You want to talk on the empty road, Santos?” she whispered and leaned forward. Angel held her weight like it was nothing, a dark look entering his eyes as he tilted his chin to gaze up at her,

“Don't get smart with me, Walker.”

A chuckle left her lips, but she nodded, moving to get off him. Angel didn't let go of her hand though, held it tightly as she carefully got to her feet and stared down at him .

“Well?” she asked with an arch of her brow, “Come on. I have a place we can go to.”

Angel raced his free hand through his hair but nodded.

And didn't let go of her hand once.

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“I don’t give a shit about what the romance genre states,” Angel snapped from beside her, “I’m not sleeping on the fucking terrace in the middle of winter.”

Ray rolled her eyes, “It’s Spring.” She said and scowled when he crossed his arms.

“It’s winter at night.”

“Christ.”

They’d stepped into the elevator of their building, but instead of heading to the same floor as before, Ray had pressed the one on the very top. One that led to the terrace. And a small house she’d made for herself in secret.

But Angel didn’t know that.

The elevator dinged as they reached the floor and opened with a soft rustle. Ray blinked at the door up ahead and stepped out with Angel in tow. Ray shot him a look before he could open his mouth to say anything and saw him fall silent with a small pout. He still held her hand though, as if he were afraid she might disappear. And a part of her was grateful to him for it. Because she knew she very well could.

Ray shook herself out of that daze and pulled open the terrace door. A gush of wind greeted them, the cold engulfing their bodies as Angel swore behind her. The air rushed into her ears, filling her lungs as she breathed it in and strode ahead. Indeed, it was cold, but it was nothing compared to how it had been on that island. That cold had been deserted. Had been lonely.

This greeted them with familiar sounds and echoes of warmth .

It was astonishing how the same wind was different everywhere.

Her gaze snagged on the door to her side as she stepped onto the grey concrete. It led to the house she hadn't been to in a while now. A place she and Lia had dreamt of making. Her breath loosened at the thought, but she plowed forth, smiling at the view that greeted her from far away. She turned to look at Angel, who was shivering but had his eyes set on the dark sky above them.

"So many stars," she heard him murmur and saw him tremble. Ray shifted closer to him, trying to give him her warmth when he looked down at her with a soft look in his eyes, "I've never seen a clear sky like this."

Ray smiled and looked up as well, "It's amazing what you can see when you just turn the lights off." She whispered in response, "Something changes in sheer darkness. But only because it shines right through it."

Angel huffed out a laugh behind her, "Light has its way of ripping through the night sky," he looked down at her, "Doesn't it?"

She didn't have a response for it. Just chose to keep that lump in her throat to herself as she turned and pulled him with her,

"Let's go."

They neared the place soon enough. Ray fished the key from her pockets, a slight tremor passing through her hands as she pushed it through the lock and grabbed the door handle. She looked up at the opaque glass door, blinking at it,

"I haven't been here in five years." She whispered before pulling the door open.

She was immediately blessed by warm air and the familiar smell of fruits when she pulled it open further. Her eyes crinkled, and she made a note of thanking Ciera when she stepped into the hallway and removed her shoes .

Angel followed her in, closing and locking the door behind him as he let out a sigh of relief in the warmth. Ray's feet flexed on the warm carpet, a moan almost leaving her lips as she ran ahead and breathed out.

Let out a scream of joy before jumping in the air.

“ Finally ,” she gasped and turned to see Angel leaning against the wall, staring at her with a small smile on his face. She grinned back, unable to believe that she was back here. In this small, cramped-up apartment-type house on a rooftop with low walls, two rooms, and one island kitchen.

This had been her promise to Lia. This had been her dream of getting them both out of that wretched town.

Her smile dimmed at that thought, her brows crinkling as she recalled Lia's face. Lia's smile. Her everything. But before she could dare dwell deep, warm hands held the sides of her face, shifting her so she was facing him. Angel's eyes were warm when she looked up at him and she could swear something in her chest stalled,

“Hey,” he said softly, “Don't become a shell of yourself.” his thumb brushed her jaw, “Not after doing everything you've done up until now. Not after winning .”

“I'm still going after the Ravens,” Ray replied, her chin tilting in his hands expecting annoyance. But Angel, he didn't do a thing. Only pulled her close with a small smile and whispered,

“Please do.” He said, not a hitch in his tone, “I've been waiting for someone to.”

Ray's brows crinkled. But before she could question him, he took a step away, his gaze shuttering,

"I'll tell you my side after you clear yours. Everything with nothing left out, I promise." A hint of doubt in his voice when he looked at her quietly ,

"Just trust me enough to tell me enough."

She hadn't talked about any of this in a long, long time. No one had asked because no one knew. But this. Him. He didn't know and yet—

Looking at him now, a part of her couldn't help but cave. Ray took a step back and sat down on the carpeted floor, her back against the couch as she saw him follow her. He too sat cross-legged in front of her, his knee touching hers in a show of support.

"Use this against me and I'll kill you, Angel." She said after a moment's pause. Angel only shook his head, an easy smile on his face,

"Never easy with you."

Indignation rose on her tongue but Angel's brush of lips against her head was faster. Ray froze. But he sat back down and tilted his head,

"If I ever make that mistake, I'll lay at your feet, Raylene Walker."

Ray breathed out and looked away from him, her hands wrapping around her body as she began, "You know that Nathan Kraft was my biological father?" she asked and he nodded, "Well, I didn't live with him. Ma left him when I was, what, two? And remarried when I was twelve. She fell in love with this man I'd never met before. He had a daughter from his previous marriage as well. She was seven when I met her."

Her eyes rose to his finally, shining with lost memories,

“And was Ira’s age when she died.”

Angel’s sharp inhale was expected. But she didn’t expect him to move closer. Didn’t expect him to carefully grab her ankles and place them on either of his side. She reveled at the connection, breathed in his closeness as he shifted closer and placed a warm hand on her calf,

“Her name was Lia. Lia Walker.” She said, her voice shaking ,

“She’d taken Ma’s and my name. She was a little shit at times but,” she chuckled softly, “She was the best. Someone new, someone so tiny and beautiful. And so happy.”

Ray pulled back an inch, “Back then, I’d needed some space. So I’d gotten involved in the dark side of business. One thing led to another and suddenly I was in the wrong league with the Lions.” She straightened against the couch, “There was another gang back then. Someone who stood close to the Lions. I helped someone bring them down. It was by far the biggest job I’d ever gotten done. But it came with its repercussions.

Lia died soon after, and I didn’t know because I was in a hospital. My hand was cut up because of that day, but no one bothered calling me.” Her rage rose with the memories that surfaced after so many years, “I saw her at her funeral . One I hadn’t even been called to. Akash told me about it and I arrived there with all these people – I,” a breath, “I just lost it.”

It got easy to get sucked back into those memories yet again.

* *

Ray had never been this numb. Had never been so absent when she stumbled upon the plain land filled with people who were nothing but blurred in her vision. She couldn't see, could barely breathe when she heard the faint voice of someone saying something far away. But when Ray stepped ahead. When she saw her mother shoot up to her feet. Saw that open casket and...

Everything shattered.

A harsh breath left her lungs as her mother's hands wrapped around her shoulder. Around her waist to haul her up because there she was about to fall as she stepped between the row and rows of chairs kept to her sides.

"Lia." Ray whispered, her voice so quiet and rough that she couldn't hear it .

But it didn't matter when a ringing began at the back of her mind. When that roar started in her mind. And suddenly—

Everything was fire.

"LIA! LIA, oh Gods, Lia—" she cried, she sobbed as she pushed past her mother. Past the monster of Lia's father. And ran towards the casket, "No, no, NO." she screamed when she saw that flutter of short black hair. Those golden highlights and those closed eyes.

That pale face.

And that blue cotton band around her wrist.

A wretched sound left Ray's throat, and she went down on her knees, her sobs ripping out of her as she cried, cried.

“No, please,” she began, her voice shaking and breaking, “You can’t leave like this. You can’t – please Lia. ”

Hands landed on her shoulder and pulled her away from the casket, but her fingers only tightened on its rim. She thrashed against the person behind her, a mess of cries leaving her tongue as strong hands ripped her away. Or at least tried to.

But Ray couldn’t think. Wouldn’t.

“FUCK OFF!” she screamed at the man behind her and sneered over her shoulder, seeing those familiar eyes widen, “ This is how you tell me my sister died? BY HER FUCKING FUNERAL?”

A disgusting look crossed his face, one she’d never seen before, “You were never sisters,” the way he spat out the words was like a slap right to her face, “And I don’t invite murderers to my daughter’s funeral.”

“SETH!” her mother’s scream ripped past them as she stepped between Ray and the man, her shoulders taut and tense, “You asshole, you said you told her. ”

Seth scoffed and the sound ripped Ray’s heart. She turned to face the open casket, reaching out to place her fingers lightly against her cold wrist as the man responded,

“She deserves to go to jail – ”

Thwack.

Ray barely flinched as his face snapped to one end, a dangerous gleam entering his eyes as he looked at her mother. But she stood tall, unafraid as she sneered at the man up ahead, “That’s me returning the fucking favor. I’ve let you get away with a lot of things, but accusing my daughter? Are you fucking serious? ”

She heard her mother take a step forward when Seth remained quiet, “Let her attend the funeral quietly. And then disappear. Or would you need my help in doing that as well?”

Seth’s growl was dangerous enough for Ray to snap her gaze in his direction, her eyes gleaming with tears but still angry enough to hurt him. He noticed that look and took a brief step back, his entire self stiffening,

“Walk. Away.” Her mother snarled softly.

Ray looked back at Lia’s soft, pale face. Her eyes filled with more tears. Her head flopped down against the hard edge as another sob ripped from her throat. And between all that, all she could think of was one statement. One promise.

I’m sorry.

* *

Angel had never seen her this destroyed. This devastated.

But he watched her, not a tear dropping from her eyes. Not one hitch on her tone.

Raylene Walker had made herself home in those memories .

Angel inched closer, and her quiet gaze lolled to his. He tried to, really did, but couldn’t hide that flicker of absolute rage light in his eyes. The thought of seeing Ray like that, the mere sight of her on the ground mourning a sister she hadn’t even known had died—

It destroyed everything he’d ever conjured up.

This Seth, or whoever he was, he better hope he wasn't fucking alive.

"Hey," her whisper drew him out of these thoughts, and he looked up to find her expression soft. To find that knowing smile on her face, "You don't have to do anything."

Angel shook at the words.

"I've already done him enough harm to last a lifetime." She said, and Angel's brow arched in question. Ray's hands landed on his, warm and blistered. He laced his fingers through hers immediately, rubbing at the roughness of her skin as she answered his question, "I might've killed his brother to find out what happened to Lia."

Angel's shoulders stiffened, a small smile betraying his actions as her hold tightened on his. Her head tilted, those eyes on his lips as she continued,

"He came after me first. I just used him instead of Seth." She took a pause and pursed her lips, frowning, "Probably not a great decision considering June was his wife."

Angel blinked, "Wait," he began, pulling away to look at her face, "You're telling me she was married to Seth's brother?"

Ray nodded, "What luck right?" she scoffed, "Cole Kincaid. Brother of Seth Kincaid. Both known for their notorious connections to the underworld. Seth might blame me all he wants, but it was because of him I got involved in the business in the first place."

She turned away from him, shifting on the carpet ,

"When Ma got to know, things got worse. But this time she couldn't just up and

leave. Lia was on the line, and she wasn't her daughter or my sister biologically. So, while Ma fought to keep him away from us, I fought to keep everyone away from her."

Angel waited for her to continue, but only saw her shoulders shake. Felt her curl further into herself, faster than he could reach her. So, he scrambled his thoughts, and came up with the best possible explanation for his insane life,

"I was five." He began and her head whirled to his. Angel could help a smile as he saw the gears in her head turn at imagining all the possibilities that could continue with that statement. He just shifted closer and placed a hand on her head, gently stroking her hair as he continued, "And I was sitting up in my room when I heard this loud sound. It echoed throughout our empty house, and I was too young then. I got scared easy."

He looked down as he continued, his hand dropping as he recalled the scene as clear as day, "And I went downstairs and saw this telephone first." He said, "We had a landline at home just in case. And it was broken that day, with the handset on the ground. Right in the pool of blood."

His head drooped further, and he shut his eyes as he continued. He told her about how his mother had reached out to him. How his young mind hadn't been able to understand a thing that day. How she'd told him to become the son his father had always wanted so he would stay off his ass. How later when his father had actually come in, he'd pointed a gun in his direction, and he'd smiled at him.

Actually fucking smiled.

A soft sound left Ray's throat at his words. He looked up at her, his eyes haunted by the same trauma. By the same devils .

“When I grew up, I finally gathered enough guts to find out more about her. She—” his breath caught. It was then he felt the light ball of dread in his gut. Felt it hurt the inside of his lungs. Ray’s body inched closer, her warmth coming closer and giving him enough air to continue, “She’d married him out of love. But was originally meant to kill him the first time she saw him,” he smiled, his hand going up to his necklace, “This was her origin. Her people.” He scoffed,

“Martin De Santos erased them from the fucking map.”

Angel held the glass shard then, its red hues shining with years of memories. He looked up at Ray, something in his chest breaking at the sheer understanding in her eyes. In the way she tightened her hold on his hand. And suddenly everything was crystal clear.

He blinked and moved. He knew her eyes were on him when he tugged the necklace off his neck and held the long glass shard in his hands. Rubbed its hard edge just once before grabbing its ends and bending it hard enough to break.

“What—” came her outrageous response as it snapped in his hands, Angel blinked down at the two red pieces, waiting for the fear, the pain to strike.

It didn’t.

With a small smile, Angel fished out a black band he’d found back at the hospital. Had sworn that day he would share this part of himself with her the next time he saw her. She didn’t say a word as he worked carefully.

He wrapped the glass carefully with the black band and tightened it enough for it to stay put. Angel breathed out, a calmness settling in him as he put his own back on his neck. The glass came with its own sort of comfort.

He wanted to share the same with her .

Angel looked up at Raylene Walker, straight in the eye when she rose her own gaze and tilted her head in confusion. He could swear Ray was barely breathing when he leaned forward and tied the band around her neck. Let the glass hang right between her collar bones, in that dip of her skin.

Her fingers rose to touch the glass, her fingers turning the glass carefully. Something in him fractured at it's sight. It fractured and rebuilt into something new. Something stronger.

Maybe that's why he cut off her response by grabbing her chin and pulling her closer before she could protest.

Ray moved easily. And didn't contest when he pressed a soft kiss on her lips. This close to her, Angel could smell her fruit scent, could feel her heart beating wildly in her chest as she moved to lean closer. To close that gap between them.

Her body moved smoothly, and without breaking the kiss, she moved to sit in his lap. A groan reverberated through his chest as his hands wrapped around her waist and tightened. As her hand wound right above his heart and fisted his t-shirt. As she broke the kiss with a gasp and placed her forehead against his. This, he thought a bit drunkenly as he stared up at her honey eyes, at the way she looked down at him, this he could do all day.

And never. Ever. Stop.

Ray leaned down to kiss him again, this time softer, deeper. Crazier. Angel breathed out when she broke away from his lips and placed a kiss on his jaw. On his neck. His body seemed to strain to keep himself in check when Ray's hand pushed him backwards.

Angel fell back with a word and Ray, the beautiful girl, breathed down on him and kissed the column of his throat. The vein that was pulsing from the side of his neck as he fisted his fingers around her wrist .

“Breathe.” She whispered, her breath fanning his chest and he couldn’t . Not when she was looking at him like that. Not when she—

An agonized sound left his lips, his back arching as she pressed her soft lips right above his pounding heart. He hadn’t even noticed that his t-shirt had ridden up. His head hung back, a groan leaving his tongue as she moved up his body. As she laced her hands in his hair and pressed a kiss to the side of his jaw. To the corner of his lips.

“Ray—” Angel gasped, but she didn’t stop. He didn’t ever want her to. No, he could lay like this forever and let her do as she pleased. Angel’s stomach flexed under her touch, his heart racing, his hands aching to touch her.

So he did just that.

Ray’s gasp was swallowed by the way his hands tangled in the mess of her hair and hauled her right towards him. A satisfied sound echoed through the back of her throat as he kissed her senselessly. Got lost in the way she moved against him. In the way she breathed. In the way she responded . Ray broke away with a harsh breath, her gaze delirious as she stared down at him.

It took great, great strength for him to say his next words, but knew he should get it out there beforehand, “I have a lead.” He breathed and saw her lean back, a curious gleam entering her eyes. Angel smiled at it. Was relieved that the burden was off his mind. Was off her chest.

“It has something to do with who might be behind the ambush.” He continued and watched her eyes narrow, “But overall, we’re back to where we started.”

Ray's eyes flashed, her hold tightening on the hem of his t-shirt, and he nodded, a sigh on his lips as he spoilt their wonderful mood.

“We have a mole.”

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The heat of the sun was like a flick of switch during the day. It was the only thing that jarred him awake. That and the soft echo of a groan that reverberated from his arms. Angel blinked his eyes open lazily, completely at peace until something shifted against his chest. It was then he realized where he was. Who he was with. The thoughts resurfaced, and with what he proudly held as great restraint, Angel peered down at her.

Ray stirred, her eyes scrunching at the sunlight that poured on her skin, casting her in a honey glow. His hands around her tightened, a short breath leaving him as she lazily turned in his arms, inching closer so she was no longer sleeping with her back to his chest. Instead pressed her forehead right below his chin and fell back into a cocooned sleep. Angel's lips twitched, wide awake now as he watched the girl before her.

Her breath fell on his skin hotly, her entire body heaving with the action. Angel's hands were wrapped around her waist, one of which was deathly numb. But he couldn't really bring himself to care, because his gaze was bent on her dark hair. On those blue highlights that twisted as he pressed his lips atop her head.

A soft hum left her lips then and she nuzzled closer. A bubble of laughter left his tongue as he loosened his hold enough for her to move. Ray barely stirred at the sound. Only breathed out in relief and fell asleep again. Raylene Walker might be the most wanted woman in the world, but she slept like the dead. They'd fallen asleep on the ground last night after leaving their discussions behind .

Angel had bared his soul, had told her everything the best

he could and had later tugged her closer.

Forced her to switch on a movie so he could stare at her in peace. That was of course, until she'd shoved his face away and had growled at him to quit acting like a fucking doofus.

Angel frowned at the memory. He thought he'd done a pretty great job at being romantic. Raylene Walker just didn't know romance, he'd decided when she'd fallen asleep against him and hadn't stirred since. He glanced down at her now, and carefully tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, blinking at her serene face. Last night had been distraught, devastating. But somehow it had brought both of them into this spotlight. One both of them had been relieved to step into for the first time.

He sighed deeply at what was going to come next. At what needed to be done.

"Don't sigh so deeply," came her sudden light voice, and Angel jumped, his hold on her tightening, "You'll ruin our day."

Our day.

Goodness he was getting childish.

Still, a satisfied smile lifted the corner of his lips as he felt Ray's head lift, her chin brushing his shirt as she peered up at him. Some remanent of sleepiness still marred her expression, but the scowl was evident as she registered where they were. He watched her, his grin growing as she blinked once. And again.

And let out a strangled sound.

"Why are we in bed?" her eyes darted up, a gasp on her lips. This close he could see the stark surprise register on her face. Could tease her a bit more as she gasped again

and pulled away from him,

“ Why are we in bed?”

Angel winced and lightened his hold on her, and Ray pulled back further. His fingers were light on her waist, his thumb running idle circles against the fabric of her t-shirt as she blinked up at him.

“You don’t remember?” he asked cheekily, biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself from grinning as her eyes widened, “ You asked me to get you here.”

She had not asked him to get her here.

Angel grinned as her eyes darted around, trying to remember last night, He decided to slip in a silver of truth through his words though, “And you asked me to stay. I mean we’ve already kissed, I believe we’re already in a—”

His words cut off in a mph as she pressed her hands to his lips and glared up at him, “I didn’t ask you to get me here.”

His eyes narrowed, a smile gracing his lips behind her hand.

“I mean after what you did last night,” he began but only broke off in a laugh when Ray blinked once, something like panic washing over her expression. Angel subdued a satisfied smile as she jerked her hands back and slipped out of his hold. Angel let her go, watching her peacefully from the bed as she jumped off and looked everywhere else. He knew she’d take a while get accustomed to this. Had barely accepted that he was in it for the long haul.

Knew it would take some pushing from his end to get her to speak.

“Ray,” Angel said softly through the silence, a calm smile on his face as he got off the bed as well. She paused in her pacing and looked up at him, breathing harshly, all signs of sleep disappearing.

“Angel.” She said, her voice even.

But these past days, he’d learnt to read her .

Had memorized the soft tick in her jaw, the way she flexed her hands just once before relaxing them, before putting the cool mask over her face.

Raylene Walker didn’t have a lot of tells. She had cold eyes when she wanted to, could lie with a straight face and lived without showing a sign of her true feelings.

She did that now. And he knew exactly what she was going to say.

So he started first. Angel stepped forward, and her eyes flashed, something like surprise flaring through them as she put one foot back. His lips turned into that calm smile. Simply waiting. Simply watching.

He waited a beat before he extended his hand to cup the side of her face and pull her closer gently. Rubbed his thumb over her brow faintly and saw her composure weaken. His own heart was beating wildly in his chest. Slow, he’d have to take this slow and carefully. Because one wrong move and she could take the biggest step back.

Angel gulped, a flicker of doubt passing through his chest as he let go of her and said quietly,

“Take a shower. Then we’ll talk.”

And walked right out, hoping he was going about this the right way.

* *

Ray had been in the shower for a while now. The hot water slipped through her hair, trailed down the length of her spine as she placed her forehead against the warm walls of the washroom. She'd thought of it for a while now. Had replayed that expression over and over in her mind. And knew she'd seen doubt. Had seen a flicker of fear before he'd turned away and stepped out of her room. Ray had waited, had heard him walk to the other room, had heard him switch on the tap and had heard him switch it off. Only then she'd walked back into the washroom herself .

She remembered every moment from last night.

Knew he'd carried her all the way here. Knew he'd held her hand and knew she'd asked him to hold it for the rest of the night. It had been a rare mistake on her behalf. She still had to take care of the Larsens. Had to figure out a way to get back at the Ravens. Knew after last night, Angel had his way of ruining his own family in motion already.

So why did it scare her to face him now? Why did it feel as though her heart would—

Ray shook her head and banged a fist against the wall of her washroom. Might as well fucking face it. Might as well get it out there. If Angel wanted to be with her, he might as well know what he would have to deal with.

Ray stepped out in a frenzy, her brain a fried mess as she put on the first thing she saw and slammed the doors open. Angel was standing in the kitchen, his shoulders bunched up as he heard her walk out. She knew he did. And yet he didn't turn. Just waited.

She didn't know if she should hate him for it.

"I'm very clingy." She started angrily, almost wincing at the volume of her voice. Fuck it, what did it matter anymore? This, him, it was all new to her. Fuck, it was scary. Because, this, them, it was a reckoning waiting to happen. Ray watched him, her entire body vibrating with anticipation as Angel placed whatever was in his hand on the counter and turned.

Froze.

His lips parted, and Ray knew exactly what he saw. Wet hair, her large hoodie. And nothing else. Angel's eyes darkened a fraction and set tingles running down her spine. Ray inhaled sharply.

He was wearing the same shirt from yesterday, same airdried hair, same look. And yet. Yet, he looked absolutely beautiful. Handsome .

Basked in sunlight.

Hers.

Angel's eyes narrowed in her direction, but he just fished a hand through the soft strands of his hair and stepped on the other side of the island, leaning back against the counter. Ray blinked back into focus.

"So am I." he countered, completely serious. Shit, Ray thought to herself, her jaw clenching, angry. She was angry. Because how dare he want to talk about this? How dare he speak his feelings out loud when she felt the exact same way? She shook her head again and breathed out,

"I'm high maintenance."

“I have money.”

“So do I.” Ray snapped, and he just blinked.

“I know.” he said softly.

They paused, Ray breathing a bit harshly. How had they gotten here? How had she gotten here? Why had she gotten here?

“I sleep like a rock.” She said, the tad bit of anger washing away at the look in his eyes.

“I’ll manage to wake you.”

Her breath caught at the complete seriousness in his voice,

“I’m not looking for anything casual.”

His eyes flashed, “I don’t do casual.”

Oh. God. That fucking look.

“I get annoyed easily,” the bite was disappearing, and Angel was stepping closer and closer. He’d crossed the distance between them. And she’d stood her ground. Didn’t know how much longer she could hold it.

“I have patience. ”

She shuddered as he stepped into her space but tilted her chin upwards to look at him. Her resolve flickered, knowing where this was going.

“I might betray you,” She whispered, “Might kill you.”

“You can try.”

Ray scoffed and he leaned down. His amber eyes flickered with the warm sunlight. She hadn't expected him to say anything. Hadn't expected this, but had hoped for it, nonetheless. And somehow, Angel De Santos gave her exactly what she needed.

“I get nightmares a lot.” He whispered, but it sounded like a tentative question. Like he was asking her if she would—

“I get jealous easily, but I'll trust you if you ask me to.”

Ray's breath left her shortly as he continued quietly, his voice not shaking once. But she saw his hands, saw the way his fingers clenched nervously at his sides.

“I make a big deal out of the smallest things.” He continued, “You think you're clingy, but I can barely think when you're not around. I'd like you beside me.”

“You don't need me?” she'd meant it as a teasing question, but her voice shook nonetheless.

His eyes flickered, “No.” he said quietly, and she couldn't help a smile, her heart beating wildly in her chest, “I want you around me only if you can be.” He paused after that and leaned back up. She could feel the faint tremors that rocked his body. Five days, she thought as he looked down at her. As goosebumps erupted on her skin, five days had caused this.

Fucking island.

A strange silence descended upon them, and she saw the flicker of hurt in his eyes at

that pause .

Saw him nod and taken a step back when a wave of panic washed over her. Following it came an odd sense of calmness and—

“I can manage your nightmares even if I sleep like a fucking rock.” Her voice was soft, enough to freeze him in his tracks. She looked up at him. His eyes were wide as he turned to face her, the terrible surprise so evident on his face that Ray had to take step forward, “I might have a thing for quiet, jealous boys,” a twitch of his lips at that,

“I like that you don’t need me.” She whispered and the devastation that fell upon his face was so dangerously close to breaking her heart that she couldn’t breathe anymore, “I don’t need you either.”

She looked up at him. Saw him look down at her as if he were holding himself back. She saw the tremors. Saw the upturn of his brows, the glistening eyes. His fisted hands, the pressed lips.

“But I’d like to be wanted by you.”

She waited for a beat. Tilted her head and smiled when he let out a sigh and put his face in his hands. Mumbled something. Ray arched a brow and took a step closer,

“What?”

He peeked from his hands and grinned a bit mischievously,

“Thank fucking God.”

A laugh burst through her at that, and she lifted her hands to her heated cheeks. Angel

seemed to beam before her, standing up to his full height.

“Thank fucking God indeed.”

He rolled his shoulders at that but paused to wince at the movement, breaking their atmosphere. Her gaze caught on the expression, a frown burrowing her brows as she took a step in his direction, “What’s wrong? ”

“Bullet wound,” he said and braced his hand on his upper hand, “Don’t remember?”

Ray made a face at that and took another step ahead. Took his hand carefully in hers and pulled back the sleeve of his shirt, “I remember. Akash best directed. He was meant to shoot me in the shoulder.”

Angel hummed, leaning back against the counter as she frowned at the bandaged wound, “I didn’t expect you jump in the way.”

“I didn’t expect Akash to shoot you.” He mumbled and she blinked up at him. His handsome face was bright with the sun on his face, his amber eyes gleaming as he probed his head forward. Ray lifted her other hand to the side of his face. Wondered how they’d gotten from trying to kill one another to here. Locks of his dark chocolate hair tumbled down on his forehead as he leaned forward, a tilt to lips,

“Worried?”

She flicked his forehead.

“Ow!”

Glared back at her as he flinched back. Ray turned to take another look at his hand, making sure that the white bandages were intact before taking a step back. His fingers

wrapped around the collar of her hoodie though, making her pause in her tracks as he pulled her closer,

“Also,” He started, his voice low, his gaze dipping to her legs and back to her face again, “Are you teasing me, Raylene Walker?”

She had to bite the inside of her cheek from grinning,

“Is it working?”

“Yes,” he muttered and pressed his lips against her wild pulse on her neck. His voice was a rumble against her skin, “Quite fucking obviously. ”

And as much as she wanted to pull him closer and ask him to close the distance between them, a faint scent filled her lungs. Ray blinked, pulling back an inch.

Angel’s eyes glimmered in surprise, but Ray was already leaning sideways and—

“What is this?” she started and pulled away from him to eye the plates sitting on her kitchen platform and the scrambled eggs that were cooking on her induction. She blinked and was about to continue when a loud ding! filled the wind. Ray jumped back, a yelp on her tongue and turned sharply to see two pieces of bread pop up from the toaster.

She frowned. When the hell did she buy a toaster?

“Breakfast a foreign concept to you, Storm?” Angel asked from behind her, and she turned on her heels, her brows furrowed,

“No.” she looked at the toaster, “A toaster is.” She mumbled.

“Well,” he clapped his hands and walked over to stand beside her and began placing the hot bread and egg in the plates. Ray remained frozen at the sight, just watching him work until he turned with the plates in both his palms. He smiled at her, completely at peace with her frozen stance as he walked past her and placed the plates on the counter before taking a seat on one of the chairs on the other end. Ray’s breath seemed to stop in her throat when he tilted his head, and softened his eyes, and—

“Coffee.” She managed to say before turning to grab two mugs. She heard his soft chuckle and couldn’t help a smile of her own, “Hot or cold?” she asked.

“Hot please.”

She hummed and waited for it to brew .

“Hey Ray,” came his soft voice from behind her and Ray turned in the silence that followed. Bit her tongue to keep herself from running over the counter and engulfing this boy in her arms as he put his face in his hands and grinned at her,

“Get used to this.”

Fuck.

Ray hummed again, her breath stopping in her lungs as she turned to get the two mugs. She walked back slowly and placed the mugs before him without saying a word.

Angel looked up at her through the locks of his hair, his cheek in the palm of his hand. She saw the twinkle in his eyes, caught an expression she’d never seen before and suppressed a smirk.

Just leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on the corner of his mouth.

Angel froze, and she let her grin slip free. Kissed him again on the other side and sat back down with a satisfied oomph . She cleared her throat and turned to her plate to pick up the bread and took a bite out of it before turning to look at him. Almost spat out the bread at the offended yet surprised look on his face. A laugh left her lips as he scoffed loudly and turned to pick up his mug of coffee angrily.

“Get used to this.” She whispered as he took a sip of the coffee. Angel’s shoulder’s bunched and she could see he was trying to gulp and retort when–

Thud!

“RAYLENE WALKER!”

Angel choked on his coffee beside her as Ray jumped away from him in surprise, almost falling off her seat with the loud voice that blared through the calm atmosphere .

Angel coughed violently as she righted herself and heard a pad of footsteps echo through her room. Her eyes narrowed into a glare when Neera and Cameron strode through her doors, Ira and Akash following in tow.

Everyone’s except Ira’s eyes narrowed in their direction. Ira just ran to Angel and started patting his back,

“Thanks–” cough, “kid.” Angel wheezed as the other three walked closer. Ira turned to peer at Ray instead of responding, her gaze curious,

“Did you and Angel sleep together?”

That had Angel erupting into another row of coughs beside her. Ray winced and glared at the younger girl,

“Christ Ira,” she said as Angel groaned and put his face in his hands,

“Fuckin’ hell,” she heard his hoarse reply as Ira cackled evilly and turned to face Akash and Neera. Cameron was standing behind them, his hands crossed as the other two looked between Ray and Angel.

“What?” she snapped and got off her seat, “How the hell did you even know – ”

“Nope.” Came Akash’s whiplash of a response before Neera grabbed her hand and hauled her to the nearest room. Ray scoffed loudly but not before she heard Ira say to Angel solemnly,

“Come on Angel,” she said, “Your friends are waiting for you downstairs. You can go without seeing her for five minutes.”

“I will start hating you, Ira Walker.” Came Angel’s wheezing response as the door shut with a loud slam and all three of her friends stepped closer to her. Ray chuckled a bit nervously and crossed her arms,

“What?” she asked again.

Neera’s eyes narrowed, “You did something.”

Ray rolled her eyes .

But yes, she’d done something. Cameron sighed from behind Neera and signed at her,

“Look,” he started as Ray bit the inside of her cheek, “Unless you messed the plan by

acting on your feelings for Angel, there isn't anything—”

She blinked innocently.

And Cameron gasped. And then Akash gasped. And Neera sighed.

“You didn’t.”

“I kissed him.” She started softly, easing them into it and turned to face Akash. Her best friend groaned out loud and put his face in his hands. She bit her lip and probed,

“Akash?”

His words were muffled when he responded.

“Was it worth the plan?” He cried and Ray smiled a small tentative smile.

“Maybe.”

“I hate you.”

Cameron looked up at her then, his gaze narrowed, “You couldn’t have kissed him before we put it all in motion?” he signed aggressively.

“Sorry.”

“What are we supposed to do now?” Cameron signed and none of them seemed to notice the set of her jaw. Lay down a trap, she wanted to say but didn’t, and simply wait for the mole to walk in.

Neera groaned again, drawing her out of her daze,

“I fucking owe Myra ten bucks now.”

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He rolled his eyes so hard he was afraid he was going to lose them in the back of his skull as Jack asked the same question the fifth time,

“So, what’d you and Ray do?”

Angel sighed, choosing not to reply as he hadn’t for the past five attempts. He didn’t know if Ray wanted to announce it to the world yet. Knew he wanted to keep it to himself for just a bit though. Just to torture the four pair of eyes glaring at him,

“What, man?” Luke finally snapped. Angel simply leaned further back in his chair in response. They were still seated in Ray’s or Akash’s house, the four of them having had slept on the floor together.

He sighed.

In his defense, this was all Ray’s fault.

And he thought about it. Thought about she’d made it her life’s mission to ruin them and how he’d done everything in his power to turn his people against his father in his time here. She’d somehow ruined all his intricate plans and had now very possibly sold him on the idea of abandoning his entire group by simply doing the easiest thing ever.

Burning everything down.

“Ah,” Angel sighed as he thought about it, “I might’ve fucked up.”

If not Jack's whines, his words finally attracted everyone's attention. Everyone here knew how he'd carefully built himself up to rip the businesses out from under Martin's nose. But knowing now, after talking to Raylene and telling her about the things he'd found in the hospital before the event, at the

end of all this, they were only going to end up in ruins.

There was a minute of silence that followed his words, and then,

"What," Christina said, exasperated as she let out a calming breath, "did you do now?"

Angel ahh'ed again and flopped back, the images of his house, his business all burning down flashing behind in his eyes. Jack's growl of annoyance filled the air, and he was totally aware of Luke holding onto a very exasperated Mia as she tried to attack him,

"Let me—" she grunted in Luke's hold as her eyes flashed in irritation, "Let me fucking at him. I'll kill him and maybe we'll know what the hell he's going on about —"

"Angel." Came Luke's tired voice, "Just spit it out or I'm going to let her go. I swear to God,"

"I kissed Raylene Walker."

That silenced them. Angel blinked and pursed his lips and was about to continue when he heard a burst of laughter from his side. He nodded solemnly as everyone burst out laughing beside him, and closed his eyes as he heard Jack gasp out,

"That's it?" he said, "God you're such a—"

“And she’s going to ruin all our plans now.”

Their laughter ceased immediately, and Angel nodded solemnly again, hilariously at peace with the fire. At peace with his doomed fate, “She’s probably going to set everything on fire as she did with the Lions. And she’s going to ruin every plan we’ve ever made up until now.”

“You’re telling me,” Came Christina’s hoarse reply, “That all those stupid calculations you made me do. All that detailed planning and hours of figuring out ways to get under your father’s nose– ”

Angel sighed, “There’s a new player in the game now.”

He said and opened his eyes. Stared at the wide expanse of the ceiling, “And now that we’re going to go after them, we’re going to also probably burn ourselves to the ground.”

Another minute of silence followed his words.

And was interrupted by Mia again jumping ahead to attack him and Luke grabbing onto her again with a tired sigh.

“I’m actually going to kill you – ”

“Oh, do shut up ! ”

Angel shot up at that, and turned to see Noah and Myra walk out their room, the former rubbing his eyes as Myra glared at all of them,

“Why do you all have to be up this early in the fucking morning?” she snapped, to which Angel fell back on his chair and returned calmly,

“It’s noon.”

“I will murder you.”

Angel closed his eyes as he heard Noah yawn loudly and mumble through it, “Get in line.”

“Where are the others?” Jack asked from beside Angel, “Or are you two the only ones here?”

“Irene’s still asleep, Ira’s waking her up right now. Sorin’s been on his phone all morning, and the others—” she paused and looked around, a frown turning her brows. Angel sat up, opening his eyes again,

“They’re yelling at Ray.”

Noah jarred awake at that, his shoulders stiffening, “What?” he almost yelled, “Without me?”

Myra smacked him on the head in response, making his entire body jerk forward .

Angel saw his friends stiffen at the action, wondering about the repercussions when Noah just shot Myra a dirty look and turned to walk into the kitchen.

Angel blinked at their interaction. It would take a while, seeing these representatives the world feared act like friends. It would take a while for all of this to sink in. Angel saw Myra turn to Christina, who was the only one who was standing, and frown,

“Your face is scaring me, please sit down.”

Angel turned and almost shot forward at the way she’d paled. Of course, it would

take all of them time to get used to all this.

It would take all of them time.

But it was an idea they'd have to get used to fast. Angel glanced at the clock hanging in the middle of the room, the chair creaking under him as he shifted uncomfortably.

Ray needed to get here as soon as humanly possible.

And as if on cue, Angel heard the faint rustle of the lock twisting and turned to see the door fly open. His eyes zeroed on Ray, who ran inside, looking absolutely exhausted as she darted her head around in search of someone. Angel blinked when he thought it might be him. And knew he was right when her eyes settled on his.

He subdued a grin as she sighed, visibly calming as she trudged in his direction. Angel didn't really care for prying eyes, just opened his arms wide and heard her sigh of defeat again. A wave of warmth washed over him when Ray flopped into his open arms and climbed so she was sitting before him and buried her face on the side of his shoulder. She mumbled something incoherent as he closed her hands around her body and fell back on the chair, taking her with him .

"This is disgusting," Angel turned to see Irene walk out with a distasteful expression in her eyes, "Make it stop."

Ray just raised her middle finger in response.

Smiling, he placed his chin atop her head and blinked at the audience up ahead. He saw Jack mimic gagging in Christina's direction, and shot him a venomous look, the smile on his lips never dimming.

"We should probably tell them now." He murmured from the corner of his mouth,

soft enough for Ray to hear. She groaned in his chest, the sound reverberating through his body as she sat up lazily. He watched her move, saw her blue black hair sweep across her face like a damned mess as she glared at him. Angel just tilted his head, the warmth in his chest spreading as he pushed back the strands of her hair,

“We really should.”

“Tell us what?” came Akash’s muffled question from the kitchen.

Ray moved so fast that the entire chair creaked dangerously with her quick movement. But she didn’t move away from him. Just turned so her back was now pressing his against his chest. She sat cross legged up ahead and turned around the room,

“Where’s Sorin?” she asked instead. Angel grunted in surprise when she dropped her weight on him without warning but wrapped herself in his embrace regardless. His eyes crinkled at her show of affection, something fuzzy spreading through his lungs at her comfort with him. At her trust. Every small action from this moment, every expression, he vowed. He’d savor it. Make it last for a lifetime.

And maybe more.

“I’m here. ”

Angel turned his head to see Sorin walk through the doors, Ira in tow behind him. The latter saw where Ray was sitting and rose a brow. Angel shot her a questioning look, which she returned by simply chucking out her tongue in his direction. He laughed softly at her actions, attracting Sorin’s attention. The boy, who’d been looking down at his phone, glanced up and saw the scene up ahead. Angel’s hold on her tightened as his jaw dropped, his eyes widening,

“I was gone a few minutes.” He said indignantly and Angel heard Ray click her tongue,

“Just sit down. We need to discuss something.”

Her words called everyone closer. They all took up chairs and made a circle around them. Angel waited for everyone to settle, and noticed as Ray shifted ahead, her arms crossing. Sorin took a seat on Angel’s left, his eyes on his phone as he crossed his legs and sat. Beside him sat Myra and Irene, who were sharing a larger chair. Neera and Cameron sat beside them, both their gaze serious as they looked at Ray. Irene sat between them, her knees tucked into her chest as she peered at everyone curiously. Noah lounged in his chair comfortably, a grin on his lips as he shot Angel an incomprehensive look. Angel blinked at it.

Luke sat on his other side, talking to Jack in low whispers as the two boys discussed something – probably their future plan of action. Christina and Mia sat solemnly beside both of them, Christina’s thumbs dwindling nervously. Angel turned to see Jack’s hand stop that movement as he laced his fingers with hers, not ceasing his conversation with Luke as he did so. Christina glanced up at that, and locked eyes with Angel, something like doubt flickering in her eyes .

Angel shook his head, a calm smile on his lips as he willed her to understand. Willed her to know that he’d never let them down. Would never willingly put them any danger. Christina nodded briskly at that, the fire in her gaze returning.

“Where’s Micah?” Angel heard Ray ask quietly and was about to divert to the conversation when he saw Mia’s brows scrunch. She was holding her phone in her hand, her eyes on the device as she read something speedily.

An odd feeling climbed through his bones when Mia’s head snapped up, utter surprise written on her features. He almost moved forward, but it was her who got up,

her hands shaking as she looked at him. And then at Christina.

Ray turned to glance at him over her shoulder, something dark shining in her eyes as Mia strode forward towards them. Angel let out a breath, the feeling turning his stomach as Mia neared him and leaned down to whisper in his ears,

“He talked.” She said, a tremor in her voice, “He’s given us some concrete leads.”

Luke, having caught her words, turned to him in surprise. This quick? This easy? Was it a trap?

Ray’s hand landed atop his, its warmth seeping through his skin, reminding him of what they were meant to do now. What all this meant. Angel breathed out and tightened his hold on her fingers. Go on, he wanted to say as Mia sat back down, but didn’t have to say it aloud, tell them.

“There’s a new player.” Ray’s voice was loud enough to quiet all the conversations around them. Angel sat up straighter and shifted back, crossing his legs as well as she continued, “We know they’re using our name. And we know they’re targeting me.”

“Us.” Neera interjected and Ray shook her head,

“ Me. I doubt they know who the Nameless group actually is, who we really are. Maybe they were just targeting the bridge between a very powerful alliance.” She said and Angel saw Neera lean back in her seat, her gaze insistent, “But I have reason to believe we might have the upper hand in the situation now.”

As if the rest of them knew, their eyes turned over her shoulder and rested on Angel.

He rolled his shoulders at the attention, fighting a bristle as he began, “Back at the ambush in the hotel, there was a man we caught. Who Ray shot down and was

believed to be dead by the Larsens.” He said, and looked at Akash, who ran a hand through his hair, “Dead by the world. But we’ve had him for a while now.”

He risked a glance at Ira and was pleasantly surprised to find the girl simmering in her spot. Her short hair swayed atop her head as she leaned forward and glared down at her laced hands. Angel breathed out, “His name’s—”

“Arwan Lyall.”

Micah’s voice was far too dark to belong to such a young boy. But the fourteen-year-old only stepped through the open doors of another bedroom and looked calmly in Ira’s direction. The girl shook but didn’t flinch at his words. Nor did she balk when he took a few steps forward and stood right behind Sorin, something venomous shifting in his grey eyes. Angel rose a brow in question, and Micah, having had caught the look simply pointed at the small scar that marred his cheekbone and jaw,

“He gave me these.” He said and Ira finally looked up, her expression giving away nothing, “I won’t forget his name.”

Angel blinked away the wave of rage that washed over him and turned back to the others, “Arwan’s been in our facilities for a while now. Half fighting for his life as he’s being questioned to give up more information about these new players.” He turned to Mia, “And up until now, we didn’t have any substantial leads.”

“All I know is that my father is one of them,” he continued and shook his head at the frowns that deepened most of their expressions, “It’s making no sense, I know. Which is why I think that he’s not the only one involved. And it’s possible he’s not the key player either way.”

“We’re dealing with a ghost here.” Ray said and massaged the back of her neck, “No one knows where they came from. And no one knows where they reside.”

“We know now.” Angel interjected and Ray looked over her shoulder, her eyes betraying the same thing both of them were thinking.

Are you sure?

Angel gave his answer by continuing, “He’s finally broken.” He said and pointed in Mia’s direction. She nodded and handed him the phone, her eyes shining with conviction as he glanced down at the device and caught the five sites written in the message, “We have five facilities around the world where Lyall’s operated. Five opportunities for us to figure out who’s behind this mess.”

“And then we’re finally out of the fucking bind.” Ray ended.

“So how do we divide this?” Noah asked from up ahead, lacing his hands as he leaned forward, “We need to figure out–”

“This can’t involve any of you.” Ray interrupted and Noah frowned, but Ray shook her head before any of them could argue ,

“If any idea of you guys being with me gets out, we’ll all be at risk. For now, their focus is solely on me as the alliance is riding on me. On whether or not I’ll wake from my coma or not.”

“But there is no alliance anymore.” Neera interpreted for Cameron, who signed the words, “We’ve successfully managed to wipe the Lion’s out.”

Ray turned to Sorin, who averted his gaze, “We haven’t gotten rid of Kyle. Which means getting rid of Maya and Alessandro is also going to be difficult. We can’t have them joining hands with this group.”

“Kyle will agree to keep his mouth shut.” Sorin said softly then, and Ray heaved a

breath from up ahead. Angel saw the look in Sorin's eyes. Was afraid he was intercepting it as something else. But then he looked back at Ray, his lips set with conviction,

"We'll get rid of the Maya and Alessandro. Silence them as we'd planned to." She spoke.

"You're talking about killing one of the most powerful families in the world." Mia said, her voice betraying doubt. But Ray only scoffed,

"There's different ways of dying Mia," she said, and goosebumps erupted on Angel's arm at her cold voice, "You're dead if you don't exist for the rest of the world."

"And making the world forget isn't as difficult as it's said to be." Came Myra's happy response. Angel blinked at her fake cheer, realizing that they'd done this before. Had probably been successful considering their confidence.

"Leave that to me." Akash said softly, and looked at Ray, "I'll take care of the Larsens," he turned to Sorin, and nudged his chin in his direction, "He can handle Kyle and Vera."

"Vera," Ray whispered, and Angel remembered the girl coming to Ray's rescue. Shooting Kyle down, "How did she get to know about me? "

"Maybe her cousin let it slip?" Mia said, her tone unbothered and matter-of-fact. Her words attracted a sharp glare from Ray,

"How about you worry about yourself, Mia?" she shot back.

Mia's eyes flashed sharply at her retort, but Angel shook his head at both of them, "Enough." He said just as she was about to snap back and saw Ray's shoulders go

taut. He turned to Mia,

“Stop the accusations, Mia.” He said calmly and leaned forward so he was within Ray’s line of sight, “And calm down.”

Ray’s teeth clenched but she nodded, calming in his hold, “I’ll get it out of her.” She said and moved so she was sitting with her back to his chest again, “For now we need to fix our plan of action.”

“I still think we should divide and work together.” Irene said, her braids slipping over her shoulder as she looked intently at Ray, “We can get more ground covered in lesser time.”

“And if not them,” Jack began, “We can help.”

Angel looked at his friend, making sure to convey his gratitude as Ray nodded at both their words. Jack shot a serious dip of chin at the look and continued,

“I doubt you’re the only target. If the players were smart enough, I’d think they would come after Kyle and Angel as well. An alliance doesn’t stand solely with the middleman.” He paused and turned to Christina, “And knowing now that they could be based in five different places, each of them could be a trap. I think we should go after all of them at the same time to see which one’s real.”

“Because even if they get even a whiff of what you’re up to,” Irene continued for him, catching his line of thought, “They’ll be on the move again .

And with what we’ve seen, they aren’t a big group after all. Recruiting children is the first sign—”

“What if they’re saving their resources? Bidding for time?” Ray countered, “What if

they want us divided and what if two of us go in one of the facilities and are bombarded with a large group, we can't bring down by ourselves?"

Angel could feel her growing panic. He'd never seen this side of her. Was used to her cold and collected self. Human, he thought a bit wondrously as he looked at her, she was human.

"Ray," Noah said softly but it was Angel who leaned forward. Who grabbed the back of her shoulders and hauled her back into his arms. Others might be used to this. Might be used to her panicking like this. But Angel wanted to deal with it in his own way,

"I have an idea." He said with a wide smile as her head tilted up to peer at him. Those honey eyes seemed to glisten in surprise as she realized who she was with. He nodded. He knew how different it felt now that they weren't out for each other's throat.

"Well?" Myra probed, crossed her arms as she tilted her head in his direction, "What is it?"

Angel's grin widened, "You like bombing things, do you not?"

Ray blinked, taking a moment to catch the meaning behind his words. She gasped when she reached the realization.

And he nodded again, a smile turning his lips.

"We could spread out as you said," Ray said, sitting up as she rubbed her chin in thought, "But instead of breaking and entering to figure out which place is the real sight, we place bombs on each of the sites and wait for confirmation. "

“When we know which site it is, we can just,” Angel snapped his fingers, “Blow them up.”

Ray chuckled before him, “Not that easy. We can’t just kill the innocents there,” she said and shook her head in his direction, “We need to scout it out. And only after making sure that everyone is out, we go in for the kill.”

“Because if there one thing we’ve learnt from infiltrating the Lions,” Myra said, playing with her pink highlights as she stared into nowhere, “It’s that we need to figure out who’s the real enemies.” Her gaze turned to Sorin, who sat straighter, “Kyle and Vera were like wildcards in our plans. Now we know what side they fall on.”

“So where do we go from here?” Mia asked, the chair under her creaking as she leaned back. Angel’s hold on the phone in his hand tightened, a movement Ray discreetly covered as she moved. He admired her line of sight, her attention. Was glad to have it as support as he answered Mia’s question,

“Now we find out where to go. And we put the first step of the plan in motion.”

Ray nodded, and turned to Ira,

“Scouting.” She said, a bit distracted as the younger girl stared back at her. Angel could see the question in her eyes. So could Ray, because she shook her head and said in a gentle voice,

“Not you.” She said and looked at Micah as well, who turned taut at her attention, “Nor you. Both of you play no part in any of this anymore. However,” she added with a hint of seriousness, “If you both have any other information to share, you best do it now. ”

Angel saw Ira and Micah share a glance. Wondered when they'd met for the first time when the latter turned to Ray, his hands tightening on the back of Sorin's chair,

"I can help you with the facilities." He said, and Angel leaned back, suddenly tired from this conversation, "I'm sure I've been to at least one of them. But in return—"

"Your father's safe.

Micah's grey eyes flashed, "How'd you know..." he began quietly, his voice shaking as Ray waved a hand in the air,

"Van's an old friend. It was a miracle he turned out to be your father." She said, and Angel's brows furrowed at the familiar name.

"Godfather." Sorin corrected gently and looked over his shoulder at Micah, "As long as you're with us until all this ends, you and Van should be safe."

Van.

Angel blinked and blurted out after a moment's pause, "The barber?"

Ray grinned at him, "Sorin and Micah were hiding there while we waited for everything to settle."

Angel scoffed, his mind blown as he flopped back in his seat. It was wonderous how they'd managed to hide this for so long now.

"Well anyway," Myra interrupted, "We need to decide how to divide ourselves." She turned to Angel's friends, her gaze narrowing. Angel straightened behind Ray, ready for a fight when Myra just shrugged,

“I think we should pair up.”

“Pair up?” Christina said and Myra nodded, lost in thought.

“It’ll help build trust,” she said realistically and looked at the rest of them without a hint of doubt or judgement ,

“Like if Luke and Noah and I start working together.”

“Jack can join us,” Sorin said, pointing at himself and Irene.

“And Christina with me and Cameron.” Neera continued calmly. Angel arched a brow as Ray looked over her shoulder again,

“I guess that leaves me with the lovebirds.” Mia said in distaste, and leveled a glare on both of them, “Don’t make it worse for me.”

“You all need to relax.” Angel noted and returned a hard glare as Akash scoffed from beside Ray,

“Why don’t you try that after letting go of her, Raven?” He remarked tauntingly. Angel shot him an unamused smile as Ray put her face in her hands and sighed deeply,

“He has a name.” she said, exhausted just as he heard Mia snort.

They all cackled but Neera just stared at Mia stoically. Angel, sighing now, just rubbed the middle of his brows with more force than necessary and growled deep,

“Can we please stay focused—”

A loud screech filled the room as Sorin got to his feet suddenly. His movement surprised Micah, who darted back as if he were caught on fire. But Sorin just turned to look at Ray, who moved to stand on her feet. Angel didn't really understand what was happening until Noah got up as well and Sorin turned to all of them.

Well, all of them excluding him and his friends.

“Are you sure you want to bring him in this?” he asked, his voice dubious. Ray blinked at him, surprise marring her features. Angel furrowed his brows, wondered if he was talking about Kyle when Neera got to her feet as well,

“Do you trust him?” Ray asked .

Sorin shook at her words.

“I do.” He said softly, “But not enough to share every minute detail of our plans.”

Ray nodded beside him, “Then tell him nothing of it—”

“I want him to know about our allegiance with them,” he nudged his chin in Angel's direction, “I want him to know who I am. Who we are.”

“Tell him.” Noah replied calmly and stepped in his brother's direction. Angel saw it now, and still couldn't believe his eyes. Couldn't believe they were twins and had slipped under so many people's noses just. Like. That.

“Don't tell him about the new player. Tell him nothing about our plans. But tell him who we are if you want to.”

Angel didn't know what was going on, but judging by the sheen look in Sorin's eyes it wasn't easy. He knew now they were talking about Kyle. Knew what went between

Sorin and Kyle was far deeper than he'd ever imagined. It surprised him but made both of them a bit more human. Made them far more understandable.

It was with that thought, he slid off his chair and brushed his pants to smoothen them down. Smiled as he saw Ray shoot him a questioning look and turned to look at the rest of his friends. Luke and Jack got up as well, turning to face him as he heaved a breath and said in a low voice,

“It's time for us to head home as well.”

Angel was aware of Ray turning on her heels to face him, and turned so he was too facing her. His eyes softened at her fractured expression, and he forced his urge to wrap her in his arms to subside as he continued,

“We'll manage some damage control from our end. Let Martin believe that we aren't onto him as of yet. And let the world believe the alliance

has been broken and the Lions are now forgotten.” He paused and Ray took a step forward, “Let the world believe you're in a coma and will be for a while.”

Never again, she seemed to say and Angel nodded, the fear of thinking that Ray was that close to death washing over him. Never again.

“Hey,” Akash said, and Angel looked over Ray's head at the boy, “Sorry for shooting you in the arm.”

Ray beamed at Akash as he turned away after shooting her an unamused glare. Angel nodded as well, a smile turning his lips as he replied haughtily,

“Consider us even then.”

Akash halted, brow arching.

Angel shrugged, “You shot me, I don’t pay for your broken house.”

“Fuck’s sake.” Akash mumbled but waved a hand in the air, walking away now. Angel grinned and turned to the rest of his friends. And turned back to Ray, who had her eyes fixated on her end of the group. They stood like that for a second and moved so they were standing closer. Angled their head so they were looking at each other now.

“I’ll come to you tomorrow.” He said soft enough for her to hear and saw her nod. Smiled softly when she melted,

“And every day after.”

* *

“So, that was...” Jack began as they stepped out of the car Angel had arranged beforehand. The others followed him out,

“Insane.”

“Crazy.”

“Stupid. ”

Angel only sighed as he too followed their movements and got out of the car. The driver reversed it away, leaving the five of them at the foot of their mansion back here. Back home. Who knew Ray was hiding right under his nose this entire time. Wondered if she would ever go back to the house he’d brought down.

“I still can’t believe half of what’s happened,” Christina mumbled and turned a sharp glare on Angel, “And now we have to deal with your idiotic father.”

Angel groaned.

And an overbearing step-mother.

Both Martin and Miranda had arrived at the mansion a while back. He’d received a notification back when Ray had been in the washroom.

He tilted his head now, staring at the desolated place without a ripple of emotion in his mind.

Once, it could’ve been a beautiful place, with its crème walls and golden-brown doors. It wasn’t really a mansion, now that he thought about it, nor did it resemble the palace as the Larsen’s had built on the island.

No, this place was big, but somehow, it was home.

At least until his mother had lived in it.

“No one says anything about Raylene.” Angel said softly, knew for sure his father might have eyes and ears on them the entire time, “And no talk of the new players at all.”

Luke nodded beside him, a movement the rest of them reciprocated as Angel tucked his hands in the pocket of his jeans. He’d been wearing the same clothes for a while now, except the white shirt he’d borrowed from Ray’s place. His fingers itched to touch the red glass that hung from his neck, but he resisted the urge .

Was suddenly reminded that Raylene Walker was wearing the same thing after all.

The thought brought him enough peace of mind to continue.

“We don’t know where Kyle is. But we do know that now that Noah’s dead to the world, Larsen’s business had crumbled. No one knows where Maya or Alessandro is. But now’s our chance to talk over the Lions and maintain our status.”

“And our previous plans?” Jack asked quietly, his eyes cast ahead, a dark curtain over them as he looked at the wretched place.

“We’ll give Martin some control and take advantage of the situation by slowly beginning to pull out.” He turned to Luke and Christina, “Find all the people who want out. Buy them out, threaten them, I don’t give a shit. But start acting on years of contact.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Mia’s question didn’t really surprise him. He turned to her calmly, “Keep Miranda out of all this,” he said gently, “And find out where Maya and Alessandro are.”

“Are we sharing that information?” she asked and crossed her arms. Even Christina turned to him, waiting for his response.

Angel nodded, “We share everything now.”

Mia’s eyes darted down to his necklace and back up again, something like displeasure running in her gaze. But it was Luke who rescued their conversation,

“Good.” He said and Angel looked back ahead, “We need someone on our side.”

You need someone on your side, he seemed to say .

Angel smiled a rueful smile and was about to respond when the main doors up ahead flew open revealing a frenzy of red hair and a pair of dead amber eyes. Angel's gaze narrowed as Jack sighed and Miranda came running down the stairs, Martin in tow behind her,

“Let it begin.” He murmured and Angel scoffed.

Once and for all.

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There used to be a dull ache in the middle of her chest. Right above where her heart pounded wildly against her ribs. Now however, it was replaced by a cool feeling of the glass pressing against her skin as she leaned down to tie her shoelaces. It was unfamiliar, having something that belonged to someone else. Holding a part of them so close to one's heart.

It was... different.

"When are they getting here?" Noah's question drew her out of her reverie. Ray let go of her laces and got to her feet, pulling the sleeves of her beige hoodie down. She didn't really pay attention to the conversation that followed. Instead, just stood between the twins and fished her phone out of her back pocket.

She'd had it changed the minute she'd gotten back and had shared her number with Angel last night as well.

Now as she opened his chat, she found the list of sites they had to visit waiting for her. Ray breathed out as she scoured the places, trying to figure out where each was. They seemed as though—

She shook her head. She'd have to plan this out carefully. Slowly. And now, she knew should focus on Kyle and Vera, but she couldn't help this nagging feeling in the back of her mind. Which was why she took a step back from the twins and said in a low voice, "I need to go do something." Ray said and looked up to see those dark pair of eyes staring back at her in equal amounts of surprise and questioning. They were standing in the lobby of opposite building .

Neera had a place here, but their true place was where they'd gathered before.

This building was taller, was much more expensive than the penthouse Akash owned. It attracted more attention as well. And served well as a diversion.

"Do you need help?" Sorin began but Ray only shook her head, taking another step back as she looked at the five sites again.

"Just ask Neera to get a map." She said and saw Noah's brows scrunch,

"A map?"

"A map."

She turned an apologetic look on Sorin, "Get them upstairs. I'll help you out then." she said and barely saw him nod as she turned on her heels. Ciera Wilson, their special security personnel, smiled as Ray passed by her. Ray returned the gesture and ran to the elevator.

The house here was on the top floor as well. Even the elevator was extravagant when she stepped in, wrapped with a red carpet and golden souvenirs. She tapped her finger on her phone impatiently, waiting for her floor. Her thoughts drifted to Angel, wondered what he was up to when the elevator dinged and stopped. Ray breathed a silent breath of relief and stepped out, immediately greeted by a huge door.

She tapped in the password on the digital lock and watched as the doors swung open dramatically.

Christ she hadn't been here in a while.

The place was just as beautiful as they'd left it. She strode through the small hallway

and entered the large living area with glass windows surrounding it .

Large white curtains draped over them, masking the sunlight as it cast a golden sort of glow on the crème sofas.

She looked to her right, saw the stairs that headed up to the rooms they hadn't used in years now and decided to work here itself. The wall on the sofa's left was empty and large. The perfect place to start planning. All she needed was a—

Beep. Beep.

“I've got it!” came Myra's loud voice, followed by Irene's deadpan,

“I haven't been here in a while.”

“Bloody love this place.” Neera continued in a content voice. Ray turned to find the three girls step through, one of them holding a large map in her hand. Myra grinned over the large piece and Ray moved, smiling back ruefully as she grabbed the map out of her hands and turned to the empty wall,

“What are you— oh okay,” Irene said and paused as Ray dropped the map to the ground and grabbed the pins from Irene's hand. The three of them stood quietly behind her as Ray took a chair and silently worked to get the map up on the wall. Was about to step down to get the hammer when a cool metal pressed against her back, making her jump in surprise.

Ray turned to find Neera staring at her with a mischievous smile and glared back as she grabbed the hammer out of her hands and nailed the map to the wall.

“Now,” Irene started as Ray jumped off the chair and grabbed her phone, “What's up?”

Ray didn't reply. Just grabbed the pins and began pinning them on the addresses Angel had sent her. She placed one on the top left, one on the top right and another on either of the bottom ends .

The last one came right in the middle of the four.

"That's five." Neera breathed out as Ray threw her phone on the sofa and heaved a breath, the odd feeling still twisting her stomach. It seemed weird, having these five sites in hand just like that. And she wasn't the only one who was feeling it, Irene also took a step forward and placed a hand on Ray's shoulder.

"It's odd." She mumbled and Ray turned to her, her expressions betraying some sort of fear. Irene had her gaze planted ahead, her other hand playing with the hem of her t-shirt as she eyed the map, "These places are all spread out in the countryside. But aren't spread across the world."

"Where are we right now?" Myra asked from behind them, and Ray pointed it out. They were currently a few miles below the five points. They'd all have to head up north, but it only led to the outskirts of the city.

"Do any of these places seem familiar?" Neera asked and Ray shook her head. Not even close.

Ray's brows scrunched, a sudden thought hitting her.

"Do any of you have thread?" she asked and extended her hand as Neera nodded. All three of them stood back as she wound the thread around the first pin and waited. Wondered if it was a rectangle with a cross inside or something else completely.

And decided, to hell with it.

Ray twisted the thread around the bottom left pin and took it diagonally across to the middle one and to the top right. And she knew she shouldn't break the thread, but an odd sense of déjà vu was hitting her.

“Scissors?” she asked softly and murmured a thank you as Irene placed it in her hands .

Ray repeated the process with the other diagonal end and took a step back, eyeing the—

“A multiplication sign?” Myra asked incredulously and Ray shrugged,

“Doesn't it look a bit familiar?”

They didn't really have time to respond because the door behind them beeped again and all four of them whirled to see Sorin and Noah walk in. Ray blinked and crossed her arms as Kyle trudged in behind him, his face withdrawn as a completely opposite Vera strode in confidently.

Her eyes widened when she saw Ray, a cheeky smile spreading across her lips as she pointed in her direction, “You.”

Ray scoffed and eyed the other girl. Vera was dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans, ones that hugged every inch of her body as her extended hand moved so it was pointing at the map behind her.

“What's that?” she asked but Ray waved a hand in air, dismissing her as she saw Sorin grab Kyle's hand and haul him up the stairs. Noah winced as Sorin walked past him, with Kyle looking awfully dead behind him.

Ray turned to face the map and took a photo of the wall, breathing out as she looked

at the sign again. It was there somewhere, lurking in the back of her mind as it remained out of her grasp. Ray swallowed a groan and watched as Vera neared her and peered up at the map,

“Why do you have that symbol up there?”

Ray froze, her eyes widening as she turned to Vera, “You know what that is?” she asked and Vera hummed, crossing her arms,

“It’s familiar. Doesn’t it resemble that one gang that Angel De Santos was known to have destroyed a while back?”

And it clicked .

Ray made sure to keep the surprise off her face as she turned to Neera. Shot her a discreet look as she veered Vera’s attention elsewhere, “So,” she said and led the girl back to the sofa, “How was your flight?”

Neera and Myra moved fast behind her as Vera flopped down on the sofa, completely unbothered, “What?” she asked, “Not going to ask me how I knew about you?”

Ray’s mind was too caught up to answer her question. Which is why she patted her shoulder impatiently, “Uhuh,” she said and smiled at Vera, “Why don’t you tell me without wasting anymore time?”

“I pieced it together when I saw Cameron step out of your room.”

Ray blinked and slammed back to reality, “You knew since then?” she almost screeched and Vera shrugged,

“I just assumed you were involved in something else.”

“So why didn’t you say anything to Kyle or Maya?”

A dark look shifted in her eyes, “I was going to,” she began, and her hold on the sofa tightened, “But then I saw how she handled that young girl and how you stepped in between and I,” her voice caught, and Ray saw the first glimpse of feeling in the girl’s expression, “I couldn’t say anything after that.”

A rare sort of sympathy rose in Ray’s chest at the sight of this girl. Vera seemed to notice her expression because she waved her off and continued, “I knew that wherever you were involved, Akash would be too, so that was another incentive to keep my mouth shut.”

“Aww,” Ray coddled playfully and laughed as Vera shot her a deathly glare, “You big softy—”

Vera slapped her hand away and mumbled under her breath, “I couldn’t have it getting back to me. ”

Ray hummed and patted Vera’s hair, “You big selfish softy,” she cooed and barely felt the sting as Vera slapped her hand away again and let out an outrageous sound.

Ray’s gaze lifted to the stairs, her mind stalling at the silence that spread through the upper floor. Wondered if she should go upstairs and make sure Sorin was alright.

“Are you fucking serious—”

Ray’s attention snapped up, her eyes going wide as she saw Kyle storm out of the room on the top of the stairs. His blonde hair was a mess as looked back at Sorin, who had followed him and was now sighing. Ray’s head tilted at the life that had now returned in Kyle’s stance as he angrily pointed at something down the stairs.

Someone.

Ray frowned when she realized it was her he was pointing at and crossed her arms as Kyle threw his hands in the air dramatically and started yelling. Again.

“She tried to kill me!” he said, sounding awfully annoyed by the fact as Sorin took a few steps forward, “And now you want me to what? Protect this miserable—”

His yells cut off as Sorin grabbed onto Kyle’s t-shirt and hauled him closer. Ray couldn’t really believe her eyes but knew what she was seeing was true when Noah groaned and turned away from the scene. Sorin Hassan was kissing Kyle fucking Larsen.

“Oh.” Irene said, not looking away as she said to Myra, “He’s really going at it, isn’t he?”

Sorin just raised his middle finger without breaking the kiss.

“ Yeah, Sorin!” Neera yelled and Ray saw Sorin pull away. She cackled when Myra whooped from her side and Noah shuddered.

She saw Sorin look directly into Kyle’s eyes, his height giving him the power to support poor Kyle’s weight as he swayed deliriously.

Ray grinned when she heard him say,

“Okay?”

She’d never seen Kyle nod this quickly in his life.

“Okay.”

“Wow.” Irene said loudly and turned to Ray, “Think that’ll work on Angel?”

Ray scoffed as Vera made her presence clear by coughing violently, “It will.” She said a bit proudly, and smirked at Irene who shot her a rare grin, “And I won’t even have to kiss him.”

“That confidence,” Neera said as Myra whistled in response, “You make me sick.” She added with a venomous smile.

“Wait,” Vera choked from the sofa, attracting their attention. Ray blinked down at her, surprised to find a morbid expression on her face, “You and Angel De Santos?”

She didn’t really give a response. Just continued staring at her until she understood she wasn’t going to get an answer.

“I can’t—” Vera took a sharp breath, trying to process the situation as she rubbed her brows rigorously, “ Why?”

That might’ve been the most offensive thing she’d ever heard. Offensive and logical, but offensive, nonetheless. Ray scoffed and glared down at her.

“He’ll keep his mouth shut. ”

Sorin’s voice drifted through their conversation and Ray turned to see him and Kyle step down from the dais, their hands entangled. Ray arched a brow as Kyle shot her a nasty look,

“I’m not apologizing.” She stated as he continued glaring. Kyle’s shoulders stiffened, his green eyes turning sharp behind his glasses as he removed his hand from Sorin’s and straightened them,

“What are you going to do about my parents?”

“You’re not getting your life back Larsen,” Neera said instead, and Ray felt a twinge of pity when his entire composure seemed to weaken. But Neera kept her eyes on her nails, inspecting them as Myra continued in her stead, sounding a bit more sympathetic,

“Your parents will be punished fairly,” she said, her pink braids falling forward as she spoke in faint cheer, “Any time you break Sorin’s heart though, you’ll be joining them.”

Ray blinked at the blatant threat but wasn’t really surprised at it. Myra had always been like this. Cheerful on the outside, deadly on the inside. It was why her ex-boyfriend hadn’t seen what was coming when he’d crossed her. It was why Ray had saved her ass back then and would do the same any day. She looked at the girl now, standing taller and stronger than she ever had. Especially after she’d had to give up on her dream.

Had to give up her career for Lia.

They’d all sacrificed a part of themselves before getting involved in this mission. Had given up on their lives to make some people pay for mistakes they didn’t even know they’d made. Her friendship with Myra was easy. But with Myra came Irene. Their relationship had started rocky. Irene used to own a business back when she was still in school .

Ray had pulled some strings back then to get her out of the ditch she’d fallen in with a few investors, and there had been a time when Irene had hated her for it.

She got used to the hatred though.

Cameron and Neera had come hand-in-hand.

Cameron had been a survivor of a dangerous family back home. Had met Neera while she'd been employed by his family. And both of them had left together, both wanting out from a world they were born in.

That was of course, until the repercussions of their actions had followed them all the way back here, where they'd met Akash. Where he had saved both of them from a family that was hell-bent on killing them.

Noah and Sorin were a simple business relationship in the beginning. She'd struck a deal with them before embarking on the mission, and somehow it had transcended into something more friendly. More personal. Maybe because they knew Lia, or because they shared the same fate of loss with her. But it had become far greater than any deals.

And Akash, the boy who was sitting back at his place, watching over Ira and Micah, was her one rock. Was the one who had been with her since the beginning. He might've been a bit foolish in the beginning but had changed with her. Had become more like a brother and a friend she hadn't asked for, but knew she needed.

"I don't plan to," Kyle responded, drawing her out of her daze. Ray followed his line of sight, and saw him staring out the windows without a hint of emotion in his gaze, "I've had enough of this life as it is." He murmured quietly.

"There will be a day," Ray said then, something sharp prickling her conscience as Kyle turned to look back at her ,

"When you will want to see them. When a part of you will want to forgive them. Will want to forgive yourself."

Kyle's body stiffened, his hands balling into tight fists as Sorin sidled close to him. Ray had the sharp urge to leave this place and go in search of a certain someone as she continued.

"Remember why you made this choice then." She said and saw him gulp, "Know that it wasn't because of Sorin, or because anyone made you."

A breath, a sigh and she said the words she'd wanted to say the first time she'd seen Kyle Larsen, "It was because you didn't belong in a place that didn't see you for who you are."

"You aren't a person who stands in shadows, Kyle," Ray continued and something in his eyes shifted. Something deep like realization swam in his gaze as he took a step closer to Sorin as well. Ray saw their hands brush, saw the poise and the gentleness they regarded each other with, "You're a leader. Become one that doesn't represent fear.

Be one that is different from how the world perceives one to be."

Ray breathed out when she finished, a sudden urge to leave rushing through her bones as she took a step back. Her eyes darted around in search of her phone and she grabbed it from the sofa. Not waiting for either of their responses, Ray ran a hand through her hair and took another breath, moving so she was heading out the door,

"We begin tomorrow." She said in a low voice, "And we end it, once and for all."

She didn't hear them murmur their agreement.

Just strode out the doors with her fingers tight around the glass shard on her neck.

* *

Angel flopped back on his bed with a muted groan. Judging by the amount of work and trust he'd have to regain with his father, he would probably have to spend the night. Martin and Miranda had stepped out for the night, saying they would spend their time elsewhere for the time being while Angel got the mess sorted out. A stupid decision considering it was pouring outside.

He could still hear that wretched conversation clear as day.

"Where have you been?" Martin's voice was thunderous through the large dining room, "I know you left that island two days back."

"Keeping tabs on me now, father?" Angel retorted, his feet tapping impatiently on the floor as he heard the faint murmurs of the conversation Mia was having with Miranda.

"What have you found out up until now?" Martin asked instead, returning the question with a calmer voice. The man was poised on the chair with his back erect, his suit ironed to perfection as he eyed his son.

Typical for him to get tested while Martin obviously knew everything.

"After Noah's death,"

"Unfortunate." Martin mumbled and Angel resisted his urge to roll his eyes,

"The Lions seemed to have crumbled. Raylene Walker is in a hospital, her situation still looking a bit dicey." He thought about it, maybe it was a good idea to throw someone under the bus as well, "On another note, Kyle Larsen is missing. There's been rumors."

"Rumors?" Martin demanded, "What rumors?"

Rumors he was making up just to mess with his father's mind.

"Rumors that Kyle Larsen might be behind all this," sorry Kyle, "And that he might've orchestrated this entire thing to abandon the alliance."

Martin's brows crinkled, "But Akash Smith was behind the attack." He said and Angel nodded,

"They might be working together. Especially considering what happened last year between you and the Smiths, it's possible they might've banded together."

Your fault, a part of him wanted to spit at him, all this was your fucking fault.

"I knew Kyle was a fool," Martin spat instead, "But never considered Akash to be one as well." He paused, "Well, I suppose you could handle it from here."

"I need you to work on something as well." Angel began. Something that would take you far away from here, "I need you to maintain our businesses abroad. Talk to people and make them believe that we're holding our ground as we always have."

Shine in a place that will forever remain in the dark.

Martin's eyes glimmered in the sunlight, something like satisfaction passing through them as he rubbed his chin, "Very well." He said and a wave of relief washed over him, "But we begin tomorrow. Me and Miranda are heading out to spend a calm night elsewhere."

And they continued by discussing some logistics. Some measures they'd have to uphold while Jack and Christina had walked in to chime in the conversation. Martin had taken some of their suggestions, satisfied by the fact that he was given his time to shine and display himself to the world like a bloody trophy in Jack's words.

Luke had stuck by Mia upon Angel's orders. They'd managed to calm Miranda long enough for her to walk out the doors with Martin and with a small, gentle smile .

Angel groaned out loud again, his hands going over his head as he thought back on the day. God, he missed Ray. Having her close was like a comfort he hadn't had in a long time. It was something he hadn't known to miss long enough. He murmured a soft prayer in Spanish, a rare slip of the tongue as he recalled her being close, her fruit scent, and her wide eyes. And it was completely her fault that he didn't hear the faint rustling of the windows being pulled open.

Not until a soft tap, tap, tap drew him out of his daze.

Angel shot up, his hands going to the gun resting in the waistband of his jeans as he heard the tap, tap, tap of the window again. His brows furrowed as he shot forward, a nudging feeling in his chest as he grabbed the curtains to haul them open and stopped short when he saw what was outside.

Or rather who was outside.

Holy shit.

Angel had never moved this quickly in his life. He pulled the windows open with a disbelieving laugh and grabbed onto her arms. Raylene Walker grinned back at him as he pulled her into his room and wrapped a careful hand around her waist as he moved to close the window behind her.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered furiously, not really believing his eyes as he saw Ray take a step away from him to look at his room, "What if someone saw you come in--"

She shot him a deadpan look that said really?

“Right.” He laughed.

She wasn't wearing the damned hoodie anymore. Instead, was wearing a soft pink t-shirt that clung to her body as she shivered in his room. He frowned .

“Why are your clothes drenched?” he asked a bit stupidly, in a low voice and saw her turn on her heels, a pout on her lips,

“It drizzled.” She mumbled, “And I might've run here.”

Angel's eyes widened, “ Are you crazy?” he almost yelled, and she jumped in surprise, grinning as she shushed him. He moved quickly past her, grabbing the first shirt he could see from his cupboard, and shoved it into her arms,

“Wear this.” He stated furiously and began pushing her through the open doors of his washroom. Ray moved with his movements and paused only to turn on her heels to face him as he opened the doors of the washroom.

“Say that again,” she said with a smirk, and a look in her eyes he couldn't really believe, “I have to say that it was insanely sexy of you to—”

“Christ,” he laughed again and shoved her through his washroom, “Just get changed, you insane woman.”

And closed the doors.

Still not really believing that Raylene Walker was in his room.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

Ray stared at her reflection, biting her lip as she contemplated her decision-making skills. What in hell had possessed her to run all the way here? She sighed again, agitated with the way her mind had begun working around Angel De Santos, and slammed her hands down on the counter. Her reflection mirrored back a flushed face. With hair loose in waves, spilling over her shoulders as she leaned forward, Ray looked at herself. Breathed in deep.

Angel was outside, waiting as he always had.

And she hadn't thought about it when she'd run all the way here. Hadn't really cared enough to. Because somehow, in those few days they'd spent together, this spark had lighted in her chest. To know more. To see more. To understand more.

Of him.

So, she breathed out now, sudden calmness spreading through her. It was the first time she'd wanted to share what she'd learned with someone. Somehow, Ray couldn't really wait to go out. To see him. To tell him everything.

It scared her.

That didn't mean she wouldn't do it.

Ray turned on her heels, a soft rustle in her movement as she faced the closed door and turned the knob. She emerged, her heart thudding in her chest, as she forced her hands at her sides. Angel was standing, his hands crossed as he gazed out the window, looking awfully calm and beautiful.

His hair swayed, his t-shirt following the quiet movement as he stared out the windows.

She could watch him stand like that for hours, she thought as she leaned against the wall and smiled softly. Angel still hadn't noticed she was out. Was just staring at the night sky with an odd emotion in his eyes.

A traitorous part of her wanted those amber eyes on hers.

Wondered what he would do if he saw her like this.

Ray cleared her throat, and Angel's eyes snapped in her direction immediately.

It happened so slowly, and Ray reveled in every waking second of it. She saw him go still, his eyes going dark so suddenly. She saw his throat bob once, and the way his lips parted slightly. Shit, she cursed herself for going through with this, she so wasn't supposed to do this.

But she did.

"It's a bit big, but I think it'll do." It took everything in her to keep her voice steady. Because she knew this was awfully cliché, but maybe cliché was good. Just for today. Knew he was seeing her in his large white shirt and well, nothing else. A soft sound drew her out of her daze and Ray looked back up. Angel was frozen on the spot, wind blowing through his hair as he looked at her.

And kept looking.

She arched a brow and crossed her arms, a smirk turning her lips, "Enjoying the view?" she asked slyly, and a guttural sound left his throat again.

“Very much,” she heard him murmur and laughed as he closed his eyes and turned away, a tortured expression on his face, “Ah,” he said and rubbed his chest, “This isn’t good for my heart.”

Ray looked down at herself, feigning innocence .

“What do you mean?” she asked and saw him peep through his closed eyes, “Want me to change—”

Nothing could have prepared her for what Angel was going to do.

Those amber eyes were embers when he moved. Angel crossed the room so fast, that Ray barely saw him move. And out of nowhere, he was just a few feet away from her when she heard him murmur,

“Not really,” his voice was strained. Low, “Say no now Raylene Walker,”

Her stomach dropped. Her heart paced.

But she just let a slow smile curve her lips.

Angel released a harsh breath, and before she knew what he was doing, Angel’s hands were cupping her neck, and his lips were on hers. He swallowed Ray’s gasp, pushing her against the wall. Click went the lights and suddenly in the darkness, the sirens of reason disappeared. Angel’s lips parted, his tongue sliding. His teeth clasp. Ray’s entire body arched, her hands reaching up to the back of his shoulders. She felt the muscles flex under her hands as she let out a soft moan and arched further against him. It was warm everywhere, him everywhere.

“Fuck.” he murmured in the darkness and with the stars shining in Ray’s eyes, pushed her further into the open doors of the washroom.

“Wait,” she managed to breathe but didn’t take a step away from him. Instead, just led him back, and as if knowing exactly what her mind was saying, his hands gripped her waist and hauled her up the counter.

Ray’s breath caught, and Angel coaxed it out of her as he fell on her again, his hand dropping to her waist as he broke the kiss and swore again, “Is this okay ?” He breathed, and a part of Ray wanted to say hell no and run away .

But she just grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in for another scalding kiss.

His groan rumbled through her and suddenly Ray was floating. His hands were on her body, her fingers roaming the broad expanse of his back. His heaving chest. And that mouth. Holy. Shit. It pulled and stretched and silenced.

It sang.

Ray’s body bowed as Angel pressed against her, his lips breaking to kiss its way down to her neck. A bit lower.

“God,” she breathed and threw her head back.

“Stay the night?” he whispered against her skin and Ray looked down at him, her gaze flickering with doubt. Angel caught the look, softening his gaze upon her as he rose to face her and cupped the nape of her neck gently,

“ Just stay.” He said and she knew by the soft look in his eyes that he didn’t want to go ahead either. Didn’t want to take another step forward in that direction. Ray melted, leaning into his touch as she kissed his palm softly and murmured,

“You?” she asked nonetheless and saw him inhale. Felt the movement as he leaned closer and brushed his lips over hers.

“Not yet.”

She might’ve murmured something in response, but lost track of her words when he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers, coaxing a moan from her lips. His hand clasped her thighs then and a soft gasp left her as he pulled her closer.

“Hold on,” he mumbled against her lips and picked her up. Ray’s legs wrapped around his body, her hands tangling in his hair as she kissed his lips, his nose, his forehead .

Angel’s chest rose with a sharp breath, a soft sound leaving his lips as she tightened her hold on the back of his neck,

“That’s dangerous, Storm.” He whispered but she pressed a soft kiss against his lips. Didn’t quite know how he handled the walk back to the bed. Was too busy getting drunk on the feel of him.

Soft, cold sheets brushed her back when Angel lay her on the bed and placed his hand right above her head, hovering over her, dragging his lips over hers lazily. As if he couldn’t help himself. As if he couldn’t stop. Ray couldn’t help a chuckle when he leaned back, a small smile slipping on his lips,

“What?” she asked, laughing as he hovered and stared. His gaze dipped to the necklace around her neck, a soft look entering his eyes as he feathered a finger over the glass shard,

“Nothing.” He answered and looked back at her, “It’s just,”

Ray hummed and wrapped a hand around his neck, the other dragging through his hair, “What?” She asked softly and watched his face soften,

“You’re real, right?”

She pressed her hand against his chest, and whispered,

“Every single inch.”

His lips pulled into a grin that destroyed her heart. Ray laughed, and then groaned. Because he was so close. And she had fucking business to mention. With what will she didn’t know, she looked away from his lips and said, “But,”

“I hate but.”

“Shut up.”

He laughed and she shook her head ,

“I came here to tell you something.”

His eyes crinkled, a smirk stretching his lips as he flopped down on the bed beside her with a muted groan, “Are you sure?” he teased and Ray went up on her elbows to face him, “Could’ve had me fooled,”

He cut off with a laugh as Ray smacked his chest, her gaze fixating on those dimples. It’d been a while since she’d seen them. She extended her arms now, her index fingers brushing over that indent before moving up to push back the locks of his hair. Angel relaxed under her touch, his eyes falling shut as he breathed out, his chest hollowing with the action,

“Do you remember the first group you brought down?” Ray began quietly, and Angel hummed distractedly, leaning into her touch. She bit her lip, wanting to do nothing but stop talking. He must’ve noticed because his lips quirked at the edge, his eyes still

shut as he teased,

“Tell me what’s going on in that mind of yours.” He said instead and Ray flicked his forehead, enticing a beautiful chuckle from his lips.

“Do you remember or not?”

His eyes opened then, a sort of laziness blazing through them as he nodded, “I do. They were notorious back then.” He said, “Bringing them down was like debuting as an official player in the world.”

“I know.” She replied softly and he moved closer, suddenly attentive to her tone, “It was in the beginning when I was working for the Lions, in the underworld, looking for ways to make my mark.”

“Before you got in their bad favor?”

Ray nodded, but she wasn’t really sure of anything anymore.

Angel’s gaze flickered but he nodded, nudging her to continue.

“Their symbol,” she said, flopping down beside him to stare up at the ceiling, “Do you remember it? ”

“I–” his brows furrowed, “Where is this going?”

Ray heaved a breath but moved to get off the bed. Angel watched her, not saying a word as she stepped into the washroom in search of her phone. Fished it out of the pants that were now lying on the floor and opened the image up before she stepped out. Ray almost stopped short when she saw that he was sitting upright now, at the edge of the bed with his hands laced together.

He lifted his head when she neared him. Ray extended her phone in his direction, and he grabbed it out of her hands, his eyes flaring wide at the image,

“This—” he began and shook his head, “These are the five sites I sent you?”

Ray nodded, “I placed them together to see if they were some sort of trap and,” she paused, gnawing at her nails, “Well, now it seems like a trap.”

“It already was one when I got to know the sites aren’t placed around the world.” He murmured and looked up at her, “And the symbol. It’s close.”

Ray’s gaze flickered and he looked back down at the image, his shoulders stiffening, “I mean, a cross—”

“Multiplication sign.” Ray muttered and was relieved to see his lips lift in amusement,

“A multiplication sign,” he amended, “Gangs back then didn’t hold symbols. They still don’t. It’s a stupid thing to do, considering we’re all trying to attract the least amount of attention in the world.”

Ray scoffed as he continued, “But they always wanted to stand out.” He looked up, his eyes glazing his thought, “Ironically, no one knew who the actual head was . No one knows this, but it wasn’t me who brought him down. By the time I’d destroyed their business, someone else had already gotten to the top and had him assassinated. ”

Well, shit.

“Yeah,” Ray managed to say and bristled as Angel snapped up, his brows drawing together, “I might’ve had something to do with it.”

He blinked, stilling for a second before erupting,

“What?”

Ray winced, “Well, I was working for the Lions back then. They didn’t know who I was, but they’d hired me to get rid of two people.” She started and Angel blinked rapidly, “That entire gang and well, you .” She mumbled the last line, in an attempt to mask the truth, but Angel caught on.

“What?” he said again, looking lost and honestly like he was going to pass out,

“I might’ve killed him.”

“You. What?”

Ray ran a hand through her hair and bounced on her heels, “Back then there were the Ravens, the Lions, and the Phoenixes.” She cringed at the names, “And you all were monopolizing this bullshit underworld. I was already entangled with the Lions, and they were looking to get rid of both of you. So, when I gathered that both the leaders were going to be at the same place at the same time I jumped at the chance.”

It was silent for a second. Ray let him take it in, crossed her arms as she waited, and counted the seconds in her mind.

A sound drew her to cease her counting. Ray’s eyes snapped in his direction, widening when she saw him with his face in his hands. His shoulders shook and she took a shocked step forward,

“Angel?”

It was then he threw his head back and let out a loud laugh .

Oh shit, she swore out loud and darted ahead to slap a hand over his mouth, muffling his laughs.

Tremors ran down her body as he continued laughing, his amber eyes twinkling in the nightlight as he wrapped a hand around her waist and tugged her closer. Ray moved, unable to bring herself to deny him when he removed her hands from his lips and placed his forehead against her stomach.

“You. Are insane.” He managed to wheeze out. Ray glared down at him, not amused by his humor as his laugh subdued into silent chuckles,

“And here I thought I had a guardian angel back then.”

Ray scoffed, “You’re lucky you got out of there alive.” She said and narrowed her gaze when he muffled his laugh against her t-shirt again.

“I know,” he said and looked up at her, his chin lifting with a playful look in his eyes, “Extremely lucky.”

Another laugh erupted from his lips, and she shushed him furiously, rolling her eyes at him, “How did I not know you up until now?” he asked, his shoulders shaking as he stared up at her,

“How in the world are you even fucking alive?”

Ray’s gaze narrowed, and she took a step back ignoring the widening of his lips, “How lovely of you to say,” she remarked, and Angel shook his head, a grin lining his lips, “No it’s great to know that my boyfriend—”

His head snapped up at that, his eyes going wide. Ray paused with an er and took another step back.

“What?” she asked hesitantly after a second. Angel just blinked up at her, his brows in the air. She was still blinking down at him when a slow smile curved his lips.

He got to his feet then and extended a hand in her direction. Ray took it, confused by the pause in the conversation as he tugged her closer and

wrapped his other hand around her waist.

Dipped his chin enough for his hair to fall atop his forehead,

“Say that again.” He murmured softly and realization hit her square in the chest. Ray tilted her head, her lips threatening to break into a smile,

“Say what?” she asked and saw close his eyes. Felt him take a deep breath,

“Ray,” he said dryly and glared down at her, the moonlight bouncing off his skin, “I’m trying to be romantic here.”

“I know—”

“And you’re being a gigantic pain in my ass.”

Ray huffed out a laugh, burrowing her face in his chest as he groaned, “And now you do that,” he said as though he was exhausted, “How am I supposed to stay annoyed?”

Ray hummed, the sound reverberating against his chest, and lifted her chin, a smirk inching her lips. She knew he didn’t see it coming. Hell, she didn’t see it coming. She just leaned back in his arms, wrapped a hand around the nape of his neck, and pulled him down. Angel’s eyes widened when she went on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his softly. Carefully.

They moved closer when she deepened the movement, her other hand moving to touch the bare skin above his t-shirt, right above his collarbone.

She moved her hands, surrendering herself to him when he deepened the kiss. She took that as a chance to groan softly in his mouth and slide her hands to his back, right above the rift of muscles that flexed under her touch.

Angel broke the kiss abruptly, his eyes hazy ,

“That your way of apologizing?” he murmured and went to kiss her again. Ray laughed softly but drew him closer and tangled her hand in his hair, sliding the other down,

“No,” she whispered, “It’s my way of calling you my boyfriend.”

He hummed against her, a beautiful smile lifting his expression, “Great. It’d be great if you did that every time instead of calling me your boyfriend.”

“Sure,” she laughed.

“Fucking storm I swear.”

She didn’t respond to that. But then again.

She didn’t have to.

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Maybe peace had a fucking timer.

His life certainly did.

Because just when he was getting more and more comfortable with the feel of Raylene Walker pressed into his chest, a loud thud, thud, thud filled the room. Ray groaned in his arms, burrowing deeper into his chest as he startled awake. He made to move, annoyance washing over him as he tried to twist away from the warmth of his sheets. But didn't really get far, because just as his hand was right around her shoulders, hers was wrapped around his body. Ever the heavy sleeper, the girl just tangled her legs with his and began snoring softly. Again.

Angel bit back a grin, the haze of the sleep washing away at the sight of her. God knew how she'd survived up until now.

Thud, thud, thud and –

“Angel?”

He blinked once. Twice.

“Angel, are you in there?”

Oh shit.

“Ray.” Angel whispered furiously and huffed when she didn't reply. He turned his head and yelled out,

“Yeah!” he said and looked back down at Ray, shaking her, “ Ray, get up.”

She mumbled something incoherent and fell back asleep. Angel couldn't help it. He let out a quiet laugh and loosened his hold on her .

God, this girl.

“Well, breakfast's ready!” Miranda said from the other end, drawing him back to reality, “And your father says he needs to talk to you!”

“I'll be out in a second!” he yelled back and shook Ray again. She finally stirred, a curse on her lips as she turned in his arms,

“Quit fucking yelling,” she snapped and winced when she realized sunlight was raining down on her face. Angel grinned at the sight, and unable to help himself, pulled her closer so her back was against his chest,

“I need to get you some fucking curtains.” She mumbled. Just when he noticed she was about to fall back asleep, he inched closer to her ear, grazing his teeth on its outer shell before murmuring quietly,

“So vulgar in the morning.”

Ray elbowed him right in the ribs at that.

Angel groaned at the pain that exploded through his chest and leaned away from her, his eyes shutting in pain. And Ray, that self-confident prick just rolled onto her back and stretched her arms wide, a soft sound leaving her lips.

“Christ,” he managed to wheeze and glared at the sight of her smiling. Her face was haloed by the sunlight, her back arching as she stretched her hands in the air and

lollered her face sideways to smirk at him,

“Want to introduce me?”

“Come here you little shit—”

Ray squealed as he reached for her and slipped off the bed. Angel followed her movement, barely managing to grab her forearm and haul her back to the bed. She was grinning when she came back on with his movement, her head angled up at him as he glared down at her, hovering from further away than last night .

She huffed before him after a moment, crossing her arms as she did so, “You know, you swear at me a lot.” She said, her brows scrunching as if she were just realizing it. Angel’s annoyance slipped at the action, his eyes flaring wide, “I doubt that’s something a doting boyfriend would do...”

“Honey, sweetheart,” Angel purred without missing a beat, coaxing her closer as she looked up at him wide-eyed, “Baby, which one do you prefer?”

Ray took a moment before him. Blinking once.

And just when he thought he’d broken her, Ray shook – no shivered before him, an atrocious sound leaving her throat,

“Gross.” She said and he scoffed, suddenly annoyed by her words, “No honey or baby. Sweetheart works.”

“Right.” He said and was about to move away but couldn’t. Okay, maybe he wasn’t really trying. But in his defense, Raylene Walker had no right to look this beautiful in the morning sun. She blinked up at him, her lips rising from the corners as moved up on her elbows, coming closer. Angel watched her hair, the beautiful crash of waves

on her back and spilling over her shoulders.

God, he could live staring at them all fucking day.

He reached forward then, unable to help himself, and entangled a hand through the soft lush, brushing his fingers through them. They were a tangled mess, one that didn't allow him to smooth his hand all the way down, but hell they were soft. Silence draped on them and somehow they stayed like that, in their own bubble of peace as he admired what his life had come to and how there was no way in hell he was ever living any other way.

But of course, as he'd thought before, peace had a fucking timer .

And it rang so loudly that Angel and Ray both jumped up in surprise at the abrupt sound.

"Fuck," he sighed and flopped down on her, making sure to balance his weight to the side as he burrowed his face into the side of her neck. Ray's laugh was soft and breathless against his shoulders, but he allowed her enough room to reach out and grab her ringing phone from the nightstand,

"Hello—" he heard her say, an obvious smile on her lips when Akash's voice blared from the other end,

"Get here now!"

Angel shot up at that, Ray following his movement as their bubble burst, bringing forth a wave of seriousness crashing down on them.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and Angel could tell she was trying to keep her voice calm despite the subtle tremor in her words. He grit his teeth at that and she looked up

at him, a rare wave of panic washing over her features as she put her phone on speaker,

“You need to get here now,” Akash said again, and Angel moved off the bed, Ray trudging behind him. She was still wearing that white shirt of his from last night. Before she could go to the washroom, he’d already darted to his closet and had grabbed a pair a denim he knew would fit her. Ray barely blinked when he threw it in her direction, grabbing it at the same time she threw her bed on the phone and said a bit loudly,

“Where?” she said as she put the jeans on and Angel turned away from her, whipping his own T-shirt off his head and grabbing the first pair of sweatpants he saw. A belt came within his line of sight and he grabbed it immediately, throwing it hurriedly in Ray’s direction before running into the washroom.

Ray followed him in, her phone in her hand .

“Brush?” she murmured as they waited for Akash’s response. Angel nodded, making sure to brace a calm hand on her lower back before grabbing the spare brush from his cabinet.

“ Mine .” Came Akash’s response, “ And get Angel as well. Him and the others.”

Ray hummed in response and hung up. Silence descended upon them, filled with nervousness and panic as they brushed as quickly as they could. Angel made sure to keep an eye on her, even when she finished, and moved to step out of the room.

“Hey,” he said before she could move farther away and grabbed a hold of her upper arm, placing his brush back on the counter after he was finished. Ray paused, turning over her shoulder to look at him with that same placid expression of hers. He sighed at its sight and took a step forward, brushing a hand through her hair before grabbing

onto her shoulders and shaking her out of her masked reverie.

“It’s going to be alright.” He said quietly and saw her blink, finally a wave of emotion crashing over her features. Angel nodded at her, and without wasting another second, grabbed hold of her and stalked out of the washroom. He let go of her hand only to grab a T-shirt from his closet,

“You ran here, right?” he asked, his voice slightly muffled as he tugged the t-shirt on.

“I did.” She answered softly and Angel gazed back at her tense set of shoulders and wary eyes.

“I’ll send Luke down to the place right below by the window, where you climbed up from and we’ll leave together alright?” he asked and grabbed his phone to relay the orders to the other boy ,

“Martin can’t see you here even by chance. There are CCTVs, but none around my area and certainly none from where you climbed up from.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, and he turned a small smirk in her direction, wanting to draw a smile from her tense lips,

“Because you wouldn’t have taken that path otherwise.”

Ray blinked at the praise and huffed after a second’s pause. Angel grinned at her grit, at the way she crossed her arms and turned away from him,

“I’m fine, you don’t need to—”

He didn’t let her complete her words. Just leaned forward and slid his lips right above hers at a sweet angle. Ray froze, but only for a second. Her crossed arms dropped to

their sides as he willed all his conviction, all his adoration for the girl before him in that short kiss. It was over before any one of them wanted it to be.

But when they broke apart, their gazes weren't hazy. For the first time in a while, they were crystal clear and alert.

“Go,” Angel said, smiling that same razor-sharp smile that he'd shown her the first time he'd seen her, “I'm right behind you.”

Her grin was nothing short of cold and malicious.

“I know.” She said and turned on her heels to jump right out the window. Angel watched her, a wave of pride washing over him, unable to believe that this was really happening. One last hurdle, he told himself and tugged the hem of his t-shirt upright.

One last hurdle and they'd be clear for a lifetime.

And a morbid part of him couldn't help but think,

Famous last words.

* *

She had her face in her hands, another groan building up her throat as the rest of them remained silent around her. Waiting for her to accept their situation. Because honestly, she couldn't tell if this was a bad thing or not. In fact, nor could Angel judging by the way he stood beside her, leaning against the wall with a confused expression on his face.

“So we're unhappy with this?” he finally asked, breaking through the atmosphere. Ray looked up at that, and shot him a glare before turning to hear Sorin's sigh

ricochet off the walls,

“ Yes,” he said and Ray leaned back in her chair, leaning onto Ira who was sitting upright beside her, “Kyle’s heartbroken.”

“Of course,” Jack said from the other end of the room, the crunching of the packet of chips in his hand attracting everyone’s attention, “I’d be worried if he wasn’t.”

“But isn’t this what you were all aiming for?” Mia inquired, she too leaning forward to grab a chip from the bag Jack was holding, “Getting rid of the Larsens.”

Ray exchanged a heavy glance with Akash while Angel responded for her, “They were looking for a bit more insight before killing him.” He said in a calm voice and ran a frustrated hand through his hair, “But what does this mean for us?”

“Alessandro Larsen’s dead.” Neera accounted and Ray’s knee bounced at her words, nerves wrecking through her, “And the entire world knows. Which means making Maya—”

“Who is very unconscious,” Myra added from the floor, her shoulder touching Cameron’s as he watched their conversation. Apart from Angel’s group, everyone was signing as they spoke. Angel signed as well, Ray noted with a hint of pleasantness .

“Who indeed, is very unconscious. Making her invisible is going to be far more difficult now,” Neera continued, tucking a lock of her pin-straight hair behind her ear, “And to make things worse, if she does wake up or when she recovers, she’s not only going to wake to a world where their businesses have officially failed,”

“But a place where the world no longer fears the Lions.” Noah murmured. He was perched on the couch beside Neera, his hands laced as Micah brooded beside him

silently, watching them all with guarded eyes.

“A place where her son no longer works with them.” Sorin added and Ray sighed, putting her face back in her hands again,

“And a world where her husband no longer lives.” Neera completed, setting them in an uncomfortable silence. Ray squirmed in her seat, her imagination running wild at the mess she’d have to handle when Maya woke up. The mess Kyle could create now.

“How did he die?” Christina asked, her question soft but loud enough for all of them to hear. She was sitting on Akash’s kitchen counter, Jack standing right beside her as she stared straight at Ray, “I thought no one knew where they were.”

“That’s what we thought.” Ray answered, lifting her face from her hands to return her stare, “And no matter what you think, I have enough dignity to not kill a man when he’s grieving.”

Christina’s gaze flared at her response, and Ray knew by that response that she’d caught the meaning behind her stare correctly. It was obvious to assume that the Nameless – that they – would be behind his death. Hell, the entire world was probably preaching that it was them who’d killed and brought the Lions down. And while Ray had played an important role in bringing them down, she hadn’t had a hand in killing Alessandro Larsen .

Especially considering his throat was slit when he was asleep.

“This isn’t time to fight amongst ourselves.” Angel’s voice rose above Ray’s thoughts, “Quit glaring at each other.”

Jack smirked from behind a chip, “Says the whipped boy.”

“Says the whipped boy.” Angel echoed with a solemn nod.

Ray ignored their presence altogether.

“What do we do now?” Cameron signed, and Ray’s jaw ticked at his question, her brows furrowing in thought.

“I think we can step into the trap now.” She said, her mind racing even as their eyes rose to hers in surprise, “Killing Alessandro was like a favor on their behalf. They did the same thing with June,” she turned to look at Ira, who stiffened beside her, “It was a gift that removed any unnecessary obstacles for me.”

“Ironical considering they want to kill you.” Luke murmured from beside Angel, sharing a glance with the other boy. Ray scoffed at his words, agreeing with them completely.

“Anyway, now that Alessandro’s out of the picture, it’s safe to assume Maya’s going to be out of it for a while as well. So as long as we go ahead and step into the trap no one else is bound to get hurt.”

“Why do you care?” came Ira’s sudden quiet words, startling Ray. She turned to face the younger girl and balked at the sheer rage in her eyes, “Why do you care about what happens to Maya Larsen? She whipped me. Whipped you – ”

“It isn’t because I care.” Ray responded calmly, and Ira turned to look at her, her shoulders drawn tight, “It’s because when she wakes up and realizes no one in the world is on her side, she’ll raise a hell that would be too dangerous for any of us to live in. ”

“Maya’s a snake.” Irene continued just as calmly, “She will do everything in her power to ruin all of us.”

“And if by then we haven’t gotten rid of these new players,” Ray continued, “Then it’ll become all the more difficult to deal with them together. We can’t kill Maya, but we can’t have her waking up to a world where we hold no power either. I’m not putting your life at risk.” She blinked at Ira, “Makes sense?”

“Makes sense.”

“So, what do you do now?” Micah’s voice was another surprise that jarred her. Ray turned to face him, making sure to keep that surprise off her features as he dug his fists through the pockets of his jacket, “Go in search of their facilities, and what? Walk into a trap?”

Ray shrugged, “It’s the only option we have left. We move quickly from this moment forth. Let’s take today to gather supplies.” She turned over her shoulder to look at Angel, “You have your contacts?”

Angel nodded briskly, “We can get you almost everything you need.” He answered and Ray shook her head,

“I’m not asking about us. I’m asking about you and your people. Do you have enough?”

“We do.”

“But what are you going to do about Martin?” Luke asked, “I thought it was part of your plan to get rid of us as well.”

Ray shared a questioning glance with Angel, who crossed his arms and raised his brows. Her question was relayed between them, you or me? Which one is it going to be?

His lips split into a grin in response.

Me .

“Martin’s connected to these new players,” Angel started without breaking away from their stare. They’d decided not to tell everyone about the possibility of it being the rise of someone the two of them had ruined a while back. When the perfect time came, they would be quick in doing so. But not today. Not when none of them were sure about who could betray them, “So when we take them out, I’ll work on disbanding our businesses as well.”

Mia’s exhale was loud enough for all of them, “If we succeed, no more of...” her voice cut off, as if the thought of the possibility was too—

Frightening. Horrifying.

But she saw the glint in Christina’s eyes. The way Jack and Luke straightened, something like stark alertness blasting through them.

Hopeful.

“God, I hope this works.” Akash murmured, clearly catching the twinkle in their eyes. The way they all seemed all the more hopeful for success despite their entire life’s work being disbanded.

“We go slow and steady.” Ray began carefully and got up from her seat. The others got to their feet as well, their gazes following her as she walked to one side and picked up the map from earlier. Knew what she was doing was a warning she wasn’t meant to ensue. But she didn’t give a shit.

She saw Cameron shuffle backward, clearing out the living room area as she grabbed

the hem of the map with one hand and looked down at it brazenly. Once the space was clear in the middle, she whipped the map open, spreading it across like a carpet, and let it sit on the floor.

The red thread was gone, the pins marking its place instead. She could see the map. The signs.

“With the groups we formed before, we go after each of these sites. ”

She went down on one knee, the paper rustling underneath her as she moved to point at each of the places, “We find out the people, the workings, everything. Scout out the cameras, find anyone who looks even closely responsible for everything that’s happened.” Her eyes still rested on the map, sudden hatred burning through her as she thought of the death that had been ripped from her hands, “This is a two-day job. One day to scout without getting caught. Second day to place the bombs and blow the entire place up after figuring out who leads these bullshit groups.”

When she looked up, they’d all made a circle around her. Everyone except Angel, who stood right beside her, his expression stark with conviction and focus. It resolved something in her, making that twinge of fear disappear altogether. He would do it with her, she realized, he would let her burn his entire life’s work down if she hadn’t given him a choice. Ray turned to the rest of them as he offered her his hand. Not to get her up. Not to help.

But to support.

Ray placed her palm in his and got up, her other hand balling into a tight fist as she stared straight ahead.

“And if anyone interferes.” She said, her voice calm, “Be sure to get rid of them.”

“We make no mistakes.”

All of them nodded, and she looked at their circle. Noticed how close they all truly were to the end. How close they were to the ending they had envisioned ever since she'd taken it upon herself to avenge Lia. She turned to Angel and thought, somehow that ending had turned into something new.

Morphed into something different that was now merged with revenge.

And how that might change what they'd envisioned afterall.

She just didn't know if it was for the better or the worse.

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“Y ou are not coming with me!” Ray yelled for what was definitely the fifth time as Angel leaned back against his bike and sighed. For the fifth time. Because Ira was standing her ground in front of her Ray, her hands crossed with a fierce expression on her face. Angel would’ve been proud of her if he wasn’t in full agreement with Ray,

“Then what do you expect me to do?” Ira exclaimed with equal force and Angel noticed Mia stalk in his direction from the corner of his eye. He shot her a grim smile when she stood beside him and handed him a helmet,

“They’re still at it?” she asked sourly, and Angel nodded, turning back to stare at the two girls.

“Stay. At. Home.” Ray said through gritted teeth, “I can’t have you lingering around. It’ll mess with my focus.”

“Oh yeah? Like a lot of good that did when I stayed home last time.” Ira shot back.

Angel bit back a grin as a tick appeared on Ray’s jaw, her eyes shutting in sheer annoyance, “Fuckin’ Christ, that was our plan!”

“I know that!” Ira said indignantly, not really making sense anymore.

Mia leaned closer, her red hair brushing his shoulder, “Just say the word, I’ll knock her out.”

Angel whipped a morbid look in her direction just as Ray shot her a dirty glare, having heard her words. Ira took a clean step away from them acutely and opened her

mouth to continue when Angel noticed a shadow take form from the entry of the building .

“Are you not done yet?”

Micah was sure lingering around them a lot nowadays. Not that Angel minded, he was just wary of the younger boy. He saw Ira jerk in surprise, her shoulders stiffening as Micah sauntered out from the building with his hand tucked in the pocket of his jacket,

“Get the hell inside. Both of you.” Ray snapped, finally losing her patience. Everyone else had already left to do their jobs and seemed as though Ira had waited for the last possible second to confront Ray on this.

“Sure,” Micah replied with a shrug and turned to Ira. But the girl was barely looking at him, was busy simmering in Ray’s direction,

“You need me for—”

“I’m not doing this again.” Ray threw her hands in the air and turned away from her, her eyes clashing with Angel’s as she moved in his direction. He straightened, the helmets tightening in both his hands before Ray neared him and grabbed one, “You get inside now. And you don’t come out. No one will knock on your door. There’s enough food in the kitchen to last you a lifetime and—”

“ Why won’t you just let me come?” Ira interjected loudly and Angel only saw Ray’s eyes flash in warning before she whipped her head over her shoulder and said in a haunted, quiet voice,

“ Because I lost someone back then. ” She said, pain lacing every syllable. Ira flinched back, her hair swaying violently as Ray continued, tremors rocking her body

before him. Angel took a single step forward. Near enough to share his warmth but not enough to touch her, “And I won’t lose you too.” She shook her head and looked away, “I fucking won’t.”

She tugged her helmet on her head then, and Angel looked over her shoulder to see Ira’s eyes snap shut and open again .

He angled his head, so he was in her line of vision and shot her a small smile.

Ira shook her head at him, her stance softening by a fraction as Ray moved to her own bike,

“She’ll be alright.” He said and Ira huffed out an annoyed breath, but he still took a step forward. The wind whipped past them when he neared the younger girl and continued in a quiet voice, “You aren’t going to lose her.”

We aren’t going to lose her.

Ira nodded, her first sign of acceptance as he lifted his head and nudged his chin in Micah’s direction, “Go on then.” He said and watched as Ira turned to walk back into the building. The security guard that Ray had told him about– Ciera, dipped her chin once before escorting both Micah and Ira into the building. Only when he saw their bodies disappear did he finally turn on his heels to sit on his bike. He couldn’t help a small smirk when Ray shot him a withering look from her helmet,

“She always listens to you.”

“That’s because I say things she wants to hear.” He responded with a small grin and saw her head shake in response, “Careful Walker,” he continued and tugged his helmet over his head, “Don’t want to look jealous now do we?”

Ray scoffed as Mia's bike thrummed to life behind them.

"I liked it better when we were mortal enemies." She murmured loud enough for him to hear as Mia swept past them, bringing forth a cold wave of wind and dust. Angel blinked past it, and lolled his head so he could stare at Ray,

"That's such a lie." He sang and laughed when Ray roared her bike to life and took off after Mia, leaving him in the dust.

* *

The facilities were far more secluded than she'd expected it to be. For once in her life, she could hear only the crickets and the faint rustling of the wind when she removed her helmet. They'd parked a few miles behind the road that led to the warehouse, but Ray could see no signs of life.

Angel mirrored her expression as he parked his bike beside hers, and swung his leg off his bike, removing the helmet as he did so. Ray took the time they both took to adjust and look around, fishing out her phone and dialing the group in the meantime. She placed an earpiece in her ear as her phone rang, stepping forward to hand Angel the other one.

Mia hadn't noticed their interaction, and even if she did, it didn't matter. She was busy staring at the faraway warehouse. Angel blinked down at her when the ringing ceased with a click and the others all connected to the secure line.

"We're here." Myra said, her voice slightly muffled, probably because she was hiding alongside Luke and Noah, "There's a working factory here, with multiple people going in and out."

Ray shared a glance with Angel before replying quietly, "Find out which company

they belong to and let me know.”

“Jack?” Angel asked, staring back ahead at the warehouse in the distance. Mia had her hands on her waist, having stepped right in the middle of the path that led up the hill. They’d all parked their bikes a bit behind, hidden by the selective bushes and trees that were planted all across the hill.

“Jack’s here with me.” Sorin said, his voice quiet as well, “It’s a working warehouse here. There are people everywhere, all carrying boxes in and out of the place. It’s like a place where they hoard their inventory.”

Ray’s brows furrowed .

Two out of five were bustling with people. So, what made their place different–

“That’s weird.” Akash interrupted her line of thought, “Me and Irene are literally standing in the middle of nowhere. This place is completely secluded,”

“And it looks completely unhabitual. Judging by the wines and the broken windows,” Ray could swear she felt Irene cringe, “It hasn’t been used in quite a while.”

A goose chase that one then.

Angel matched her gaze, his thoughts matching hers, no doubt. Ray hummed and watched the warehouse sitting atop the hill, “And the last?” she asked,

“I don’t know how to say this,” Neera replied, “But it looks like this place might be a hostel. For orphans.” She added. Ray thought back to how Micah had pointed at that very spot and had looked at her warily,

“Be careful here.” He’d said, his voice twinging with a rare catch, “It’s where the

worst of us hail from.”

“That might be the place where they recruit and train children,” Ray replied darkly. Neera went silent for an entire minute.

“I’ll start making adjustments to get them all out.”

Ray nodded even though she could see her movement, “I’m standing on a small hill. There’s this warehouse sitting on top, and it looks empty from here, but we need to go check it out. It seems to be in a good condition.”

She turned to Angel as the others responded, asking her to be safe and stay on the call,

“Do you have your gun?” she asked quietly and saw him inch closer, his necklace swaying with the movement .

Angel leaned down and bonked his forehead against the top of her head lightly, making her blink in surprise,

“Don’t worry about me.” He murmured in response and Ray saw Mia stride forward without looking at either of them, “I have everything I need.”

“Can you both stop for five minutes?” came Irene’s tired voice from their earpieces and Angel leaned back in surprise, a small grin on his face as echoes of agreement followed.

“Fuck off–”

Ding!

Ray snapped her gaze down at her vibrating phone in hand, her brows furrowing.

“Did any of you send me a message?” she asked tentatively, a sudden ball of dread rocking her stomach.

“No,” everyone responded, and Akash continued, “Why? What’s wrong?”

No one else had her number, that’s what was wrong.

Ray breathed out harshly and lifted her phone, her body suddenly shaking with anticipation as she saw a sealed message from an unknown number in her notifications. Shit, if someone had her number, that meant their communication was fucked as well.

“We’re compromised.” Ray said as quickly as she could, “Get off the line.”

She didn’t wait for their response, just ripped the earpiece from her ear and slammed it to the ground. A satisfying crunch filled the air as she slammed her heel down on it. Angel followed her actions, his brows furrowing as Ray opened the message from the unknown number.

‘Miss me? ’

Ray grit her teeth and looked up at Angel, not at all surprised to find a tick feathering in his jaw.

She looked back down as her phone vibrated in her hand again.

‘I have another gift for you.’

The message was followed by a video.

Ray didn't wait, was too afraid to when she clicked the video with shaking hands and waited for it to load—

All air left her lungs as she saw the image of a man tied up against a metal pole, a gag on his lips as his entire body sagged forward. There were light bruises on the sides of his face but no dangerous markings. Ray's world tilted, suddenly nauseous, and would've almost fallen back if it hadn't been for the hand Angel braced against her lower back.

“Who is that?” Angel asked her, his voice tight as she looked at the man over and over again, unable to piece where she'd seen him. The video proceeded and the man's head lolled to one side, revealing his beard and a marred, round face.

“You're better off not knowing my name...”

Ray gasped, all strength leaving her as another message popped up in her notification bar.

‘How do you want it wrapped?’

A growl left her tongue at the blatant threat, her mind racing as she pieced back who he was. Zahir, the same man who'd told her to believe in this world. The same man who'd asked her to smile more often. The same man who had a wife and daughter and holy shit—

“What have I done?” Ray whispered, her heart thudding in her chest as Angel held her weight,

“ Nothing . ”

His voice was clear when another message rolled up, revealing an address. She glared

at the message, fear and rage mixing and turning into something ugly.

‘Alone.’

Angel read it as well and scoffed at it,

“No way in fucking hell—” he began, and Ray shook her head, her body shaking with leashed rage as she took a step away from him. Her head was pounding, struggling to grapple with the situation as she clutched her phone tightly in her fist.

“Get this over with,” she started darkly and turned towards her bike, “With Mia, scout it out. Go with the plan. I’ll get this done—”

“ No,” Angel responded, stepping between her and the bike, “I’m not leaving you alone in this.”

“You won’t.” She said and showed him the address, knowing there was a dangerous glint in her eye, “Come get me after you’re done here.”

Ray willed him to understand. Glanced at Mia and back at him again.

His eyes flashed, understanding morphing into reluctance as she swung her legs on her bike and roared it to life. She looked up at him, her eyes gleaming with seriousness,

“Get out of here alive and come get me. Do you understand?”

Angel gritted his teeth and started forward to wrap a steady hand around the side of her neck, hauling her closer,

“You will not die today.”

He stated as if it were a fact and Ray's gaze shuttered, a smirk lifting her lips as she put her hand atop his,

"And you will live to see tomorrow." She replied, "You will live to see me. "

Angel shook his head, a resultant smile rising on his lips as well,

"So self-entitled."

Ray leaned forward then and brushed her lips against his,

"Only for you."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

Ray walked in knowing it was a trap. She walked in knowing that whoever had called her here had committed a great mistake.

Because they'd called her alone.

And if anything happened to anyone outside this place, she wouldn't stop until she'd rip them to shreds. It hadn't stopped her before. It won't now.

Her gun was cocked in her hand, the cold metal digging into her skin as she gripped it tighter and placed her other hand perpendicular to the first one. She walked slowly, making sure to not make a single sound as she shifted through the shadows provided by the boxes that were surrounded in the storehouse she'd walked into. Or rather, had jumped through. Because there was no way in hell she was going to walk through the doors like a damned maniac.

Her phone buzzed in her hands.

'How long are you going to keep me waiting?'

Ray blinked down at the message. So, whoever this was, hadn't realized she was already here. But also, could have sent the message as a way to distract her. Ray grit her teeth and stopped in her tracks. The shadows masked her movements as held her gun between her armpit and cracked open her phone to remove the chip.

She should've done this way before, but her mind had been a blubbering mess until now. Ray snapped the chip into two pieces, making sure it emitted no noise, and threw it out the window she'd jumped in from .

To hell with this person. This fucking group.

She didn't make the mistake of throwing her phone. Couldn't risk making any noise. Just placed it in between the two boxes to her right and left it there to rot. Ray balanced her gun again, seeking some comfort with the knife tucked in the denim she'd borrowed from Angel. She wasn't wearing a vest, a stupid mistake she'd made before getting here.

But it didn't matter now.

Ray strode ahead, tracking her movement by the shifting shadows up ahead. As far as she knew, she was walking between a wall and a tall shelf filled with cardboard and wooden boxes on her left. Judging by the structure of the metal and the way it was coated in rust, however, one wrong move, and they could all come tumbling down on her.

The storehouse had looked timid from the outside, but stepping in now, she saw the rows and rows of endless boxes stuffed closely enough to leave only a small pathway that led down to a bunch of steps at the far end. The rotten stench of the damned boxes did no good either, but Ray had been in these situations too many times now. She knew how to lock away that nausea that rose with fear far away.

She willed her heart to calm as she reached the very end of the storehouse, ending up at a greased wall up ahead. Ray turned to her left, her gaze narrowing as she saw a narrow path for her to take. The same one that led to the stairs that led underground.

That led to a place that for sure had someone waiting for her.

Ray didn't wait to reconsider. Just slipped through the narrow path and walked as close to the greased wall to her right as she could until she reached the unguarded stairs .

Her heartbeat increased to dangerous levels as she braced her back against the wall and grimaced at the stench of oil and rotten wood that filled her lungs.

She kept a lookout on both her sides as she descended the stairs, her gun aimed and shifting from one direction to the other as she climbed down sideways.

Ray was expecting a door. Was expecting people waiting for her in the shadows. But was greeted by another underground storage area, filled with similar rows of metal shelves and boxes. The only change was the smell. It was no longer rotten. Was fresher, as though these boxes had been brought here recently. As soon as she reached the end of the stairs, she whipped to the side, hiding herself within the shadows cast by the boxes, and stilled. Listening.

Pretty stupid of them to call her in a place like this.

Ray peeped to the side, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening up ahead when she saw the faint flickering of yellow light. She ducked back immediately, her heart beating wildly as she took a few steps back into a corner. She could hear the wind whistling by, and the faint sounds of cloth rustling. But other than that—

“LET ME GO!”

She stilled, her blood running cold at the familiar voice that echoed through the storehouse. It was followed by a loud curse and another scream. Too familiar, she thought as a wave of fear crashed over her, that voice was too familiar.

“She’ll come for you, you know,”

Oh gods.

“And she’ll fucking rip you apart. ”

That was Ira.

Ira was here.

A laugh followed her words and Ray moved swiftly, running as she was before as a loud bang, probably from someone slamming something metal into a wall. It ricocheted all across the room.

“Stop screaming you leech –”

“Stay the fuck away from her!” A male voice roared, making Ray almost freeze in her tracks again.

Shit, Micah was here as well.

This had gotten so much worse. Too many betrayals, Ray thought with clenched teeth and silently wove through the darkness, too many fucking rats . She followed that faint yellow light that peeped from below the shelves, hiding her steps as she did so.

“What have you done to him?” Ira's voice was a soft cry, shaking with fear. The amount of rage that rose in her mind was ungodly as she gripped her gun harder and neared the nook of the place. If there was even a scratch in Ira's face—

She would lose her fucking mind.

“That's none of your concern.” A female voice said cruelly, and Ray had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from screaming in frustration. Fucking Ciera. Could she trust no one?

“When's she getting here?” Ciera continued, probably snapping at the man who had yelled at Ira earlier. Ray's gaze narrowed, the yellow light more prominent as she

stepped to her left and saw the same pole she'd seen in the video. Her breath caught when she saw Zahir tied against it, his body slumped forward dangerously as he lay there, unconscious.

“She'll get here soon enough– ”

The man began but a growl shifted through the air,

“I didn't ask for your fucking opinion,” Ciera snapped, “ Check her location.”

Now, she had to move now.

Ray inched forward, taking quick but soft steps closer and closer to the yellow flickering light. Closer to Zahir and closer to Ira. She neared the very end of the stacked boxes when the light flickered again. Ray crouched, peeping carefully to see how many people she had to deal with.

Her brows rose when she realized it was Ciera and two other men standing on her either side, all their backs turned to her. Her eyes darted around in search of Ira and Micah, the dread in her stomach dissolving when she saw the two of them tied to their chairs, their backs touching one another's.

Three people. She had to get rid of all three of them and not risk it getting back to whoever their superior was.

Because there was no way in hell Ciera was the brain behind these operations.

“Well?” Ciera asked, shaking Ray out of her reverie, “Where is she? She better be close or he'll have my fucking head on a spike.”

Ray's gaze narrowed. He?

“One second.” The man on her right murmured as Ray took him in. Muscular, long hair and a body that belonged to an athlete. He could be a pain. The man to Ciera’s left was another bother, especially judging by the height advantage he had over her and his lean body that showed he’d probably done martial arts.

The light flickered again, leaving her vision dark for a second.

She looked up at the light, her brows furrowing. And it clicked .

Ray blinked, forcing herself to calm down and steady the gun in her hand as she breathed out. Prepared for the next flicker of light.

“Is she here?”

“Ma’am,” the man to her right began, his voice confused as he said as clearly as he could, “It says she’s close.”

Ray saw Ciera shuffle closer, saw her brows furrow as she grabbed the phone out of his hands and peered down at the screen, “What?” she started and Ray smirked, watching the play of the light, “It says she’s right outside. What’s she waiting for—”

Darkness enveloped them for three seconds.

One. Ray stepped forward, right beside Zahir. Removed the knife from her pockets and slid it in Micah and Ira’s direction, the sound emitting a loud screech.

Two. The twist of feet as Ray extended her gun up ahead, blinking past the darkness as she let a maniacal smile curve her lips. It’d been a while since she’d done this.

Three. A while since she’d seen the mix of sheer surprise and fear light bright on their faces.

The light flickered back on, and Ray tilted her head, her gun aimed at the guy to Ciera's right. Bang! And he went down, a bullet embedded deep in his heart. She moved it to her left and bang! Another one in his heart.

And turned it right before Ciera. The woman who was now looking at Ray as if she'd never seen her before. Ray grinned, her eyes crinkling as she heard Ira breathe out,

“Surprise bitch.”

Fear often tended to change.

To morph into something far more dangerous. Far more deadly .

Ray saw it now as Ciera's beautiful face contorted into something devastating. Something lethal. And she went right after Ray's weakest point.

“Ira move!” Ray screamed before Ciera whipped out a knife from her waistband and pounced in Ira's direction. Bang! Ray shot the rope that Micah had been trying to cut for a few seconds and both of them ripped apart with a yell. Ray darted forward, her footsteps nimble as she made to step between Ira and Ciera, and went to shoot Ciera, but she'd been too fast.

Ciera grabbed a hold of Ira's hair and wrenched her upright. A scream ripped from Ira's throat as Ciera poised a clean knife against her neck, glaring at Ray maliciously, murder written in her darkened eyes as she dug the knife deeper. A whimper left Ira's lips, and goosebumps erupted on Ray's arm, her blood running cold at the sight.

Scratch. Not. One. Scratch.

She saw Micah try to dart forward, but Ciera was trained enough to see it coming. She took a step back, taking Ira with her as she huffed out to remove the stray piece

of unbound hair from her face,

“Call your dog back,” she snarled, her voice dry, “Call him back or I kill her.”

Ray contemplated for a second and Ciera might’ve seen it because she smiled wickedly, and suddenly she was unrecognizable, “I’d do it in a heartbeat Raylene Walker. You shoot me, but I’ll take her down with me.” To emphasize her point she dragged that knife up to Ira’s left eye. Ray’s heart shook, fear and rage overtaking her as she saw Ciera tip the edge of the knife right below her eye. Testing her.

“Get behind me.” Ray ordered but didn’t look away from Ira, “Get the fuck behind me Micah.”

“We can take— ”

A wretched scream lifted in the air as Ciera cut a straight line below Ira’s eyes, deep enough to scar. Ray growled loudly, her body shaking as she yelled at Micah, “Behind me. Now!”

She was going to enjoy killing her.

Micah moved. Ray watched Ira, heard her sobs as blood dripped from the ripped skin below her eye. Ciera laughed against her ear, “You know the drill,” she continued, “Now the gun. Get rid of the bullets fist.”

Ray’s jaw ticked, her mind racing as she followed her instructions. The bullets fell to the ground with clinks that echoed all across the larger space, each sound making Ira and Micah flinch. Each echo sharpening Ciera’s glare and Ray’s idea.

Ira’s eyes found hers, a brief state of fear and pleading flashing through them as she shook in Ciera’s arms. I’m sorry, Ray wanted to say but instead strengthened her

resolve. Said trust me instead. Ciera barely noticed Ira's nod. Was too focused on the gun in Ray's hands.

"NOW!" she screamed, and Ray winced, willing her body to relax.

"Christ," she muttered and shot Ciera a tired look, "I'm doing it. Calm the fuck down."

Ciera's gaze narrowed, but Ray squatted, making a show of putting her gun down while her eyes remained on the knife poised against Ira's throat. She gave herself a mental countdown, knowing Ira was watching her. Hoping that she would pull Ciera's arm away from her when Ray acted.

"Quit dawdling," Ciera seethed and that's it. Her hold slackened.

Ira felt it.

Ray saw it.

And didn't dare smirk as she whipped her hand back and threw the empty gun right at Ciera's head .

Ira. That little genius ripped Ciera's arm away with a shrill yell of fury and ducked as the gun connected with Ciera's nose. Ray ran forward as Ira jerked away from her in a frenzy and ran in her direction only to collide right into her arms.

Ray returned her embrace briefly, relief flowing through her as she let go of the sobbing girl and moved so she was hidden at her back, between her and Micah.

"Stay behind me," Ray snapped, boding no argument, " Both of you."

Ciera's groan reverberated through the air as Ray darted forward and saw the knife she was still clutching in her hands. She looked over the blood gushing from her nose and opened her mouth to speak when Ciera snapped ahead with a yell and tried to slash Ray's face. Ray moved back stealthily, already seeing that move as she took the opportunity to grab Ciera's wrist. She pressed the point on her wrist, enticing a scream from the woman's lips as she dropped her knife to the ground.

Ray moved quickly, darting forward to grab the gun that was hanging in the waistband of Ciera's jeans. She tucked it in hers before grabbing both her wrists and twisting her around, so she was face flat on the floor. An annoyed yell surprised Ray as she held both her wrists behind her back with one hand and grabbed a fistful of her hair in the other.

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing at the two pairs of eyes staring at her in half wonder, half fear,

"Look away children." She chastised and nudged her chin for them to follow her instructions, "And cover your ears."

She didn't wait to see if they'd listened. Just went down on one knee with a sigh and pulled Ciera's head back with her hair. Ray leaned down, bringing her lips close to Ciera's ears to whisper ,

"Who do you work for?"

Ray didn't really wait for a response. Just pulled her head back to a dangerous angle and slammed it down on the concrete floor. The crack sounded in the air, a wretched scream leaving Ciera's lips in a gurgle as Ray pulled her head back again.

"Talk Ciera, today." She whispered again and when Ciera waited for a beat, she slammed her head on the floor again, a sickening sound rising with her action as

Ciera let out a howl, mixed with a delirious sob,

“Go on.”

“You shouldn’t have come.” Ciera finally rasped, her voice breaking and barely audible. Probably because she couldn’t breathe quite well, “They know you’re here. He knows you’re here, so he’ll strike at the other places first.”

Ray’s brows furrowed, “Who’s he?”

“He will kill me. He’s out for your blood but he isn’t alone. He’s going to go after all of you.” Ciera continued babbling, irritating her further. Ray let loose a guttural sound and reared her head back again, and a sob ripped past Ciera’s lips,

“ No! Please!” she cried, and Ray gripped her hair harder,

“Who is he?” she sneered, and Ciera sobbed again,

“He doesn’t work alone.” She said and Ray rolled her eyes,

“I’m getting tired of this,” she replied and was about to bring her head back to the ground when Ciera shook in her hands, trying and failing to scramble away,

“Martin!” she finally screamed, and Ray stilled, “ It’s Martin De Santos who hired me!”

“What have you told him?” Ray asked past her wildly beating heart .

Cold shivers climbed up her spine as Ciera spat through the blood gushing from her face,

“Everything. He knows your allies. He knows who you are and has been hunting you and the others ever since.” She rasped, pausing for breath, “He’s the one who had Alessandro killed.”

Red flooded her vision, making it all the more difficult for her to keep this fucking woman alive, “Please,” Ciera pleaded, shaking terribly, “He’s going after every one of your friends. He’s going to have them killed at each of the facilities.”

For a second, blind fear clouded her judgment. But the hiss of the glass against her neck was like a reality check. They wouldn’t die, Ray told herself and gripped Ciera’s hands tighter, they won’t die.

“You said he’s not working alone.” Ray snarled, “Who is he working with?”

Ciera cried, “I don’t know.”

Ray growled and slammed her head on the ground again, another desperate wail leaving her lips as her face collided with the ground. When Ray pulled her head back up, Ciera was barely conscious,

“ I don’t know.” she still managed to rasp, “ I swear,” a crazy sob, “ I swear I don’t know!”

“Quit. Screaming.” Ray snapped through gritted teeth, shaking her head wildly with her hair. Ciera sobbed, but quieted, nonetheless. Without letting go of her, she looked over her shoulder, somewhat surprised to find both Ira and Micah with their backs turned to her.

“Can one of you get me a rope?” Ray called out in the gentlest voice she could muster. Ira turned, her expression blank, but it was Micah who moved. He grabbed the rope she’d shot through and handed it to her with a

brisk nod. Ray turned down to Ciera, and without wasting another second, she tied the rope around the woman's hands and legs altogether.

When Ray was done with her, Ciera had her hands and legs tied together, was lying on her stomach, and was probably unconscious with the amount of blood she'd lost.

"What now?" Ira whispered and Ray turned to look at her, her expression souring at the sight of slash down her eye. Ira caught her glance and shook her head, her cheek stained with dried tears as she balled her hands into fists, "It'll leave a battle scar." She said softly.

Ray wanted to go ahead and hug her. Hide her far away from this mess of the world.

But that would have to wait.

She looked at Zahir, surprised to find his hands unbound and his unconscious figure lying on the ground. Ray bit her lip in contemplation, she couldn't leave him alone here. But she also should get to Angel and the others as soon as possible. And with no way to get into contact with them, she had no choice but to wait for them at their rendezvous.

But it wasn't the thought of all of them walking into traps that scared her.

It was the promise Angel had made to her.

And how, after all this, he hadn't come to get her yet.

* *

Fear was insane.

He should've been afraid of what was to happen to him now. Was he going to die without fulfilling his promise to his mother? Without bringing down this wretched gang as he'd planned to since the very beginning ?

But in reality, all he could think of was the last thing he'd told Raylene Walker.

Even as he lay on the wet ground with his hands bound tightly behind his back and heard the drip, drip, drip of water far away, he could only think of Ray and where she was. If she was fine. If she'd made it out alive.

“Such fools.”

That voice, that miserable, aged fucking voice.

God, he was going to kill her when he got out of here.

“She will come, you understand?” a breath and a small laugh, “Young love makes you so foolish. She will come thinking she can sacrifice herself for you.”

Maybe it was because he was lying on the floor. Or because it was dark. But as a slow smile raised his broken lips, it hid in the water. Because no matter what anyone said, he was counting on Raylene Walker stepping through those doors. Was bidding his time as he waited for her to come and rage havoc all over this desolate place.

Because she wouldn't come alone.

No, she would bring her entire army with her.

And she'd burn this place to the fucking ground while she was standing in it if that's what it took.

So yes, he smiled as the voice laughed and walked away. He grinned and stopped his urge to laugh out loud as well.

And began counting for the very. Last. Time.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

There was this dreadful ball of flame in her stomach, gnawing her insides as she laced her hands and leaned forward. Her head hung limply, waiting for something, anything that could show her that they'd all made it out alive. That she wouldn't have to end this war all alone.

Warmth seeped through the side of her arm as Ira leaned against her. Ray lifted her head slightly, turning so she could see the young girl. She had her eyes closed, her lips parted as she fell asleep under the dark sky. Ray's gaze strayed to the wound on her face, her tongue souring at the thought of it scaring. But it was a deep cut, there was no point in hoping that it wouldn't.

To make things worse there was another small cut on the bridge of her nose, probably from when she'd been taken by Ciera and her minions. One she hadn't seen before. Ray forced herself to look away from the blue-black skin, her eyes flooding with unwanted tears. At least she was alive, was all she allowed herself to think, at least she was here and alive.

Ray moved slowly, careful not to wake Ira as she carefully leaned back against the bench and let her head fall limp against her shoulder. Ira didn't stir, not when the wind hustled past them and not when the leaves rustled as Micah paced across them.

Ray watched the young boy. He too had his share of bruises marred all over his face. His wrists had been bleeding when she'd managed to get both of them treated. They were wrapped with a clean cloth now. But he was alive. Was walking around. Looking at herself now though, with only Ciera's blood tainting her shirt, she knew she'd gotten the easy way out .

Whoever was planning this had given her an easy task to overcome.

Angel , she thought, the fear rising in waves now, might not have gotten an easy way out.

The sound of a footstep and leaves crushing had Ray's head snapping back up.

"Micah." She started quietly and nodded when he turned to her, stark surprise and fear written on his face, "Get here."

Micah moved quickly, going to sit where she was sitting as she got up. He held Ira's head, his hands shaking as he sat down, and Ray covered both their bodies with her own. Her gun was up in the air, her gaze narrowed at the dark pathway up ahead as the trees moved violently with the wind.

"Ray," a voice, a familiar, faraway voice cried out and Ray wanted to go ahead. Wanted to move but she had Ira and Micah behind her. She couldn't leave them alone unless,

"We don't have a corny code," a female voice snapped from the woods, " Get here!"

Ray shot forward, her heart calming finally as she tucked her gun back. Neera. That had been Neera who'd snapped at her. And amidst the dark small paths and the stones that sat across the layout, Ray made her way to the faint rustling of the bushes.

"Neer—" Ray began but paused when Neera emerged with Christina. Her breath caught as she saw Cameron standing between them, his arms around both their shoulders as they dragged him forward. Ray ran ahead, her teeth gritting at the sight of the dried blood from the side of his face,

"What happened to him?" she asked as she took him from the two girls, "Cameron?"

she asked gently, probing at his cheeks as Christina and Neera stopped .

Ray looked at both of them, her eyes widening with concern. But Neera only shook her head and made to move forward when Ray stopped her.

“I’ll take him,” she murmured and grunted against his weight as she pulled him up ahead, “Are you awake?”

He couldn’t hear her but must’ve noticed her shaking because he winked open one eye and smiled back at her softly.

“I’m alright.” He signed with one hand and let his eyes fall shut again, trying and failing to walk without any support. Ray wrapped a steady hand around his waist and hauled his weight against her, not blinking at the way he fell limp at her side. She dragged him forward, blood rushing into her ears. If she stopped to think now, she was afraid her world would tilt as well.

“Are you both alright?” Ray asked over her shoulder and watched as Micah went to stand up. She shook her head and dropped Cameron’s limping body beside him as gently as she could. Ira jerked awake at the abrupt quake and snapped away from Micah as if he’d burnt her. Ray didn’t wait to see their reaction, just heard Ira’s gasp as she knelt on the ground and carefully took Cameron’s face in her hands,

“We’re alright,” Neera responded, and Ray felt her presence nearby. As if on cue, her hand landed on Ray’s shoulder, squeezing gently, “We managed to procure some information about those kids. I think we can get them out tomorrow.”

Ray grit her teeth. If Angel didn’t show up, there was no way the plan was going to go as she’d wanted it to.

“Sneaking in and getting a count of the number of children was the easy part,”

Christina muttered ,

“But we were spotted when we were getting out. It got dirty very fast, and Cameron was the first of us to receive the brunt force of it.”

Ray angled his face to see where the dried blood sat and was not at all surprised to find a soft bump on the side of his forehead. Her gaze narrowed at the broken skin, and without turning to look at Micah she began speaking,

“Get me the first aid.” She said, patting Cameron’s cheek to get him to open his eyes, “Both of you go together. And scream if you see or hear anything suspicious.”

They left silently as Ray let loose a silent breath.

“Why are the kids here?” Christina asked as if noticing them for the first time. Ray clicked her tongue as Cameron cracked open an eye and lifted a hand to inspect the wound on his head. She slapped his hand away with a glare and responded to Christina,

“We encountered our share of problems.” She murmured as Ira and Micah returned with the first aid in their hands. Neera took it from their hands and walked around Ray to sit on the bench beside Cameron. Her eyes were trained on Ray, probing her to continue as she opened the box, “Ciera betrayed us. She was working for Martin.”

“Fuck.” Christina swore behind her and Neera closed her eyes in sheer annoyance. Ray scoffed at the question written on her face, could they trust no one? She’d asked herself the same thing before.

“I left Angel and Mia at the—”

“Whose stupid idea was it to meet at a damned cemetery?”

Jack's voice snapped all of them back to reality. Cameron must've noticed the stiffening of her movements, because he sat straighter, his eyes snapping open as he braced a hand against the gun poised at his hip .

Ray shook her head and saw him relax. She continued working on his wound as a tired sigh echoed through the air,

"Noah's," Sorin replied as though he too, was exhausted with his twin. Ray would've smiled at his tone if it wasn't for the dread slowly inching up her spine. Still, she forced herself to think as she wiped away the blood from Cameron's forehead and the side of his face, they were all alive.

"You made it." Christina breathed and if Ray had turned, she would've seen the girl rush forward in Jack's direction and jump into his open embrace. Neera, on the other hand, just slumped down in her seat and put her head on Cameron's shoulder. He, however, was now watching Ray with a guarded look in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he finally signed at her as Sorin neared their group and flopped down on the ground in front of Neera. Ray shook her head, looking anywhere but in his eyes as she fought past the nausea.

"Why is Ira--"

"Kidnapped. Ciera. Bad guy." Neera answered with her eyes shut. Ray looked to her side then, watching the glint of silver earrings as he leaned in closer. She blinked at the bruises on his cheekbone and looked down to see the angry red skin around his knuckles.

"What happened to you?" she asked softly and Sorin's eyes flashed, something like realization rushing through them. Ray looked away, back at treating Cameron's wound as he responded,

“We walked into a trap. The boxes had nothing. People were waiting for us inside.” He said and caught the first aid box as she swept it in his direction, “If they’re smart, they’ll be gone by tomorrow. I know their faces though, so they won’t get far.”

Ray hummed .

“Where’s Angel?” Jack asked tightly from behind them, “Wasn’t he supposed to be with you?”

“Me and Mia,” Ray returned, stepping away from Cameron now, “I left him with her to get Ira and Micah. And this other guy they’d held hostage.”

“Ciera,” Sorin murmured, “She worked for—”

“Martin,” Ray replied and got to her feet. When she turned, she found Christina and Jack standing shoulder to shoulder, their gazes narrowed in her direction, “They knew all about us. Which makes me realize that—”

“This was a dumb idea.”

Ray blinked at the other voices, something like relief flooding through her veins when she saw Noah, Luke and Myra walk through the clearing.

Luke, who’d been the one to say the words, looked all around the space until he spotted Jack and Christina. The relief that rushed into his gaze was nothing compared to the way her world threatened to tilt when she saw Akash and Irene stride in as well.

“Of course, we had to meet in a fucking graveyard.” Akash was murmuring as he wiped the dust off his shirt and darted his gaze around. Ray breathed out and shook in her spot until his dark eyes found hers.

The panic in them calmed immediately and without really waiting for any other reaction, both Akash and Raylene crossed the clearing and collided with one another. Ray was aware of Irene and Myra hugging behind her back as Akash enveloped her in his arms and placed his forehead on the top of her head.

“You alright?” he asked, his voice shaking with the same fear she’d felt when their communication had been cut off. Ray shivered in his arms now, a new fear thudding through her blood as she shook her head,

“Something’s wrong. ”

She murmured and pulled back. Akash gazed down at her in a slight frenzy, his eyes darting around in search of any injuries, but Ray shook her head, her gaze betraying her as she looked past him in search of Angel.

Who didn’t appear.

“Angel was supposed to come find me after he was done checking the property with Mia,” Ray said, breathing out harshly as she took a step back, “He didn’t come though. And I couldn’t leave Ira alone, nor could I take her with me—”

“Ray.” Akash’s voice cut through calmly and she looked back at him. A rock, that’s who he was. A rock that steadied her for a single moment. Long enough for her to fish out a plan. Ray turned on her heels to face the rest of them,

“Ciera confessed she worked for Martin.” She began and saw Neera sign the words to Cameron. Ray shot him an apologetic look and began signing the words as she spoke, her hands shaking slightly,

“I received a message from her when I reached the site with Angel and Mia. A video showing that she was holding someone I knew hostage. I didn’t know about Ira and

Micah being there when I left.” She paused, turning to Luke, Jack, and Christina now, “I gave Angel the address and asked him to come there when they were done looking at the facility. He,” her breath caught, “He didn’t come.”

Ray’s shoulders tensed further, her brows furrowing, “Ciera also told me that Martin is working with someone else. But we already knew this.” She paused, contemplating whether she could tell them yet or not. Christina caught her hesitation and took a step forward,

“You know something,” she began, almost angrily, “ Both you and Angel, you know something. ”

Yes. And somehow, it was all working perfectly.

Ray shook her head and opened her mouth to continue when she saw Luke’s eyes dart past her as if he were looking behind her. She paused when she saw him go still, the color draining from his face. She heard it then, the slight panting, the rustling of the cloth against the skin, and the rushed breathing. Maybe, she prayed as hope rose in her chest, maybe he’d made it.

“Mia,” Christina breathed, and Ray turned on her heels, her eyes widening as she spotted the redhead limp through the clearing, a hand braced against her bloodied abdomen, “Mia!”

Ray moved with habit, Christina at her side as they both neared the girl and caught her before she could stumble and fall to the ground. Mia let loose a guttural sound as Ray caught at her waist and pulled her weight as gently as she could. Christina followed her example, her expression contorted into worry and pain as she swept Mia’s red hair away from her face, revealing bruised and scratched skin. She gasped at their sight as they carefully pulled her forward.

“ Angel,” Mia rasped, and Ray froze on the spot, her heart stalling for an entire second. God fucking damn it.

“What are you doing?” Christina hissed in her direction and pulled Mia up as she fell limp in their arms. Ray grunted and picked her up the waist again but didn’t respond.

“They took him,” Mia sobbed, and Ray could swear the wind howled above her head. Blood rushed into her ears, a dull roar as they neared the bench. Neera got up immediately, leaving space for a gasping Mia.

Ray placed her on the bench as gently as she could and immediately knelt as Christina braced a hand on her shoulder,

“What do you mean?” her voice a whisper, “Who took him? ”

Ray didn’t say a word. Just grabbed the first aid box and lifted the hem of Mia’s bloody t-shirt. She was aware of her brown eyes fixed on the top of her head as she spoke,

“After Ray left and we entered the warehouse together, it was like walking into a straight trap. As soon as we stepped in, there was smoke and these people who jumped us from nowhere.”

Mia hissed as Ray took a cotton swab and cleaned her wound. It looked like a slash wound, from a clean-cut knife. Not too dangerous, but deep enough to draw out a large amount of blood. Ray didn’t look up at Mia as she continued,

“I think,” she said, half-sob as Ray touched sensitive skin, “I think they worked for Martin. And they left me there to die while they took Angel with them.”

Ray breathed out finally and turned to her right to see Sorin standing right beside her.

His dark eyes widened when she beckoned him to stitch her up. Mia might've continued speaking, but Ray was already getting up, the rush of waves in her ears drowning out her voice as she thought of a way out. Thought of ways to get him back and...

She placed her bloody hands on her waist as she lost herself in thought, staring at the ground as she tapped her feet.

One wrong move and she could lose all this within a snap of their fingers. Two players. Martin was the face, and the other was the brains. Ray looked over her shoulder at Mia, who was looking too pale to be alive. Who was looking too afraid to be here. And yet she'd made it.

She was sure Angel would too.

"We're changing the plans a bit. "

Ray's voice cut through all their conversations, but she looked at none of them. Just stared straight ahead at that one gravestone that sat at the very end of the long field. This far she couldn't read the name but knew exactly who it belonged to.

Lia Walker, it said, A beautiful daughter, sister, and friend.

"I know where to find Angel," she continued, her resolve strengthening with every word. They wanted her to play?

Fine, she would fucking play.

"Get the kids out. Bomb and burn their facilities to the ground tomorrow."

Ray looked over her shoulder, and straight into Mia and Christina's eyes. Looked at

Luke and Jack who watched her carefully, war waging in each of their minds,

“I’ll go where they want me to. And I’ll get him out and end this.”

Akash matched her gaze then, his chin tipping.

Not alone though, she thought and shut her eyes against the cold air, never alone.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

Martin De Santos stepped down from the dais, unremarkably calmer and happier than he'd ever been... Well, maybe that wasn't true. Ever since he'd gotten rid of Isabella perhaps. Or since he'd seen Angel lift that gun. Oh, what a day that was. And what plans he'd had in mind with his son. They didn't last long though. Not really.

God, this joy though, this peace right now, he wished it would last forever. But Isabella had always called this place a wretched curse. Had called him a monster. So, it seemed only fair that peace was no longer a viable option for him anymore.

What he hadn't been expecting when he stepped off the last stair and strode to his dining room, of course, was the very solution to all his problems come knocking right at his door. But it was. Because there she was.

Martin pulled the doors open, the sound echoing through his empty walls as he lifted his head and well... froze.

Because seeing the particular girl who was supposed to be in a coma and had betrayed everyone the Lions behind their backs with her long legs propped up on the glass table wasn't something you saw every day. Seeing the very girl they'd been hunting—

Things had gotten so much more interesting.

So, Martin stilled, his hands stalling on the handle of the door as he watched the scene play with a mere blink. His heart began pacing, sudden such of anticipation, of excitement rushing through them.

Oh, she'd been right. She was so right .

“Raylene Walker.”

Martin announced, trying and desperately failing to keep that faint amusement from his tone as he dropped his hand from the door handle.

Raylene's eyes were closed, her head hanging back as her highlighted blue bangs draped over her forehead. She was sitting on a chair, her arms crossed as she let out another one of her long sighs. Her white shirt was coated in red, blood that didn't seem to belong to her. Blood from one of his people he knew for sure. Her brand-new black boots gleamed on his glass table, crossed and constantly tapping against one another.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” He grinned now, couldn't really help himself. Because just as she'd said, Raylene Walker had come straight into his arms. And now, he'd have the perfect way to get rid of both his son and her .

Tap. Tap.

“Remind me,” Martin purred and took a few steps forward, the sound echoing through the empty room as he neared the glass table, “Aren't you supposed to be dead to the world?”

Raylene didn't respond. Just let out another breath and laced her hands against her abdomen, not a hint of expression on her face. He knew who she was now. What she was. Many had warned him. Seth Kincaid. Cole Kincaid. June Kincaid. Everyone had said the same thing.

Be careful. She's dangerous. Don't provoke her.

It was why he'd come prepared. His shadows were ready to strike at his orders, standing silently in the meanwhile. It gave him the confidence, the satisfaction of all of it playing right in the palm of his hands .

Martin's eyes seemed to gleam as he watched her, gauging her reaction as Seth's words rang soundly in his head.

And never, fucking ever, back Raylene Walker into a corner.

Tap.

"Looking for someone?"

Raylene's entire body stilled, her feet freezing on his table as a satisfied grin stretched his lips wider. As he took another step forward and braced a hand on the gun hanging from his hip. Martin knew he shouldn't, but really, really wanted to,

"Lost someone important now?"

Martin watched with fascination, as if a scientist were watching his monstrous creation, as Raylene's eyes snapped open. Those golden hues were razor sharp, cutting right through him as she sleekly removed her feet off his table and placed her elbows in their place. Martin paused in his steps as she leaned forward onto her arms, the blade in her gaze sharpening as a slow smile curved her lips. One that sent goosebumps trailing down his spine.

His stomach twisted when she tilted her head to one end, looking at him as though she weren't surrounded by his men. As if she weren't in his territory and didn't have a dozen guns pointed straight at her head. No, Raylene looked as though she owned

this fucking place.

Martin's nostril flared. But the smile on her lips only spread,

"I don't lose things, Martin." Ray purred back and jerked up from her seat suddenly. The chair fell back with a huge bang!

The movement and the sound surprised him enough to rip out his gun and point it straight at her heart. The sounds of the guns clicking into action filled the air, and Martin's smile dimmed at the way her brows rose in amusement .

This girl, he cursed and tightened his hold on the metal of his gun, she's dangerous.

"You're alone in this Raylene Walker." He announced and nudged his chin for his men to move out of their shadows. The people in black armor moved, not making a single sound as they stepped in her direction carefully. Raylene's grin only widened though, the action making the hammering of his heart louder as well. That's it, he wanted to scream, step into the trap like the rat you are.

"I know." she responded, her words cutting smoothly through his thoughts as she blinked innocently at him, "But why shouldn't that be enough?"

All the hooded people, his men paused for an entire second. Waiting. Afraid. Even Martin stilled, not knowing what was coming when—

Raylene jerked forward suddenly, her hands slamming down on the glass table. A loud thud echoed through the air as Martin stumbled back in surprise, almost dropping his gun as he did so. The sheer fear set the pit in his stomach, tumbling into a gnawing action, the blood in his veins fucking pounding when he finally forced himself to look up.

And stilled when he found her standing in the same place. Simply with her hands braced on the glass table and a gun placed right against her forehead and grinned at him maniacally,

“Boo.”

Blood rushed into his ears, the rage rising like a fucking tidal wave. How dare she? Martin’s eyes flared wide, the blood washing onto his skin as he slammed his fist against the concrete wall and roared,

“GET HER OUT OF MY FUCKING SIGHT! ”

Raylene began laughing when his men shuffled forward and grabbed her arms, twisted them behind her back, and checked her for any weapons roughly.

The sound of her laughter only climbed up his back, scratching like a damned nail on a wall as she threw her head back and laughed louder. Martin growled low when his people caught at her hands and shoved her forward without letting go of her.

“Oh Martin,” she wheezed when she was made to stop beside him, “When will you all learn?”

He was going to fucking kill her.

Martin turned to her with a lethal glare,

“You will die tonight, Raylene Walker.” He began and wanted to smile when Raylene’s laughs ceased.

And he was about to continue when she threw her head back and let out another roar of laughter, shaking in the hands of the man holding her. He shook her roughly

enough for her hair to come loose from her ponytail, but she never stopped laughing. Martin's fingers curled into tight fists, the anger clouding his vision enough for him to see only red.

"You will see Angel. And both of you will watch each other die." Martin forced his tone to calm, "Amazing, isn't it? Death by the same hands you forced years back."

"I didn't come here for Angel," Raylene said incredulously as if she were talking to a child, making him stumble on his words yet fucking again. She blinked, and shook in the man's hands, muffling her laugh, "I came here for you, stupid man . And your partner."

She leaned closer, looming over him despite his advantage in height over her .

Watching her now though...with the sheer ice in her expression despite her smile, Martin couldn't move away. Not when she had clear murder written in her eyes.

"You took something from me, Martin." She purred, and chills erupted on his arm, "You really shouldn't have killed Alessandro. Shouldn't have hurt my people. Shouldn't have taken Angel De Santos."

She looked up and down, her lips dipping into a slight frown as she stared back at him, "And yet I'm not here for him. I'm here for you." She grinned again, "I'm here to burn you and your partner to the ground."

Raylene leaned closer to his ear, a mere whisper in her words, "I did it years back easily. I can do it today." She veered back and winked at him, "Kind, aren't I?"

"Take her away," Martin growled, the shaking in his bones beginning. Dear God, "Take her away now!"

Raylene was still laughing when his men hauled her away to the arena for tonight. Was still grinning when he dragged a hand down his face and looked up at the white ceiling. Prayed a little bit maybe.

Because Raylene Walker was now backed into a fucking corner.

* *

Angel coughed, the wretched action digging out his lungs as he braced his palms flat against the ground and tried to push himself up. For the third time in the past half hour. At least he thought it was half an hour. He'd never been great at keeping count. Or patient. But he still tried. Despite the deep burning of his blood or the aching of his bones, he still tried.

Because judging by the loud thud he'd heard mere minutes back, something was happening upstairs. Something important. Something that could involve Raylene Walker .

Angel pushed himself on his palms with a pained grunt, his eyes shut in concentration. Christ, his bones weighed down like lead as he pushed himself up.

Got barely up to his elbows when they snapped abruptly, and he fell face flat on the floor. His world spun constantly, the movement nauseating enough for him to turn on his side.

Angel braced a tired hand against his forehead, his fingers balling into fists in an attempt to get his mind to stop spinning. The nausea, the lump in his throat only rose though. Angel forced himself to blink his eyes open, squinting in the grey darkness of the rotten place. The walls were all dripping with water, the sounds hissing against its harsh surface. He had his ear pressed to the floor in an attempt to catch any other voices, any other sounds. But apart from the thud from before, there was nothing.

He'd have to force the damned poison out of his stomach, he thought and braced his palm against the wet floor. A part of him wanted to recoil away from the water, the grim walls of the prison, but he didn't have that privilege now. By someone's grace, the place didn't stink to the point of torture. The odor wasn't pleasant by normal standards – it reeked of soiled concrete and wood, but it was bearable. It was all he could hope for.

He pushed himself up on the palm of his hand and placed his weight on his elbow, grunting at the sudden wave of dizziness washing over him—

Angel's world turned, his eyes going into the back of his skull as he lost whatever balance he'd gained and fell back with a loud splash. The action came with its own nauseating repercussions, with the shot of pain down his wounded arm and the pounding of his fucking head.

All thanks to whatever poison he'd ingested.

“Fuck.” He murmured and took a second. A breath .

And turned to his side again. Trying the same thing. His focus on the task at hand was so honed to perfection that he barely noticed the shadow that loomed at the entrance of the prison he'd been sitting in.

Not until the soft voice echoed through the dark place.

“Won't work.”

Angel froze through the haze in his mind, the movement leaving behind a faint ringing in his ears.

The voice was female but unfamiliar. Hadn't been even remotely close to the one

he'd been expecting. Angel grit his teeth, his hands balling into fists as he slid his leg up and finally, finally pushed himself upright. His eyes widened as his body swayed back, threatening to fall. Angel scrambled to the ground and righted himself, not yet looking at the woman up ahead. He couldn't deal with bad surprises anymore.

But then the woman sighed, and he heard her faint footstep near the rotten metal of the prison that kept him inside and heard her sigh deeply.

“Estás envenenado.” You are poisoned.

Angel blinked. Martin had forbidden any other language other than English in this household. He knew it was because of Isabella, because deep down, somewhere in that twisted heart, Martin had loved his mother back. So, he'd wiped every trace of her. Including her language. His head snapped up, his eyes widening with the rush of adrenaline,

“Quién,” Angel breathed, the action burning his lungs but giving him some strength, “Quién es usted?” Who are you?

It was still too dark to see, and her figure was hidden in the shadows of the dark hallway. From where he was sitting, she seemed about average height, something wary about her stance gave away that she might be older than he was .

But he didn't have time to swell deep on that thought. Not when a soft click snapped him out of his daze.

He looked up to see the woman pull open the door with a soft creak and step in.

Angel's eyes narrowed. His hands weren't bound. There could be enough strength in him after lying down for so long. And judging by the way the woman easily strode forward, she didn't seem to have a lot of training. He couldn't see any tray of food in

her hand, but everything about her screamed normal. He could take her. And leave this place before Ray came for him.

Or before she died.

“Stay still.” Her words froze him, and his eyes flared wide as she kneeled down in front of him. Her black curls were within his line of vision as she gazed down at him, her doe eyes wary and tired. Something like an alarm set off in his mind as she removed what looked like an injection from her apron’s pocket.

Apron?

Angel let out a rough grunt and responded by splashing the water on her face. He didn’t wait for her reaction though. Just scrambled back with whatever strength he had left until his back touched the wall. The woman was frozen in spot, watching him unflinchingly as he pushed himself up the wall– or at least tried to when she sighed again.

“Raylene Walker sent me here.” She said and Angel scoffed,

“And you want me to believe you.” He rasped, the movement taxing his body.

The woman just blinked back at him and got back to her feet with a resigned sigh, “I’m too old to deal with children.” She murmured.

“I heard that. ”

She arched a brow in his direction, “I worked for Lions.” She said, the accent coating her words as Angel shrugged, still not really believing her.

Not until she pulled back the sleeve, revealing the faint dark lines that every staff

member bore in the Larsen's household.

Angel blinked but still narrowed his eyes in her direction,

“You could've gotten that anyhow.”

The woman scoffed now, throwing her head back, “You think I'd get this ridiculous thing out of everything?”

Angel just stared at her in response.

She shook her head again, “Fine.” She said, “The girl never said this would be so difficult.” She shook her head and put her hands into the pocket of her apron again,

“Look, I have the antidote of the poison she's given you—”

“Why would you come to work for my,” he coughed and winced as a wave of pain washed over his chest, “father. Especially, if you worked for The Larsens?”

“I owe Raylene Walker a favor.” She said, sounding exhausted.

“Okay if she sent you here, I'm sure she would've asked you to say something so you could prove—”

“Yeah yeah,” she snapped, and Angel shot upright in surprise. Suddenly she seemed far younger than he'd thought. Still older than him but, “I really didn't want to say this.”

Angel crossed his arms, the dizziness of his mind suddenly forgotten as the woman sighed again.

“Any beach.” She began and Angel froze, that night tumbling back into his mind. With Raylene Walker drunk out of her fucking mind and her sitting up ahead on the sand .

Angel blinked now, the image forever embedded in his mind as she continued.

“Wherever in this world, I’ll ask you to dance, without any music. With or without any people around. I promise.”

And he would’ve smiled if it weren’t for the mock gagging that followed the words.

Angel shot the woman a glare as she shuddered and took a few steps forward in his direction. This time when she crouched down, Angel just looked away as she removed the injection again and grabbed his arm. He blinked, ignoring the slight prick that came when she pierced the needle through his skin as he just looked away.

“How did you get here?” he asked and almost shook when she pressed a soft cotton right at the point where she’d pierced his skin.

“It’s easy to get hired when there are fewer people here in the first place.” She said quietly and looked up at him, her eyes wide in defiance and alertness. One that jarred him enough to smile at the words hidden in her gaze.

You have a chance.

“Is she okay?” he asked after a moment. The woman in front of him let out a silent breath,

“She’s taken by your father.” She spat the last word. An odd sense of silence settled in his chest then, calming his hind until he could hear nothing but the soft pounding of his heart. But the smile remained on his face. It was all going well, he told himself,

all according to plan.

“Do you know where she is?”

“You know where she is.” She responded and Angel’s brows arched.

The woman shrugged and removed the cotton ,

“That’s what she asked me to say.”

Angel sighed.

Well, shit.

“Gracias.”

He said finally and pushed himself to stand up. The woman up ahead hummed and got up as well, her hands on her waist as she waited for him to hoist himself up.

Angel grunted with his own weight but managed to scramble up the wall, some strength returning in him.

“Here.” She said and shoved a chocolate against his chest, “Eat.”

He blinked down at the wrapper but grabbed it out of her hands, “Thank you.” He said again and opened the wrapper,

“How do I get you out of here?”

The woman scoffed, “I don’t need your help.” She said as Angel bit into the bar, savoring the sweet taste, “I’ll get out the same way I got in.”

He nodded and grinned down at her. The woman only shook her head and took a few steps back, “You owe me a favor now, Angel De Santos.” She said and turned on her heels to walk out the doors,

“Cecilia.” She said, her eye glimmered as she looked over her shoulder and smirked, “Cecilia Rodriguez.”

Angel froze. No way.

But she only grinned wider, “Remember that name when I come to collect.”

He gasped, but the woman only strode out the unlocked doors and disappeared into the shadows. Just like his very own guardian angel. And he was about to go after her when he felt it. The uncomfortable lurch of his stomach and the –

Oh shit.

Angel snapped his head to one side as nausea clenched around his stomach and rose up his throat. His body dipped in reaction and all the bodily contents of his stomach came heaving down his throat.

He’d forgotten, it seemed, how repulsive vomiting was. It had been a while since he’d been poisoned after all.

Right now, he remained crouched until his body stopped heaving. Until it stopped getting rid of the poison he’d been injected with before.

“Oh right.” The same voice, Cecilia’s voice said from where she’d disappeared, “That’ll happen too.”

He could swear she was grinning when she said those words.

Angel didn't have enough energy to lift his head and watch her walk away again, not until he was done. And when he was, he remained rooted in the spot, his eyes shut against the way his mind spun as he tried to calm his wildly beating heart. He counted. One. Two. Three.

And lifted his chin.

His head was still pounding, his breath coming out a bit harshly, as he regained a sense of balance. The first thing he did was take a step away from the vomit and force himself to not breathe or look in that direction as he turned softly and strode toward the open metal doors of the prison.

Water, he thought when he stepped into the dark hallway, he needed water.

And he needed to get the hell out of here.

Angel braced a hand on the metal pole of the open gates, the other balling into a fist before he slammed it harshly against his chest. The chocolate crinkled in his head as he coughed and pushed away from the empty place .

Martin had made a grave mistake in putting him here, a stupid decision in all honesty, all considering he'd lived here all his life and knew this place like the back of his hand.

And now it was up to him to decide whether he'd take an easy way out or—

Angel sighed. He could either turn right and walk out of this place without looking back. Could get to Ray's friends, to Noah and everyone else, and get her out. Or he could gamble on his people.

So, Angel strode to his left, standing straighter with every step as he climbed the

stairs that led up to the kitchen they'd all been barred from ever since Isabella had died. All because it led down to this hell. Angel had spent countless hours down here, usually the one outside the bars. Who knew he'd end up on the other side?

A humorless laugh left his lips as he reached the door and inhaled deeply. There was no doubt there were people, Martin's and her people, standing on the other end of the room. But there was one misjudgment that Martin had made when he'd thought to lock him up here.

It was with that thought Angel grabbed the knob of the door and twisted it open.

The clicking of guns filled the air, but he stepped through without looking up at any of the men or women standing in the kitchen. A dangerous game, that's all this was. And all Angel was banking on was Christina Morris and her words. Her conviction and whether or not she'd managed to get all of them to agree.

Maybe that's why he walked through the faintly crowded place without a single one of them shooting his brains out. Maybe a mercy? He wouldn't give them the same courtesy though .

Angel didn't say a word until he reached the kitchen sink and grabbed a glass from the counter. An odd sheet of silence settled upon them as he filled the glass with water. Heard the faint shifting of feet behind him, the rustle of metal against skin as they all took a few steps toward him. None of them dared step within his attacking range though.

A faint smile tilted his lips as he gargled the water and spat it out before filling the glass again.

He drank to his content and set the glass down gently, the nerves in his veins calming with years of patience. He knew these people. Had worked with them all his life. And

if they decided to go against him after all, he'd show them the same face he'd shown all his foes over the past years.

Unflinching. Painful.

Angel turned on his heels and faced the crowd.

Merciless.

“You all have five seconds.” Angel said calmly, his deep voice booming in the small area as he opened the chocolate. He saw them flinch, heard their sharp inhales as he looked at each one of them, “Five seconds to decide if you'll walk with me, or Martin De Santos.”

No one said anything. The ringing in his ears became louder. He didn't have time for sweet words like Christina. So he picked the next best thing.

“La muerte no te hace ningún favor.” Angel said softly, a pang going through his chest as his eyes sharpened with focus, “Muerto, no puedes hacer nada.”

Death does you no favors.

Dead, you can do nothing .

He had a sudden urge to touch the glass shard sitting against his neck but knew it would be a show of breaking. A show of pain and fear. Right now, he needed pure, unrelenting strength. They needed strength and willpower. It's what they would follow.

It took a moment.

Angel saw them exchange nervous glances and a shard of doubt carved up his chest when he saw them murmur to one another. He bit into the chocolate, using the flavor as an attempt to get his hands to stop shaking. Anticipation, fear, is what this was. Something new. The way his entire body shuddered, the way it wanted to go running out those doors and get to Ray.

A soft rustling brought him back to focus, and his chin tipped upwards with satisfaction when he saw them lower their weapons one by one.

“Have you made your choice?” he asked in Spanish and repeated the question in English until all of them had their weapons lowered, “Will you stand with me?”

Will you stand against a foreign enemy?

None of them replied.

But they all took one unanimous step forward. A loud step, one that sent a tremor running through the ground. One that made him grin again.

Their faces reflected the same expression he’d learned to hone over decades. Had the same promise written he’d repeated over and over in his head when he’d followed his father.

No regrets. No remorse.

No fucking mercy.

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I t'd been easy to convince them to join him. Somehow his and Christina's words from the day before had struck a nerve because as Angel watched them file out of the house on Martin's order, none of them derailed. None of them were regretful.

The plan was finally in motion.

Angel breathed out, slumping against the pillar of the second floor as he waited for all of them to disappear. He'd follow them later, would get to Ray before anyone else did. And would have his entire army by his side.

He wanted to leave immediately. Wanted to run after Ray and wherever they'd taken her.

But couldn't leave without raising any suspicion. Nor could he contact anyone. All he could hope for was Ray and her way of distributing the tasks amongst everyone. But hell, he didn't even know if any of them were alive. The thoughts rushed through his mind like a tidal wave, the pace leaving his heart racing as he drew his knees to his chest.

His forehead tapped against the bone of his knee, his fingers sliding through his dirt-filled hair as he watched the glass that hung from his neck. It swung back and forth, occasionally touching his skin as he breathed in and out. Angel could hear the whisper of their footsteps echo away and could feel the rumble of the door as it shut. And left him in unforgiving silence.

A sudden ringing began in his ears in the quiet air, not a hiss or a crack within range.

Angel gave it a few seconds .

Knew it was too easy for him to just leave his prison and not have any repercussions coming banging at his door.

Maybe he knew his fate too well because the repercussions came just a few moments later.

Click. Clack.

Angel's head snapped up, his body tensing as he heard the heels clack against the marble tiles on the floor below his. He straightened, suddenly glad he'd been sitting behind a pillar, to hide himself in case anyone spotted him. Angel's first guess was her, judging by her heels. He didn't have such a strong hold on his fate. Because it wasn't her.

It was someone worse.

Angel stiffened when he heard the clicking cease and braced himself for an attack. For something.

"I think we're too old for hide and seek, no?"

He grit his teeth, his fingers shifting back to touch the gun hanging from the waistband of his jeans as he heard her familiar voice echo through the large area. There had been a time when he'd accepted her as his family. Had believed she was a blessing after the turmoil of his life.

Turns out she was nothing but karma.

Angel rolled his shoulders back, not daring to peep as he carefully crouched on his

toes,

“Come on Angel,” there it was, the touch of impatience. She’d never been one to wait. Never a great person to have on hand if there were any stealth missions, “I’m getting tired of this.”

Angel didn’t move. Just removed the gun without making a single sound and twisted the silencer on its edge. It was still too difficult to determine her exact spot, which is why he needed her to continue talking .

In her case though, doing that task wasn’t all that difficult.

“ Angel!” she screeched, her voice making him flinch as he removed the knife and placed it in the placeholder of his sleeve, tucking it so it was invisible, “ Come on. I have a fucking prospect for you.”

Angel’s brows arched, his movements stalling as she sighed loudly,

“Look, we can get rid of Martin for you.”

His eyes flared wide in surprise.

“You can work with us to get rid of him. And you’ll have all the power you need. I know you’ve been wanting to tear down Martin to take his place for a while now.”

Suddenly Angel was glad he hadn’t shared his personal vendetta against this entire organization with the others. Had only insinuated that he was on board with getting rid of it all when he’d told them about Ray’s plans. No one, except Ray, knew he wanted to get rid of the Ravens altogether.

Everyone thought he was targeting solely his father.

“I know you don’t want to get rid of the Ravens,” she said loudly, and Angel tilted his head to catch a glimpse of her figure. His gaze narrowed when he saw the brush of red hair disappear under the dais he was sitting on, “And I know you aren’t fine with Raylene Walker destroying them either.”

He shook his head.

“So we’re offering an alternative. A truce of sorts. Join us, and we’ll make it easy for you to take Martin’s place.”

As what? Angel wanted to spit in her face, your fucking pawn?

Angel reined in his rush of anger, inhaling calmly. Judging by her ricocheting echoes, she was right below he was. Just a few steps forward, he coaxed as he looked through the railings. Saw nothing but plain white tiles and a large shut door as she groaned out loud at the lack of his response .

His hold on the gun tightened as he heard her angry murmurs, felt the clacking of her heels, and—

Angel smirked.

Got you.

Her red hair was a blur when she stepped right into the middle of the large hallway area and spun around dramatically. Angel saw her waving her gun in the air maniacally, her brown eyes ablaze as she looked up to the second floor but missed him completely. He could see the way she kept one hand braced against the wound he’d left her with back at the warehouse.

He'd been too drugged not to do deeper damage.

Today, however, that would change.

Angel took aim, his gun aimed at her heart as he waited for her to stop spinning. For her to face him.

And turning on her heels, just when she stopped, Angel saw her red hair sway violently, disorienting her for a second as she tried to look up. His gaze narrowed in focus and just as she raised her hand to shove the mess of her hair behind her ear, he pulled the trigger.

Swoop, the bullet went.

And buried itself deep in her heart.

Angel watched her eyes widen in half surprise, a gasp leaving her lips as she stumbled back and landed painfully on her back. Somewhere in his heart he felt an echo of pain, heard the grief and regret of ever knowing and trusting her as he saw her wide eyes shoot up to his spot. Angel didn't rise then, just aimed the gun towards her head and was about to shoot when she growled out loud, clutching at her chest with one hand. And used the other to grab her dropped gun and start shooting haphazardly.

He grunted in surprise, ducking as a bullet whizzed over his head ,

banging on the railing as he aimed the gaps of the railings again.

Her eyes met his then, her body stilling as their gazes clashed in half haze and horror as he grit his teeth.

And pulled the trigger.

Right over her heart, once again.

This time, when she slammed back with a groan, she didn't rise.

Angel waited for a moment, watching her stomach, waiting for it to stop moving. It took a few seconds. But it did. And only then did he get up from his crouched position. Slowly. Carefully. His gun was limp in his hands as he rose to his full height and watched her for a second.

An odd silence fell over them, ruining the control he had over his emotions as he watched her corpse stain the white floors once again. He saw the blood flow, watched it just as he had the day his mother had lain on the same floor. He saw her red hair clash with the white and saw her crippled skirt twisted around her hips. Heard the echo of the dying wind. Saw her fingers twitch and last dying movement and—

Nope.

That was her hand. Moving. Holding a gun.

That was now pointed straight at his head.

Angel blinked. Something like holy shit and sorcery passing his dumb as fuck mind as he watched her finger curl around the trigger of her gun. Angel ducked at the very last second, a rasping sound leaving his throat as he heard her groan. Saw her tug at her t-shirt.

He rolled his eyes at the black vest that showed through her movements.

“Fucker.” He heard Mia Andrews murmur menacingly as she snapped her eyes open and stared straight at him .

Shit.

Angel didn't really wait for her to continue shooting.

Just twisted on his feet and well... ran.

* *

The blindfold on her eyes was tight. And with the bounds around her wrists and the painful way in which she was getting hauled forward, she should've been tense. Should've at least been uneasy. Almost afraid.

Instead, Raylene Walker just yawned.

The man who'd been hauling her forward seemed to pause in his step behind her, his hold on her wrists tightening. Ray let out a soft echo of laughter and heard him growl in annoyance behind her.

She was aware of others striding in as well, people shuffling all around her as they all filed through one... doorway ?

She heard someone murmur fucking psychopath under their breath as they passed her, other whispers following his words. She couldn't help it, another burst of laughter left her tongue.

Ray could only assume they were heading into the building Angel and her had blown apart years back.

And judging by the porch the man had hauled her up, the place was still in ruins. She could feel the debris under her feet, could smell the dirt of broken rocks all around the place as the staircase they'd been climbing up ended. Echoing sounds followed

the next step she took, and Ray had an acute sense that they'd stepped into a larger arena. She took a deep breath and did the best thing to figure out how big this place was.

She let out a loud and booming whoop!

Except her voice didn't echo .

Ray's brows furrowed as her loud yell got swallowed by the howling winds. But it also surprised everyone enough. She tilted her head when she heard the paranoid clicking of guns in her direction followed by faint swears and yelps. Even the man behind her flinched back, his hold on her wrist slackening. A shiver ran down her spine at the thought of having more than a dozen guns pointed in her direction. At the thought of her being unable to see her enemies before they pulled her apart.

And yet, Ray smirked. Took their distraction as an opportunity to slip the metal of her knife into her fingers and cut through her tapped wrist with one swift movement. She didn't move away from the man though. Kept that advantage to herself, even as the man growled behind her again and shoved her forward roughly, swearing in a language she didn't have enough strength to recognize. She stumbled forward, a gasp stuck in her throat as she felt the blindfold around her eyes loosen and shook her head to make it fall against her neck.

Ray kept her hands flexed behind her back as she blinked back into focus. As she breathed in and coughed at the dust in the air. Smiled, when she found unfamiliar people with their glares fixated on her. A man was standing in the place she had been, something grave shining in his light eyes as he took a threatening step forward. Ray didn't move. He was large compared to her, with his taut muscles pulled back to show his enormous figure. The snarl on his face did nothing to subdue his menace, it only heightened the pure rage written on his dark and cutting face. But she didn't move.

“Afraid?” she rasped, her throat dry.

It’d been difficult to keep track of the time. But judging by the dark sky outside, the night had only just begun .

She could only assume that only a few hours had passed. The thought reassuring her, Ray tipped her head back and cast her eyes upwards and all around the place.

Her lips parted in half surprise when she saw the state of this place. Years back it’d been beautiful, lined with sheer perfection and concrete walls that had held one of the most powerful families in the world.

Now it was nothing but a pile of broken bricks and walls.

It was so sad. Ray breathed out and watched the brown debris surrounding her. She didn’t dare look up, knew she’d find nothing but a gaping hole from when she’d shot down that hideous chandelier and Angel had blown the roof apart. The bricks were black with soot, vines climbing through each crack venomously. Priceless furniture was ruined, the once familiar décor left to rot.

The moonlight poured down on them like waves, its white light casting an odd glow on everyone in the arena. It gave her enough to keep watch on how many people she’d have to deal with just in care. Her gaze narrowed as she rolled her shoulders back, keeping her hands still flexed behind her back as if they were tied. Ray saw them all tense, their fingers going to the trigger of their gun as they waited and watched.

A sigh left her lips at the lack of any response,

“Can anyone tell me the time?” she asked finally and took a tentative step forward. The man stiffened, his shoulders going taut as he glared down at her, his own finger

tightening on the trigger,

“Stay in your place, girl.” He snarled, his voice low enough to send dangerous tremors running down her spine. Ray only shook her head, the strands of her dust-stained hair falling on her face as she moved .

“Or what?” she asked and lolled her head to one side, giving nothing but amusement as she eyed the crowd. Counting. Calculating. Judging by the time, there was no doubt everyone was already out and searching for her. She could only hope Neera had gotten the other kids out and the others were working on getting as much manpower as she could.

And Angel, she thought with slight fear, she hoped all this would work out.

“Or you’ll lose your head before your time comes, Raylene Walker.”

It was a sweet, female voice that slipped through the dark night. Ray’s head snapped up, alertness rushing through her as she kept count of the number of people around her. A click-clack of heels was all she heard before the shadows around the doorway she’d been shoved through shifted. Ray squinted, her heart pounding in her chest as she watched the shadow take form. And blinked when a slip of red shone under the moonlight.

They’d been right. They’d been right. They’d been right.

Ray breathed out when she saw the woman step through the doorway elegantly.

While Maya Larsen had been a snake-like beauty with her blonde curls and dangerous eyes, this woman was all angelic. Her red hair was like a bloodstain on her white shirt and white trousers. Ray watched her as she stepped through the doorway and dipped an invisible hat in her direction.

A devil, Ray couldn't help but think as her mind swayed with anticipation, in an angel's disguise.

Her green eyes shone like emeralds in the moonlight, something calm in the way she strode through the crowd and waved in her direction.

"Raylene Walker." She said, and gods even her voice was as still as an ocean before a storm .

A small smile, one she would've seen as sweet if they weren't in this situation, played on her red lips, "How nice of us to finally meet."

Ray's gaze shuttered, her body shuddering with leashed rage as she looked at the woman step over a pile of debris. She had a part to play, Ray forced herself to think, forced herself to believe as the woman stopped a few feet away from her.

"You?" Ray forced her voice to break, her hands balling into tight fists behind her back. The woman's eyes crinkled at the edges,

"You can stop acting now darling," she purred in response, her voice making Ray's blood run cold, "I know you freed yourself a while back now."

Ray's jaw ticked as the man who'd been holding her took a cautious step away from the woman. He dared a glance in her direction when Ray sighed, and put her hands forward to rip the tape off her skin.

"Stupid decision really," Ray said calmly, as she dropped the tape to the ground and flexed her fingers, "To tie someone's hands with tape."

"I agree." The woman agreed.

They remained silent for the next five seconds. Ray counted, each second passing like a hundred years. She took comfort in the feel of the metal pressed against the skin of her wrist. Of her guns tucked in her boots. Two weapons. One gun and one knife were all she had after Martin's men had ripped all the others off her. It was enough, she told herself as she tipped her chin upwards and watched the woman with narrowed eyes, enough to last. Enough to end this.

The woman's lips twisted into a soft smile then, her green eyes shining with something malicious as she raised her hands in the air. Ray braced herself, her one foot sliding back in a defensive gesture when—

Clap !

Ray blinked, a breath leaving her as the woman brought her hands together, the clap booming through the large arena.

“We really should be getting this started.” She began, her voice still calm. It vexed her, seeing a woman like this sound so soft. So calm. Like an angel. She looked at Ray now, and laced her hands behind her back, her shirt flexing against her skin as she pushed her shoulders back,

“We can't keep Raylene Walker waiting now, can we?”

Ray grit her teeth, subduing the urge to shove her knife through the woman's throat. It was as though she could read her mind because her red curls slipped off her shoulder as she tilted her head. A tender, almost motherly gesture that had Ray flexing her hands in an attempt to stop herself from rushing through this. But then she spoke, and everything around Ray just...shattered.

“Get Angel De Santos here.”

Please, Ray pleaded with all forces above, begged the moon that shone down upon them, please let it have gone smoothly.

Not a single thing occurred for the next five seconds. No, only a blanket of silence settled upon them, its presence suffocating as the men and woman behind the woman shifted on their feet. Ray didn't know what the woman was expecting. But judging by the dark look that crossed her perfect face, it was the first sign of something wrong when no one appeared behind her. Still, Ray didn't hope. Didn't think a thing. Not until she knew for sure.

But it seemed as though the moon, the night was on her side. For once.

Because soon enough, a faint tap, tap, tap of footsteps filled the dark air and Ray saw a man, taller than the one who'd held her captive run into the broken mansion.

"Madame," he panted as he rushed past the men and woman who surrounded Ray, "A problem, madame. We've had a breach –"

Ray's breath left her lungs, her eyes flaring with relief at the words as the man took another step in the woman's direction. Ray could see her shoulders stiffening. Could see her calm, perfect composure collapse bit by bit as the man continued in hushed tones. The satisfaction that rushed through her body was nothing to the adrenaline she felt when those emerald eyes shifted to hers delicately. The absolute pleasure that rocked her bones.

"You," The woman finally said as the man finished speaking and bowed his head, taking a step away from her, "You must think you've won." She took a smooth step forward, her white shirt rustling with the movement. Ray hid her scoff but kept her defensive position intact. Anytime now, she told herself, it could begin at any moment.

“I’m not stupid, Miranda Andrews.”

Miranda froze, her body stilling with Ray’s words. It was then she saw that glint spark in her green eyes. It was then Ray knew Miranda was no ordinary woman. Not anymore.

“I don’t think.” Ray breathed and balled her hands into fists,

“ I know. ”

“Oh?”

Her blood ran cold at her calm tone. At the way Miranda straightened and tugged the sleeves of her shirt forward. And suddenly Ray knew she and Angel had made the right choice that night. Had taken a gamble.

And had played quite well.

A slow smile curved her lips, her heart pounding with excitement as she watched this play out .

Ray rolled her shoulders back, forcing every ounce of conviction, of shamelessness in her frame as she looked down upon the woman standing far away,

“I’m no stranger to those who climb through ashes for revenge.” She said and saw Miranda’s eyes flare wide, saw the glint of curiosity entire her frame as she placed one hand delicately over the other, “And I know what lengths one goes for it.”

“Revenge.” Miranda breathed, and let loose a soft laugh, “You speak as though you know the word quite well.”

Suddenly Ray was taken back to the night she and Angel had reunited. The night when she'd taken him up to her place and they'd bared one another's souls. Had shared a part of themselves that now hung between both their necks. Right above their equally beating hearts.

And after the emotional bit, they'd conjured up a plan.

Had laid the perfect trap for any eavesdroppers.

She saw it play out now. Knew she would have to tread carefully.

Which was probably why she was bidding for time.

"You've given enough lessons to last a lifetime Miranda," Ray replied easily and shifted her weight on her backfoot when she saw someone take a tentative step in her direction. She sent a cold look in older woman's direction, and saw her raise a swift hand in the air, stopping them in their tracks, "Or have you forgotten?"

The hours of research. Of searching after they'd understood who the mole was. The desperate attempts to not believe what was truly happening. When reality kept shoving them back into the same pit again and again.

Because Mia Andrews had betrayed them from the very beginning.

She'd chosen blood over loyalty .

And in all honesty, Ray couldn't really blame her.

Didn't mean she wouldn't kill her.

Ray's words had struck a nerve because Miranda Andrews took a ruffled step

forward, her eyes ablaze with years and years of rage as she snarled, “Forgotten?” she began. Shivers erupted down Ray’s spine at the sheer murder written in her gaze,

“Forgotten what? Forgotten having seen my own home ravaged by flames you caused? Forgotten having seen everything you’ve worked for come crumbling down right at your feet?” she paused and scoffed, her demeanor cracking, the grief in her voice showing,

“You burnt my daughter’s childhood, making ashes of the memories we’d built over years .” She was seething now, her red hair a wildfire behind her, “You burnt the room where me and my family sat every night. You burned a library I’d built from the ground up for my daughter. You –”

"You burnt my sister." Ray's voice was low. Was calm despite the pain, the sorrow ruining her heart. When she looked up, she saw Miranda’s face. Saw the stark horror that crossed her eyes before she turned it into indifference.

"What?" Ray laughed without an ounce of humor, "You thought you could have your daughter spy on me, and I wouldn't know? You thought you could kill Lia Walker the minute she decided to deny you, and I wouldn't know ?"

Ray shook her head, "I didn't burn you down for the Lions." She said as though Miranda were stupid, spitting out the words like venom,

"I burnt you down because you birthed that waste of a man in my fucking home. "

Miranda’s eyes went cold .

“You were always meant to join us. Lia and Seth Kincaid were merely agents sent to get that job done.” She snapped and Ray faced her, her eyes flaring with years of hidden rage as her body shook with the fierceness she kept leashed,

“Instead that stupid girl got you wanting to step out of the underworld.”

“How did it feel?” Ray interrupted, her voice shaking with fury as she tipped her chin upwards, “To kill a girl who was younger than your own daughter?”

Miranda didn’t break. But Ray didn’t relent.

“How did you do it?” she asked again and took a maniacal step forward, her mind a spiral as she looked at Miranda, “How did you get a father to murder his own daughter?”

“Like a man who murders his own wife?” Miranda asked, her lips thinning as she looked past Ray, “It’s quite easy.”

Ray heard it then and didn’t have to whirl around to see Martin De Santos run through the open void behind her. Didn’t have to turn to hear his panicked pants as he breathed out,

“It’s gone.”

Miranda closed her eyes.

“All our people. All our holdings. Everything.”

Ray didn’t smile. Couldn’t bring herself to do anything but tilt her head upwards to look at Miranda, “You—”

“Don’t get too hopeful.” She said and shrugged as she opened her eyes and gazed down at Ray, “He won’t come for you.”

Ray’s gaze narrowed, her hands fisting as Miranda leered closer.

“One way to get everyone to do as you want,” she whispered ,

“You give them something better.”

Ray’s gaze flickered in a pretense of nervousness.

She would give Miranda whatever she wanted until their time came. Until they could all get here. Miranda saw that nervousness, and jumped on it like a starving predator,

“I’ve promised Angel De Santos full control over the Ravens.” She said, her voice barely above a whisper, “He can have everything he’s worked for. I will end Martin and open up a whole new path for him.”

Ray’s gaze narrowed, aware that Miranda was speaking but Martin couldn’t hear her, “What do you think?”

Click.

Ray bit back a grin as Miranda leered closer, looking far more like a wild animal as she snarled in her face,

“He’d be foolish to not take the opportunity.”

Swoop.

Ray’s eyes snapped over her shoulder, her brows arching as she saw the man who had captured her go down, clutching his shoulder as he howled in surprise. Miranda whirled on her feet, surprise marring her features. Ray took that as a chance to take a step back. To shift the spotlight upon someone else.

“You’ve lived with him for years now,” a voice spoke up from behind her. A familiar

one. Ray's shoulders relaxed, the anxiety leaving her as she breathed out,

"And yet you don't truly know him."

Luke's voice was clear, but his shadow had not yet taken form. Miranda shifted on her feet again, her movements almost hasty.

"He'll burn you down again and again." Luke's voice boomed, chilling everyone but Ray to the bone, as he continued, "Until he gets what he wants."

Ray rolled her eyes, even as a familiar warmth spread across her ribs.

"And what he wants."

Jack.

"Is her."

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They waited for a beat.

And another.

And finally, Ray let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Oh.” Luke began, but his voice was followed by a loud clang behind Miranda. Ray tilted her head sideways, her eyes crinkling as Miranda whirled on her heels to see Akash stride in with a rifle resting on his shoulders.

Everyone remained silent for a second. Not really knowing what to do.

And Miranda was well... bewildered. She stared at Ray and back at Akash as if they'd gone mad. And quite, Ray couldn't help but agree, they had gone mad.

Because Akash cocked his gun and aimed it towards the man standing on his right.

“Your precious boyfriend isn't here yet.” He snapped and a smile curved Ray's lips as she took a step back and heard Miranda scoff in half surprise, “That was just a distraction.”

“For what?” Miranda finally snapped and Akash rolled his eyes.

“For this. ”

It all happened like a blur. Akash whirled on his feet as Miranda let out a guttural yell and turned, looking for Raylene. Looking to end her.

But Ray wasn't there.

In the night sky, Raylene Walker had disappeared within the shadows.

* *

Angel could see his breath as he ran through the dark alleys. The same ones he'd navigated back when he was searching for the Phoenix's hideout.

That night had been equally as silent as it was today. The only difference was the faint bangs he could hear through the cold air that blew past him. He shuddered as the cold seeped through his t-shirt, cursing the entire setting as he ran alone through the dark alley.

The ruined mansion was close. And judging by the faint gunshots and yells, he knew the others had gotten there before him.

The plan had been simple.

Convince Martin's people to join him and just wait for Miranda to call upon them as they rounded up on Raylene Walker. What he hadn't considered was Mia. And now, after having seen her lose her cool like a fucking psychopath after he'd well... shot her, Angel hadn't stuck around to find out more.

He really should've been smarter though.

Because Mia was now following him like a hellhound.

And now he would have to waste his time searching for ways out of this situation.

To make matters worse, he had a terrible feeling that Mia was far too close than he'd

been expecting. He cursed out loud as he shifted his weight and ran to the dark alley on his right. The moonlight was like a saving grace, lighting his way to the mansion. There was no way in hell he wouldn't get there, he told himself as he ran, no fucking way.

If he had stopped to listen, he would've heard the sounds of faint footsteps behind him .

But he didn't stop.

And was far too quick for Mia to catch even a glimpse of him as he turned around the corner and ended up in a familiar clearing.

Angel blinked, his face alight with the moonlight as he saw the ruined mansion sitting at the end of the clearing, barely a few feet away. And with the view came the rush of sounds. A yell made him pause in his tracks, his eyes flaring wide as he saw a man wearing a black suit fly from one end of the huge open doorway to the other.

Angel began walking again, keeping half his attention on Mia and the other half on the terrible scene up ahead.

There had been a time when a gate was used to guard the place. For a gang that was based in the underworld, they'd sure made their presence very clear. They'd been the easiest ones he'd hunted down back then. Angel could see the debris of the fountain he'd ripped apart the day he had set foot here. The bricks lay over one another, the water no longer flowing through them.

And up ahead, was the mansion with no roof.

Angel's eyes narrowed as he slowed his pace. The yells, the bullets were all too loud now. Were too many for him to hope for the best. He rounded across the ruined

fountain, disguising himself in the shadows that were cast from the large walls built around the estate. His footsteps were light. Silent in the wave of flashes and screams that swung in the air. Angel kept his head ducked, maybe he could get to the back entry of the place. It had no roof, nor no walls to keep it upright for long.

Maybe they could blow it all apart again.

A faint shiver ran up his neck then, making him pause. He could swear he'd heard a click—

Angel ducked .

All air left his lungs as he heard her guttural scream of annoyance behind him but didn't wait for her response as he covered his head with his hands and ran to the other end of the fountain.

“Mia,” Angel said, keeping his voice calm and loud enough for her to hear as he saw her red hair snake its way through the line of his vision. Mia stood with a hand braced on her hip, her eyes narrowed as she stood right opposite him. He watched the gun in her hands, waiting for her to lift it as his own fingers inched back to grab his own. But she didn't move. And then it struck him,

“You're out of bullets, aren't you?” he yelled, a grin sneaking its way past his lips. It lacked humor but made its mark as Mia hauled the gun in his direction.

Angel ducked and barely flinched when the gun landed behind him with a loud thud. But with the gun, came another surprise.

Angel's head snapped up, his eyes flaring wide as he saw Mia climb over the ruined fountain and scrambled back when she unleashed herself upon him like a fucking maniac. Her yell was nothing short of booming as she pounced on him. Hadn't seen it

coming, Angel barely managed a step back as her weight brought him down.

His back collided with the ground in a painful rush, a shot of pain running down his spine as Mia's fingers closed around his neck, her thumbs pressing on the point right above his collarbones, blinding his vision for a second. The air gone left him gasping in surprise. Too much strength, he realized as Mia's red hair fell like a death curtain around him, she'd been training. Mia leaned down further, her eyes ablaze as though she could read his mind.

"Came to bite you back in the ass, didn't I? "

She snarled as Angel gasped, his hands snapping up to clasp her upper arms forcefully.

But he didn't push her away. He realized then as a tear leaked out of the corner of his eye and Mia looked down at him with such hate that he couldn't kill her. Didn't want to.

"And this fucking necklace." Her chin nudged in its direction. Her words, it brought forth an unholy sort of rage in his mind and his vision, which was once going black now turned red,

"Your mother's gift, wasn't it? Martin's told us all about it. How she died so easily. " Fuck no, "How after giving birth to waste like you, she spent all her life mothering you. Protecting you." Mia laughed and Angel shut his eyes, unable to breathe, unable to think, "And what did she do in the end? Died after putting a gun in your hands."

Oh, Gods, it'd been a while since he'd felt such fury rock his bones. Even as his vision flooded, as his air left, nothing could stop him from hearing her next words.

"You gave one to Raylene Walker as well, didn't you?" it was the low baritone of her

voice, the silk venom hidden in her words that had him snapping his eyes open. Mia matched his glare and laughed, her hold on his throat tightening as she stood up to put more of her weight on it, “How would you feel if I hand her the same fate?”

Screw whatever he’d said earlier.

Angel’s fingers dug into the skin of her fingers, his nails biting into her arm as he glared up at her. By getting up, she hadn’t realized, she’d just granted Angel the perfect opportunity to get out of this situation.

Mia barely noticed as he grabbed her right elbow and grunted softly with the increase in weight around his neck .

Enough air, he told himself as he drew his knees closer, he had enough air to do this.

And it was with that thought he propped his feet against her hip and pushed. Mia’s eyes went wide, her hold loosening enough for him to gasp out loud. But he kept his eyes on the movement as she lost her balance and was about to fall on him when he twisted his leg, wrapped it around the back of her neck, and slammed her to the ground. Still holding Mia’s hand, he twisted it hard enough to have her screaming as he snarled low enough for her to hear,

“Keep her fucking name out of your mouth.”

And shoved her away from him.

Mia rolled away from him with a half gasp and groan but gave him enough time to get to his feet and look to his right to see if anyone was there. All he saw were the bodies in the shadows, hurling around with the sounds of bullets in the background. Angel’s gaze narrowed as he took a step back. And another.

And caught a glimpse of pink highlights in the glimmer of moonlight. Angel's chest hollowed out. Myra Jelani. They'd all gotten here before him.

A scream had him snapping his head away from the scene and he breathed out in anticipation as he saw Mia get to her feet, rubbing the side of her head angrily. He could see the glimmer of metal twisted around her fingers as she flexed them forward. His gaze narrowed, his leg shifting back in a defensive position as Mia turned her head and spat on the ground.

The vulgar gesture was nothing new. But it still had his mind racing with endless thoughts. He needed to end this quickly, he thought as he slipped his own knife into his fingers, he needed to end Martin tonight. Had to get to Ray before Miranda got to her. Before something bad happened .

"You said we didn't have enough people." Mia began the calm in his voice making him still, "But look at the scene now. It's flooded with people against you. Against Walker."

His gaze narrowed as she flexed her palms again and curled them into tight fists. Angel watched her every movement, careful not to begin it first as she took a step forward,

"Wrong this time Angel," she said, "Maybe you'll be wrong in the future too."

"Half of them are ours, you moron."

The words came with a whiplash of movement. Angel saw her black hair and her blonde strands first. He almost cried out in relief when he saw her run and stand in front of him. She's alive, he thought and sent thanks up to the universe as she saw her look over her shoulder. Her hazel eyes glinted in relief and a spark of mischief as she nudged her chin in the direction of the ruined mansion.

“Go.” Christina Morris said and turned to face Mia with raised fists and a half-hearted grin, “I’ll handle her.”

Angel didn’t wait to reconsider. Nor did he doubt her capabilities as he turned on his feet and ran in the direction of the back entrance of the place. If there was any place he would find Raylene Walker, it wouldn’t be in the shadows.

It would be in the middle of the battlefield.

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Raylene had been a part of far too many massacres to be surprised by anything.

Which was why, seeing all her friends spread across the field with their weapons and their fists raised was nothing new either. Her eyes weren't on the people who worked for Miranda, not when half of Martin's men had turned and were on their sides now. No, her eyes were fixated on Miranda and Martin who were now coated in blood of the people they'd shot down. Miranda's white shirt was covered in specks of RED, her green eyes narrowed in focus as she used her endless bullets.

They were only alive because of the men and women who had made an impenetrable circle around them.

Impenetrable because Ray hadn't tried yet.

She looked down at her gun and was checking the bullets she had left when she felt a prickle to her light. Raylene didn't have to look up to load her gun back again with a quick click, raise it to the air, and shoot the person to her right. Whoever they were, fell immediately, a yell on their lips as Ray raised her gun and began walking. Her gaze narrowed in focus and,

Bang!

Her shot struck true. Miranda's gun went flying out of her hands, a gasp and yell leaving her lips as the bullet graced her fingertips. Those green eyes flew to hers and Ray smiled back at her, raising her hand in a wave as she saw a scoff leave the woman's lips. Miranda turned to one of her men and grabbed another gun, but Ray didn't wait for her reaction .

Just blended with the people right in the middle and began making her way to the circle as Miranda whirled around to find nothing but a hollow spot in the middle of the battlefield.

Five.

Ray saw Cameron on her way, his own share of enemies swarming him as he fought barehand with Neera braced against his back. Ray turned towards him as one of the enemies got too close, her eyes narrowing in focus as she shot the man straight through the head. Cameron's eyes flashed and his head whirled to hers, gratitude shining silently in his expression as he turned back to the people who rounded them.

Four.

Irene had her back against Myra's as well. Both worked together, the former using her gun while Myra shifted swiftly on her toes with a knife in her hand and a disturbing grin on her face. Ray blamed her stealth on the dancing she'd left behind years back, but it was faster than any bullets. And way more efficient.

On the other end stood the twins. Ray could only scoff as she saw Sorin and Noah stand, back-to-back as they constantly changed their weapons and found their targets.

One held a wooden plank with sharpened edges which disturbingly looked like it was ripped off a table. Ray didn't stay to ask who had done it. Or how. And Akash. That fucking idiot, shifted around on his feet like he was on a playground. His gaze caught hers as she whizzed past him, the grin on his widening as he waved at her. They were good, Ray thought worriedly as she reached the circle, but they'd tire soon enough.

She had to end this.

Now .

Taking down the circle one by one was efficient, but took far too much time. It gave her time to think about things she didn't want to even consider and had her gut churning in worry as she spent most of her energy. Maybe she should hire a sniper, Ray thought as she brought the first man's face down on her knee. His groan was loud but inaudible in the insanity of this place. And it left her masked.

Taking them down turned out to become easier after that. Rigorous, in a way. Repetitive. A cut at the ankles or the knees to weaken their hold when they weren't looking and a slash to render them unconscious. Gone were the times she would kill in cold blood. Not until it was absolutely necessary. The authorities were going to have a fun time handling this, Ray thought to herself as she rounded to the last person standing. Unlike the others, the woman standing saw her coming and immediately whirled with her fist raised in the air.

Ray blinked in surprise but let her land the blow. Pain exploded in the side of her face, disorienting her for a second as she took the distraction and turned it into a chance. The woman up ahead didn't see her coming when Ray crouched down suddenly and landed a deathly blow to her abdomen. Used the knife in her hands to rip the skin off her knees and elbows. The woman's screams were lost in the crowd as she fell to the ground, still, some strength remaining in her as she glared up at her. Ray's brow arched, alright then. She raised her hand and put a bullet through the woman's arm, just in case.

Three.

Ray didn't wait for her to return. Just took a step through the destroyed circle and saw the bloodied man and woman right in the middle of it .

Some power couple, she thought as she cocked her gun in place. Martin saw her first, and his amber eyes went wide in rage as he stilled. Ray grinned at its sight and leveled her gun to his forehead. Specifically to the angry vein that was popping

through it.

“It’s begun and he isn’t here yet.” Martin snarled, his words carving her chest as he raised his gun as well. He couldn’t be dead,

“Think Raylene Walker,” he baited, “Why isn’t he here?”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself Martin,” she snapped back, keeping up her facade even as her heart pounded in her chest, “Your wife’s taken to the shadows and left you behind.”

Martin whirled on his heels, and she saw his surprise at the lack of Miranda's presence. Ray hadn’t been surprised at all, had let Miranda disappear. She had to get rid of him first. Raylene took his distraction as a chance and pressed the trigger. Bang and a bullet buried itself in one of his knees. Martin’s yell had her gaze narrowing, but the prideful man didn’t fall to his knees. Just clutched his thigh and heaved.

Two.

He’s alive, she told herself over and over again as Martin glared up at her, he’s alive.

“Or maybe,” he rasped, a menacing smirk tilting his lips despite the bullet in his leg, “Maybe he left you behind after all. Maybe you’ve been imagining it all.”

Ray’s lips curled in disgust at the audacity of this man. A rush of red blinded her vision, her entire body shuddering in leashed anger as she looked at his other hand. Saw the gun he was still holding. Ray’s eyes narrowed at the same time the realization dawned upon Martin. And he was a second late as she shifted her gun and shot !

An ear-splitting scream wrenched out of his throat, his eyes wide as his gun dropped

to the ground with a silent click.

One.

Ray breathed out as Martin shook before her, soft whimpers leaving his lips as he looked up at her, his face ashen. And yet such murder was written in his gaze that she felt it sear through her. Ray scoffed at the sight and shifted the gun towards his head.

“He,” Martin panted and groaned out in pain again, clutching his shaking wrist, “will not come.”

Her fingers tightened on her trigger, but this was Angel’s trigger to pull—

“Such petty lies.”

Ray’s entire body stilled. His voice was like a soft curtain that parted and slowly drew her in. Out of the massacre around her. Into his arms.

Relief exploded through her chest, he’s alive. He’s alive. He’s alive. And his eyes, they glinted like embers when he stepped into her view and barely looked at his father.

“You came.” Ray couldn’t help but say, her voice barely above a whisper. But he heard it. Somehow, he always did. Angel turned to face her, his brows contorted in worry as his palm wrapped around the side of her neck, inspecting her for any injuries. A soft sound left her throat as he took a step closer. She lifted her free hand and placed it on his cheek, her eyes almost wide in surprise, “You came.”

“Of course I came,” Angel scoffed and leaned into her touch, the twinkle in his eyes sparking, “Who was there to stop me?”

Ray's lips parted with a smile before she drew back .

Angel turned back to face his father again, still looking like the amber-eyed boy she'd fallen for back on the island. He showed every ounce of that happiness to Martin.

"This girl right here?" he pointed to her, and Ray blinked, her heart stalling as something like holy shit crossed her mind,

"I'm going to marry her someday."

Ray blinked.

And her mind did holy shit for a whole other reason now.

"You're going to what now?"

He didn't turn to look at her as he faced his father and covered her body with his own, "Stay back babe, I got this."

"Babe?"

And then proceeded to take a menacing step forward in his father's direction. Had the audacity to shoot her a wink before doing it as well.

Ray scoffed and took a step back, compressing the urge to jump into his arms and hide somewhere deep in her chest as she turned her head to look around for Miranda. Her gaze narrowed when she saw the red hair glint from the shadows. Ray didn't wait. Just turned to Akash who was standing a few feet away and dipped her chin.

Cover me.

Akash was beside her in an instant and watched her back like a hawk as she crossed the arena, getting closer and closer to Miranda. Close enough to see her whispering to a woman she couldn't recognize. And close enough to be further away from Angel once again. Her pace slowed as she neared her. One wrong move and Miranda would be gone once again. One wrong move and they could all lose –

Boom .

The sound wasn't quiet. No, it was a dangerous rumble that cracked the air. Ray's brows furrowed in confusion as she and Akash stopped. They all did. And snapped their gazes upwards. Ray's eyes flared wide when she saw the smoke that rose in the night sky and that one piece of ceiling creak. Saw it inch downward. No, she thought in surprise as it rendered her frozen.

Creak, it went and Ray's heart stopped, all breath knocked from her lungs. Creak, it went again, a desperate sort of sound of bricks rubbing against one another. Please, she prayed as she saw the debris fall upon them like snow, please don't–

A single brick tipped from the edge of the ceiling.

Absolute silence spread through the arena, everyone stopping. Everyone pausing.

Ray saw that brick fall.

And watched as the entire slab of ceiling followed it's course of motion.

It all happened so fast. So quick . A desperate scream left her throat, maybe Akash's name. Or Angel's. Or Neera's, Irene's, Myra's, she didn't fucking know. Just screamed out a name as a part of the mansion came pouring down on them. Her gaze snapped to her left and she saw Akash, standing too close to where it would land. A gasp left her throat then, and without thinking, without barely breathing, Ray willed

her entire strength to throw herself upon Akash's figure.

Maybe he'd seen it coming.

Because when the piece of concrete came crashing down and when the tremors rocked the earth, he'd wrapped her in his embrace.

Had jumped further away from the concrete .

A mist of dust flew over their heads then and for a moment everything went silent.

And suddenly, all they could hear was nothing.

Not even the sounds of their beating hearts.

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She'd killed them. Her people. Her men and women. She'd murdered them with her own hands.

Miranda Andrews was unsalvageable.

Ray coughed through the dust, her mind a whirlwind of emotions as she braced a hand atop something hard. A groan rumbled under her, the sound going through her as she blinked her eyes open. Her vision blurred for a second, a mix of brown and black and red flooding it as she registered a hand against the back of her head. Akash, she realized and widened her eyes in an attempt to see if he was alright or not. Her world tilted, a faint ringing in her ears as she pushed herself upwards to look down at him.

Her breath caught at the bruises and red blood marring the side of his face. No, no, no. He couldn't be injured. Not like this. Not ever.

"Calm down," she saw him rasp and leaned down with a sharp inhale to angle his head sideways. Akash followed her movement, not arguing but groaning nonetheless,

"You're fine." She whispered, her hands shaking as Akash's eyes shot up, the black in them menacing. Ray's brows contorted as he removed his hand from the back of her head,

"Of course I'm fine," he said dryly as Ray moved to get off him, "Don't pull that shit on me, Raylene Walker."

Ray blinked.

“You shouldn’t have— ”

She didn’t know how she heard it.

With the dust still swirling around and with the few shouts of pain echoing in the wind. But the voice came like a tsunami,

“Ray.”

Her head snapped back, a wave of panic crashing over her. Angel, she thought as she got to her feet haphazardly, he’d been too close.

“No,” she whispered shakily and didn’t even turn to Akash before pointing down at him, “Don’t get up.”

She heard his scoff and turned her deathly glare upon him, “ Don’t.”

Akash’s jaw ticked. But he stayed down.

Ray’s gaze darted around in a daze and—

Just froze.

Her hands flew to her lips as she saw the havoc the bomb had created. She saw the faint touch of red all around it, people she didn’t recognize sticking out from underneath the pile of broken bricks. All dead. All red. A gasp left her throat, Miranda had done this. Had murdered in cold blood.

She was as bad as Maya Larsen, if not worse.

Ray forced herself to look past them, scanning the crowd for everyone. Scanning the

crowd for him. That fear, that panic was climbing its way up her spine, threatening to choke her as her body swayed back. Ray's heart was like a terrible beat of war in her chest when she righted herself. Took a breath. And began looking again. Immediately, she caught the pink highlights. Where Myra was, Ray thought with a brief step in their direction, Irene was as well.

She saw two heads move close to them and breathed out a sigh of relief as she saw the twins stir awake as well .

Her head snapped to the left, her gaze narrowing in an attempt to catch strands of blonde hair when... yes, there they were. Ray's chin dipped when she saw Neera's body rise next to Cameron's, her hands visibly shaking as she lifted her head to stare at her.

End this. Her eyes screamed, end this now.

Ray didn't have to wait for long. Not when she heard the brief rustle behind her.

Her ears hollowed out, a dangerous calmness settling in her nerves as she looked sideways without turning her head. Her foot shifted back, her hands not moving from her sides in case she gave away the small advantage she did have.

Miranda Andrews was a soft reckoning behind her, probably in search of a gun through the bodies she'd murdered. A soft growl left her tongue,

"You killed them." She snarled softly and didn't have to look back to know Miranda was listening, "You murdered your own people."

"Pity it didn't do the necessary damage." Came Miranda's dry response.

The response brought bile up her throat, the mere idea of using people like that—

Ray rolled her shoulders back.

And caught a brief movement up ahead.

Ray had never turned this quickly in her life. But when she saw the dark chocolate locks and that crumpled shirt of his, she knew she'd done the right thing.

Stupid, she yelled at herself as she saw Angel's amber eyes glow under the moonlight

.

Saw the cuts on the side of his face. Replacing the first one she'd ever given him with the graze of a bullet. She saw his chin dip. Saw another shadow rise behind and strike the same pose Miranda did behind her.

They both stared at one another for a second.

She had one bullet left in her gun. A red knife and that was all.

She didn't know what he had left but knew it was enough when a look of pain flickered on his face. Come here, he seemed to plead as Ray jerked forward, come to me. Maybe this was stupid. But it was something no one saw coming. Not Miranda. Not Martin.

And the underworld might not agree with many rules. But they believed in one.

Never, no matter who, no matter when— shoot someone in the fucking back.

She exploited that rule to her full degree. Suddenly, Ray was moving so fast that everything blurred around her. Away from the debris that separated up, both ran diagonally until they met at its very edge.

And when they collided, both of them almost fell over. But it didn't matter. Not with Angel's hand clasped around her waist and his head burrowed in the hollow of her neck. Not with her hands around his neck and her lips kissing his shoulders.

They were here. They were safe.

Angel used their momentum to maneuver them until they stood still, Ray with her back to Miranda and Angel with his to Martin.

It all happened so fast.

So quick that under the pounding of their thundering hearts, they felt nothing. Angel placed a hand against her waist and kept the other propelled ahead over her shoulder, his gun poised forward .

Everyone could do nothing but watch. Ray lifted her chin high enough to glare down at the man who had been standing behind Angel as she took up the same pose. She showed him every ounce of malice , of death written plain on her face as Angel lifted his own gaze to the woman that had been standing behind Ray.

They moved at the same time.

So fast that no one saw them move as both of them lifted their pistols in the air. Pointed it in the direction of their enemies.

And it all went bang!

Bang!

Suddenly all Ray could remember was that time when she'd entered the underworld for the first time, and everyone used to scream at her to run. To get away.

“Run, Raylene Walker.” They would say, “Get out of this place!”

But how after today, everyone would start screaming something else entirely.

“Run!” they would scream, Ray knew as she saw Martin De Santos’s body jerk back, and finally fall,

“ It’s Raylene Walker!”

* *

Maybe they’d been lucky.

Had gotten out of this alive in the worst possible way.

Because as he shot a bullet through Miranda’s skull and saw her body fall back like a sack, an odd sense of calm spread through him. She’d been a mother too, a part of him mourned, a wife. A daughter. Angel made sure to watch her fall, made sure to remember every haunting memory of her eyes wide in horror as she fell back and –

A warm body sidled close to his and a smaller hand snaked its way to the side of his neck. Angel hadn’t realized he was shaking until Ray pulled his forehead down to the side of her neck. Had barely registered them taking a step away from one another. A breath left his lungs as she shut out all sounds with a simple hand on his ear and whispered,

“Don’t,” she said, her own voice breaking, “Don’t do that to yourself.”

A sob threatened to rip his chest apart as Ray shuddered against him, “Close your eyes. And let it end.”

Angel didn't argue. Didn't want to. Not when he could shut it all out with her. He raised his head and tugged her closer. Ray moved until she fit into his arms, her back braced against his chest as he placed his chin atop her head and opened his eyes,

"It's kind of anticlimactic now that none of us ended up shot or stabbed," she said quietly and tipped her head upwards. Angel shook his head at the truth that shone in her words,

"Haven't we done enough of that already?"

"Is everyone—" Ray's voice broke. Angel tugged her closer, a pang echoing in his heart as he nodded,

"Luke and Jack are alright." He whispered and looked outside, where he'd left Christina and Mia, "Christina should've been done by now though."

Ray didn't respond. Just slipped out of his hold smoothly. He saw the haunted look in her eyes and knew it reciprocated his own as she walked in Miranda's direction.

Angel watched her go, his body swaying slightly with the wind. He didn't notice Jack and Luke were near until his world tilted to one end, and a hand wrapped around his waist. Angel blinked as Luke tugged his arm behind his neck and hauled him upright ,

"You alright?" Jack asked, his voice a rasp. Angel's eyes crinkled as he saw the bruises that marred their faces. Saw the cuts through their shirts and the blood that seeped everywhere. Knew he and everyone here looked the same as Angel turned his head to look out the doorway again,

"Chris," he began and saw Jack's body go still, "Did she get here?"

“What do you mean—”

“Get the fuck AWAY FROM HER!”

Angel’s eyes snapped away from the entrance, his body going rigid as he recognized the red hair and that devastated voice. He watched from the corner of his eyes as Jack jerked away from them,

“Christina—” he cried as Angel ripped away from Luke in a frenzy, his eyes flared wide in agony as he watched an injured Mia Andrews run in Ray and Miranda’s directions. Black tears streaked down her face as she wrenched Ray’s hand off Miranda’s body and shoved her away. A dark sort of rage rose in him when he saw Ray fall back willingly, her eyes blank as she watched Mia fall to her knees.

“I’m sorry,” Christina’s wheeze brought him back, “She got away when she saw the ceiling fall.”

Angel didn’t want to, but still ripped his eyes away from the scene, “Are you alright?” he asked Christina as Jack wrapped a hand around her waist and hauled her up, “Are you hurt?”

Christina shook her head, nothing but dust and a single cut on her face. The bruises shone on her neck, on her fists, and her abdomen as she inhaled sharply, “I think she might’ve broken a rib though.”

“Fuck,” he heard Luke murmur as Angel shook his head,

“Get out of here—”

“I got her good though. ”

Christina continued as if she hadn't heard him, "She's stabbed in two different places and I'm pretty sure I broke her right arm." She looked up at Angel then, something like regret shining in her eyes, She paused, her shoulders shaking, "I could've killed her."

Angel gulped but nodded his understanding. He wouldn't have been able to either.

"Your mother murdered a lot of people here." Ray's voice was sharp through the daze of his mind, "She was the one behind—"

A sob made her pause. Angel started walking in their direction, his gaze wary as he saw a crumpled Mia against her mother's dead body. Saw her red hair curtain her face as she sobbed against Miranda's chest. Her body shook as Ray continued,

"I'm sorry."

Mia's head snapped up then, her dark eyes looking downright evil as she glared through the rough strands of her hair, "You're not sorry," she spat, her uninjured hand curling into a tight fist,

"You weren't sorry when you murdered my father. And you aren't this time either."

Ray's eyes were cold, "Are you sorry?" she began. Goosebumps rose on Angel's arm as Mia's fingers crumpled Miranda's white and red shirt, "Was she sorry? For killing my sister? For planting an agent in my house and then murdering them when she turned?"

Mia scoffed, "She—"

"Do you even know her name?"

Ray's voice came out every bit pained as she stared at the girl. Angel didn't take a step forward, remained a few inches away as Ray's shoulders shook ,

“Did you know how old she was? What she loved? What she hated?”

Mia didn't respond. She couldn't.

Angel saw Ray inhale a deep breath and watched calmly as Ray got to her feet carefully. Brushed the dust off her pants and looked down at Mia Andrews, the pain disappearing from her voice,

“I won't kill you now. But make a mistake again, and I won't be just as kind.”

Mia's shoulders curved inwards as Ray's chin tipped upwards,

“And her name was Lia Walker.” She snarled, that rage never gone, “She was fourteen. And your mother killed her because she broke one rule.”

Mia's eyes snapped up, dark and delirious.

“I hope that haunts you for life.”

Ray turned her back to Mia then, her entire posture screaming exhaustion as she looked at Angel.

He tilted his head and gave her a small nod. Ray all but stumbled in his direction after that, barely complaining as he wrapped a hand around her shoulders and weaved his hand through her hair.

“Let's get out of here.” She whispered as he pressed a soft kiss on top of her head.

“ Not so fast, you bitch –”

“No, you don’t.” Neera’s voice was a calm violence behind her, and Angel looked over his shoulder to see Mia’s arm twisted behind her back. He heard the girl scream in surprise and drop her knife.

“You had one chance.” Came Myra’s soft voice behind them as Ray and Angel limped forward, “You really shouldn’t have squandered it like that. ”

“Fucking rat,” Ray murmured beside him, enticing a laugh from him as she tightened her hold against his waist. He pressed another kiss to her head,

“Let’s never come back here again.”

He whispered and she shook her head, a smile tilting her lips.

“Deal.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

Somehow there was a part of her that couldn't really believe any of this was real. Not as she stirred awake in Akash's penthouse, surrounded by people who were still asleep. Not when she realized she was engulfed by warm hands and a head burrowed deep in the back of her neck. Ray blinked her eyes open, the movement dreary and drugged by sleep. Still, the sunlight shone down upon all of them like a golden halo, forcing her to drag them open.

Last night, all of them had ended up back at Akash's place and had barely gotten to the living room before passing out. Ray had been the last one awake, tending to each and every one of their wounds, before and after they all went to sleep. And Angel, he'd really tried. Had gotten almost close to keeping his eyes open until she was done with all of them. But one touch from her and somehow, he'd fallen asleep while she was tending to the bruises on his face.

After that, it'd become easy for her to lie down on the floor next to him and just... sleep. Now, however, as she opened her eyes and saw all of them— all she could do was... breathe.

Because hell, it was all over.

Akash lay a few feet away from her, his hands sprawled under Myra's shoulder. Myra had her back to him, curled towards Irene as the other girl lay in Akash's open palm with her hands tucked under her chin. Neera and Cameron had taken the couch right above her and Angel, each with their head resting on either end as the former snored loudly .

The twins were in the kitchen, Noah embracing an empty bottle of vodka as Sorin

curled against Kyle's asleep figure.

Kyle?

Ray let out a muted groan and shifted in Angel's arms. Her brows arched when she caught the dark blonde hair mingled with Chrisina's dark hair. She smiled as she looked down to see Jack's hands tighten around Christina's shoulders and saw her burrow her face further in his chest in response. On the contrary, Luke was asleep on a chair, his head lolled back at a dangerous angle as his mouth remained open.

A silent laugh rumbled through her chest at the sight.

"Somethin' funny?"

Angel's voice was far too sleepy to have that insane effect on her this early in the morning. Still, she felt the tingles reach her toes as he pressed a kiss to the back of her neck and pulled her closer,

"Go to sleep."

Ray let out another laugh and turned in his arms to stare up at him. Angel's eyes were closed, his beautiful face cast in an odd golden glow. This close, she could see the exhaustion weighing him down, could see that one mole right below his right eye. She reached up to touch it softly and smiled when Angel twitched in surprise but didn't move away. Ray tilted her chin upwards as his hold on her tightened. A small furrow appeared between his brows as she leaned back.

"Hey, Angel?"

Those amber eyes opened, blowing her mind with the stark alertness shining in them. Still, a lazy grin tilted his lips as he hummed.

“You remember the first deal we ever made?” she whispered, and he nodded, his brows rising. Ray subdued a grin, “I broke that promise. ”

Angel’s lips stretched into a beautiful smile, his dimple showing with the action as he bumped his forehead with hers softly, “I know.” He whispered and placed a small kiss on her head. Ray’s eyes shut, “This is so much better than dying.”

A laugh burst out of her, “Thanks?”

She could feel his grin as he pulled her flush against him, “Because now I can do this.”

His palm dropped down to the side of her neck lazily then, his thumb sliding up her skin until it reached the underside of her chin and tipped her face upwards. Ray’s lips parted deliriously as he filled the gap with his own.

She could feel the steady beat of his heart as he kissed her softly. Quietly. Fervently. Like it was all they needed. Ray’s hands fisted around his t-shirt, a soft gasp leaving her as he angled her face up further and leaned closer. Slid his lips across hers as if he could do it all day. And sent terrible butterflies fluttering in her chest and stomach as he swallowed any sounds she made like he was drunk and—

Thud!

Ray broke away from him with a start, her eyes flaring wide as she turned over her shoulder and ignored Angel’s groan as he flopped on his back.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

“Where the hell is he?”

All of them jerked awake at the muffled yell from the other end. Ray shot up from her seat, her hands going to the knife hanging in the waistband of her jeans when a movement stopped her. She looked down in amusement as Angel wrapped a calm hand around her waist and placed his head in her lap ,

“It’s Verana,” he said and yawned. Ray blinked in surprise and barely got a word out before she heard the silent click of the door. Could do nothing but watch as Verana Smith whipped her door open and rushed in. Ray’s eyes widened as her head whipped around in search of–

The snoring idiot who was still asleep on the chair.

Her lips parted as she saw, everyone saw, Verana literally step over her cousin and stride in the direction of the chair where Luke was lying with his head hanging back.

Verana stopped a few inches short of Luke, her eyes narrowed in leashed rage as she breathed out harshly. And placed a hand on the chair, right beside Luke’s asleep face.

“ HEY!”

Luke jerked up so fast that he almost collided with Verana’s face. Verana watched him calmly though, her eyes aflame as she waited for him to settle. Waited for him to wake out of his daze and realize just where he was.

They all saw the moment realization dawned upon his face.

For a moment, Ray could see the stark surprise on his face. As though he thought he was dreaming. But then he blinked. Once. Twice.

“Vera?”

Verana's shoulders stiffened,

"You're an asshole for calling me last night."

Luke's brows furrowed, "I didn't call you."

"Yes, you did. Drunk out of your fucking mind." Verana snapped in response, her hold tightening until her knuckles went white, "And you said shit I didn't want to hear – "

She stopped short when she saw his lips curl into a satisfied grin.

"Verana Smith. "

Ray had to bite her knuckles to keep herself from laughing when the girl's eyes twitched in annoyance.

"Where you concerned for me?" Luke asked cheekily, his eyes sparkling as he watched her seethe, " Worried?"

"Fuck. Off." She growled and jerked away from him to run a shaking hand through her hair.

"Were you worried?" he drawled and leaned forward, propping his chin on his fist, "Is that why you're here?" he gasped, "Did you sleep last night? Or were you too busy worrying?"

Verana's glare was dark enough to send a normal person scurrying away. Luke only laughed and shook his head, looking absolutely smitten as she looked away and said something inaudible under her breath,

“Vera,”

“ Don’t.”

A clap had all their attention directed elsewhere. Ray’s lips threatened to break as she grinned and saw Akash looking at his cousin in deadpan. Clap his hands went again, his lips thinning as Vera’s brows arched,

“I feel so loved.”

Ray pressed her lips together when she felt Angel muffle his laugh against her waist. His shoulders shook further when Vera just turned away from her cousin and looked at Luke,

“I was worried.”

“Wow.”

Ray had to look away when she heard a faint wheeze leave Angel’s lips. She could tell the others were trying their best not to break as Luke’s grin widened,

“I know. ”

Vera’s eyes flashed, a growl leaving her throat as she took a step forward and mimicked strangling him from a distance. Luke didn’t even lean back. Just angled his face upwards to give her higher access.

Ray put her face in her hands, breathless with attempts to keep herself from bursting out laughing as Angel shook against her waist.

“Jesus,” she whispered just as she heard Angel’s murmur against her skin,

“Fuck.”

Ray peeked through her fingers to see Vera take a step back and turn away from Luke without another word and grinned when she saw the boy get off his seat and stretch his hands above his head before following her calmly. Vera shook her head again and snapped over her shoulder,

“Don’t fucking follow me.”

“Okay.”

And continued to follow her out the door.

“ Luke, I swear to fucking G—”

Luke only nodded solemnly before placing a hand on her lower back and leading her out calmly,

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He murmured as if he were talking to a child and led both of them out of the penthouse. The door shut behind them with a soft click, leaving them awake and enthralled. A curtain of silence fell upon them. Ray breathed out, biting her lower lip to keep herself from saying anything when a sound broke through the atmosphere.

The strangled sound echoed through the room as Angel tried and failed miserably in muffling his laughter against her skin. And with that one sound, the entire room broke .

Ray grinned widely and looked to her side to watch Angel roll to his back and laugh out loud, his body shaking as he placed a hand against his forehead. Other laughs and hoots followed him soon enough, lighting up the room like never before.

“I have never – ” Christina wheezed, her voice erupting another round of breathless laughter as she got up and winced, “ Never, seen Luke so satisfied.”

“Ah,” Jack said and covered his eyes with his hand, “This is crazy.”

Ray bit her lip just as Angel moved to sit up beside her, leaning against the sofa as his shoulders shook in muted laughter. She was about to continue when another series of knocks followed their laughter. Her head tilted as Jack barked out a laugh,

“Back already?”

This time it was Irene who twisted on her back to get up and look through the peephole. Ray watched as her tense shoulders loosened and she opened the door wide. Ray wasn’t ready for the surprise, but it came running into her and Angel’s arms like a whirlwind.

A gasp left her throat as Ira ran through the doors and pounced in Ray’s and Angel’s arms. She buried her head against Ray’s shoulder, one of her hands twisted around Angel’s body beside her as she squished all three of them together. Angel shot Ray a glance above her head, his hands hovering away from Ira’s body hesitantly. Ray’s brows furrowed, a wave of panic washing over her as the previous atmosphere washed away,

“Ira?”

The young girl only sniffed loudly against her shoulder.

Ray matched Angel’s calm glance this time, and both moved forward to engulf the girl in their arms .

Grief seemed to knock all breath out of her lungs at the reminder of the timid body.

Of the young eyes. But it was slightly better with Angel's hand reaching behind Ray's shoulder to rest on the back of her head calmly. Like he knew. Ray heard Ira's sob again and her heart, it just, broke as Ira shoved her face further against her.

"She's been insufferable." Micah's voice was emotionless, but Ray could swear she heard a tint of relief in his tone.

It was only when she looked up that she realized her eyes were blurred by unfallen tears. It reassured her somehow, that they had truly, truly gotten out of this alive. It was enough for her to twist Ira deeper into her arms and breathe out calmly.

"We made it." She whispered in Ira's ears and watched as the girl pulled away from both of them. Somehow, Ray knew Angel's exact expression. It was the only reason why she didn't turn to look at him. Not even as she laced her hands and looked at Ira's scarred face. Her eyes crinkled in pain, "I'm sorry you didn't—"

"You're," she interrupted, sniffing once like a kid, "Late."

Ray's lips split into a smile, "I know. I'm sorry." She said softly and touched Ira's face lightly. Her wounds were still healing, the one line below her eye obviously leaving a scar as it healed. The one on her nose, on the other hand, seemed to disappear bit by bit. But Ira's beauty, her eyes, her face, everything was untouched by the violence she'd seen so far. Instead, the other girl looked brighter than ever as she beamed at both of them.

Ray didn't think she'd ever seen her this happy.

"So," Ira began, recovered surprisingly quickly as she hastily wiped her tears away and faced Angel,

"I heard you proposed? "

Angel's brows shot in the air as Ray whirled to face him with crossed arms. He looked at her for help and found nothing but don't you dare.

He turned back to Ira and shrugged,

"I'm ready to marry her anytime she wants." He began and turned to her with a grin as she scoffed in surprise,

"I'm not planning on going anywhere."

Ray heard Neera mimic gagging behind her but didn't turn to shoot her a glare. Just leveled that look on Angel as Ira murmured loudly,

"Obsessive much?"

Angel clicked his tongue, a touch of annoyance in her eyes as he stared at the younger girl,

"It's called romance."

"Oh yeah?" Ira countered, "And how many women have you dated to know what that is?"

Angel's eyes narrowed, "Are you testing me right now?"

Ray's head darted between them, her eyes lit in amusement as she watched the two of them banter. A tap on her shoulder had her shying away from the conversation and she looked over her shoulder to see Cameron hovering behind her.

He had a few bandages on his cheek and one around his head from when he'd slammed his head against some bricks when the ceiling had fallen upon them. But

overall, he looked way better than he was last night. Ignoring her pang of relief, she arched a brow in question, and he just lifted his hand and pointed in the direction of their destroyed kitchen.

Her head lifted and turned in the direction of the kitchen. And her eyes widened when she saw Kyle sitting upright with Sorin asleep beside him .

Sorin's head draped on his shoulder as the other boy fixated his green eyes on her. Ray tipped her chin upwards, her brows furrowing as she relayed her question silently.

Kyle didn't move an inch though. Not when Sorin was curled against him like a cat. He didn't stop glaring. Ray tilted her head in question and began signing,

“What the hell do you want?”

Kyle's eyes lit up in recognition and he lifted his hands in the air,

“What happened last night?” He signed back and Ray looked at Sorin once before looking back at him.

“Didn't he tell you?”

Kyle frowned, “No, he was half dead last night.” He signed angrily, “He said it was you who barred me from heading there.”

Ray shrugged, “I couldn't trust you to not kill him.”

An outraged sound left his throat, and he began signing more aggressively, “He's my fucking boyfriend. Are we going to have a problem with that? You might as well get used to it because I'm going to make your life – ”

Ray blinked in surprise when she saw Sorin slap Kyle's hands down. And laughed silently when Kyle shot him a dirty look. Sorin didn't open his eyes, just yawned and curled further against him. Ray could practically see Kyle melting as the blonde boy turned to face her again, calmer than before.

"Who was behind this?"

"Mia Andrews." Ray spelled out and saw his eyes flash in surprise, "You remember the phoenixes?"

Kyle nodded.

"Miranda Andrews – Angel's stepmother – was the leader's wife. And Mia their daughter. "

"So, revenge?"

Ray nodded, "Something like that."

Kyle took a second to process it. But turned back to her with the same cold calculative look in her eyes, "Are they dead?"

Ray had to press her lips together to not relive it all, but she responded nonetheless, "Yes."

The relief in Kyle's eyes wasn't surprising, but it jarred her still. Somehow, she still couldn't bring herself to accept it all. Miranda's death didn't bother her as much as Mia's did. Mia had been mourning her father, and then a mother. Maybe she didn't deserve to die, but Ray's gut had told her to end it right there. She'd given her a chance, she told herself, one chance.

And then the rest of them took care of it.

A warm hand landed on her shoulder in a show of comfort and Ray looked over her shoulder again to see Cameron's still and calm face.

"Stop." He signed and Ray let out a sigh, "There's no point."

It was Neera who continued beside him, her eyes grave, "And there's never any safety in being merciful."

Never.

Ray nodded and looked back down to see Angel's eyes trained on her. She realized then, that after Angel had let her murder his father after he'd let her take what he'd been wanting for so long now, that something had changed. Angel shifted closer, like he could read her thoughts as they were, and placed a soft kiss on her cheek.

"I'm sorry." She breathed out, low enough for only him to hear, and saw him pull back in surprise, "I shouldn't have taken Martin's death from you. Shouldn't have ruined your lifelong plans just like that—"

He stopped her by pressing a kiss on her lips. Ray paused as saw his amber eyes narrow in understanding,

"I have a new lifelong plan now." He whispered and Ray's lips threatened to break into a smile as he leaned in closer and closed his eyes just as she did,

"She might swear a lot. And she might be a tad bit crazy." He whispered and Ray shook her head, a smile ghosting across her lips, "But she's my lifelong plan now."

"Is she?" Ray taunted, her voice soft. And Angel's smile was utterly hers and

devastating when he said ,

“She is.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:56 am

Ray braced a palm on the back of her neck in an attempt to get it to stop hurting as she held her phone with the other. Her eyes were trained on the screen, narrowed with the thought of answering it or not as she lounged in her chair. It vibrated in her hand again and Ray let out an insufferable groan but picked up nonetheless,

“What?” she snapped, a bit irritated as she looked ahead, “What part of vacation do you not understand?”

A sigh reverberated from the other end, “I wasn’t looking forward to this call either, but some investors had some questions—”

“Get them to Neera, she’ll handle it.”

She could swear she could see Akash’s glare from the other side, “I tried her already. She isn’t answering her phone.” He grumbled as Ray swore silently, “I don’t understand why you all get to go on vacation and I’m stuck here fucking babysitting —”

“Hey!”

Ray grinned at the sound of Ira’s voice, “Hi Ira! Hi Micah!” she called out and heard a muffled response. She heard Akash’s tired sigh again and nodded, a smile on her face as she looked ahead at the sunset,

“Alright, alright, what do they want to know?”

“Company history. Why the CEO isn’t present here. Shit like that.”

Ray looked over her shoulder in an attempt to catch a glimpse of a certain CEO when she was rewarded with a beautiful view of his bare back. A grin tugged at her lips as she saw him pour the drinks, his eyes trained on the

glasses with extreme focus. Ray turned back ahead before he caught her staring and moved to stare ahead again,

“CEO’s busy. Get Sorin in touch with them,” Ray responded as she leaned down in her seat, “He owns some shares, ask him to seduce them.”

It’d been a year since everything.

A year of building back a life they hadn’t managed to build up until now.

Most of them, all except Kyle and Sorin were continuing their education. Ray was enrolled in a German University while Angel had taken to online studies from a university in Spain. It’d been the perfect way for them to be together everywhere and start a whole new way of earning .

Turns out, inheriting family money and a shitload of it, was a great way to start a business.

So she and Sorin had joined hands, Kyle wielding his last name as a way to whiten some of the black money while they started a whole new thing. Neera was busy all around the world, pursuing her pre-med like she wanted to and volunteering wherever she could.

After months of pestering, Myra had taken up ice skating once again. Irene, being absolutely useless in that field, had come with Ray and Sorin as the CTO of the company.

And Akash, he was her shadow. Handled everything when she wasn’t there.

Noah had gone back to the family business and was doing everything in his power to protect children like Micah and Ira. It'd been a surprising development, but one that had somehow won his father over.

"Okay, good idea," Akash murmured from the other end, "Also, you get back next weekend right? For Angel's thing? "

Ray hummed her agreement. While Ray had gotten into the world of technology and digitizing businesses, Angel and Luke had done the next best thing.

With Christina's growing knowledge while she pursued her law degree, and Jack's interest in sustainable solutions in today's world, Angel and Luke had taken their expertise in either field and opened up a green law firm. Not only that, but Angel had spent the last months investing in stocks, in real estate, and her.

She'd left her investments to Akash, who handled them expertly, but Angel's interest in the area was deeply encouraging.

Next weekend, their firm was finally going to be opened to the public.

"Great," Akash responded, "While you do that, I'm going to be out for the entirety of next week, so don't even think about dropping the babysitting bomb on me again."

Ray laughed silently, her eyes fixated on the splash of the waves up ahead, "Don't worry. You're free next week."

She heard his sigh of relief but was drawn out of the conversation when she saw a shadow pass on her right. Ray's head leaned back lazily, a grin growing on her face as she saw Angel De Santos with two drinks in his hands.

He stood at the foot of her chair, his amber eyes narrowed at the phone pressed against her ear as he blindly handed her the drink. She watched him now, his body

haloed by the golden glow of the setting sun as the wind blew past his hair gently. He'd put on a button-up on his pants, the shirt open to reveal the expanse of his lean body.

Ray watched him place his drink on the cart beside her and saw him go down on his knees on the foot of her chair. Her brows arched when his head lifted, a mischievous smile curving his lips now .

A faint shiver passed through her bones when his fingers landed on her ankles, and seeing the impact it had on her, Angel's grin only widened.

"Ray?"

She hummed but wasn't really listening when Angel slowly climbed over the chair and moved until he was hovering above her. His amber eyes were calm, his touch soft against her wrist as he kissed the side of her neck softly.

"Let's go." He whispered in her ear and leaned back again, his eyes shining as confusion morphed on her face.

"Oh for fuck's sake." Akash's voice was barely audible. Angel only responded by grabbing the phone out of her hands and hanging up. Ray moved to place her drink beside his and peered up at him.

"Go where?"

Angel leaned back, his movement soft as he climbed off the chair. She watched him with interest as he rose to his full height and placed a hand behind his back professionally while he extended the other in her direction. Ray's hair spilled over her back when she tipped her chin up to look up at him. His eyes glittered with mischief, a small smile playing on his lips.

“Are you sober?” he asked, and Ray nodded, having an acute sense of where this was going.

His eyes softened, the beauty of his expression shining with the sunset playing at his back as he lowered his voice,

“Ever danced in the sand, Raylene Walker?”

Ray couldn’t help it, she went up on her knees and moved until she was face to face with him. After so long, after so much she still couldn’t believe she could do this.

“No.” she whispered, “Ask me anyway. ”

Angel’s smile was borderline dangerous for her heart when he wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her flush against him,

“Will you dance with me on the beach?”

As if on cue, soft piano music began behind them. Ray let out a soft laugh, placing her forehead against her chest as she breathed out,

“I’ll think about it.”

His laugh was loud enough to draw out his dimples.

“Good,” he whispered, “Be aware though.”

Ray looked back up at him and saw his eyes crinkle.

Saw Angel De Santos look like an absolute beauty as he leaned down and kissed her softly as if he couldn’t help himself.

Ray didn't blame him. Not when she'd been close to pleading with him to do the same. When he pulled back, the mischievous glint in his eyes was back.

"I twirl now."

She grinned, "Finally." And his gaze narrowed,

"Smartass."

He murmured as he hauled her to her feet.

Made her forget the entire world in the process.