



Wrath (Seven Deadly Sins)

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Category: Romance

Description: Wrath

I don't remember much from my childhood before I was dragged away from my mother and brought here.

They all call me a monster and keep me chained, using me for fighting and fu— reproducing.

When Wynter crosses my path, something stirs inside and ignites a flicker of the person I used to be. Her presence gives me a glimmer of hope, a chance at redemption, until she's ripped away from me and promised to another.

I have to break through the darkness to get her back.

Retribution will be my salvation.

Wynter

Our world is confined, hidden from the outside and fueled by the truths of the forefathers. They claim it's for our safety, that going beyond the high walls is too dangerous, so it's all I have ever known.

But as I grow older, doubts cloud my mind, and I begin to question who our world really benefits, much to my father's displeasure.

When he sends me to work in the caves below our village, I start to uncover a dark truth. And as I grow closer to the monsters, I realise the forefathers are what we should fear the most.

Without warning, I'm thrust deeper into their world of lies, and I have no choice but to play along while secretly holding on to my own sins.

They took everything from us, and now, they must pay.

Vengeance will be my salvation.

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CHAPTER ONE

WYNTER

It's the sound of sniffing that wakes me. I stir before sitting up and rubbing my eyes. It's then I realise Summer is in my bed. I frown, gently brushing my hand over her hair, causing her to jump. "What's wrong?" I whisper.

As if I've disturbed her trance, she sits upright, and the moonlight from the window catches her red, puffy eyes. "Nothing. Bad dream," she whispers back, shrugging.

"Must've been terrible if you're in my bed," I tease.

Her eyes fill with tears again, glistening in the white light. "It's just . . . do you think I'll be okay?"

The words I want to say clog my throat. How can I reassure her when I don't believe the bullshit my father spouts? Instead, I take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. "Shall we go downstairs and get a hot drink?"

"I know you don't believe in it," she utters.

I don't voice my opinion. After all, in our world, we'd be struck down if we even dared to.

But I think it's plainly obvious on my face whenever these rituals are mentioned.

My mother gave up long ago trying to warn me to keep my expression neutral.

I can't help it—I just have that sort of face.

“But can't you at least try and reassure me? ”

I sigh, forcing a smile. “You know I'd be lying,” I admit.

“How bad can it be?” she asks, and I know she doesn't expect me to answer. “There're loads of girls before me and they're all doing great.” I nod. “It's an honour . . . right?” I want to scoff, but I restrain myself. “And it's my duty.”

Duty. Fuck, why do we believe that shit? Like it's a woman's duty to smile, a woman's duty to care for her man and serve him. Of course, the rules are made up by men. Men like my father.

I swing my legs off the edge of the bed and stand, taking her hand. “Hot drink.”

The sun rises as I watch from my seat on the porch.

It's cold out, but I'm past the shivering stage.

I'm still clutching my half-drunk cup of hot water, although it's cold now.

Summer went to bed to try to get a few more hours, but I couldn't.

Once I wake, that's it. Besides, all I can think about is Summer's impending ceremony.

I've seen other girls go through it. It's nothing new. But I never really thought about my own sister having to go through it. She's the youngest, by one year exactly, and

it's customary for the second daughter to be given as a gift to one of the warriors in another faction.

Warriors. The title makes me sick. Each of the four families, the creators of our village, choose a warrior who will represent them. A strong and fertile warrior means the family is very powerful. Of course, it's all bullshit. How can one man determine the power of a family? But it's tradition.

As part of the Sanchez family, we own exactly ten warriors. Our most powerful are pitted against the other families' fighters to keep 'top dog' positions. And we're on top, the most powerful family of the four.

To keep us there, my father finally agreed to Summer being presented to the Garcia family's warrior, Maximus.

Apparently, it's seen as an honour when other powerful families request your second born daughter to bear the child of strong warriors, and Summer hasn't been short of offers.

Below the families is a village of people who came here to find shelter and protection from the outside world. We live off our land, which was purchased hundreds of years ago by the founding ancestors who had refused to follow the laws set by a government whose only purpose is pleasing itself.

The door swings open and my mother steps out onto the porch. She's beautiful, and all the men think so. They say she has good genes. "Good morning," I say, standing. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"Draw Summer a bath. Let's start the preparations."

I give a stiff nod and go to head inside. She grabs my upper arm, her bony fingers

digging into my flesh. “Today will go ahead with no hitch,” she warns. “If you so much as whimper, I’ll have you cleaning for the rest of your life.”

I pull free and head inside. I’m practically her personal slave already, so cleaning elsewhere would probably be a relief.

Upstairs, I turn on the hot tap and wait for the tub to fill a little before adding vanilla bath milk. It’s Summer’s favourite. I drop some fresh rose petals into the steaming water before adding some cold.

When I go in to wake Summer, my father is in her room. Summer has her head bowed, and I have no doubt he’s reading her the riot act. His eyes fix on me. “Summer will not need breakfast,” he says firmly.

“Won’t she need the energy?” I ask as politely as I can so as not to get a slap.

“We do not want her looking fat and bloated,” he utters, heading for the exit. “And besides, she’s terrible with pain. The last thing I need is the embarrassment of her vomiting that stodge you serve for breakfast.”

I offer Summer a weak smile. I have no doubt her nerves are through the roof, so I bite back my own thoughts and smile. “It’s going to be fine,” I reassure her. “We’ve sat through ceremonies before,” I add. “It doesn’t look that painful.”

“But never with him,” she mutters.

“How different can a warrior be?” I surmise, “They’re all the same, right?”

Once she’s comfortable in the bath, I set about washing her hair. The first daughter is the maid of the family, usually born to a warrior, while the second is the princess. I’m expected to do most things—cleaning, cooking, gardening—but I’d rather be the first

than the second.

My mother enters as I'm rinsing conditioner from Summer's hair. "We have one hour, and your father is hungry," she snaps. "I'll finish here." She snatches a towel from the side, and I head downstairs, where my father is sitting expectantly at the table.

I get right to work, frying bacon fresh from our pigs that were sent to the slaughter a few days ago.

I take the bread I baked last night and slice off two pieces, adding them to toast in the pan.

"I assume you know the rules for today," he says, his eyes burning into me, and I nod.

"Words," he yells, slamming his hands on the table.

I turn to face him. "Of course, sir."

He reaches for me, grabbing my wrist and hauling me closer until I'm practically lying across the table. "I don't need your sarcasm," he spits.

"I wasn't being sarcastic," I rush to add.

He strikes me hard across the thigh, the handprint leaving an instant burn. "This is an honour," he shouts, and I remain silent. He strikes me a second time, and I wince. "Say it."

"It's an honour," I almost whisper.

The third strike is enough to make me cry out, and my mother enters, alarm on her usually sour face.

“Recite it,” he orders, dragging me from the table to my feet.

I stand before him, arms by my sides, the way we have been raised to stand while reciting the bullshit they had fed us from the second we could talk.

“We will honour our families. We are righteous and free. Bound to our fathers, we will serve until our last breath.” I want to point out that the entire speech is a contradiction.

I am not free. Women are not free. “Our fathers will protect and guide us along the path they have chosen, keeping us from evil.”

My mother runs a hand over my father’s shoulder.

“Let’s concentrate on Summer today,” she says gently, nodding for me to go back to tend to breakfast, which I do immediately.

“It’s her day. And yours,” she soothes. “A chance for the other families to see how amazing our daughter is and how she will bear child to a strong warrior.”

I hear the chair scrape back, which means he must be inviting her to sit with him at the table. I risk a glance to see her beside him, looking into his eyes with love and admiration. She’s got the act perfected.

“You’re right,” he says. “Summer is excited, and the match with Maximus is the best yet.”

“And think of the offers from the other families. Once she has shown she is strong

enough to carry a warrior's child, men will be lining up for her hand in marriage."

I roll my eyes, confident no one can see.

The sons of other families will ask for Summer's hand in marriage, and my father will choose the most suitable candidate.

It makes bonds stronger, and I know my father admires the Morales family, even though the father, Silas, is a cruel and violent man. I imagine his sons are no better.

Summer enters the kitchen as I plate up breakfast for my father. She's naked, ready for his inspection. I lower my eyes to the floor, wondering how self-conscious she must feel with all eyes on her. I guess she needs to get used to it.

My father stands, moving closer to her, and I glance up, watching as she stiffens. He circles her then stops before her and grins. "Perfect," he says, and her shoulders sag in relief. "You remember how to act?" he asks, and she nods. "Everyone must believe you're having an amazing time."

"Of course," she says.

My father reaches for a bag on the side, holding it open for her to look inside.

She gasps, smiling as she reaches in and retrieves a pile of lace.

My father takes it, unzipping the dress and lowering before her so she can step into it.

As he pulls it up, it clings to her curves.

It exposes her skin beneath the white material but covers her breasts and lower area perfectly.

“Stunning,” he remarks, zipping it closed and placing a kiss on her cheek. “You’ll do me proud today.”

The ceremony takes place in the church. I guess this makes the men feel better about what’s about to take place, like it’s some holy tradition that God approves of. If God is real, I don’t think he’d condone this.

I shift uncomfortably in the front row. The Morales family sits on their side, and the two other families are opposite us. We’re all in our own quarters.

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In the centre is a raised glass table. That's where my sister will meet Maximus for the first time. We only see warriors when they are brought here. The rest of the time, they're kept in separate bunkers beneath the village.

Once everyone is seated, my father stands and takes Summer by the hand. He leads her to the centre and unzips her lace dress, slipping it from her body, leaving her naked. The fear and uncertainty in her eyes makes me want to scream. This is barbaric .

If it was such an honour, it wouldn't feel so wrong.

He lifts her to sit on the glass table, placing a gentle kiss on her forehead before laying her back.

She slides up a little, raising her feet onto the table and parting her legs.

My father takes her wrists and guides them above her head, taking the silk cuffs and securing them there.

Then he sits back beside my mother, who offers a proud smile his way.

I glance around at the other families, seeing if the daughters amongst them are feeling the same horror I am. But they don't, making me wonder whether they're all great actresses or if they truly believe in this 'honour'.

The door opens, and we all turn to stare. Maximus is huge. His cuffs clank as he walks along the red carpet to where his new sacrifice is laid out. He's naked too, his

huge erection standing proudly, and I can't hide my anxiety. How the hell will he even fit there?

The other families look on eagerly, excited to watch the impregnation of my sister. Poor Summer.

Maximus looks eager too, fisting his erection like a fucking animal as he moves closer.

I wince in disgust as his chains are loosened enough for him to approach Summer, while the guard remains by the side.

It's a reminder that Maximus is animalistic.

Otherwise, why would the guards carry cattle prods?

Maximus climbs onto the table, crawling over Summer while pressing his nose to her stomach, dragging it up her body, continually sniffing her.

She turns her head to one side and a small squeak of panic leaves her as her eyes connect with mine.

I sense her terror as she silently pleads with me to help her.

I bite my lip until I taste blood, trying desperately to stay quiet.

The monster lines his erection up before surging forward, so fast and hard that Summer screams out in shock.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my father sit straighter with his fists clenched tightly by his sides.

He's angry because she made a noise. She's embarrassing him, and if he could, he'd yell at her to shut up.

Maximus groans. It's an animalistic sound that only causes more fear in my poor sister's eyes.

He slowly withdraws from her, and I feel myself relaxing.

Maybe this is it. It's over. She must think the same because she releases a long, shaky breath.

I give her a small reassuring smile, and then Maximus surges forward, impaling her again.

This time, it doesn't stop, and he continues his onslaught, ignoring Summer as she openly cries out in pain and distress.

Father nudges Mother. "Get up there and shut her up," he hisses.

Mother rushes up to the raised podium and strokes a hand over Summer's hair. She whispers into her ear, and to the rest of the congregation, it appears to be words of encouragement, but I see the evil sparkle in my mother's eye as she hisses threats of worse things to come.

"It hurts," Summer replies. "It really hurts."

Mother gently places a hand over Summer's mouth and continues to hiss in her ear.

All the while, the monster fucks her, taking no notice of what's around him.

I don't blame him—it's how he's trained.

The warriors fight and fuck. They aren't free to roam or join with the village.

They are treated like animals, raised like dogs.

They serve their masters in this sick game we're all complicit in.

Without thinking, I push to my feet. My mouth opens a few times, but no words come out. Not until I see the blood smeared over my sister's legs. "Stop," I yell angrily. Father is glaring at me, and I swallow the panic ripping through me. "She's hurt," I cry desperately.

"Sit down," he hisses.

"Don't you care that she's hurt?"

He tries to discreetly make a grab for me as everyone's eyes turn our way. But no one is attempting to stop this charade. I run towards the podium, dodging a guard who also makes a grab for me, and I jump on the monster's back. "Get off of her," I yell, squeezing his neck as hard as I can.

"Jesus, Wynter. What the hell are you doing?" Mother screams.

Summer watches, almost smiling as I pummel the monster with my tiny fists while he tries to remove me, growling and bucking.

Then, I feel a sharp pain in my back, and I stiffen before falling from the podium with a thump. I stare up into Father's furious eyes as he stands over me with the guard's cattle prod. "Get her out of here," he hisses angrily.

I wake, groaning out loud as I roll onto my back and find myself back in the ceremony room. It's now quiet, and without moving an inch, I glance around to see

everyone has gone. I sigh with relief and slowly push to sit, wincing as pain radiates through my body.

“Finally, she’s awake.” Father is sitting on the first pew, his cruel eyes trained on me. “Tell me, Wynter, what was the plan today?”

I swallow, but my mouth is so dry, my tongue sticks to the roof. I notice through the brightly stained glass windows around the top of the room that it is now dark outside, which means I’ve been passed out for some time. “He was hurting her,” I manage to croak out.

He sneers, pushing to stand, and I see he’s still holding the cattle prod. “After everything we have done for you,” he says, his voice dripping in anger, “this is how you repay us?”

He drags the cattle prod tip across the floor, and I eye it warily. “You have embarrassed your sister,” he suddenly roars, “but worst of all, you’ve embarrassed me.” He swings the prod, striking me across the head, and I fall onto my side. “You’ve made the Sanchez name a laughingstock,” he bellows.

When I try to sit up again, he presses his foot onto my thigh.

“Stay down,” he orders. “Now, remember what happens to girls who cannot follow the rules?” I feel a lump forming in my throat as he presses down harder on my thigh.

“You have disappointed so many people today, Wynter. Your punishment will be great, and it will be long.”

He removes his foot, and I stop myself from rubbing the painful area, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’s hurt me.

He reaches down, pushing his hand into my hair and curling it into a tight fist. Each hair feels like it's ripping from my scalp as he pulls me to my feet.

I grab his wrist and stand tall on my tiptoes to try and lessen the pain.

"Girls who do not behave need lessons in how to please the heads of the families. Recite the words."

"I don't want to," I whisper, tears betraying me as they fall down my cheeks.

He presses the cattle prod to my thigh. "Now," he warns.

"We will honour our families. We are righteous and free. Bound to our fathers, we will serve until our last breath. Our fathers will protect and guide us along the path they have chosen, keeping us from evil."

Wrath

I snarl, curling my fists into tight balls of anger. The pain stick is pressed to my side, and I hiss through gritted teeth, spittle leaving my lips. "Next time I tell you to fucking move, you move," my guard growls.

The door to my room slides open, and he shoves me in, causing me to stumble. Fuck . If he didn't have that stick in his hand, I'd rip him apart limb by limb. He's half my size, just a man with anger issues and a God complex.

He lingers in the doorway, smirking. "And, mute," he adds, "just for your attitude, you'll be going hungry tonight." Sneering, he steps back as the door slides closed. Fucking prick.

I glance around the room, noting it's still a mess from when I lost my shit earlier.

I ignore it and drop down on my bed, closing my eyes.

I'll never sleep without my meds, but there's no way I'll get them from that fucker.

At least if he thinks I'm sleeping, he might leave me alone for a few hours.

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CHAPTER TWO

WYNTER

I shiver uncontrollably, wrapping my arms around myself and hunching my knees up to my chest. Raindrops slide down my face and drip from the end of my nose.

I glance up to see my mother watching from the kitchen window.

She wants to bring me inside, I can tell by the pained expression on her face.

Despite her performance for my father, I know she hates it when he treats me like this.

I've been chained to the washing line pole in the garden for three days now.

It's all part of my punishment for interrupting my sister's ceremony.

They have been ordered not to speak to me or even look in my direction.

I heard my father laying down the law after he brought me home from the church.

I also heard my mother pleading my case, stating how I was an emotional person and how I love my sister dearly.

It made no difference. It never does. If she'd have carried on fighting for me, she'd be out here too.

After a few minutes, the door opens and my mother stands in the doorway.

She's out of my reach but close enough that she doesn't need to shout for me to hear her.

"He's on his way home," she says in a lowered tone.

"Please, Wynter, please don't aggravate him further with your smart mouth.

" I stare at my bare feet, pressing my toes hard against the stone path.

"I don't know what he has planned, but I'm certain if you just take the punishment, he'll move on, and we can get back to how things were. "

I roll my eyes. "We both know he won't let me forget this."

"If you give off this attitude, you'll be out here for another few days, and the weather isn't getting any better."

"Why did he marry you?" I ask, finally meeting her eyes. "If he felt like he couldn't love the daughter of a warrior, why did he marry you?"

"Stop this nonsense right now," she hisses. "You make it so difficult, and it doesn't need to be."

"He hates me, so whatever I do or say makes everything worse."

"It's your role as the eldest daughter to provide services for your family."

"Like a slave," I spit.

“Like a good daughter,” she counters. “What you did had so many other consequences. Summer may not fall pregnant, and if that happens, Lord only knows how your father will react. And then he will turn on me for only giving him one daughter.” She goes back inside, locking the door.

I know she’s right. I’ve made things worse for us all, but in that moment, I’d lost control.

If Summer fails to conceive, my father’s rating in society will drop.

It’s not unheard of for families to offer the third daughter, but my mother almost died during childbirth with Summer, so a third child was out of the question.

“Thought she’d never go,” a voice whispers from behind me, and I smile, turning slightly.

“No, don’t look back in case she looks out the window again.

” I feel a paper cup being pressed into my palm, and I sigh in relief, gripping it in my shaking hand and taking a sip of water.

“There’s some bread here too. I even put some butter on it.

” I place the water back behind me and take the bread.

It’s still warm, and my stomach growls with hunger.

“Any news on the next ceremony?” I check the window is clear before turning my back to the house and staring at my best friend, Abel.

His family runs a bakery in town, and they’re the kindest people I’ve ever met.

But if my father knew I'd become friends with someone from the town, I'd be in more trouble.

He prefers me to not have anyone at all.

"No, but it's probably going to be Livia."

Livia Garcia is almost twenty-three, and Abel has loved her since she was ten years old. Not that she knows, because the girls who are used for ceremonies don't associate with anyone outside their homes and are never unaccompanied by a family member.

"I hope not," he mutters, watching as I take a bite of bread.

"I saw more boys arriving today," he adds, and my stomach churns at the thought of where those little boys have come from and what awaits them.

Jade, who is also from the village, Abel, and I have been watching the comings and goings of the guards.

Once every six months, they leave in a van, and when they return, usually three or four days later, they bring young boys aged around five years, who are taken to the camp below the village and trained to become fighters.

The ones who grow strong and fight well are moved to the warrior camp, and eventually, families bid on them and take them into their own camps, where they are trained to fight for the family.

Jade works in the dorms, setting up for their arrival.

She often tells us how the boys cry for their mothers until they learn not to.

Guards beat it out of them quickly enough.

“You should go,” I say. “My father is on his way home, and if he catches you here . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, he doesn’t scare me.” But we both know the penalty for villagers who break rules—helping me would get Abel beaten in front of the entire village.

My father returns ten minutes later and saunters towards me. “Are you ready to rejoin the family?” he asks. It’s the same question he asked me last night, only this time, I’m too cold and hungry to get another beating.

“Yes, please, sir.”

“Stand.” I grip the pole and drag myself to stand on aching legs.

I almost buckle to the ground, but he catches my arm.

He takes out the key from his pocket and releases the metal cuff from my wrist. “You will bathe and meet me in the dining room in one hour.” Then, he turns on his heel and goes back inside.

I spend way too long in the bathtub, enjoying the warm water heating my bones.

It’s only when there’s a light tap on the door that I startle and get out, grabbing a towel.

Summer enters, offering a weak smile. “Father wants me to hurry you along,” she says before asking, “Are you okay?” We embrace, and she gently tucks my hair away from my face.

“I’ve been so worried about his plan to punish you. ”

“I’m sure it can’t be too bad,” I whisper. “Besides, it was worth it if it meant you wouldn’t get hurt.”

She smiles. “I thought Father’s head was about to explode.” She giggles. “Thank you, Wynter. What you did was brave.”

“Was it hurting bad?”

Tears sparkle in her eyes, and she nods. “I’ve never felt pain like it. And I bled afterwards.”

“I just hope you get pregnant,” I mutter.

Summer helps me to dress, and we head downstairs to where my father is waiting. “Both of you, follow me,” he says calmly, and we exchange a surprised look. Maybe my punishment is over.

It’s only as we head towards the cellar, and Summer slips her hand in mine and gives it a gentle squeeze, that I begin to worry.

Once we’re in the cellar, Father pulls out a bunch of keys from his pocket and pulls back a rug, revealing a wooden trapdoor.

He unlocks and lifts it, staring at us expectantly.

I lead first, carefully descending the stone steps that lead us down below the village and into a tunnel.

My father joins us, grabbing a lamp from the wall and lighting it to illuminate the

passage. “Keep walking,” he orders.

We follow it for a few minutes until it opens into a large cave with more tunnels leading from it.

Father then takes the lead, moving straight ahead.

Eventually, there’s another door which opens into a room.

It’s carpeted, with bookshelves on one wall and a large oak desk with a computer.

I knew my father had an office outside the home, but we’ve never been down here.

He picks up a telephone from his desk. “We’ve arrived,” he says, then he hangs up.

Seconds later, there’s a tap on the door and a guard enters. “Summer, go with him,” my father orders. She reluctantly lets go of my hand and is taken away, leaving me feeling more alarmed by the second.

My father watches me for a few silent minutes before sighing.

“In the time that follows, I want you to remember two things. The first is that everything you’re about to witness is your own fault.

” My heart beats faster, and I feel a sickness in the pit of my stomach.

“The second is that this wouldn’t have to happen had you not messed up your sister’s ceremony.

” He points to a side door behind his desk.

“Let’s go.” I wipe my sweating palms down my thighs and take a deep breath before following him.

We go into a small room, where there are two Chester-style couches facing closed red curtains and a drinks cabinet in the centre.

My father pours himself a drink and takes a seat on one.

He points to the other, and I sit. The silence is deafening, but my mind is racing so fast, my head hurts.

Where is Summer, and why am I in this nice room with him?

A few more minutes pass before a speaker crackles, causing me to jump in fright. “Gentlemen, we are ready to begin.”

The curtains automatically open, revealing a large window. It’s impossible to see what is on the other side as it’s too dark, but suddenly, bright lights flicker to life and illuminate a large circular room. I gasp, my heart skipping a beat.

In the centre, blindfolded, is Summer.

Wrath

I growl in frustration as I watch the film play out.

The woman on the bed screams as she’s held down while multiple men fuck her, filling her holes until she’s silent.

My cock is straining painfully, but with my hands tied behind my back, there’s nothing I can do to ease the urge.

I watch as the men release, one by one, then the film cuts out and a fifth begins to play.

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I almost sag in relief when the door opens and a guard enters smirking.

“Are you ready, Mute?” He stops the film playing, but my ears still ring with the screams of ecstasy.

He holds up his stick as a warning then reaches for the metal ring on the wall and proceeds to unlock it.

I stand, following as I’m led from the room.

Instead of being taken upstairs to the church, I’m led down into the caves. My heart beats harder the closer we get, and my cock pulses with need.

Today, I’ll kill any fucker that gets in my way.

Wynter

“What’s happening?” I ask desperately as I stand at the window with my palms pressed to the glass. I bang and cry out, “Summer.”

My father laughs. “She can’t hear you, and even after the blindfold is removed, she won’t be able to see you. The glass is one-way. Now, sit down.”

I swallow the bile that forms at the back of my throat.

If I vomit, he’ll be angrier. I lower nervously into my seat, pushing my hands under my thighs to stop me throttling my father.

The speaker crackles again. "Place bets now." My father presses a button beside his seat.

"You have voted for Maximus as your winner."

"What's a bet?" I ask, pretending I haven't read about the sin that is apparently banned in our town.

"Never mind," he says coldly. "You always did ask far too many questions."

A man enters the ring and removes Summer's blindfold.

She smiles politely while straightening her hair and glancing around the room nervously.

A door opens, and she jumps with fright, turning toward it as four warriors are led in one by one.

I stare in horror as the large, burly fighters are lined up against the wall, still chained to their guards.

All of them are naked with erections on display.

I stand again, slamming my hands against the glass. "What the hell is going on?" I scream.

My father joins me, this time grabbing a handful of hair and tugging my head back.

"I have to ensure your sister gets pregnant, and this is the only way to save face," he spits angrily.

“This is down to you, so you will watch.” He forces my head to face the window, pushing me until my nose is pressed against it.

Guards begin to unfasten their warriors but still keep them pinned against the wall by holding the cattle prods in their faces. The warriors trained from very young to be terrified of that thing, and after feeling its bite a few days ago, I can see why it’s so effective.

There’s a countdown coming from the speaker, but it’s also being played to Summer, who begins shaking her head in panic as she looks around the room, desperate for any type of escape.

“Please,” she begins, backing away. The warriors are growling, occasionally glancing at one another as they lean forwards slightly, showing their intention to be the first to make it to her.

An alarm sounds and the guards rush from the room, slamming the door closed behind them. The warriors run forwards, and Summer screams in fright, dodging their grabbing hands as they reach her. “No,” she yells. “Please don’t.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, praying to the god I definitely don’t believe in to save my sister. My sweet, innocent sister. My father smashes my head against the window. “You will watch,” he roars.

“Run,” I whisper as she dodges Maximus. He catches her shirt and rips it from her.

She spins, almost falling to the floor but managing to catch herself just as Wrath makes a grab, his fist going into her hair.

She screams as he pulls her against him, gripping her shorts.

Another warrior, Abraham, joins him, shredding the material completely until she's left in her underwear.

I cover my mouth, unable to stop my tears.

Maximus shoves Abraham out the way, and he stumbles back, landing on his backside. "Yes," my father cheers, releasing me and clapping. I glance his way, unable to hide the disgust on my face.

"They'll hurt her," I tell him. "What if she's already pregnant and they hurt her?"

"Then you will be to blame for putting her in this situation."

When I look back, it's Maximus who's holding Summer to the floor.

She's on all fours, and as he impales her, she cries out.

His hands grope her breasts, and that same animalistic growl escapes him.

The other three warriors close in on him, all fisting their erections in a disgusting display of perverse behaviour.

Zeus kneels before Summer, grabbing her hair and forcing her mouth to his erection.

She shakes her head until she's so close, she has no choice, and he pushes himself into her mouth, choking her.

Maximus roars loudly, jerking a few times before stilling.

His chest heaves as he pulls from her and backs away for Abraham to take his place.

She's crying so hard, Zeus stops what he's doing and moves to stand in line behind Abraham, who by now has also finished.

Wrath fists himself. His body is larger than the rest, and I see why my father paid a lot of money for him.

His muscles bunch as his huge erection glistens, and then he comes apart, throwing his head back and roaring, releasing streams of cum onto the floor.

The guards rush in, and he's slammed to the floor.

They're yelling, angry he didn't do that inside my sister.

Two cattle prods are pressed to his side, and he stiffens, his eyes widening as he stares up at the ceiling.

I watch as he's chained up again, his hands bound together, and I'm grateful for the distraction from my sister.

My eyes travel back to where Summer is curled up on the floor, her knees to her chest, sobbing quietly.

"Are you happy now?" Father hisses in my ear. "You did this."

"It didn't have to be this way," I whisper, watching as the warriors are led away.

My father opens the door that leads back to his office, shoving me through it.

The door Summer went through is open, and I rush to it, running into the room where Summer is still crying.

I drop to my knees and gently touch her arm.

She jumps in fright, crying out. "It's me," I whisper. "It's okay. It's just me."

Her eyes reach mine as she pushes to sit. "This is all your fault," she whispers.

"Summer, I'm so sorry," I cry. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Well, it did," she screams, standing. She looks down at the wetness between her legs, and I stare in horror at the blood there too. "Never speak to me again." She runs towards Father's office, where he's waiting in the doorway, watching our exchange with a smirk.

I stare in disbelief as he wraps his jacket around her, pulling her against his chest and soothing her with soft words of comfort.

CHAPTER THREE

WYNTER

It's been two days since the incident in the caves. Two days of being ignored. Two days of listening to Summer cry herself to sleep at night, refusing to let me comfort her in any way.

I'm preparing lunch when my father breezes in. Behind him is a slender woman with a pale complexion. She's much younger than him, possibly early twenties. "There's an extra guest for lunch," he tells me, leading her through to the dining room.

Minutes later, I carry the salad bowl through and notice my father standing extremely close to the woman.

Her head is bowed, and he's whispering in her ear.

I place the bowl on the table, and he steps back from her, pulling out a seat beside him so she can sit down.

My mother enters the room and pauses, looking mildly confused at the stranger sitting in her seat, but she doesn't cause a fuss and instead takes the seat on the other side of my father.

I go back into the kitchen to grab a tray of sandwiches, and when I return to the dining room, Summer is also seated.

I place the tray down and take my own seat, leaving a space between Summer and me.

Father is the first to take a sandwich, like always.

He then offers the tray to the woman before placing it back on the table.

Mother frowns slightly but helps herself.

I want to scream at her for not asking the obvious question.

Who the fuck is this woman? Instead, I watch as everyone eats, unable to touch anything until my father tells me I can.

Once they're finished, I eye the few sandwiches left, and my stomach growls in hunger.

"From now on, Annastasia will join us for every meal," Father announces.

"You will all treat her with kindness." My stomach growls louder.

"Wynter, please inform our suppliers and adjust the groceries accordingly. Annastasia will eat extra green vegetables and meat, as she is with child."

We all look up, our eyes darting between the pair. "Anthony," Mother says gently, "I don't understand."

"She will also be joining me in bed. You will now sleep in the next room."

"She's having your child?" Mother whispers.

“Twins,” he says proudly. “The doctor confirmed the pregnancy just this morning.”

“Only women who have carried a warrior’s child are worthy of having a founding family’s child,” my mother replies.

“I do not have to justify my choice to you,” he says firmly, pushing to stand.

My mother does the same. “I’ve been loyal,” she spits, and I wince at her tone. “I have given you a daughter.”

“And a rebellious, disrespectful wench,” he snaps, looking at me.

“But for me to remain at the top, I need a bigger family. You’re not up to the job, probably God’s punishment for the way Wynter has behaved.

” All eyes turn to me, and I shrivel down slightly.

“Annastasia will take your place beside me.”

“And what will be my role?” she asks.

“The same as it always was, to please me. I will call upon you when I require your services.”

“I am not a common whore,” she screams.

He rears his hand back and strikes her hard enough to knock her to the ground.

She lands on the floor at his feet, and he lowers, grabbing her hair and bringing her face to his.

“That is exactly what you are,” he spits.

“And unless you would like to end up in the circle like Summer, you will find your new role an honour and thank me for it daily.” He shoves her back down.

“Now, what would you like to say to me?”

She cowers slightly before taking a deep breath and muttering, “Thank you, sir.”

He holds out a hand to Annastasia, who takes it. He leads her away, picking up the leftover sandwiches and dropping them in the bin as he leaves the room.

I rush over to where Mother is sobbing in a heap on the floor and hold out my hand. She glares at it with contempt. “Do you see?” she demands, getting to her feet. I take a few steps back, wary of the anger in her eyes. “Your behaviour has consequences for us all.”

“I didn’t mean for any of this,” I cry, glancing at Summer, who is staring at her plate. “It’s him who’s evil, not me.”

“All you had to do was keep quiet,” she screams. “Now, you’ve ruined everything.” She leaves the room, sobbing into her hands.

I turn to Summer and whisper, “I’m sorry.”

She stands, finally lifting her eyes to mine. “It doesn’t make anything better,” she says sadly. “You have to follow the rules, Wynter. It’s simple.”

“But I don’t agree,” I whisper. “Why can’t you all see what I see?”

“What choice do we have?” she hisses. “There is no way out. We’re stuck here in this

make-believe world they have created.

So, you can keep shouting about how unfair it is for women, but they don't care, Wynter, and all your noise is getting everyone you love hurt.

So, do us all a favour and just stop." I watch in stunned silence as she also leaves the room.

She's wrong. There must be some way we can escape this madness. Jade talks all the time about the outside world, and maybe together, we can come up with a plan.

Wrath

Being force-fed the little blue pills, one after the other, means only one thing—it's my turn to go to church today.

After my eagerness to pleasure myself in the circle a few nights ago, I've been beaten and starved and reminded over and over what my purpose is here—to impregnate the goddesses presented to us by our masters.

The door opens and dread fills me as a guard enters with another pill. He shows me his stick, knowing I'll comply rather than feel the pain it delivers. I open my mouth, and he places it on my tongue. Once I've swallowed it, I open my mouth for him to check.

"It's ten minutes until showtime, Mute. We expect a long and successful performance this evening.

If you mess it up, you'll be sorry." He waits for me to acknowledge him, and when I don't, he points the stick in my direction.

I scramble away, wincing in anticipation, which only makes him laugh.

“You fucking pussy,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“I’ll send in your starter,” he adds, heading out the room.

The woman who enters looks terrified. Three guards gather in the doorway, watching with greedy eyes as she approaches me cautiously.

I want to reassure her that I can’t hurt her because I’m tied so tightly, I’ve lost feeling in my fingers and feet.

She squirts some cold gel onto her hands and rubs them together before settling between my open legs and gripping my erection.

I close my eyes and shudder with pleasure.

“You gotta sit over him, sweet thing,” says a guard, and the others laugh.

“Naked,” adds another.

I feel her stiffen in fright. “Want me to help?” asks the other, sounding much closer.

I open my eyes to see him hauling her to her feet.

His hands grope her breasts, and she squeezes her eyes shut.

“Fuck it, maybe he can just watch the show,” he adds, gripping her dress and ripping it down the middle.

Her breasts pop out, and he twists her nipples until she cries out.

I hate that sound, and I pull on my restraints, growling angrily.

“Now you’ve awoken the beast,” he whispers, turning her to face me. He places her hands on my knees and bends her over.

“Hurry the fuck up, Larry, before we get caught,” a guard warns, fisting his own cock.

Larry sniggers, pulling his trousers down to his ankles.

“Hold on for the ride,” he warns, shoving his dick into her.

She screams, her panicked eyes fixed on me as he takes what he wants.

“Suck his cock,” he orders, grabbing her hair and shoving her face to my erection.

When she sobs, shaking her head in refusal, he slaps her hard across the thigh.

She reluctantly sucks me into her warm mouth, and it disgusts me that I can’t hate it like I should.

My cock is so painfully hard, I have to concentrate so I don’t come, because that’ll earn me a whole world of pain.

Larry growls, coming hard. He pulls her mouth from my dick, and I sigh in relief.

“His turn,” he snaps, pushing her to her knees in front of the other guards.

The first fucks her mouth while the other gets behind her, not caring his friend’s cum is still inside her.

I watch as they use the poor woman, and once they're finished, she runs from the room, sobbing.

"Now, Mute, are you all worked up and ready for your duties?"

Wynter

I'm not invited to the evening's ceremony. It's a relief because I don't want to watch another woman go through the same pain my sister did. So, I wait until everyone else has headed off and then I take a walk into the village.

Jade is stacking crates in her father's butcher shop. I tap on the window to get her attention, and she rushes to unlock the door. "I feel like I haven't seen you in ages," she cries, wrapping me in a hug as she pulls me inside.

"Things have been difficult at home," I explain.

"Abel told me," she says, offering a sympathetic smile. "I think we have it bad down here in the village, but I'm glad I don't have your life right now."

The villagers live on rations. Each family has a ration book, and they have to make their weekly supplies last them. However, being one of the four families, we can take as much or as little as we like, but we have to order in advance.

"We had a new family join us a couple weeks ago," she adds, lifting a crate of meat and handing it to me. I place it with the others, and she opens the large walk-in fridge. "Rumour has it, your father already claimed one of their daughters."

"Annastasia?"

"That's her. What's she like?"

“I haven’t seen her much. She was only introduced today, and she spent the day with my father.”

“It’s got everyone talking, seeing as it’s not how they normally do things.”

“It’s not like anyone will challenge him.”

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“Anyway, the family has the plot by the main fields. Their eldest son is . . .” She smirks and fans her face dramatically. “H.O.T,” she spells out with a giggle. “You never know, maybe your father will marry you off to get rid of you.”

I sigh dreamily. “Imagine.” It would never happen. Daughters born from warriors are made to serve their families in any way required. Sons are sent to work in the fields during harvest, and eventually, they’ll marry and have their own families.

“Abel mentioned more children arrived recently.”

She gives another sad smile while hanging the meat onto the hooks. “Yep. It’s heartbreaking when they first come through those doors looking so lost and scared. The youngest looks about three years old.”

“Did you manage to ask any of them about their life?” It was a plan we’d come up with together so we could try and suss out the outside world.

Jade shakes her head. “The eldest is around five, Wynter. All they do is cry for their mothers. Plus, the carers are always watching us like hawks.” The carers look after the children when they first arrive.

“They’ve already introduced the cattle prod. ”

“I’m running out of ideas,” I mutter.

“Are you sure we should even be trying?” When I stare at her, she sighs. “It’s just that you’re already in so much trouble. Everyone in the village knows what you did.

Some of them are blaming you for the rain we've had over the last week. They think God is punishing you."

I roll my eyes. "Idiots."

I turn as the fridge door opens and Jade's father leans against the door frame. "Well, if it isn't trouble." Jade gives him a pleading look, and he shakes his head. "I can't have you calling in at unsociable hours anymore, Wynter."

"My father asked me to come to explain we're feeding an extra guest."

"Thank him for letting me know. I'll make sure to add to your weekly delivery." He opens the door wider. "You should go."

As I head out, I hear him lecturing Jade, and I pause to listen. "I've told you already, you cannot be seen with her anymore. It's bad for us. The other villagers will tell her father, and he'll punish us."

The fact my father is already trying to destroy everyone I love plays heavy on my mind as I leave, closing the door carefully behind me.

Abel rushes to catch me up as I head up the hill back home. "What are you doing out and about? Why aren't you at the ceremony?"

"I've been in exile, in case you haven't noticed," I say with a small laugh. "They banned me so I can't mess up another."

"Wanna come and see whose turn it is?" he asks.

I frown. "Not really."

“Please,” he argues. “If it’s Livia, I’ll die on the spot.”

I smirk. “You’re so dramatic.”

I follow him along the path that leads to the main doors of the church.

It’s silent inside, and Abel slowly opens the door, giving enough space for us to peer in.

I clamp a hand over my mouth, staring wide at the vision of Livia as she rides Wrath.

There are no tears or dramatics as she cries in pleasure.

Wrath has a hand wrapped around her waist as he grunts with each thrust. “Holy shit,” I whisper.

“My life is over,” Abel mutters.

“Or just beginning,” I soothe. “You could offer her a shoulder to cry on once the baby is born.”

“As soon as the baby arrives, she’ll be married to someone from one of the families. Probably Dudley,” he says with disdain.

I frown. “The cousin of Lucas Perez is not going to marry Livia.”

“All I know is it won’t be me.”

I step away and head back along the path with Abel hot on my heels. “Who knows? My father is already changing the rules to suit himself.”

“I heard about the new family and his liking of their daughter.”

“She hasn’t even had a child with a warrior, so how is she in his bed?”

“Do you think he’ll let villagers marry the warriors’ castoffs one day?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Probably not.”

The sound of chains has us both turning, just as Jax and Lenny reach us with their warrior. We immediately step to one side so they can pass. Wrath locks eyes with me, and for a second, I can’t breathe, like I’ve forgotten a basic function. “Here she is, the fuckup,” sneers Lenny.

“I’m sure her father will be pleased you’re speaking to his daughter like that,” Abel snaps.

They pause, and Wrath’s eyes run down my body. I look away, embarrassed by his nakedness. “Her father doesn’t give a shit,” says Lenny, laughing. “Not since she embarrassed him.”

Jax’s hand darts towards me, and I flinch. Wrath growls, his eyes blazing with something I can’t quite place. Jax glances back, frowning. “What’s the matter, Mute? Do you hate the entitled princess too?”

He wraps a piece of my hair around his finger, and when Abel squares his shoulders, Jax holds his cattle prod up in warning.

“Well, that’s something we have in common, warrior,” he adds in a low whisper as his eyes run over my terrified face.

He smirks, letting his finger trail down my cheek and over my collarbone.

“Maybe I should offer to take you off your father’s hands so he doesn’t have to worry about you messing up his name. ”

Wrath pulls on his chains, anger burning brightly in his light blue eyes, and I get the impression he isn’t aiming it my way as he glares at where Jax’s fingers touch me.

Jax glances back a second time, sneering.

“You don’t want me to touch this one, Mute, is that it?

” he asks and then grabs my throat. I gasp, wincing as his fingers dig into my neck.

Wrath lunges forwards, hitting Jax in the side of the head with his fist, forcing him to release me so he can catch himself as he hits the ground.

I grip my neck, staring wide-eyed at the beast as he tries to pull towards Jax.

Lenny presses a button on his radio before pressing his cattle prod to Wrath’s thigh.

It does nothing—the spark only seems to anger him more.

I see more guards running up the hill with cattle prods in their hands, and I panic, rushing towards Wrath and placing a hand on his.

He stills immediately, staring at my touch with curiosity.

“Calm down,” I whisper, “or they’ll hurt you.

” His mouth opens and closes before his eyes meet mine.

We’re locked in something I can’t explain, and all I see in his stunning blues is pain.

“Thank you for saving me,” I add.

He suddenly falls to his knees, his eyes rolling to the back of his head and his body stiffening as prods are pressed to him. “He’s calm,” I scream as Abel pulls me back. “Get off him. He’s calm again.”

“Wynter?” I turn at the sound of my father’s voice. The disappointment I see in his eyes is a reminder of his hatred towards me. Beside him is Cornelius, Adrian, and Silas. The heads of all four families are staring at me . . . again.

“Anthony, this cannot go on,” Adrian says firmly. “She came here to disrupt my daughter’s ceremony.”

I shake my head, glancing back as Wrath is taken away, his feet dragging over the stone path. “I didn’t . . . I haven’t . . . that’s not what I was doing.”

“Sir, if I may,” Jax interjects, holding his head where he was hit. My father gives a stiff nod. “I found them together, getting intimate. They distracted me from my duties, and Wrath got in a lucky hit.”

I gasp, glancing at Abel, who looks just as mortified. “We were doing no such thing,” I argue.

“Intimate?” my father repeats, arching a brow.

“No, we just wanted to see the . . .” I pause before admitting the truth. “We were watching the ceremony.”

“And then you got intimate with a man from the village?” Cornelius accuses. “Ceremonies are a ritual we have performed for many years. How dare you let the devil corrupt your behaviour and make your thoughts dark.”

“I didn’t,” I argue again.

My father steps forwards, striking me across the face. “Do not argue,” he bellows. “Go home and wait for me there.” Abel turns to leave too, but my father adds, “Not you.”

I glance back at his terrified expression, praying to God nothing bad happens to him.

Wrath

Over and over again, I’m kicked and hit with objects, yet I don’t feel a thing because the only image I have in my head is of her.

The woman with the green eyes. I glance at my hand, to the spot where her fingers touched me.

It still feels warm there, and I almost smile.

“This is just the beginning, Mute,” pants Lenny. “The boss has some plans for you.”

The door opens, and they all pause their assault. “Get him cleaned up.” The boss never comes down here, and as she looks around my room, she turns her nose up in disgust. “And get this shithole cleaned up. I can’t have my top warrior living like this.” Then, she turns and leaves.

CHAPTER FOUR

WYNTER

My father storms into the house, and I freeze, careful to bow my head and not make eye contact.

“You never learn,” he bellows, slapping me hard across the face.

I can’t contain the cry as I fall to my knees.

“God may have chosen your mother to birth you, but somehow, the devil intercepted and created you,” he yells, grabbing my hair and forcing me to look at his red, angry face.

“You gave in to desires outside our holy place,” he screams, tugging harder.

I try to ease his grip, digging my fingers into his hands. “I have no place for you here.”

“I didn’t do what he said,” I cry, trying to scramble to my feet as Father drags me from the kitchen towards the basement.

“You continue to disobey me after I gave you a home.”

“I was in the village adjusting the groceries,” I argue.

“I can’t even marry you off because you have disgraced yourself.” He pulls open the trapdoor and shoves me down the stone steps. I land in a bruised heap at the bottom. “You’ve made me a laughingstock.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Your only job is to serve your family. You can’t even do that with grace and dignity. Instead, you mock my laws and test my boundaries.”

“Laws made by men,” I scream, pushing to stand as he descends the stairs. I back off, feeling behind me along the cave walk but fixing my eyes on him. “Men who sin every single day,” I continue. “Yet you make laws to disguise your greed and dominance.”

He tips his head to one side, his smirk menacing. “Is that right?”

“You may fool all those women but not me, and you hate that I can see you for what you all are.”

“And what is that?” he asks, following me step for step.

“A perverted animal who gets pleasure by forcing women to have sex with monsters. An evil man who steals young children so he can make them into monsters.”

“And tell me, how do you know all this?”

My mind races. There’s no way back from this, but whatever the punishment, I’ll take it just to finally get the words off my chest. Words I’ve thought about for so long.

“I see it all,” I tell him, my voice low and dangerous.

“I see the bulges in men’s trousers while innocent daughters are taken by those beasts.

I saw how your eyes lit up when they chased Summer around that room.

You enjoyed it. And I know those little boys are not from our village or else you wouldn’t have them beaten for asking about their families. ”

He arches a brow, and I feel smug knowing how I’ve surprised him with my knowledge. “So, where do you think those boys come from?”

I come to the opening of the cave, pausing before stumbling over a rock.

He steps in too, pushing open his office door and indicating for me to go in.

Instead, I shake my head, standing firm.

“I taught myself to read,” I say, smiling wide.

“The first book I read was the Holy Bible.” His eyes blaze with anger. “The real one, not your bullshit.”

His eyes widen. “And now you curse?”

“I’ve learned a lot.”

“How?” I press my lips in a firm line. There’s no way I can tell him that some of the villagers got access to a mobile phone device that showed us the outside world.

It was a year or so ago, when a new family had joined us.

They're supposed to come with no possessions, ready for a new life, but their sixteen-year-old daughter wasn't ready for that, and she showed us all kinds of things that happen outside our village.

Things that made us question everything we'd ever been taught.

Father snatches my wrist, twisting my arm up my back and pulling me against his front. "How?" he repeats.

"I worked it out," I lie.

"Lies," he yells, pushing me farther into his office.

I stumble, grabbing onto the desk. That's when I notice the other men in the room. Cornelius, Adrian, and Silas all watch me as I straighten. "You thought you'd all come together to beat the devil from me?" I demand.

"You can't see it, Wynter, but he is there," says Adrian.

I try to slow my breathing as my heart hammers wildly. "No, he isn't," I yell. "The devil is no more real than God." They all gasp. "How can he be real when he allows this?"

"The warrior bestowed upon your mother was strong, probably the strongest we've ever had," says Adrian thoughtfully. "It was a shame when he had to leave us."

"You killed him," I snap, "like you do every fighter who no longer shows strength."

"What kind of warrior would he be if we'd have kept him?" asks Cornelius, laughing. "You think they should fight when they're too old and slow?"

“I think they have served a purpose and then you get rid of them. Why can’t they live amongst the villagers?”

All three of them laugh. “And this is why women can never be in charge,” my father states. “You’d have us set those feral men amongst women and children?”

“ You walk amongst them every day,” I spit.

“I am not feral,” he says firmly. “Nor am I a monster.”

“According to you,” I mutter. “They’re only that way because that’s how you make them,” I yell. “They come here as innocent little children.”

“They are given to us by mothers who can no longer look after them. They come here for a better life. We give them power and purpose,” says Adrian.

“They come to us with no boundaries, unable to follow rules, feral and out of control,” adds Cornelius.

“They’re little boys,” I remind them. “They need their mothers’ love.”

“You don’t understand,” says Silas, shaking his head. “We help those boys.”

“Like you help the women here?” I shout. “It’s lies you tell yourself to help you sleep at night.”

“I think you’re right,” says Silas, looking past me to my father. “She can’t be managed.”

“You mean I can’t be kept quiet.”

“She will cause a rebellion,” adds Adrian, ignoring me.

“So, what do we do?” Father asks.

“I’m standing right here,” I yell. “Let me leave.” They all stare at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Let me leave the village, and I’ll never bother you again.”

“And risk you spouting more lies?” Father scoffs. “No, I know exactly where you’ll be of use.” He picks up his telephone and presses a number. “I’m ready for you now,” he says before placing it back on the receiver.

A minute later, the door opens and Martha enters.

She works below ground, looking after the guards.

She bows her head slightly as a sign of respect.

She’s every bit as scary as the villagers say, her build large and her grey hair scraped back tightly into a bun.

“You have a new recruit,” Father tells her, and she runs her eyes up and down me.

“She will do everything and anything you ask of her.”

She sighs heavily, like I’m some kind of inconvenience. “Well, come with me, I don’t have all day.” And she heads out. I glance at my father, hoping for a glimpse of emotion, but there’s nothing.

“Maybe it’s time you change the rules,” I say, “because if you’re not going to love the daughters of the warriors you hold in such high esteem, what’s the point in any of it?”

Martha is already through the circle and entering another door, and I jog to catch up.

We head through tunnels, twisting and turning until we step into an opening where a couple guards are sitting on some old wooden chairs with a table between them, playing a game of cards.

They spot Martha and scoop the cards from the table, standing quickly.

“The princess of the Sanchez family has been sent our way,” says Martha, her tone laced with annoyance.

“You’ll make sure none of the guards harm her.

” They give a stiff nod. “Alex, please show her around.” She turns to me. “Name?”

“Wynter.”

She rolls her eyes before marching off and leaving me with the guards. Alex gives a small smile. “I’ll show you around.”

We walk along a passage, and he points to the various doors. “These are the guards’ sleeping quarters.” We head back out and move on to the next passage. “The women stay along this one,” he adds.

“Women?” I ask as he pushes the first door open to reveal a basic room with a single bed, a sink and toilet, and a set of drawers. I didn’t think there were any women down here other than Martha.

“It gets cold at night, so use extra blankets.” He points to the sheets folded neatly on the end of the bed. “You can get extras from the cupboard outside your room,” he adds, pointing to a door opposite.

I stare blankly, trying to take in all the extra information. “My room?”

“Yes, this will be your room.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat. We head back out, and he points to a larger door. “And down that one is the warriors’ quarters.”

I raise my brows in surprise. “They’re kept amongst you?”

He grins, grabbing a set of keys from his belt and unlocking the door.

“Not exactly,” he tells me as I follow him through.

He locks it behind us then unlocks a metal gate.

We go through, and he locks that too. We walk along the tunnel and, again, we come to a large open space with doors leading off.

In the middle is a table with chairs around it.

“You’ll find on-duty guards here usually,” he says.

“And behind the doors are the warriors?” I ask.

He gives a nod. “Wanna see?”

I chew my lower lip with worry but nod anyway because I’ve always wondered where they live.

He grins wider, moving to a door and unlocking it.

There’s a metal gate the other side, followed by a second door.

Once inside there, I gasp in surprise. The room we enter is brightly lit and modern-looking.

There's a large screen television on the wall and a bed in the centre, a couch and table to one side.

“Do they get to leave this room?” I ask as we step into it.

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“No, not without a guard. They leave to fight and to fu . . .” He laughs.

“They each have a gym,” he adds, pointing to an archway.

I move closer and glance inside. Across the room, at the far end, Zeus is running on a treadmill.

He’s lost in thought, not noticing us watching as his heavy feet pound on the machine.

“He trains hard,” Alex whispers. “Harder than any of them.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll see you and hurt us?” I whisper back.

“Nah, he can’t. He’s chained.”

I frown and stare back in Zeus’s direction. Sure enough, there’s a chain leading from his wrist to the wall. “What happens when he’s finished?”

“He’ll press his buzzer, and if there’s a guard available, they’ll move him to his next machine or to his bed.”

“Why can’t he move freely in here?”

He laughs, this time disturbing Zeus, whose head spins our way. He growls, clearly unhappy that he’s been distracted. “Easy, big man,” says Alex. “She ain’t here for you.”

“Get out,” he spits, his voice booming.

Alex holds his cattle prod up. “Careful. We don’t want to end up in bed for the day.” He shakes his head, smirking as we turn to leave. I offer a small smile and wave as I follow.

Wrath

I squeeze my eyes closed, concentrating on the feel of the warm mouth enveloping my cock.

My legs begin to shake, and right as I’m about to release, Anna stops.

I growl angrily, my eyes homing in on her as she sits back on her heels and wipes the back of her hand across her mouth.

“Sorry, just following orders,” she says, shrugging.

She keeps her hand around the base of my erection, squeezing hard to keep it semi while the feeling of my orgasm ebbs away.

When she’s satisfied I’m no longer on the edge, she begins the process all over again.

An hour she’s been doing this, keeping me on the edge so my balls ache and my cock feels sensitive. I can’t even think straight. But it’s all part of the punishment for losing my mind earlier.

The door opening makes me sigh in relief, hoping they’ve come to take her away. I’d rather not feel anything at all than this torture.

“Jeez, your jaw must be locking,” jokes the guard, but Anna doesn’t stop sucking,

knowing he'll only hit her if she does.

My eyes are drawn to him when I see a movement behind him.

And then she steps out from behind, the girl with the green eyes.

We stare at one another, and I stop breathing.

Her mouth falls open—maybe in shock, though I'm not good at reading people—and then I feel a rush of warmth and I come hard, roaring until my throat hurts.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear yelling, but I'm too lost in the sensation to pay attention, and then I jolt as electricity passes through my body, causing me to jerk uncontrollably until the stick is removed from my stomach.

I open my eyes, desperately searching for her.

She's by the door with her hands over her mouth and terror in her eyes. I want that look to stop.

Anna is holding her cheek as the guard turns to her. "You're a disgrace. Get out." She wastes no time escaping, pushing past the green-eyed beauty. When he turns back to me, I'm already bracing myself for the next round of torture, eyeing the stick warily.

"Get me those pills," he tells her, pointing to the shelf outside my room where they store the cocktail of crap they force-feed me. "The blue ones."

I watch as she nervously picks up a couple bottles before finding the right one. "What are these?" she asks, and her voice makes my heart swell with something . . . happiness?

“They make him perform,” the guard tells her, snatching the bottle from her and shaking a couple into his hand.

“Open,” he orders, and I do so because ignoring him will earn me a beating.

He drops the pills onto my tongue and waits for me to swallow and show him my empty mouth.

Then he turns on the large screen, and I groan.

The familiar sounds of a woman’s screams play out, drawing green eye’s farther into my room to see what it is.

She gasps, and my cock twitches at the sound.

“It’s good for them, Wynter. They need to be able to perform well,” the guard explains.

Wynter . Her name is Wynter. I smile. “Ain’t this the fucker you managed to calm down?” he adds.

“Oh, erm, I don’t think I helped,” she almost whispers, and a flush of pink fills her pale cheeks.

“That’s not what the other guys are saying. Apparently, they’ve never seen this fucker calm down so quickly.”

She looks my way, her cheeks full-on red this time, and she smiles.

Her eyes drop to my strained cock then she suddenly glances away.

I want to scream at her, tell her it's not my fault, that this isn't my choice and it never was.

But instead, I stare at her, the words clogging my throat.

"This fucker is a selective mute," sneers the guard, heading out. "A retarded freak."

She glances back, and the smile is there again. She adds a little wave before disappearing, and I stare down at my cock. It's the first time I've thought about a woman in a way that makes my insides spark.

CHAPTER FIVE

WYNTER

“The butcher will have everything we need,” says Martha, handing me a basket. “Alex will go with you.”

I nod and follow Alex through the tunnels and out into the open.

It’s been a week since I came here, and I’ve scrubbed every inch of the kitchen at Martha’s request, followed by the guards’ quarters, which leave much to be desired.

And today, I’m on kitchen duties. I’m not sure what that means yet, but right now, all I can think about is getting out into the village to breathe fresh air.

“Do you get out much?” I ask as we head down towards the village.

“We work a rota,” he tells me. “So, on my days off, I get to do what I want.”

“Will I get days off?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I doubt it. A lot of the women don’t.”

“Figures,” I mutter.

Out of all the guards, Alex is the best out of a bad bunch.

He's vile to the warriors, but he's been nice to me, showing me how to navigate through the caves and how to stay ahead of Martha and get things done before she asks, to save a lecture.

There're two other girls like me who help Martha keep house.

They also 'help the warriors prepare for ceremonies'.

So far, I haven't been asked to do anything like that, much to my relief.

Jaycee and Anna are quiet, but they work hard and seem like nice women. I've yet to ask how they've ended up here as we hardly have any time to chat.

"I have some business to take care of," he tells me, and I eye him suspiciously. "Can you go to the butchers yourself?" he asks. I nod, relieved he won't be looking over my shoulder. "Great. I'll meet you outside the store in five minutes."

I wait for him to rush off before I cross over to the bakers and go inside. Abel glances up and smiles wide when he sees it's me. "Oh my god, I've been so worried," he says, rushing around the counter to greet me. We hug as he asks, "Where have you been?"

"My father sent me to the caves," I tell him, and his mouth falls open.

"I'm so sorry," he cries. "I should never have asked you to come to the church."

"It's fine," I reassure him. "Being down there isn't so bad."

"Your father asked to speak to me earlier," he adds, glancing away.

"Why?"

“He wants to know how you got a Bible,” he says. “Why did you tell him those things? He knows about the smartphone and everything.”

“I didn’t tell him about that,” I say, confused. “And the Bible thing just tumbled out. You didn’t tell him anything, did you?”

He hesitates, and I grab his arm and give him a shake. “Abel, you didn’t tell him?”

“Not yet.”

“What does that mean?” I cry.

“He’s offered me something in return.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“If Livia has a child, he said I can marry her.”

I glare at him. “Are you crazy?”

“You know how badly I want this.”

“It’s all lies,” I yell. “He’d never allow Livia Garcia to marry a villager. You know this.”

“Her father was there, and he agreed.”

“Why would they go to the trouble of allowing a warrior to see if she’s worthy and strong enough to carry a child if they were going to let her marry you? She’ll marry Reginald Morales, and you know it.”

“I think you’re just angry because you’re in the caves.”

I grip my head and growl in frustration. “Don’t you see? He’s lying to get what he wants. He’ll make an example of Jade, telling the villages she corrupted me to make himself look better. You can’t say anything, Abel, promise me.”

There’s a tap on the window, and I turn to see Alex, who holds his hands up with exasperation. I head for the door. “I have to go, but please don’t mess it all up, Abel.”

I step out, and Alex glares at me. “What are you doing?”

“Just trying to get us an extra loaf to walk home with.”

He frowns. “You’re not in the Sanchez clan anymore, so extras aren’t allowed.”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s what Abel told me.”

“Get the meat. We need to head back.”

“What’s the rush?”

“We’ve been summoned to a gathering this afternoon. An announcement is coming from the forefathers.”

I head into the butchers wondering if the announcement will be about Summer. Maybe she’s pregnant with the next Sanchez slave.

We stand in a neat line, Jaycee, Anna, and me, and all the guards.

Martha walks down the line, taking each of us in, occasionally straightening a collar or ribbon.

I feel like an idiot dressed in a black dress with white cotton detailing.

All the women are dressed the same, with a white ribbon in our hair.

All the guards have their uniforms on too.

I've seen them dressed this way before, at pregnancy announcements.

It has to be about Summer. Maybe if they see I haven't ruined her chances, they'll reconsider sending me to work in the caves.

We're led from the caves out onto the giant hill where all four large houses were built looking down on the village. The town hall is in the centre, and that's where we head, joining other villagers who have gathered to see what awaits us.

The front of the town hall has been covered with a large sheet. It's different, but then who knows what my father has planned for Summer's announcement. He'll want to make a show to take the focus off the antics I've pulled that he believes have embarrassed him.

The forefathers file out onto the steps, and my father taps the microphone on the lectern.

I frown as he greets the people, wondering where Summer and the other families are.

"Your time is precious," he says as I zone back in, "and I appreciate you being here." He clears his throat.

"Some of you have been here from the start. Your families continuing to grow here, bringing generation after generation of delightfulness. And some of you joined later, coming here for a better life, one that isn't dictated by the British government.

We strive for peace and tranquillity here in our village.

Being off-grid is one of the most rewarding ways to live, and I think I speak for everyone here when I say this place is so amazing because of you.

Each person here brings their own skillset, making us a success.

We will always do whatever we can to keep safe what we have built here as a team.

We are one big family, and like in most families, there will always be one or two who decide to work against the rest of us.

” My blood freezes, and I glance around the crowd, trying to pick out Jade.

“Our peace and tranquillity have been put at risk.” There are a few gasps from the crowd.

“It brings me great sadness when I am called upon to deal with such evil amongst us.” He pauses, looking around the crowd.

“We promised to protect you, and to keep that promise, we have to make tough choices.” I scan the crowd again, desperately trying to find Abel. I swear, if he’s behind this . . .

“Our younger generation were being corrupted.” More gasps.

“Their minds being taken over with the one thing we have forbidden from day one.” My father holds up a mobile device, and the crowd becomes unsettled, some shouting out in anger, others looking around shocked.

I shrivel back slightly, praying Jade is safe.

“We all know the implications of this innocent-looking device and how it corrupts and controls people’s minds.

The devil himself uses modern day technology to get to our young people, and we cannot let that happen here. ”

He allows the crowd some time to process before holding up his hands, commanding silence.

“We have recovered everything that made it into our peaceful village, our sanctuary.” He removes the battery and throws the mobile phone into a metal drum.

Adrian steps forwards and lights inside, and when flames fan up over the top, the villagers cheer.

“But it doesn’t stop there,” my father continues.

“The people involved had already been corrupted. We were too late to save them.” He gives a solemn look before pointing to the huge sheet covering the pillars of the town hall.

“We had no choice but to put an end to the devil. Releasing them back into our world would have threatened everything we’ve worked for.

And so, it’s with great sadness that I now reveal the traitorous sinners.

” He holds his hand in the direction of the sheet, and it falls away.

My world stops turning as I stare into the lifeless hanging bodies of Jade and Abel.

I can’t breathe, and I tug at the white collar on the dress, snapping the button to

loosen it.

I stare as the button bounces across the path in slow motion, coming to a stop by Martha's foot.

She glances at me, frowning. I see her mouth moving, but the ringing in my ears stops me from hearing her words.

Crouching down, I dig my fingers into the stones as I painfully inhale each heavy breath.

I feel hands under my arms, and I am lifted to stand again, this time sandwiched between Jaycee and Anna.

Martha stands before me, and she gently taps my face.

I blink a few times. "That's it. Come back to us," she whispers.

I look around and notice the villagers are beginning to clear away, some sobbing, some looking angry.

"I have to go and see the forefathers," Martha explains, concern playing out in her expression. "The guards will take you back."

"Did you know about this?" I demand. "Is that why I'm here?"

She raises a brow. "You're here because you're the same as the rest of us," she says, frowning. "Welcome to our world." And she walks away.

By the time we get back to our rooms, I'm exhausted. I don't have any more tears left to cry after these last couple weeks, and so I stare into space until I finally fall into a

disturbed sleep.

I wake with a start to find Martha staring down at me. I yelp in surprise and skuttle back until I'm half sitting against the headboard. "I trust you slept well?"

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I risk a glance at the clock beside my bed. It's almost half past six, and I should have been in the kitchen at five. "I'm sorry."

"It's all gone wrong this morning anyway," she says, rolling her eyes. "Hurry up and dress. You'll need to serve the food today as Anna is sick." And she leaves me to dress.

By the time I get to the kitchen, the breakfasts are on the trays and Jaycee is stacking them on the trolley. "Alex is on duty today," she whispers, offering a sad smile. "He'll tell you what to do."

I return her smile. "Thank you."

I push the trolley into the guards' hangout, where Alex is occupied with a new warrior.

He glances my way and points to the keys on the table.

"Just hand them each a tray. I've already uncuffed a hand.

"I nod, grabbing the keys. "Take a prod," he calls back over his shoulder.

I stare at the device leaning against the table and wince.

I hate the things, but I also don't want to be attacked by any of these monsters.

"And Wynter," I look over to him, "don't do anything stupid that'll get us both

hanged.” I shiver at his words.

Abraham is at his table. His ankles are chained to the wall either side of him and one wrist is also chained.

He eyes me cautiously as I step in with his tray.

“I have this,” I warn, holding up the hand with the prod.

“Don’t make me use it.” He grunts in response, rolling his eyes.

I know he could easily overpower me if he wants to, but instead, he makes a show of sitting on his hands.

I swallow down the nervous energy and carefully lean closer, sliding the tray onto the table.

“It doesn’t look great,” I add, staring at the plate of chicken, eggs, and rice.

“Certainly not something I’d eat for breakfast.” He stares at me, and I fidget uncomfortably.

“Enjoy,” I whisper, backing out. I leave as he begins to grab at the food, stuffing it in his mouth like a starved animal.

I move to Maximus’s room. As I enter, he looks agitated, and I hold the prod tighter. “Good morning,” I say politely, and he scowls at me.

“Is it?”

I almost smile. “Not really,” I agree.

“Then why say it?” he demands, snatching the tray as I slide it to him.

“I was being polite.” I back out as he also rams the food in his mouth.

Zeus has his head resting on the table. He doesn’t bother to look up, so I place the tray beside him and leave, not wanting to disturb him.

As I get to Wrath’s room, I pause. Every time I see him, I feel something.

Excitement, maybe? But that quickly leaves me as I open the door and find him sprawled out on the floor.

He’s bruised and bleeding from his lip, and his eyes are closed.

I glance back, wondering if I should get Alex, but he’s the one who told me I should use my own initiative rather than bother people.

I clear my throat, and he stirs slightly, groaning. “I have your breakfast,” I say gently.

He opens his eyes, and when he sees me, he frowns, trying to sit up. I rush over, not really thinking as I crouch beside him and link my arm in his to help. He freezes, staring wide-eyed at where we touch. I immediately release him, but before I can back off, he grabs my hand and yanks me closer.

I freeze, my heart hammering hard in my chest as he leans closer.

I think about screaming, but there’s a piece of me that wants to know what he’ll do.

I’m intrigued. The way he’s holding on to me isn’t aggressive, and he’s moving slowly, like he doesn’t want to scare me.

I watch cautiously as he gets closer, and then he presses his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply.

Wrath

I can't ignore the way my body reacts to her.

Wynter. I shudder as her sweet scent fills my nostrils.

I bring her hand closer to my face, inspecting her thin fingers and her perfectly rounded clean nails.

I can feel her pulse fluttering fast beneath my thumb, and I wonder if she's as intoxicated with me.

Her eyes find mine, and I stare hard into the green embers burning brightly.

She takes my breath away. I try to focus, to steady myself, but her proximity, her presence, the warmth radiating from her skin—all of it is overwhelming.

Her eyes search mine like she has a thousand questions, and then her tongue darts out, wetting her lower lip before she asks, "Are you okay?"

Her voice feels like warmth wrapping around me, and I open my mouth to speak.

Yes. I just have to say that one word. Instead, I clam up.

"I've brought your breakfast," she adds, standing and holding out her hand for me to take.

I frown as she reaches down to grab mine, tugging me.

I don't move an inch, and she laughs. The sound bounces around the room, and my heart skips another beat.

"As if I can lift you," she says, rolling her eyes.

"At least help me to help you," she adds with amusement, and I realise she's helping me off the floor.

This time, when she pulls, I push up until I'm back on my feet. Now, I'm towering over her, staring down as she cranes her neck to look up. "You need to eat," she says, pointing to the table where my tray is waiting.

I go to it, taking my seat and holding up my wrist for her to chain.

She frowns, and I point to the cuff hanging on the wall.

"Oh," she whispers. "You want me to chain you?" She takes the metal cuff and carefully wraps it around my wrist, taking her time to examine the red marks already on my skin before she clicks it shut.

I move my legs apart, making it easier for her to chain them too, which she crouches to do.

A second later, the guard comes in looking panicked.

I stuff a handful of chicken into my mouth before he can say what he's about to.

"I'm sorry, Wynter, I . . ." He stops, staring at her as she stands straighter.

"I remembered I hadn't chained him," he murmurs, his frown cutting deep into his forehead.

He looks over to the spot where they left me in the early hours and then back to where my chains hold me as I continue to stuff my face with food.

It's been days since I was last fed. "How did . . . wait, how did you chain him?"

She smiles. "I just put the cuffs around his wrist and ankles."

"And he let you?"

She nods, smiling wider. "Why?"

"Because he never does anything quietly."

She turns her smile to me. "Maybe you just don't ask nicely enough." And she taps my hand before heading out the room. The guard gives me one last confused glare before following her.

CHAPTER SIX

WYNTER

“Y ou’re the talk of the caves,” Martha says with a smirk as I peel potatoes. “They’re saying you must be some kind of warrior queen.” She laughs.

“I didn’t do anything,” I mutter. All I’ve had is hassle from the guards since the incident with Wrath two days ago.

Martha leaves, and Jaycee leans closer. “It’s kind of amazing,” she whispers.

“I’m not sure what I did that fascinates everyone.”

“The warriors are violent beasts. They serve the Lord, but they’re not tamed.”

I laugh. “Who told you that?”

“My father, may God rest his soul.”

I offer a sympathetic smile. “They’re just strong men kept in caves.” I’m tempted to tell her the truth—that they’re all stolen children from the outside world, trained to be fighters—but then I picture Jade and Abel, and I press my lips together in a tight line. My words get people killed.

“Martha said each warrior could produce up to thirty children before they’re moved on.”

“Moved on to where?” I ask.

She shrugs. “She didn’t say. But Wrath is the strongest of all, winning all his fights. After tonight, he’ll be ready for a full ceremony.”

“Tonight?” I ask. “What’s happening?”

She scoffs. “Do you ever listen to Martha when she tells us the schedule? He’s fighting his fiftieth fight. He’ll be the ultimate warrior should he win.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Do you get to watch the fights?”

She glances around nervously. “Alex sometimes takes us.”

“How?”

“He can sneak us out to a special viewing box. Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” I say with excitement. “Of course.” My father never allowed me at any of the fights, as the first born doesn’t need to check out the talents of a fighter to have children with.

I spend the entire day in the kitchen, from prepping breakfast to lunch and then dinner.

And by the time I’m excused to go to my room, I’m exhausted.

It’s not until Jaycee knocks on my door that I remember the fight.

Anna is with her, and both look excited as I put my shoes back on and follow them to the guards’ quarters.

Alex leads us through the caves, and I wonder how he remembers all these passages and where they lead.

We're taken into an alcove that overlooks the fighting ring.

"No one knows about this part," he tells me, clearing a branch that hides the viewing window.

"You must stay here, and you have to be quiet."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I have to be ringside with Jax. We're on duty."

I stare down below us at the crowd of men.

Most I recognise from being at dinner parties and such, but others I've never seen in my life.

I spot my father shaking hands with another man before exchanging cash.

No one in the village has access to money, never needing it as everything is provided for us.

Anything that requires cash is passed by the four families to deal with.

But the closer I look, the more cash I see exchanging hands. "Why do they have money?" I ask.

Jaycee shrugs. "We don't know about the politics of it all. We come for the fight."

The crowd begins to cheer as a large man is led in by chains.

I haven't seen him before, and I turn to Anna, who smiles.

"He's an up-and-coming warrior. There're loads training to become as good as Wrath and the others.

When they're as good, the forefathers will bid on them, hoping to have them fight for their namesake. "

"My father boasted we have ten good fighters," I tell them, "yet I've only ever seen Wrath. The other three are for the other families. So, where are the nine?"

"They're training, waiting to take on one of the four and win. Only then will he be seen as good enough to fight beside Wrath," she explains.

"If Wrath loses, your father could drop him back to the lower camp and replace him with one of the nine," adds Jaycee.

"But that's a risky move because Wrath is far too good," says Anna, and Jaycee nods in agreement. I'm impressed at how much they know about it all.

Wrath is led out and joins the other fighter in the ring. Both are glaring at one another, looking ready to kill. "They look so angry," I mutter.

"They're riled up before the fight," says Jaycee. "Loud music, noise on repeat . . . it messes with their minds."

"Why?"

She laughs. "So they fight well."

I watch the fight through the gaps between my fingers.

It's violent and bloody, and each time Wrath hits his opponent, blood splatters across the people surrounding the ring, causing delight amongst the spectators.

Mabel, one of the Garcia daughters, actually licks the blood from her lips and smiles.

When the warrior finally hits the deck, Wrath is cuffed and taken away.

"That's it?" I ask, watching as the men below swap more cash. "He just goes back to his room?"

"What did you think would happen?" asks Anna. "It was a great fight, wasn't it?" She looks excited, but I feel sick.

"I don't think I'm cut out for all that blood," I whisper.

"We have to wait here for Alex to come get us," says Jaycee.

The crowd below begins to thin out, and I watch my father as he moves amongst the remaining guests, smiling and being friendly. They probably have no idea how cruel he really is.

A woman is brought into the room by Lenny, gaining the attention of the remaining few spectators.

She's bound, her hands tied behind her back, and her dress is short, way shorter than the attire usually seen around the village.

I frown, glancing around and realising there are now only six men remaining, including the forefathers.

They each take a seat, and the woman is placed before them, making me feel uneasy. Lenny unties the rope holding her wrists, and she rubs them. “That will be all,” my father tells Lenny, who nods before leaving.

“What’s happening now?” I whisper. The other two look just as confused as me as we watch my father take out a mobile telephone.

He fiddles with it and then music sounds.

I gasp, clamping my hand over my mouth. We don’t often hear music in the village, only occasionally if the forefathers agree to it.

The woman begins to sway, entrancing all the men who watch intently. She begins to remove the dress, and I watch open-mouthed as she slips it from her body, leaving her naked. She sways towards my father, placing a hand on his shoulder and wiggling her breasts in his face. “Oh my god,” I whisper.

“I don’t think we should watch,” adds Jaycee, staring wide-eyed as the woman sits in my father’s lap. She rubs against him, taking his hands and placing them on her breasts. Adrian stands, moving in front of her while unzipping his trousers. I cover my eyes.

“We can’t watch,” I say, turning my back.

“We can’t tell anyone,” adds Jaycee. “Not even Alex.”

“We don’t want to be like the two who got hanged,” says Anna.

My father’s plan to terrify the villagers has clearly worked. “Let’s wait in the passage,” I suggest, slipping out the alcove and into the dark passage just as Alex arrives.

He grins. “Sorry I took so long. Wrath was unsettled.”

“How come?” I ask, following him back through the tunnels.

“Who knows,” he says with a shrug. “Doesn’t take much with that one. He soon settled when he saw his entertainment.” I shudder with revulsion. It seems all the men here are controlled by one thing only—sex.

When we arrive back, Martha is pacing. She looks up and relief passes over her expression. “Thank goodness,” she says. “I don’t even want to know where you’ve been,” she adds before we can think of an excuse. “Wynter, how confident are you that you can calm Wrath?”

I arch a brow. “Not very.”

“He’s hurt two guards, and the cattle prods have done nothing to calm him. I can’t get the guards out.”

“They’re still in there with him?” Alex asks, pulling out his keys in a hurry.

“The door is unlocked,” snaps Martha. “I’ve tried everything, but nothing is working.”

“We can’t send Wynter in there,” he barks angrily.

“You said yourself, she has something that instantly calms him,” she cries.

“I’ll try,” I say, and they both turn to me.

“No,” says Alex firmly. “It’s not a woman’s job to control the warriors.”

I square my shoulders, annoyed he doubts my abilities, even though I'm not confident myself.

"I'm in charge," says Martha, "and I will take the blame if anything goes wrong."

Alex shrugs helplessly, pulling the first door open.

I step closer, wincing at the sound of pure rage coming from Wrath's room as the second door is pulled open.

Lenny and Jax are cowering in the corner, their cattle prods carelessly strewn from their reach.

Wrath grabs his table and throws it in their direction, roaring like a wild animal, and I flinch as it crashes against the wall.

I take a deep breath and step into the room.

My heart beats out of my chest, possibly loud enough for him to hear because he pauses all of a sudden.

His back is to me, and I watch how his shoulders rise and fall with each heavy breath.

He slowly turns, and I immediately hold up a hand.

"I'm just here to check you're okay," I say gently.

"You sound so angry." I look around the room, noting the damage before looking at the two guards who watch me with surprised eyes.

"Look at this mess," I add, shaking my head. "What's wrong?"

“He won’t answer,” snaps Jax. “Fucking mute,” he spits angrily.

Wrath spins back in their direction, growling. “Relax,” I call out, stepping closer. “Hurting those idiots won’t help you.” Wrath turns back to me. “Let them leave.” He shakes his head. “I don’t think this is you, Wrath,” I say, offering a sympathetic smile. “I don’t think you like being angry.”

Alex watches from the doorway. “What made him kick off?” he asks his colleagues.

“We took the women away,” mutters Lenny.

“Why?” I ask.

“I don’t have to run shit by you, princess,” Lenny snaps, and Wrath immediately turns back, his shoulders squaring like he’s getting ready to attack.

I don’t hesitate, moving closer and placing my hand on his arm.

He glances to where I touch him, that same lost look on his face.

I move in front of him and smile as his eyes find mine.

“They’re not worth it,” I whisper. “Let them go. I can stay if you need to talk.” He’s reluctant, I can see it in his eyes, but eventually, he nods, and I sigh in relief. “Thank you.”

As the guards scramble to leave, Wrath keeps eye contact, and it’s so intense that the background noise fades away until I feel like it’s just the two of us.

His mouth opens, and I hold my breath, waiting for something, anything .

. . because I'm desperate to hear his voice.

But then Martha calls my name. I break eye contact and the moment is gone.

He clamps his mouth closed and stares at the floor.

"You need to get out here now," she says. I feel him withdrawing, and I hate it.

"Actually," I say, and Wrath looks up in surprise, "I'll help tidy this mess."

"Wynter," she mutters, disapproval lacing her words, "it's not how things are done."

"You asked me to help," I say, picking up a chair. "And he isn't going to hurt me."

She looks hesitant but eventually pushes the door closed. I smile at Wrath, who continues to watch me with curious eyes. "Are you going to help or just stare?" I tease.

We tidy up in silence, and once it's cleaner, I place my hands on my hips and try to think of another reason to stay longer.

I really hoped he'd speak. Martha said he's a selective mute, refusing to speak a year after he arrived here.

Before that, he spoke perfectly well. "I hate it here too," I whisper, glancing at the door to check no one is there.

"But it must be harder for you when you're forced to do things you don't want to do.

" He watches me with interest. "Like fight," I add.

When he doesn't speak, I ask, "Do you like fighting?" He nods once, and I can't hide the disappointment showing on my face.

"What did you expect?" comes Lenny's voice from behind me.

"He's trained to fight. It's his purpose.

He knows nothing else." Wrath's demeanour changes and he grabs me, taking me by surprise as he pulls me behind him.

Lenny laughs. "I don't want to hurt her," he says.

"Look, Mute, I get the appeal. She's hot.

Of course, you wanna fuck her. Bet her cunt is neat and tight.

"I shudder at his words, sickness settling in my stomach.

"But she ain't here for you." Wrath growls, and Lenny laughs harder.

"Luckily, we got the approval to bring out something stronger," he sneers, and I glance around Wrath to see Lenny pointing a yellow stun gun at Wrath.

"I'm okay, Lenny," I reassure him. "Wrath won't hurt me."

"You haven't seen the way he ravages the women we send in here," he replies.

I can't deny I hate the thought of the women coming in here, and I can't work out if that's because I feel for them or him.

I don't think he wants this life any more than I do.

“I’ll come out,” I offer, stepping around Wrath, who growls louder and pulls me against his hard body.

I inhale sharply as his arms wrap around me.

They’re not tight enough to hurt. In fact, if anything, I feel safer than I ever have my entire life.

But then I feel it . . . the bulge in his shorts is pressed to my backside, and I panic.

Wrath

Holding her so close is dangerous, but I’m not ready for her to leave. She’s the reason I smashed this place up. I needed her, not them. Not the pale, sad-looking women who come here out of duty.

And then she tugs free from my hold and spins to face me.

Her face is burning red, and her fists are balled at her sides.

I think she’s angry . Her eyes fall to my shorts, and she gasps.

And then something strikes my chest, and I fall to the floor, shaking uncontrollably.

It’s the same sort of feeling I get from the sticks they use, but it’s so much more intense, and the buzzing doesn’t stop until I’m drooling and breathless.

When it finally does stop, she’s already gone. I didn’t get a chance to speak.

I close my eyes, seeing my mother’s familiar smile. This time, she’s holding out her hand for me. I take it, happiness filling my heart as she leads me away from this

place.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WYNTER

“How old was he when he came here?” I ask Martha as we prepare breakfast the next day. I’d spent most of last night going over the fight and thinking about Wrath. There’s just something about him that calls to my soul, and I can’t get him out of my mind.

She pauses stirring the porridge and glares at me. “It’s almost like you’re trying to get into trouble.”

“I know young boys are brought here.”

“Warriors,” she corrects.

“They’re just boys when they first get here, and they’re trained into warriors.”

“Asking all these questions will only get you deeper into trouble, and honestly, I don’t know what will happen to you if it doesn’t work out for you in the caves.”

I picture my father and how angry he’d be if he could hear me now, or worse if he’d seen me calming Wrath. “Maybe he’ll kill me,” I say thoughtfully.

“And, for some reason, that doesn’t scare you.”

I smirk. “When you’ve been raised by a man like Anthony Sanchez, you don’t fear

much.”

She watches me for a silent few seconds before sighing. “That’s exactly why he didn’t hang you before. He knew that wouldn’t upset you nearly as much as hanging your two friends.”

Thinking about Abel and Jade hurts me way more than I’ll ever admit. They’re ghost-like faces haunt my dreams, making sure I don’t rest easy at night. “How long have you been here?” I ask, changing the subject.

She begins stirring again. “My husband wanted to join the village. We sold all our belongings to come here almost twenty years ago.”

“Wow, that’s dedication.”

Her smile fades, but before I can question her, she starts dishing up the porridge. “Please get Anna so the warriors can eat.”

I glance at the three bowls. “That’s not enough,” I tell her.

“Wrath is nil-by-mouth until further notice.”

“Says who?” I demand, and she smiles again.

“Believe it or not, you’re not in charge, Wynter.”

“You’re going to starve him for his behaviour last night?”

“Not me,” she admits. “I’m in charge of the girls in the cave, not the guards.”

“He has to eat. He won the fight, and he’ll need fuel after putting himself under so

much strain.”

She nods in agreement. “But it’s their decision.”

I chew on my lower lip before giving a stiff nod. But as I leave the kitchen, I take two bread buns from the basket and stuff them in my apron.

Anna is scrubbing the bathroom floor in the guards’ quarters. “Would you like me to do the food delivery?” I ask.

She looks surprised by my offer. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I smile all the way back to the kitchen.

“I’m doing the food run,” I tell Martha, who can’t hide her smirk as she points to the trolley loaded with the three plates.

I think she’s getting used to my behaviour.

“They each have fruit today,” she adds, placing a basket on the top shelf.

“And if you send Lenny my way, I have bacon. That should keep him busy for ten minutes.” She gives a knowing wink, and I head off.

Lenny eyes me with mistrust. “Where’s Anna?”

“She’s busy cleaning the bathrooms. I offered to help out. Also, Martha has bacon in the kitchen.”

He grins and unlocks Zeus’s door. “Great. Let’s make this quick.”

I take in his breakfast, seeing him chained at the table. “Good morning, Zeus. I hope you slept well. Martha sent fruit today,” I say brightly. He grunts, and I laugh. “It’s polite to say good morning back.”

“When it’s a good morning, I’ll say it back,” he tells me.

I greet Maximus the same way, smiling more when he grunts in response. “I think he’s growing to like me,” I tell Lenny. “Look, there’s only one more. You go and get the bacon, and I’ll sort Abraham.”

He laughs. “Nice try. I’m not a pushover like Alex.”

I shrug. “Suit yourself, but Jax was already in the kitchen when I left, so don’t blame me if he eats it all.”

His eyes narrow, and he sighs heavily, dropping his keys into my hand. “Lock it properly,” he orders, heading off.

I give Abraham his breakfast in the same way as the others, smiling wide. He also grunts, and as I’m leaving, I ask, “Can I call you Abe?”

“No,” he mutters.

I grin. “Thanks, Abe.”

“I said no,” he calls as I close the door, but I think I hear a hint of a smile in his tone.

I rush over to Wrath’s room, unlocking it.

My step falters at the sight greeting me.

He's completely naked again, with his hands chained above his head and his ankles shackled together.

The sound of a woman's cries fills the room, causing me to wince in embarrassment.

I reach for the television switch, flicking it off and sighing in relief when the noise stops.

Wrath's head twists my way, and his eyes widen.

He glances nervously at his stomach, and my eyes fall to the wetness coating his skin.

His penis is glistening with the same wetness, and I feel my cheeks burn with more embarrassment.

Jade once told me about the stuff that comes out when a man has sex to get a woman pregnant.

I step closer. "Should I . . . erm, wipe that?" When I drag my eyes to his face, he looks mortified. I offer a sympathetic smile. "It's not your fault, Wrath."

I swoop down and grab a discarded pair of shorts from the floor.

I take a breath and carefully place them over the wet patch.

The second I brush it across his skin, his breathing hitches, but I try not to look at him.

As I'm wiping his abs, the back of my hand knocks his penis, and I gasp, dropping the material and stepping back.

His penis is hard, straining as it rests against his stomach.

“I’m so sorry,” I rush to say. “I didn’t mean to touch . . . it.”

Wrath groans, and it sounds painful as he strains against the cuffs. He doesn’t want me to see him like this. It’s evident by the way he turns his head away from me.

“I got you some food,” I say, changing the subject. “Apparently, you’re nil-by-mouth, but that’s ridiculous seeing as you fought last night. You must be hungry.”

He slowly turns back to look at me, and there’s a hint of a smile.

I step closer, taking a bread roll from my pocket.

His chains are too short for him to feed himself, so I place it to his lips and wait for him to take a bite.

He does so quickly, biting half the roll away, and I smile.

“I knew you were hungry.” I retrieve the second roll and hold it up, which earns me a smile from him.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I whisper, winking.

Once he’s eaten the rolls, I take a banana from the trolley and peel it. “This should keep you going,” I add as he takes a bite and closes his eyes in delight. “You like sweet stuff?” I guess. “Me too. My father didn’t allow us to have it much, but when we did, it was the best thing ever.”

“Thank you,” he whispers. It’s so low, I thought I’d imagined it, but when I look into his bright eyes, he grins, confirming I heard him correctly.

I give a small laugh, using my thumb to wipe some of the fruit from his lower lip. I pop it in his mouth, and he sucks it in, taking me by surprise. I know I'm blushing as he releases it, but I can't rip my eyes away from his as my stomach ties itself in knots.

"I hate to interrupt, but I have work to do." I glance at the naked woman in the doorway, gasping in fright and immediately stepping away from Wrath.

Wrath begins to shake his head and pull hard on his chains. "Don't blame me, Wrath," she snaps. "You brought it on yourself."

I begin to back out, hating his distressed body language as she straddles him with ease.

She slides down until her face is level with his erection then she wraps her hands around it.

Wrath roars in anger, trying to fight her off as she licks the tip of his penis.

His eyes find mine again, and he cries out.

"Wynter," he calls, and a choked sob leaves me.

The woman looks up in surprise. "Did he just speak?"

I nod, smiling again. "It's my name," I add.

"What the fuck is going on?" comes Lenny's voice, and I jump in fright, spinning to find him in the doorway.

"Relax, Len, she let me in cos you weren't around," says the woman, and I almost sag in relief at her lie.

Lenny throws his arm around me. “Thanks, gorgeous,” he says, leading me from the room. “Don’t let him come,” he tells the woman. “Drag it out at least an hour.”

I risk a look back at where Wrath has his eyes squeezed tight as the woman sucks him.

Lenny slams the door and locks it. “Is she safe in there?” I ask.

“He can’t do anything chained up.”

“Why is she doing that?” I ask.

He grins, this time looking at my chest area. “Turn you on, did it?” I shake my head, words failing to escape as my mouth opens and closes in embarrassment. “It’s punishment.”

“For what?”

“You saw how he was last night.” He dumps the keys on the desk and sits down. “Thing is, it doesn’t matter what we do, he still kicks off. He’s dangerous.”

“He seems okay to me,” I mutter, shrugging. “Maybe it’s how you approach.”

He smirks. “I’ve been a guard for six years, pretty princess, and he’s the only warrior who doesn’t learn a lesson.”

“What will happen if he doesn’t learn?”

“We’ve got a meeting with your father today. It’s his choice, but we’re going to suggest he replaces him with a better trained warrior.”

“Will he listen? I thought Wrath was the best he’s got?”

“Don’t you worry about it,” he reassures me.

“If I have my way, he’ll be gone by this evening.

” My heart aches at the thought. If Wrath goes, I won’t get to see him again, and I feel like we were just beginning to get to know one another.

Lenny rests his arms on the desk. “I don’t know what the rules are now you’re just .

. . one of us, but do you want to go on a date sometime? ”

I stare at him, waiting for him to laugh or tell me he’s kidding. When he doesn’t, I force a smile. “I’m pretty sure it’s against the rules.”

“You’re not part of the Sanchez family anymore. If you were, you wouldn’t be here in the caves.”

“It’s a misunderstanding,” I lie, hoping to bide me some time. “Once my father realises how much he needs me, I’ll go back home.”

Lenny laughs. “You think you’re too good for me, princess?” He stands and rounds the desk.

“No, of course not,” I mutter, eyeing his hand as he brings it to my hair and wraps a loose curl around his finger.

“So, why are you making excuses?”

“It’s just, you’re a lot older than me, and I . . . well, I don’t know what happens

outside my family. I don't know the rules."

He grins. "I'll show you things that happen in the real world, princess. Things your father would hang us all for." This gets my interest, and I allow him to run a finger over my collarbone.

"Okay," I squeak out. "I'll go on a date with you."

Wrath

More blue pills are shoved into my mouth, and I'm forced to swallow.

My cock is painfully hard, and my balls feel heavy.

Leonie sits over my stomach, her mouth inches from mine.

"What I'd give to finish you off," she whispers.

"Just hearing your voice got me all hot," she adds, biting on my lower lip.

Out of all the women, Leonie is the only one who's horny the entire time.

She loves the power of having me chained and bringing me to the edge over and over.

I close my eyes and think of the only woman who's ever piqued my interest. Wynter.

Her green eyes and flowing, long hair . .

. the few flecks she has over her nose that match her hair colour .

. . and how delicate her hand feels when it touches me.

I groan, remembering how she'd accidentally brushed my cock.

Leonie takes my moan as encouragement, and she rubs herself along my cock, trapping it between us.

I hate the sensation of being touched. Or at least I did, until Wynter came along. Her touch calms my mind, it relaxes me. But as Leonie grinds over me, I shudder in repulsion. She smells damp, like the caves. Wynter smells fresh and sweet. I can't get her out of my mind .

The door opens, and I sag in relief. Leonie's flushed complexion makes me sick, and as she slides off me, I thank the Lord for saving me.

The guard leers from the doorway, and I notice the yellow thing in his side pocket, the thing that hurt me.

"Someone looks happy," she purrs.

"I just got myself a date," he tells her.

"Who's stupid enough to date you?" asks Leonie, laughing.

He smacks her backside as she passes him, and she yelps, laughing louder. "Wynter," I hear him say as he slams my door closed. Wynter.

I growl, angrily tugging until the metal cuffs cut into my skin and make me bleed. Not my Wynter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WYNTER

“A re you crazy?” Jaycee whisper-hisses. “He’s at least ten years older.”

“And a complete bastard,” adds Anna, and I laugh at how brave she’s getting with cursing.

“It gets me out the caves for a while,” I say with a shrug.

“Well, you can’t go dressed like that,” Jaycee tells me.

I glance down at my uniform. “It’s all I’ve got.”

“I’ll ask Martha to get some clothes from your father,” Anna suggests, “but for now, you can borrow one of my summer dresses.”

I smile gratefully, and we follow her to her room. She pulls out a choice of three cotton dresses, and I point to a lemon one. “I have a cardigan to match,” she adds, pulling out a short, knitted cardigan.

“Thank you,” I say, relieved to be able to get out of this uniform for a change.

By the time I’m dressed, Lenny is waiting for me outside the women’s chambers. He looks me up and down in a way that makes me uncomfortable, and I fasten the buttons on the cardigan. He holds out a hand, and I reluctantly take it.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

I’ve eaten the soup Martha prepared, along with the small bread roll we’re allowed, but I’m still hungry, so I nod.

“Great. You’re going to love this.” He leads me through tunnels until we step out onto the hill that overlooks the village.

I glance up at the four houses, wondering what Summer is doing right now and if she’s happier now I’m gone.

My heart sinks a little. I miss her so much.

We go into the village and round the back of the shops. There’s a wooden trapdoor disguised under some thick ivy. Lenny smiles proudly as he pulls it back. “Ladies first.”

I peer down into the darkness. “Where are we going?”

“Trust me, Wynter.”

I take hold of the rusty ladder and slowly climb down. Lenny joins me then lights a lamp from the wall and leads me through more caves. After at least ten minutes, I begin to hear music and laughter. “What is this place?” I ask.

“This is where we come to relax, Wynter.” He stops, turning to face me. “But no one can find out about it. I’m risking everything to show you this.” He turns, illuminating a set of stone steps.

At the top, he bangs on a wooden door loudly. When it opens, light streams through, and I shade my eyes as we step into a room full of people. People I’ve never seen. My

heart hammers in my chest as I take in the scene before me. “Thanks, Pete,” Larry says to the man who opened the door.

“They’re all over in the corner,” Pete tells him before walking off.

Larry grabs my hand and pulls me through the crowded room, stopping at a table where Jax sits, along with some guards I don’t know by name. There are a couple women there too, ones I recognise from their visits to the warriors.

As we approach, they all stop and stare. Lenny seems oblivious as he takes a seat, pulling out the one beside him for me. “Wynter, this is H, Carl, Leonie, Anise, and Jez,” he points to each, “and, of course, you know Jax.” I give a small, nervous wave, lowering into the offered seat.

H leans closer to Lenny. “What the fuck are you doing?” he hisses.

“What?” Lenny asks innocently.

“We should go to the bathroom,” Leonie announces, grabbing my hand. “Let the guys catch up,” she adds, also grabbing Anise. I’m so surprised, I let her lead me back through the crowd and into the bathroom.

“I didn’t know we were coming here,” I say the second she turns to me, because I’m sensing the hostility.

“It’s not your fault,” says Anise, giving my arm a gentle squeeze.

“Where are we exactly?” I ask.

Leonie rolls her eyes. “Lenny is such a dumb fuck.”

“We’re in the Tavern,” adds Anise. “It’s a bar.”

I frown, and when she realises I have no idea what she’s talking about, she nudges Leonie, who’s still ranting about Lenny. “This is the outside world,” she explains, using air quotes on outside. “And when your family finds out, we’ll all end up dead.”

“How will they find out?” I ask, reeling from her words. If this is how close the outside world is, maybe there’s hope of us getting out after all.

“You mean you’re not going to run back and tell your father?” asks Anise, looking hopeful.

“I’d never tell him anything,” I say.

“How can we trust you?” asks Leonie.

I shrug, looking around the bathroom. I tap a machine on the wall. “What’s this for?”

They exchange a smirk, and Leonie produces a coin and places it in the machine.

She twists the handle and then hands the blue box that comes out to me.

“Condoms,” she says, and my mouth falls open in surprise.

I’d heard about things like this to help stop pregnancies from some of the girls Jade befriended.

“How did you find out about this place?” I ask, opening the box and taking out the foil packet.

“I wasn’t always in Paragon Village,” says Leonie, watching as I rip the packet and

take out the squishy thing inside. I hold it up, frowning.

“Paragon?” I ask.

She laughs, taking the condom. “Paragon is what they call the village. I discovered it from . . .” she trails off, “well, that’s not important.

” She takes my middle finger and places the condom at the tip.

“This covers the man’s penis,” she explains.

“You roll it down like this.” She proceeds to unroll it down to the base of my finger.

I hold it up, staring at it, then I give it a shake and it flies off. Both girls burst into fits of laughter. “That doesn’t seem like it will do much.”

“It fits a penis better. It should be tight when the man’s got an erection,” says Anise, picking it up from the floor and dropping it in the bin. “Let’s go back out there.”

When we rejoin the men, they’re all sitting in silence. Larry points to a drink. “I got you a lemonade.”

I notice the way Anise frowns, but when she goes to speak, he glares at her, and she clamps her mouth closed again, taking a sip of her own.

I follow her, taking a sip and closing my eyes at the sweetness.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I declare. We’re only ever given water or milk at home, and now I’m in the caves, it’s always water.

I drink it all in one go and place the glass on the table.

“Did you meet my father?” I ask Lenny, and all eyes fall to me again.

“Can you all relax,” says Leonie. “She isn’t going to grass us up.”

“You better pray she doesn’t,” mutters H.

“I won’t,” I add, looking him in the eye. “My father hates me, and I doubt I’ll ever get near him again.” This seems to settle him, and he gives me a nod before drinking his own drink.

Lenny stands, taking my hand. “We’re gonna have some food. We’ll join you after,” he tells the group before leading me off to a different table.

I’m feeling happy, the happiest I’ve ever felt in my entire life, and when another drink is placed before me, I drink half before Lenny stops me. “Slow down.”

A woman places a tray between us, and my eyes widen. “I took the liberty of ordering for you.” He points to the various meats and cheeses, but it’s the shiny green round things that I go for, popping one in my mouth and groaning in delight. “Olives,” he tells me, laughing.

“Did you always live in Paragon?” I ask.

“Who told you the name?”

“Isn’t that what the village is called?”

“Only outsiders who join know that name. Don’t say it around anyone important, Wynter. They’ll know you’ve been talking to people who could corrupt your mind.”

“Aren’t we allowed to mix?” I ask on a laugh.

“Outsiders are given rules on arrival, one of which is to never speak about the outside world. And also to never speak of Paragon. Insiders only know your life as the village.”

“So, you came to the village too?” He nods. “All of them did?” I ask, nodding to the group across the room.

“Yes, and the other thing we have in common is we all missed going to the local bar for a drink.”

“Couldn’t you open a bar in the village?”

He laughs. “No, Wynter. Alcohol is forbidden.”

I eat some meats, and he laughs at my over-the-top reaction again. “Salami,” he says. “It comes from Italy mainly.”

“Italy?”

“It’s far away. You have to travel on aeroplanes.”

I grin. “My mother told us about aeroplanes. I’ve always wanted to go on one. We would watch them fly over the village and wonder where they were going.”

“Did your mother talk a lot about the outside world?”

I nod. “Sometimes. Her mother taught her, and she thought it was important we knew some things. And, of course, with planes flying over, she couldn’t avoid some questions.

But she mainly told me how bad it was out there, and that bad people lived there.

” I look around. “But it doesn’t look as scary as she said. Why did you come to the village?”

“My parents decided they wanted that life. I was sixteen, and they thought I was getting in with a bad crowd.” He laughs, but it sounds empty. “I wasn’t. I was just a teenage boy. But I don’t mind it in the village.”

“Don’t you mind all the rules?”

He shakes his head. “No. They protect the people.”

I finish my drink and notice I’m feeling dizzy. “Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to just be normal and live on the outside.”

“Trust me, Wynter, it’s not that great. Your mother was right about one thing—bad people do live here. The order in the village is what the rest of the world needs.”

“But they make warriors fight,” I argue.

“They’re beasts,” he tells me. “What do you think their life would be like out here?”

I shrug. “They wouldn’t have to fight or . . . take part in ceremonies.”

He laughs, and I feel myself blush. “You’re so innocent,” he says. “They love all that.”

“Really?”

“One thing you should know about those beasts, they love sex. It’s what they crave, and if they were out in the normal world, they’d be a danger to innocent women. They’d prey on them. In the village, it’s controlled well. Their urges are met in

productive ways.”

“Did my father say that?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:55 am

“Your father is a good man, Wynter. He has a lot of responsibility and does a good job at looking after our village. Along with the other three forefathers, they’re saints in my eyes.”

I choose my next words carefully. “Is it true they take young boys from the outside and bring them to the village to train as warriors?”

He stares at me for a few silent seconds before nodding. “But only the boys who need us,” he adds quickly. “Boys who have no parents. They’re usually unruly and misbehaving. Nobody can handle them.”

“So, how do we help?”

“We take them in and give them a home, a purpose.”

“I guess that’s a good thing.” But it doesn’t feel right, not really.

Once we’ve eaten, we rejoin the others, and I’m handed a fourth drink. This time, I take my time, and once I’ve drained my glass, I feel even more dizzy. I push to stand and almost fall, but Leonie jumps up to steady me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m a little . . . I feel really dizzy,” I mutter, realising my voice doesn’t sound right and my eyes are heavy.

“I’ll take her back,” Lenny offers, pulling me against him and wrapping an arm around me.

“We should all go,” Leonie suggests.

“He’s got this,” says Jax, grabbing her arm and tugging her to sit down. She looks worried, so I offer her a smile, giving a little wave before I’m led away.

The deeper into the cave we get, the worse I feel. My head spins, and there’s a ringing sound in my ears. Lenny keeps us moving, practically dragging me along until we get into a small clearing. “Let’s rest,” he says, dumping me on a large stone in the centre. I lie back and close my eyes.

“I had a good time tonight,” I tell him, even though my words sound funny.

I feel him crawling over me and open my eyes.

My smile soon fades when I see him staring down at me with a suggestive glint in his eye.

He looks fuzzy, like there’re two of him.

“Now, it’s time for my payment,” he says with a grin.

Before I can protest, he presses his lips to mine.

They’re too wet, and I turn my head to avoid them. “Come on, Wynter, don’t tease me.”

“I’m not,” I mutter, trying to shake him off as he grabs my face and forces me to look at him. His fingers dig into me, hurting, but he doesn’t seem to care as he kisses me again.

I lie still, praying he’ll take the hint, and when he gets up, I’m relieved. I’ll talk to

him tomorrow when I feel better, set him straight.

But then I feel his hands travelling up my thighs and under my dress. “Hey,” I mutter, batting them away. It doesn’t deter him, and he settles himself between my legs. “What are you doing?” I mumble, trying to shove him off but missing completely.

“I got you dinner,” he snaps, slapping my hands away. “It’s the least you owe me.”

I panic, knowing there’s no way I can stop him. He’s so much stronger than me. “No,” I whisper, clamping my legs as closed as I can with him between them.

“You’re a fucking tease,” he snaps, and I shiver at the harsh tone in his voice. He’s angry. “All you have to do is lie there. I’m gonna do all the hard work.” I feel his hands pulling at my underwear.

“I don’t want to,” I snap, and I know it’s loud enough for him to hear, but he continues to try and remove my underwear.

He takes my hand and shoves it against his groin. “Feel how hard I am,” he growls. It’s warm, and I yelp in surprise. “Just touch me,” he snaps, forcing me to wrap my hand around him.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I’m relieved to hear Leonie, and Lenny scrambles around to fasten his trousers. “Jeez, Lee, a little privacy.”

“You’re in the passage to the village. Everyone is heading back, so I suggest you go on ahead,” she snaps.

“You think the others wouldn’t join in?” he sneers. “Fuck, this princess needs a few

cocks in her to show her she's the same as us."

"Well, it isn't happening tonight, not on my watch," she tells him, and I feel her hand in mine. "Get up, Wynter. Let's go."

"Maybe you both need a lesson in who's in charge around here," he growls.

"I'll tell Martha everything," she warns. "I'll tell her about the bar and the mobile phone you have. She'll go to the forefathers."

"You'll hang beside me if that happens," he says with a laugh.

"I'd rather hang than allow you to touch either of us," she spits. "Now, stay the hell away from us."

She drags me off, and I stumble along behind her as we rush through the darkness. "How do you know where you're going?" I ask.

"I've learnt these caves. Hurry, before he tells the others and they all come."

"Are you really going to tell on them?"

"No. Don't ever date any of the guards, Wynter," she says firmly. "Don't be alone with them when Martha isn't nearby to hear your screams."

"I don't understand," I whisper, almost in tears. I'm tired and dizzy, and everything is happening so fast, yet it all feels blurry.

"Because you're drunk," she snaps. "We'll talk tomorrow." Drunk?

We find the steps and climb them. Then, we run all the way back to the cave entrance

and back to the sleeping quarters. “Lock your door,” she tells me, kissing me on the forehead as I go into my room. “We’ll speak tomorrow.”

Wrath

“There’s another ceremony tonight. They reckon you’re going to be chosen,” says Leonie as she wraps her hands around my erection.

She’s distracted today and not as annoyingly chatty.

Lenny bangs on the window, and she shrinks back slightly.

Something’s happened between the two, I can sense her nervousness when he’s around.

“Are you sucking or talking?” he barks.

“Prick,” she mutters under her breath before taking me in her mouth. Lenny watches like he often does. “He’s just pissed because I ruined his night,” she whispers, coming up for air.

I close my eyes, concentrating on holding back.

I can’t come with him watching or it’ll be more beatings.

“Like any woman would willingly sleep with that monster.” She sucks me in again, and when I open my eyes, Lenny is gone.

She sits up. “I reckon he came here because his parents knew he was a monster and they thought this place would save him.” She runs her hand up and down my shaft, and when I jerk, she pauses.

“Poor Wynter is too innocent,” she adds, and I grab her wrist at the mention of her. Leonie gasps as I haul her closer.

“Wynter?” I repeat, shocking myself, but I have to know what she means.

“She went on a date with Lenny, and he almost hurt her,” she whispers.

“He made threats to hurt us both.” My heart hammers hard in my chest, and Leonie smiles.

“You like her,” she states. I release her, and she stumbles back, rubbing her wrist. “There’s no way to stop him, Wrath. I think I’ve just made things worse.”

The door opens, and Lenny appears. “Martha wants you in the kitchen,” he tells Leonie, and she grabs her shirt, pulling it on as she leaves.

His eyes linger on me before he laughs and leaves. I’ll wipe that smile off his smug face.

CHAPTER NINE

WYNTER

I sit at the table wondering why Leonie and I have been summoned by Martha.

Inside, I'm panicking. If she asks me about last night, I might crumble because I've been tearful all day wondering what Lenny planned to do to me.

I have vague memories of him lying over me, and I know I told him to stop. If it hadn't been for Leonie . . .

Martha's kept me in the kitchen all day, which was a relief because it meant Lenny couldn't corner me.

"I know," she begins, and I exchange a wary look with Leonie.

"It's okay, Wynter. I told her," she explains. "Martha is here to look after us."

"You won't tell my father, will you?" I ask, and Martha smiles kindly, shaking her head. She turns to Leonie. "I'll take it from here. Thank you for letting me know."

Leonie nods, offering me a small smile before leaving. Jaycee turns from the sink where she's washing vegetables and begins to dry her hands.

"We know we can trust you," says Martha, "and it's very important you keep this amongst us."

“We’re planning an escape,” Jaycee blurts out, sitting beside me, and Martha gives her an eyeroll.

“An escape?” I repeat, confusion clouding my brain. “Can’t you just leave?”

“We’re as trapped here as you,” Martha explains. “When people arrive here, they surrender everything.”

“Money, houses, debt . . . everything,” says Jaycee. “They sell it like some dream,” she continues. “Come to Paragon Village, where all your troubles will be resolved.”

“And once you’re here, you realise it’s nothing more than a cult set up by men to serve men.

” Relief floods me. They see it. They see what I’ve been trying to tell people for too long.

“They say this isn’t a prison, that we’re free to leave, but after witnessing what happened to Jade and Abel, we realise that’s not the case. ”

“Has anyone ever asked to leave?”

Martha shrugs. “Most of the men in the village want to stay. Why wouldn’t they? And I think some of the wives are too scared to stand up and argue for freedom. Once here, men change, or maybe they’ve always been the way they are and this place gives them the power to control their families.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I ask.

“My husband promised this life was better. Turns out it was just a way to keep me to himself and control my every move.”

“But he’s been gone a while,” I point out. “Why haven’t you asked to leave?”

“And go where?” she asks. “I have nothing and no one. Besides, I’ve been too scared to raise my views in case it upsets the four pretentious pricks,” she adds, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes me.

“How did you end up here?” I ask Jaycee.

“I was trouble back home,” she admits. “I was under the care of the government after my parents died. Their places for kids aren’t very nice,” she adds. “And then I noticed younger boys were being sent here, so I asked if I could come too.”

I look at Martha. “Is that why you said the boys who come here get a better life, because the government don’t take care of them?”

She places a hand over mine. “What they’re doing is wrong, Wynter, but I couldn’t admit that in case you weren’t trustworthy.”

“Why do you suddenly trust me?” I ask warily.

“I thought I could when you were asking so many questions,” she admits, “but when Leonie told me what happened, I knew I could share this with you and you wouldn’t be able to tell a soul.”

I frown. “Because you have a secret on me?”

“Exactly.”

I’m not sure how I feel about her veiled threat, but I give a slight nod. “Okay. Let’s just leave. We’ll go to the gate and tell them to open them. And when we get into the outside world, we’ll tell someone what they’re doing here.”

“Tell who?” asks Jaycee. “No one cares. That’s why they’ve not noticed when kids go missing from the system.”

My brow furrows. I’d never felt able to leave because I was too scared of what awaits me. But if there are more of us, maybe it wouldn’t be so frightening. “What’s the plan?” I ask.

“We don’t have one,” Martha admits. “There’s only the four of us.” I look confused, and she adds, “Anna wants to leave too.”

“We could just leave through the caves, get out from that bar?”

“Impossible,” says Jaycee. “For one, I have no idea how to get there. Do you?” I shake my head.

“The bent guards have maps. They also know what times other guards patrol. And even if we made it, there’s nothing to say there won’t be guards waiting in that bar.

They won’t risk us getting out in case the forefathers discover what they’ve been up to. ”

“Plus, that bar is in the middle of nowhere. It’s miles to the nearest village. We’d need to avoid roads in case the forefathers are driving to or from the village. It’s too risky.”

“We should just tell them we’re leaving,” I say, pushing to stand. Anger courses through me. “They can’t make us stay. We just need to walk out the gates and leave.”

“The gates they keep locked?” asks Martha. “This place is guarded from the outside in. If we were allowed to leave, they wouldn’t keep it guarded. Besides, once we alert them to our plan, they might just kill us all.”

“Seeing what they did to Abel and Jade changes everything,” adds Jaycee. “They’re getting more controlling and more powerful. The people in the village are being brainwashed into thinking the forefathers are keeping them safe.”

“We need the warriors,” I say, my mind racing with ideas. “They can’t get to us if we have them beside us.”

“Are you crazy?” asks Martha, laughing. “The second we set the warriors free, they’ll kill us or rape us. It’s all they know.”

I shake my head. “No. Wrath wouldn’t, and he’s the strongest. I can get him on our side.”

“You’re delusional,” Martha snaps. “Those men aren’t like other men. They’re animals, trained for two things.”

“And we need them for only one,” I say firmly. “How do I get regular access to Wrath?”

“Why? What are you going to do, just let him out?” asks Jaycee nervously.

I shake my head. “I’m going to tell him our plan. Then I’ll need to think of a way out of here for us all.”

“You want to bring the warriors out into the real world?”

I nod. “I won’t leave Wrath behind.”

“But they’re not trained to live in normal society,” reasons Martha.

“I see it in his eyes,” I argue. “Wrath isn’t a cold-blooded killer, and he hates

everything they make him do. Give me time to figure it all out.”

Jaycee smiles. “I knew you’d help us.”

Martha doesn’t look convinced, but she gives a stiff nod. “I can get you access. You can take over from Anna and deliver food three times a day. She also tidies their rooms in the evenings.”

“What about Lenny?” asks Jaycee. “You can’t be alone with him.”

I sigh. “I’ll have to be brave and face him sometime.”

“You’ll get the keys to the room doors,” says Martha. “If he comes at you, place a key between your fingers and hit him in the face,” she says, demonstrating with her own set of keys. “Then scream for me.”

“We’re going to do this,” I say firmly, smiling.

“I have no idea how,” mutters Martha, “but I believe you.”

At lunchtime, Martha sets up the dinner trolley and hands me the keys. The second I step into the guards’ quarters, Lenny pushes to his feet. “Here she is,” he sneers, throwing his arm around my shoulder. Alex offers a sympathetic smile. “I thought you were avoiding me.”

“No,” I say, shrugging him off. He glares for a second. “I’m taking over for Anna,” I add.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he spits. “Wrath doesn’t need unsettling.”

“He seems calmer when she’s around,” says Alex. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Good thing I never asked for your thoughts,” snaps Lenny, sitting back down. “I’ll speak with Martha.”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” I say, forcing a smile. “It means you get to see me more.” Alex frowns, clearly confused, but Lenny thinks over my words and nods.

“Good point.”

I force a wider smile before going to the first room.

Zeus is ready at his table. He scowls when I smile, placing his tray before him. “Stop pretending you hate me,” I tease.

“I hate everyone,” he mutters.

“But not me,” I sing-song. “Plus, I got you a treat,” I add, placing a square of chocolate on his tray. “Don’t tell the guards,” I whisper.

He eyes it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“It’s the best-tasting thing ever,” I reply. “Try it.” He takes it carefully, sniffing it before licking the edge. Then he pops it in his mouth and groans in delight. “Now do you like me?” I ask, heading for the door.

“I’ll think about it.”

Maximus is sleeping, so I leave his tray on the table and go straight to Abraham. “Good afternoon, Abe,” I say, placing his tray down.

“Why are you always so happy?” he snaps in irritation.

“I’m not happy at all,” I tell him, “but neither are you. We’re in the same boat, so I thought I should be nice to you.”

“Not the same boat,” he mutters. “You’re free out there.”

“It may look like that, Abe, but trust me, I’m not.” I place the chocolate square down. “I also stole this for you,” I whisper. “It’s a sweet treat. Don’t tell the guards.”

He stuffs it in his mouth. “What is this?” he asks, his eyes wide with surprise.

I smile. “A square of happiness.”

Wrath is chained at the table with his back to me.

The second I’m close, he inhales then turns to look at me.

“Good afternoon,” I say, placing his tray down.

“I’ll be bringing your meals from now on,” I add.

“So, be on your best behaviour and we’ll get to see each other.

” His eyes narrow, scanning my face like he’s looking for something.

“I also got you this,” I say, holding out two squares of chocolate, there’s no point in Max’s going to waste.

He doesn’t take it, so I place it on his tray. He suddenly makes a grab for my hand, and I almost cry out in surprise. He stares at the faint finger bruises Lenny left on my skin. “Guard,” he mutters.

I glance back to make sure no one is watching from the doorway before gently placing a hand over his wrist. “I’m fine,” I whisper.

“He hurt you,” he says, and his deep, rumbling voice makes my heart swell.

“But I’m okay.”

“It’s not okay,” he says, taking my other wrist and examining the bruises there. His eyes trail up to meet mine. He raises a hand, but the chain is too short, and he growls, tugging it even though it’s clear it won’t budge.

I gently cup his face, and he leans into my touch.

“Be good so they have no reason to stop you eating,” I whisper.

“I’ll be back this evening.” I take a square of the chocolate from the tray and rest it against his lips.

“Open.” He does, and I slide it in, watching as his eyes light up.

And then I do something I’ve been dreaming about doing for days—I press my lips to his.

I linger there for a moment, enjoying being close, and when I pull back, his eyes are closed like he’s lost in the moment too.

I step back and release a long breath before turning and heading out.

Wrath

I stare after her. My lips are tingling, and the urge to drag her back to me is

overwhelming. I close my eyes and picture the bruises that bastard left on her perfect skin. He'll pay.

The door opens and in he comes, smirking like he has every day for months.

Out of all the guards, he's the worst. He gets a kick from causing pain, but up until now, I've taken whatever he's given.

"Looks like you're in demand," he sneers, placing a metal cuff over my wrist and releasing the short one from the wall.

He chains my hands together and leads me from the room like a lamb to slaughter.

I've performed in three ceremonies this week, and I've hated every last one.

The only thing getting me through is thinking about Wynter.

I picture her beneath me and it's over pretty quickly.

I'm forced to swallow some of the blue pills they make us take before ceremonies.

"You need to last longer," he warns me. "You're making it too quick.

" But that's how I want it to be, because it's clear each woman is terrified.

I cause them pain, make them bleed, and they cry quietly beneath me, waiting for me to spill into them so it can all be over.

As we make our way through the caves, he glances back. "Bet you're pleased Wynter will be bringing your food every day now. Just don't get any ideas because she belongs to me." My hands clench into tight fists. "I'm gonna fill her with my fucking

babies,” he adds. “Then she can’t leave me.”

The thought of Wynter carrying this idiot’s child fills me with rage. I have nothing here, only memories of my mother, and Wynter is the first light I’ve felt in so long, I refuse to let this monster dull it.

I slam my fist into the back of his head, making him stumble. He reaches for the yellow thing in his side pocket, but I pull on my chains hard and he falls back onto his arse. I grip the chain between my hands and wrap it around his neck, my heart pumping fast as adrenaline fills my body.

He tries desperately to loosen it, coughing violently as I choke the air from him. I tug harder, and he falls limp, his head lolling to one side and his hands easing their grip on the chain.

I wait a second, making sure he’s not breathing before unwrapping it. Reaching into his pocket, I take his keys and unlock the cuffs, sighing in relief. I don’t remember the last time I walked free.

I stare at Lenny’s lifeless body and smile. She belongs to me.

I make my way along the familiar tunnel that leads outside. Then I make my way up the hill and into the church, where everyone is waiting for the ceremony to begin. I walk along the fluffy carpet, my toes sinking into the softness, making my heart even happier.

The people turn to look at me, surprised I’m not wearing chains.

I hear men talking in hushed tones, but I continue to the raised area, where a shaking woman lies with tears in her eyes.

I climb over her, pushing into her as gently as I can so I don't cause her further pain.

She stiffens, squeezing her eyes closed.

I concentrate on her as I move back and forth, trying to last as long as they want me to.

And when I feel like enough time has passed, I close my eyes and think of Wynter—her dark hair wrapped in my fist, her swollen lips from our kisses, and the way she clings to me as I .

. . I stiffen, releasing into the woman and groaning in relief.

Then I climb off and head back the way I came.

CHAPTER TEN

WYNTER

We stand in a line, nervously waiting. We were summoned into the guards' quarters and told by Martha to line up ready for a visit from the forefathers.

I can feel Jaycee occasionally looking my way, questions in her eyes that I can't answer.

And when the footsteps of men can be heard, we all stand a little taller.

My father is the first to step into the room, followed by the other three forefathers.

The guards shift behind us nervously, and I notice Lenny isn't amongst them.

I begin an internal panic. What if they know about us sneaking out last night?

I prepare a lie, but then a dragging sound is heard from the tunnel they appeared from, followed by two guards I don't recognise pulling a lifeless body.

I gasp as Lenny is dumped in front of us then glance at Martha, who looks just as shocked.

"Why was this guard alone with Wrath?" my father asks.

Alex steps forward. "Sir, he insisted on taking Wrath himself."

“Why would he do that?” asks Anthony. “We all know how dangerous the warriors are.”

“If I may,” says Martha, “Lenny liked to think he knew best. He stated many times he was in charge, and he thought he could handle the warriors.”

My father sighs. “This proves otherwise.”

“Is Wrath in trouble?” I blurt out, internally wincing when all eyes turn to me. “It’s just, he’s the best warrior,” I add feebly.

“Luckily, Wrath carried out his duties and returned himself to a guard so he could be brought back to his room,” says Adrian. “Remarkable, really,” he adds with a furrowed brow.

“Well trained,” my father cuts in. “But let this be a lesson. No one should be alone with the warriors.”

He turns to me. “Come,” he says, leading the way from the quarters. I resist the urge to groan and follow him to his office, where he takes a seat. “There will be an announcement this evening. You will gather with the rest of the villagers, but you will not react.”

“What announcement?” I ask.

“If you cause trouble, you will hang.”

I scoff. “You wield your power and it will eventually cause a rebellion.”

He laughs. “Wise words for a slave.”

“Is that what I am?” I ask. “Tell me, how is your village better than the outside world?”

“You’ve learned nothing from being down there, have you?” he snaps. “I thought being amongst the lowlifes would show you how lucky you are, but all it’s done is make you more bitter.”

“I’m not bitter, Father, I’m honest. And that’s why you’ve shoved me down there.”

“I am no longer your father,” he says, standing and rounding the desk. “Remember that.”

“What does that mean?”

He wraps a piece of my hair around his finger.

“There must be a place in this world where you fit,” he murmurs.

“Maybe I was looking at this all wrong.” I shiver, not liking the way he looks at me.

“After this evening, I will be the most powerful of the forefathers,” he says, “and the new rules I create, will ensure you’re used in a way that benefits me.”

He dismisses me, and I rush back to the caves with sickness in the pit of my stomach. Whatever he meant back there made me feel uncomfortable, and I need a plan to get out of this place . . . and fast.

Alex looks up when I burst into the quarter. “Are you okay?” he asks, standing.

“I need to see Wrath.”

He shakes his head. "You heard what they said, no one can be alone."

"They don't know how calm I make him," I snap. "Please, I feel like it's my fault Lenny is dead." He groans, pulling out his keys before unlocking Wrath's door. "Thank you," I say, touching his arm as I head into the room.

Wrath looks over from his bed, relief on his face as I move closer.

"Did you hurt him because of me?" I ask gently. He shifts, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, but when I step back, he pauses, searching my face for a clue as to why I'm suddenly nervous. I don't have an answer for him, I guess I'm just as surprised.

He frowns. "He hurt you."

His words confirm my fears, and I groan out loud. "I didn't ask you to do that," I snap.

"You're sad for him?" he asks, his voice dangerously low and his eyes glinting with anger.

I take another wary step back, and his jaw clenches tighter. "He didn't hurt me. Leonie stopped him."

His eyes blaze with anger as his fists clench by his sides. "Out," he orders. I stay glued to the spot, enraging him more. He pulls on his chains, making a sudden lunge. "Out," he yells.

I scream in fright, stumbling back and landing on my arse. Pain shoots through my hand and tears slowly trail down my cheeks as I push to stand. I bring my hand up and see I've cut it across the palm. Wrath notices too and sits back down. "Come

here,” he orders.

“Well, which is it, Wrath, leave or stay?” He doesn’t respond, just holds out his hand to me. I step closer, enough for him to snatch my hand in his. He stares at the wound as my palm fills with blood. “It doesn’t hurt,” I whisper.

He inhales deeply, almost closing his eyes, and I notice the bulge in his shorts.

He tugs my hand closer to his face and presses his tongue at the base of the cut.

I watch in astonishment as he drags it along, humming in approval as if he’s savouring the taste of my blood.

My breathing hitches as a shiver escapes me.

He releases me. “Now, leave.”

“I don’t want to,” I whisper. He doesn’t respond as our eyes lock on to one another, a heated glare passing back and forth. There’s something between us, a static in the air dragging me closer, and I know he can feel it too.

I place my hands on his shoulders, and he parts his legs until I’m standing between them.

His hands cup my backside, and he tugs me closer, causing me to yelp in surprise as his erection prods my leg.

Our breaths are heavy, and as we stare into one another’s eyes, something stronger passes between us.

His hand goes into my hair, tangling it around his fist and bringing my face closer

until our lips are almost touching.

His eyes search mine one last time, looking for an objection that isn't there, and then he kisses me.

At first, our lips are just pressed together, and then I gasp and his tongue sweeps into my mouth.

Our lips move together in a slow dance. I shift then lower to his lap so my knees are either side of his thighs.

The way his cock presses against my private area sends a thrill through me, and I jerk, shuddering. I've never been touched there, and I've never felt anything like what I feel now. It's like I've lost all control of my body, reacting purely on instinct.

When I pull back, our heavy breaths mingle, and I offer a small smile, suddenly feeling shy. "I have a plan," I tell him. "Sort of. To get out of here."

He frowns. "Get out?"

"Yes, there's a better world out there, Wrath. A place where you won't have to fight, and I won't have to live in fear of my father."

"I don't understand."

"There's so much you don't know yet," I tell him.

I hear Alex's footsteps, so I quickly climb from Wrath's lap. "We have to go," he says from the doorway.

Wrath takes my hand, and I run my palm over his cheek. "I'll be back."

“Can I come to this other place?” he whispers.

My heart leaps. “Yes.”

Wrath

A new place. A place I won't have to fight. I smile at the thought. And I'll get to be with Wynter, which is all I've dreamed about these last few nights.

I lean back and close my eyes.

My mother fills my vision, smiling wide and crouching with her arms held open.

I feel my heart swell as I run towards her, crashing against her warm body and wrapping my tiny arms around her neck.

She kisses my cheeks over and over until I giggle, then she stands and takes my hand.

“Now, little Ares, I have some errands to run and then we can go for ice cream.” It's our favourite thing to do, especially when the weather is so hot like today.

I wait outside the butcher's while my mother chats with the man inside.

The door is open, and I can hear her laughter.

I pick up a stick and dig it into the dirt.

A shadow falls over me, and I look up, shading my eyes from the bright summer sun.

Bony fingers dig into my arm, and even though I try to pull free, it's impossible.

He's too strong. I open my mouth to call for help, but something is shoved in it—a cloth.

It tastes funny, and I try to push it out with my tongue as the man now has both my hands as he pulls me along, making sure I'm in front of him and my arms are pulled up high above my head.

I glance down at my new, blue plimsoles. The bright material is now dusty from where I've tried to stop walking. Mother will be sad when she sees them, they cost her so much.

There's a van by the side of the road. It's the one with pictures of animals on the side.

I saw it earlier when Mother was taking me to school.

The door slides open, and the man forces me into the back, climbing in after me and sliding it shut again.

I can hear her, my mother, calling my name. "Ares? Ares, where are you?"

The van pulls away, and I'm thrown against the side, hurting my arm. As I look up, I notice lots of other boys too, all with cloths hanging from their mouths and hands tied. The man reaches for my hands too, wrapping a thick rope around them and pulling it tight. I wince as it cuts into my wrists.

When the van finally stops, some of the boys are asleep.

And as the door opens again, I realise it's now dark.

There's a lady waiting as the man bangs on the side of the van to wake the others up.

We're pulled out and lined up in front of the lady.

She walks along the line with her hands behind her back.

It reminds me of my grandfather checking we're dressed smartly enough for church.

The cloths are removed from our mouths. "How old are you?" the woman asks me.

"Six."

She glares at the man, who shrugs. "You were told under-fives from now on." She moves along the line, and most boys tell her they're six and seven. Only one claims to be five.

"The forefathers will not be happy," she tells the man. "Go and explain. I'll deal with these."

"It's hard to find them alone so young," he mutters as he marches off up a steep hill.

"My name is Ms. Cathy. I will be taking care of you. Follow me."

We're led to a wooden trapdoor, which we all go through, and then she leads us through a lot of dark caves. My feet are damp and they hurt. Some of the other boys are crying, asking where they are. She doesn't answer but just keeps walking.

Eventually, there's a large cave with thin mattresses on the ground. We're told to pick one and have a rest.

The boy beside me is Ethan. "I don't know what's happening," he whispers through the dark. Now that Ms. Cathy has taken the lamp, it's pitch black and we can't see each other.

“I was taken from my mother,” I tell him.

“Me too. She was talking outside my school, and I was playing on the nearby field.”

“They’ll come for us,” I tell him. “I’m sure.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WYNTER

I stare up at the village hall at all forefathers. The families stand behind them, including my mother and Summer, along with my father's new lover. I can see the tension pouring from Summer, but she has that familiar smile in place like Father would expect.

My father moves to the lectern. "We've all been awaiting some good news," he says proudly, "and I have it in abundance." The crowd claps, and I glance around at the sea of smiling faces.

"My beautiful daughter, Summer, is pregnant by the warrior, Maximus.

The crowd erupts in cheers, but I shake my head in annoyance.

"He can't even be sure of that," I mutter to Martha, who gently pats my hand.

"Not only that, but I have plans to expand our founding families' bloodline.

"The crowd settles. "Each head of the family will take more than one wife." There's silence stretching out as people process what he's saying.

"I have recently married Anastasia. She is expecting twins in a few months." A few people clap, but it's not as strong as before.

It sets my father on edge, and he glances back at the other forefathers.

Adrian steps up to the lectern, smiling wide.

“Those of you who have unmarried daughters may present them as possible matches for the forefathers,” he says. “We will hold a gathering, and all families with daughters will be requested to attend.”

A mother to the left of me stares in horror as her husband gives his daughter an excited nod. She looks no older than fourteen. “We can’t let this happen,” I mutter.

“Stay quiet,” Martha warns. “We will talk about it when it’s safer.”

We’re dismissed minutes later, and as the crowd parts, the mother falls into step beside me.

“I agree,” she whispers. “We can’t let this happen.

” I give a stiff nod. “I run the pharmacy,” she adds.

“I’d love you to drop by. My husband isn’t around tomorrow.

” I nod again, and she walks off in the direction of her husband.

“We might just be able to cause a rebellion,” I tell Martha excitedly.

“Wynter, wait.” I turn to see Summer running towards me. She glances back to check my father hasn’t noticed, but he’s too busy shaking hands with other men. “I just wanted to check up on you,” she says.

“Congratulations,” I tell her, smiling warmly.

“It doesn’t feel like a celebration,” she mutters sadly.

“How are things at home? How’s Mother?”

The smile no longer reaches her eyes, and she slips her hand in mine. “I miss you,” she tells me. “I’m sorry for the things I said. I didn’t mean them.”

“I know. I miss you too.”

“Maybe we can meet somewhere?” she suggests.

Martha takes my arm. “Let’s not make trouble for ourselves,” she says.

I slip my hand from Summer’s. “I’m sorry,” I whisper as I’m led away.

“If your father sees you, he’ll follow through on his threat,” Martha warns.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen her since I left, and she reached out to me.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re our only hope of getting out of here,” she says. “Don’t mess it up.”

We get back to the caves and gather around Martha’s kitchen table. Jaycee and Anna stare at me, waiting for me to speak, and eventually, I sigh heavily. “I don’t know what the plan is yet,” I admit.

“Nothing at all?” asks Martha.

“Not exactly. I know I need the warriors on side and I’m working on that.

A villager approached me tonight to meet with her tomorrow.

She doesn't want her daughter to marry one of the four.

Understandable seeing as she's just a kid.

But what I really need is to piece together the warriors.

I want to know how they got here and if they knew they were coming. ”

“So, you need to spend time with Wrath,” Martha states, and I nod.

“They all need to trust me.”

“Alex is on duty, and he's pretty relaxed,” says Anna.

“Only because he's in love with you,” teases Jaycee.

My eyes widen, “Use that,” I tell her. “Go on a date and I'll watch the warriors.”

“He'll never leave his post,” says Anna.

“Unless you make him,” says Martha, smirking.

She takes a small brown bottle from the shelf.

“Slip this in his drink and he'll spend the night over the toilet.

” She begins to make Alex a cup of hot milk.

“Tell him it's a treat from me to cheer him up.

It's the least I can do after the loss of his friend. ”

Alex looks up from the desk and smiles. I place the hot milk on the table and pull up a chair. He eyes it suspiciously. “What’s this?”

“Martha sent it, to say sorry you lost Lenny.”

He smirks, taking a sip and closing his eyes. “That’s delicious.”

“I’m sorry too,” I add.

“Don’t be. Lenny was a hard man to please. I’m not exactly sorry he’s gone,” he admits, shrugging. “And things are a little less stressful down here without him.”

“He liked to upset the warriors,” I agree.

“What’s going on with you and Wrath?” he asks.

I rest my elbows on the desk. “I feel bad for him,” I say. “Lenny was hard on him.”

“Lenny was hard on everyone, most of all Wrath.”

“Why?”

He shrugs again. “I guess he didn’t like him being the best.”

“The best?”

“In the ring. Wrath is strong, and he’s clever. He just hides behind his silence so nobody can work him out. Lenny was suspicious of him.”

“I heard you like Anna,” I say with a grin.

He laughs. “And what’s that got to do with you?”

“Nothing. Although I could see how she feels about you. With the forefathers announcing extra marriages, you should make your move now. They might choose her.”

His smile fades. “Do you think they would?”

“Do you want to risk waiting around to find out?” He shakes his head then grips his stomach. Half the milk is now gone, and I’m pleased it’s working so quickly. “Are you okay?” I ask with fake concern.

“A bit of cramp,” he mutters, frowning. He winces again, this time half standing. “Could you find Jax?”

“I can wait here if you need to go,” I say innocently.

“Not a good idea,” he mutters, and this time, his stomach growls.

“I’ll be fine. They’re all quiet. I’ll get you if anything happens.”

He doesn’t have time to argue, instead, rushing off to the bathroom. I grin, relaxing in my seat.

Half an hour passes before I gently knock on the bathroom door. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“Don’t come in here,” he calls back.

“Okay, well, do you need me to get anyone?”

“No. Leave me.”

“You need your bed,” I say. “If you’re sick, that is.”

“Maybe,” he mutters.

“Look, go to your room and I’ll stay here until the morning.”

“No, go and get Jax.”

“With Lenny gone, Jax will need to be here tomorrow. Until they get an extra guard down here, you need me.”

He sighs. “Fine. But if anything happens, you have to come and get me.”

“Of course,” I lie. “Feel better soon.”

I wait another hour before going into the first room. “Evening, Abe,” I say with a grin. His eyes narrow in on me. “I thought you’d like some extra food,” I offer, holding up some freshly baked bread from Martha. “We couldn’t get butter, but she did find some jam,” I add, moving closer to his bed.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I think we should all get treated better,” I explain with a shrug. “Don’t you?”

“That’s never going to happen,” he says with an empty laugh. “You’re just another daydreamer thinking she can change our world.”

“There’s been others?” I ask.

“None that came back more than once,” he mutters, taking a bite of the bread.

“How did you get here?” I ask, taking a seat at his small table.

He chews the bread, all the while watching me. Eventually, he says, “I was taken.”

“Like the others?”

He stares down at the bread. “I came here with Max.”

“Maximus?”

“He was just Max back then,” he says with a small smile. “There were others too, but I haven’t seen them in a long time. Look, you’re asking for trouble poking around like this.”

I sense his reluctance and offer an easy smile as I push to my feet. “I’m all about trouble, Abe. Don’t worry about me.”

Zeus takes his bread eagerly, biting a large chunk off and closing his eyes. When he opens them and sees me watching, he frowns. “What are you doing here?”

“The guard was sick, so I offered to do the night watch.”

“And you’re bringing food. Why?”

“I’m just being friendly.”

“Why?”

“You’re all so suspicious. Can’t a girl be nice?”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned the hard way, it’s that no one is nice for the sake of being nice.”

“If you all came here so young, how did you learn so much?”

“Who said I came here young?” he asks.

“All the others came here around the age of five, so I just assumed . . .”

“All the others shouldn’t be talking to you,” he snaps. “I remember you.” He narrows his eyes.

I shift uncomfortably before asking, “From?”

“Watching at the ceremonies. You were with the Sanchez family.”

I stiffen slightly at his words. “I’m no longer part of them,” I tell him.

“I don’t trust you,” he says firmly. “Leave.”

Maximus is sleeping, so I take the final chunks of bread in to Wrath. His back is to me, and by the soft sounds coming from his corner, I realise he’s asleep too. I put the bread down and move closer. “Wrath,” I whisper, “wake up.”

He groans in response, and I gently place my hand on his shoulder.

His hand dashes out quickly, taking me by surprise.

I cry out as he yanks me towards him, and I land on the bed in a heap.

He lurches over me, his blue eyes narrowed, making him look more possessed than

usual.

He inhales deeply and suddenly relaxes, letting go of me immediately and dropping down beside me.

“You shouldn’t creep up on me,” he mutters. “Sorry about that.”

I’m shaking as I nod, trying desperately to fight back the tears gathering in my eyes. He props himself up beside me, and his expression softens. He gently rubs his thumb under each eye, smearing my tears over my cheek. He licks his thumb and smiles. “Tears of an angel,” he murmurs.

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“You should talk more,” I whisper, remaining beside him. “You have a soothing voice.”

“Sometimes it’s like the words just won’t come,” he admits. “And other times, I just don’t want to speak, so I don’t.”

“Even when you were small?”

He shifts himself to get more comfortable. “What did you mean before? You said you were coming up with a plan.”

I sigh heavily. “Everyone is suddenly counting on me,” I whisper. “What if I let them down?”

“Why are they counting on you?”

“To get them out of here.”

“I dream about it,” he says with a small smile.

His eyes glisten, and my heart squeezes.

“Not getting out of here,” he adds, “but the world before.” I briefly close my eyes as his fingers play with the ends of my hair.

“I used to think it was just a dream. I mean, it is, but she was real, wasn’t she? The woman I dream about.”

“What do you dream, Wrath?”

“Ares,” he mutters, twisting my hair round his finger. “My name before was Ares. She calls me Ares.”

“Who?”

“I think she was my mother.”

I almost choke on the sob that leaves my throat, and I cup his cheek. “Yes, she’s real.”

“Earlier, after you told me there was more of the world out there, I dreamt of her again. I think it was the last time I saw her.”

“Before they brought you here?” He nods. “Tell me about it.”

“She was collecting me from somewhere and she had to run errands. I waited outside, and a man came. He took me by the arm and led me away, and when I started to fight back, he shoved a cloth in my mouth and dragged me into the back of a van.”

“I was told that the boys who came here were given over because they were unruly or unloved. I don’t think that’s true.”

“There was something they said when we arrived, about us being too old. They were meant to take under-fives.”

Another sob leaves my throat. “I have to find a way to get us all out of here.”

“How?”

I shrug. Even if I managed to get us all out, where the hell would we go? “Thinking about it overwhelms me.”

“Then just for tonight, don’t think about it,” he says, leaning closer. I inhale, anticipating his lips as they press against my own in a bruising kiss. I feel his erection press against my thigh and shift closer.

Then, just as I feel him relax against me, he breaks the kiss and shifts away so we’re no longer touching. “Sleep, Wynter.”

Wrath

She closes her eyes but not before I see the disappointment in them.

But I’m a monster, and I’m terrified of hurting her the way I hurt the girls in the ceremonies.

I don’t know if I can be gentle when my body wants her so badly.

The need isn’t like anything I’ve ever felt before.

Usually, the pills take over and I turn into some sex-crazed animal, but I want her even without the tablets.

I want to feel her naked skin against mine, and I want to kiss her in all the places she keeps covered beneath that black dress.

“What do they do?” she whispers, her eyes still closed.

“Who?”

“When they get you here as a child, what happens?”

“I don’t think I want to put those images in your head.”

She finally opens her eyes. “I need to know what they did to you, Ares.”

I take a shuddering breath. “When they’ve beaten every last tear from you, they start to put you in the ring.”

She pushes to sit up a little. “To fight?”

I nod, hating the terror in her eyes. “We had to fight one another, even the kids we’d befriended.”

“It must have been awful.”

“It wasn’t all bad. Some days, we went to school.” She frowns, and I laugh. “They taught us about the four families, and how some of us would be chosen ones. It sounded so good, it’s what we all began to want.” I look around the room. “Turns out, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“What happens after here?” she asks. “You can’t fight forever.”

“Men die in the ring, Wynter. Then you’re replaced just as quickly. There are fighters waiting to step up.”

She runs her hands over her tired face. “And the ceremonies?”

I get up from the bed, hating how my chains rattle.

“I don’t want to talk about them,” I utter.

They taught us it was human nature. Breeding with the families' offerings was a privilege, but it's never felt that way.

Not for me. "Why can't you leave?" I ask.

"You can go out the caves alone. Why don't you leave? "

"The gates are locked. There are guards outside, and I have no idea where to go. Apparently, we're in the middle of nowhere."

"But nowhere is somewhere," I say, picking up the bread and taking a bite.

"How do I walk out of here with everyone?" she asks, her voice desperate and pleading. "I don't know what they'll do if we're discovered. They've already killed two of my friends because of the way I behaved. They had you attack my sister," she adds, and I still at her words, turning to face her.

"What?"

"They put her in a cave with all four warriors. She was attacked so my father could ensure she got pregnant."

I allow her words to sink in. "Your father?"

She stands, her eyes searching mine. "Anthony Sanchez." My blood boils, and I clench my fists. "He's disowned me," she rushes to add, like that somehow makes it all better.

"Why?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"Because I don't conform to his beliefs." She walks over to where I am and slips her

tiny hand in mine. “He’s created a world that suits him, and everyone else is just . . . compliant. I hate him, and I hate this fake world he’s forcing us all to live in.”

“I didn’t know you were one of them,” I mutter, and I feel her tense.

Her brow furrows. “I’m not. I’ve just told you I don’t believe.”

I release her hand. “Believe or not, it makes no difference. You’re only down here because he’s disowned you. Before that, you lived up there with them.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“No, Wynter, I didn’t have a choice. You’ve only decided to help now you’re amongst us.” I place the bread in her hands. “You should leave.”

Her face is full of confusion, but I turn away. “Ares?—”

“My name is Wrath.” I sit on the bed, twisting and lying back to stare up at the ceiling.

“What just happened?” she asks, but I continue to stare.

I’m done talking now. “You’re going to ignore me?”

” She waits a beat. “Please, at least let’s talk about it.

” When I still don’t reply, she gives a defeated sigh and backs out the room.

“Yah know, when everyone was telling me what a monster you were, I gave you a chance. I wanted to make my own decision. I’m sorry you feel you can’t give me the same courtesy. ” Then she closes the door, locking it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WYNTER

My heart is breaking. It's the only way to describe the pain that's sitting in my chest as Martha dishes the breakfasts up while she hums to herself. "What's that song?" I ask, and she lifts her head to meet my eye and smiles.

"I used to sing it to my daughter." Her smile immediately fades.

"Your daughter? You have children?"

She gives her head a slight shake. "Not anymore."

"What happened?"

"My husband happened," she mutters. "He wasn't a nice man."

"What does that mean? He killed her?"

"He may as well have. In the real world, things work differently," she explains.

"There are laws you can't break and things you can't do.

And children are protected by laws, and if those laws are broken or the child is hurt by an adult, there's an organisation called social services who take your child away if you can't keep them safe. "

“Where do they take them?”

She smiles sadly. “Sometimes they care for them in a home filled with other children, and other times, like in my daughter’s case, they give them to a new family.”

I stare wide-eyed. “But she had you. Why didn’t they let you have her?”

“I had to make a choice,” she almost whispers, “and I chose wrong.”

“You chose your husband?” She avoids my eyes as shame washes over her expression. “My mother did the same,” I say with a shrug. “I wish they’d sent me to a new family.”

“You do?”

I nod. “Everyone deserves a chance at being happy.”

“I used to think if I ever got out of here, I could try to find her.”

“It’s the first thing we’ll do when we get out,” I tell her, squeezing her hand.

I take the trolley and go through to the warriors’ rooms. I can’t shake the pain in my chest, and the thought of seeing Wrath again makes me feel sick. I go to Abe, smiling as I place his tray down. “Morning, Abe.”

“You really don’t like my name, do you?” I see the hint of a smirk.

“Should I call you Michael?”

He glances at the door nervously. “What is wrong with you?”

I shrug. “I don’t have anything to lose anymore, Abe. I guess I’m in self-destruct mode.”

“I’d appreciate you imploding alone and not taking me with you.”

“How does it feel?” I ask, pouring him a cup of water. “The ceremonies?”

He frowns. “Why are you asking?”

“I just want to know. I’m curious.”

“It’s like a relief,” he tells me, biting into his toast. “They build me up, so when I finally get there, it’s a relief.”

“I wish we could talk longer,” I say as I back out the room. “I like our chats.”

He grins. “I hate them.”

“Liar,” I sing-song as I leave. I can feel him warming to me, and as I enter Max’s room, I’m smiling while thinking about how different things would be if we all got out.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” I ask as I hand him his tray.

Max narrows his dark eyes. “Huh?”

“You must dream of getting out. Wrath does.”

“Wrath?”

“You might know him as Ares,” I say, watching his face closely for a sign of

recognition.

He bites into his toast, his eyes still dark and angry-looking. “I know him as Wrath. Don’t use his real name again.” He sighs before adding, “There’s no way out.”

“Do you remember how things were before you came here?”

“We’re not allowed to remember,” he snaps. “Why are you asking me these questions?”

“You can remember,” I tell him, pouring his water. “They can’t stop your thoughts.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve spent years trying to get to this point, and you’re not ruining that and having me back in fight club.”

“What’s that?”

He narrows his eyes again. “It’s how warriors get here, by fighting day and night to be the best.”

“And remembering your family, your mother, they’ll stop you being at the top?”

“It does no good thinking about them,” he mutters. “They can’t help me here.”

Zeus is glaring at me as I pass him his tray. “No treats today?”

I laugh. “I’ll try to get some for lunch. How are you?”

“What?” he scowls.

“How are you?”

“Why are you asking?”

I laugh. “You really have to stop being so suspicious. I’m a nice person, honest. You look tired.”

“I don’t sleep well,” he mutters.

“Maybe I can help? I’ll visit the pharmacy later.”

“I don’t like pills,” he snaps. “No more pills.”

I nod. “Okay. I can ask for liquid form.”

When it’s time to see Wrath, my heart is beating wildly. I half hope he’s cooled off and is ready to talk, but deep down, I don’t think he’s the cooling off type.

He’s at his table waiting, and I breeze in with his tray and place it down.

“Good morning.” He doesn’t reply, and my heart twists.

“Did you sleep well?” Nothing. “I didn’t.

My mind was racing.” Nothing. I sigh and pour his water.

“You might hate me, Wrath, but I can’t hate you, so I’m going to pretend like we’re friends still and keep talking like we are. ”

I head out and close the door quietly, leaning against it and groaning. It’s too hard to pretend we’re okay when we’re not, but he’ll give in eventually. I know he will.

Midmorning, I take a walk into the village to grab some things for Martha.

Alex goes into the butcher's and bakery for me because I can't face seeing the families of Abel or Jade.

I head for the pharmacy, and I'm surprised when I find a man behind the counter and not the woman who asked me to pop in and see her.

He looks up, and I force a smile. "Is there anything I can take for not being able to sleep?" I ask.

"Insomnia?" I nod. He looks back at the shelves behind him.

"But not tablets. I can't swallow them very well."

He gives a stiff nod and takes a bottle from the shelf. "Try this," he says, handing it over.

"Thank you. It can go on the Sanchez account," I tell him, and he smiles wide.

"Of course."

Medicines are one of the things we have to pay for, and that's usually left for a man because they have access to money. The forefathers have an account.

Next, I call into the grocer's and pick up four apples. "On the Sanchez account," I tell him because fruit is also limited and any extra on your rations must be paid for.

At lunch, I call in to Abe, holding up the green apple with pride. "See what I got you?" He goes to take it, but I snatch it away. "But first, you have to accept my friendship." He smirks, and I hand the apple over. "Enjoy."

He bites into it and groans. "I don't remember the last time I had one of these."

“I’ll try to get different fruit each time I go out,” I promise and place his tray down.
“Do you ever think about the times before you were brought here?”

He shakes his head. “Why would I?”

I shrug. “Don’t you miss that life?”

“I was only young,” he says. “And my life before was no different to how it is now. I was yelled at and locked in my room a lot.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

“But if you find a way to get us out, I’d leave.”

I smile. “Me too.”

Zeus stares at the small bottle with two spoons of medicine inside. “Just drink this at bedtime and it should help.” He smiles. “But don’t let anyone find that bottle. I’ll collect it in the morning and refill it.”

“Thank you, Wynter.” I nod, smiling wide as I leave.

Max bites into his apple eagerly too. “You’re good at breaking rules,” he says.

I give a small bow and laugh as I head out.

Wrath doesn’t even look at me as I hold up his apple.

I place it on the table, and he sighs, moving it away and waiting for his tray.

“You don’t like apples?” I ask. He stays quiet, picking up his boiled potato and biting

it in half.

“I can try to get something else for you.” Nothing.

“Sometimes they get strawberries in.” Still, he ignores me. I roll my eyes and head for the door.

“It must be easy to get that stuff when you’re a Sanchez,” he mutters.

I pause, his words stabbing at my already wounded heart. “I never get anything for myself, Wrath,” I say his name clearly, letting him know I heard his request to not use Ares.

“You’ll get us into trouble if you’re caught. But I bet you didn’t think about that.”

I bite on my lower lip before saying, “If you’d prefer, I can have Anna bring your meals again.”

He tucks into his food, making sure I know he’s done talking.

Wrath

I eat the apple the minute she’s gone, enjoying every juicy mouthful. Desperate to tell her how good it tastes. Desperate to offer her a few bites.

I groan. Her name means nothing and yet I’ve made it mean so much. It doesn’t define who she is, and she’s more than proved she’s here to make things better for us all.

But it’s that name. His name. Sanchez.

That man chose me to fight for his family name and made it perfectly clear I couldn't fail him. His hunger for power makes him a dangerous man, and I thought it better to be on his side, even if I am kept at a distance. But the things he's made me do to prove I'm good enough make me sick.

He's the reason this place is still going.

He's the reason we are all trapped here.

He's the reason my life remains miserable and empty.

At least it was . . . until her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WYNTER

I can't lie around crying, even though my heart hurts so badly, I want to.

The way Wrath dismisses me breaks me a little more with each passing day.

Every meal I've taken him for the last week, I've tried to engage in conversation, but he refuses, keeping his back to me or his head bowed.

He hates me, and I didn't do anything to deserve it.

The other warriors are warming to me, and I'm relieved because I might need them if we ever want to leave this place.

It's clear I can no longer count on Wrath.

Martha comes in just before dinner. "Anna will serve the warriors this evening." My heart tightens. Even when he isn't speaking to me, I still need to be near him, to see him .

"How come?"

"Your father asked to see you," she says, avoiding my eyes.

"Why? What does he want?"

“I honestly don’t know, Wynter, but I’ve learnt that nothing is ever good when it comes to that man.” She places her apron on the side. “I have to walk you up.”

I follow reluctantly. “You don’t think he knows?”

“How could he? You went to meet the woman in the village, and she didn’t show. Who else would have said anything?”

We reach my father’s office, and Martha gives my hand a squeeze before leaving me there.

The guard opens the door, and I step inside to find him behind his desk.

In his hand, he’s holding a glass of amber liquid, and he knocks it back before grabbing a bottle to refill.

“Alcohol,” I guess, nodding at it. “Isn’t that a banned item?”

He grins. “And what do you know about banned items, Wynter?”

“You’d be surprised what I know,” I say, taking a seat without being asked.

He eyes me with disdain, and I know he wants to yell at me for sitting, but instead, he gives another cruel smile. I brace myself for his next remark. “Actually, I’m not surprised at all.” He takes another drink. “I expected you to cause waves down there, but I knew you couldn’t do any damage.”

“Is there a reason you asked to see me?” I ask, making sure to keep my tone bored.

“You’re not scared,” he says thoughtfully.

“Why would I be?”

“Everyone is,” he says with a shrug. “But not you. I see the defiance in your eyes. It’s always been there. And so, I can’t leave you down in the caves for too long because you’ll bring me problems.” He laughs, and it’s cold. “You’ll start a revolution.”

I feel my heartrate speed up, panic warning me that he knows. “I wouldn’t,” I mutter, shaking my head. The thought of being taken out the caves scares me, not only because I’d be losing Wrath but also the friends I’ve made. It’s the only time I’ve ever felt a part of a family.

He laughs again. “You’re already building an alliance.” I shake my head. “Don’t lie, Wynter, you’re not good at it. You’ve been taking extra food, and I can only assume it’s for your new friends.”

“Because what you give the workers in the caves is too little. They’re hungry.”

“I give plenty, and you should be grateful you get anything at all,” he booms, slamming his hands on the desk. He takes a calming breath. “I think the best thing is to have you married.”

“Married?” I gasp, feeling instantly sick. “I’m the daughter of a warrior. I can’t get married.”

“Like I said before, I’m changing the rules.”

I push to my feet, the need to run away strong. “Who would marry me?” I ask with a nervous laugh. “Everyone knows I’m the daughter of a warrior.”

“You think they’ll defy me?” He grins. “I call the shots, and I will have you married.”

“I could be happy,” I say, trying to make him see this is a bad decision. “My husband might love me.”

“I doubt that, Wynter. There’s nothing loveable about you.”

“You’re going to risk me making a home and living happily ever after?”

” He finishes his drink before two guards enter the room.

I glance at each, and then at the exit longingly, sensing I’m out of time.

“Please,” I whisper. “I’ll stay quiet in the caves and get on with my job there. You won’t get any trouble from me.”

“Don’t beg, Wynter. It doesn’t suit you.” He gives a nod to the guards, who each grab my arms and lead me from the office kicking and screaming. It’s only when they release me in the large cave that I freeze. My father leans in the doorway. “But first, they want to see you perform.”

“They?”

“Your potential husbands. You understand that to make you more appealing, we have to break you first.”

“You’re sick,” I whisper.

He smirks before closing the door and locking it.

I rush to it, pounding my fists against the strong wood and screaming to be let out.

My pleas are met with silence, and I turn back to face the room.

I stare at the stone in the middle where Summer once lay screaming as the warriors put her through hell.

There's a fleeting thought that this could be a similar situation, but there's no way my father would risk me getting pregnant to a warrior.

I take a deep breath and move to the centre of the room.

Whatever they have planned for me, I have to stay calm.

I glance at the four windows, the dark glass preventing me from seeing if anyone is watching, yet I somehow feel eyes on me.

They'll expect a reaction, and there is no way in hell I'm giving them one.

Wrath

The screaming women have been playing for hours. My ears ache from the sounds of terror and orgasms, and my cock is painful. When the door finally opens and the guard enters, I pull angrily on my chains. He smirks. "Relax, big guy, your time is coming."

The guard shows me the yellow gun before he unlocks the chain from the wall.

A silent warning. I stand and my hands are secured behind my back, just like they always are when they don't want us to relieve ourselves.

As we step from the room, I notice the three other warriors waiting with guards.

It's not often they take us all together—the last time was when the scared woman was in the centre, and they wanted us to fight to get to her.

Wynter's sister. I don't like sharing, so my anger is already building as we head through the passages.

We're led into the cave and lined up, but I'm tense and in desperate need of release.

I glance at the others, all looking just as keen, and I growl, again pulling against my restraints.

My head is full, the sounds of screaming on replay, and that heady scent of sex is in the air.

My blood pumps fast through my veins, and my cock stands tall, desperate to feel the clench of a woman.

The second I'm released, I home in on the target, rushing forward before the others.

She's in the centre of the room with her head lowered, resting on her knees.

I reach her first, grabbing her arm and pulling her to stand so I can get her naked.

But the second we make contact, she gasps, and I freeze.

Her terrified green eyes burn into mine, and then her scent hits me. "Wynter," I mutter.

She pulls free. "They're watching," she whispers, backing away slowly, her eyes darting from me to the warriors who have now joined me. "You all have to act like you normally would."

I glance behind me at the others, who are looking just as confused.

And then jealousy rips through me, wondering if she's been talking to them too.

When she realises we're not moving after her, she turns to run, crashing against the door and banging hard, screaming to be let out.

There's no fucking way the other warriors are touching her.

I advance on her, and she turns, pressing her back to the door. "They can't see," she whispers, her lips hardly moving, "how I really feel about you." I grab her wrist and slam it above her head. She uses her free hand to try to fight me off. "Pretend you hate me," she adds.

"Easy," I mutter, grabbing her flailing hand and placing it in my other hand above her head. "Sanchez."

I grip the black dress at the neck—the dress I've pictured ripping off many times—and I tug hard.

The sound of the material shredding rings out around the room.

I sense the warriors all behind me, waiting for a chance to jump in, but they won't get it.

I'll kill every last one before they get near her.

I pull her against me, and she lets out a desperate cry for help.

When I turn to face the other warriors, the look in my eyes must warn them to back off because they slowly part.

I keep her in front of me, moving to the middle of the room where the raised stone is

set.

I push her to lie back, placing my large hand against her stomach.

I don't remove her underwear—there's no other man here who will see her naked—but I move her cotton knickers to one side and edge my dick closer.

She stops fighting, like she's resigned to the fact it's going to happen, and she turns her head to one side, squeezing her eyes closed.

I press at her opening, closing my eyes as I push forward fast, breaking through her tightly clenched opening and groaning in pleasure as I fill her. Wynter screams, her entire body tensing with pain. The sound pierces my already sensitive ears, and I slam a hand over her mouth.

I want to take it slow and make this feeling last forever, but my body acts upon instinct, ramming into her uncontrollably to chase the sensation I'm addicted to.

I zone out, unable to hear her muffled sobs, only focussing on finishing quickly to end her torture.

I feel one of the warriors pulling at my shoulder, and I reach back, shoving him away.

The others move closer, all touching themselves.

I growl, placing my arms over her protectively. "No," I warn.

Maximus gives a knowing nod, throwing his head back and coming on the floor. I lean closer to Wynter, my movements jerking as my body begins to shake. "I'm sorry," I whisper, inhaling the scent of her as I come hard, shaking as I empty everything into her.

The groans of the other warriors tell me it's safe to release her, and the second I do, she shoves me away.

I stumble back a step and watch as she rolls from the stone and springs to her feet.

The effort is too much, and regret fills her expression as she doubles over in pain, grabbing onto the wall for support as though it might hold her together.

I want to reach out, to be there for her, but Zeus's sharp look reminds me they're still watching, and our entanglement might get her into serious trouble.

Powerless, I watch as she folds into herself, curling up on the floor as her sobs echo through the silence.

The door creaks open, the guards' heavy boots marking their arrival. The cold, unfeeling metal of the cuffs wraps around my wrists, but my gaze is anchored to her—helpless as her pain consumes her. Pain that I caused.

What have I done?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WYNTER

I 'm not sure how long I stay curled up on the stone floor, but it was long enough for the cold to soak through to my bones, causing me to shiver uncontrollably.

My plan to act fearless soon left me the second Wrath took my arm. I wasn't scared of him—I was scared my father would see how I feel about him, certain he'd have him killed just to spite me.

But nothing could have prepared me for the feral way in which Wrath took me.

I've never experienced pain and humiliation like it, knowing they were all sitting behind their darkened glass, excited by my downfall.

Knowing that no matter how Wrath feels about me, he's unable to control what they've bred into him.

A desire to take. A desire to breed. A desire to fuck.

And yet, I still feel grateful it was him and not the others.

I sensed the jealousy radiating from him, and it drove him to protect me from them.

Having that pain four times over may have finished me off.

The door opens, and a guard stands over me. I don't move until he swoops down and grips my arm tightly, hauling me to my feet. The stiffness in my bones causes a burning ache, and I cry out in surprise. His soulless eyes don't flinch as he drags me through to my father's office.

I notice the chair I sat in opposite the desk is now gone, forcing me to stand before him. I lay an arm over my chest while my other dangles in front of my private area. He sneers, giving the guard a nod to leave.

"Not so gleeful?" he asks, pouring himself another drink.

When I don't respond, he laughs. "Finally, a way to wipe that smug grin off your face." His words stir up the anger I've pushed down, and I snatch his drink from the desk and knock it back in one.

He stares open-mouthed as I gag in response to the liquid burning my throat.

"Fuck you," I manage to squeeze out before coughing.

He stands, rounding the desk quickly. I stumble back as he crowds me, his large frame shadowing mine. "I should hang you," he hisses close to my ear.

"Then do it," I snarl.

"You'd enjoy it," he snaps.

"I will never give you the satisfaction you crave," I warn. "I will not beg ever again. I will not sob for your mercy. That," I warn, pointing to the door, "was the last time I will ever cry in front of you."

I gasp when his hand wraps around my throat, squeezing tight enough to cut off air.

“I have watched you for many years whispering poison into your mother’s ear, trying desperately to turn Summer against me.

All because you’re an ungrateful little bitch.

” He spits in my face, releasing my neck and taking a step back.

I drag air into my lungs, anger pulsating through me as I wipe his spittle from my cheek.

“I gave you a home. I fed you, clothed you. Let you live amongst us even though you are not my blood.”

“You made the rules,” I cry. “I didn’t ask to be born into this fucked-up world that you created for your own selfish needs. Which god do you believe in?” I scream. “Which god chose you to make the rules?”

“I am the god,” he roars.

“And you made the rules,” I hiss. “Rules to gratify you and men alike. Men who like to watch women cry as other men double their size pin them down and have sex. Men who get excited by watching monsters force themselves upon young girls. Men who sleep well at night in the castles they built on other people’s misery.

I don’t know anything about the outside world, but I know that what you have created here is purely a man’s world.

And you have forced me to live here along with all the other women,” I take a shuddering breath, “and we are tired of it.”

My father grins then claps his hands loud and slow. “What a speech,” he murmurs.

“Beautiful.” He takes a few more steps back and settles on the edge of the desk. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were a born leader.”

“You must have taught me well,” I sneer.

He takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Silas Morales was most impressed by your performance out there,” he says, checking his watch. “He will be here any minute to unburden me.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I will not marry a man like Silas. He’s older than you,” I say through clenched teeth.

“His sons are just as excited about your arrival.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes briefly, trying desperately to find something to make him see how mad this all is.

“Don’t you think the villagers will start to realise what’s going on?

” I ask calmly. “The fact they work hard to provide for the forefathers, and what are they getting in return?” I ask.

“The threat of hanging if they step out of line? They’ll begin to see how happy you are with your wives in tow and your hundreds of children, and they’ll question what they’re getting from all this. ”

“We are securing the future,” he says. “Our responsibilities as the creators are to ensure this village grows and continues on for centuries.”

“What about when new villagers begin to talk?” I ask. “When they tell tales about the real world and how it’s nothing like this.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Out there, where their women are exposed to ridiculous ideas. Here, men are looked after, and their wives won’t leave them for another man or get drunk in bars with friends. Here, they will become devoted, caring wives.”

“No,” I snap. “Here, they become trapped. You’ve made sure they can never escape. Is that what you promise men?”

“I merely tell them how it is here. How they choose to conduct their marriage is their business. No one gets involved. But women do not frolic in the streets or tease men in bars. They raise children and do their duty.”

Understanding dawns on me. “You offer controlling, violent men a dream. They get to keep their wife all to themselves, no questions asked.”

“I created a place where marriage vows are taken seriously. In sickness and in health, for better or for worse. If you commit to marriage, you shouldn’t just get to leave when things are tough. Out there, divorce is easy. It’s become the norm.”

There’s a knock on the door, and my father rounds the desk. “Come in,” he calls.

Silas enters, and they shake hands. He brings his greedy eyes my way, and I shudder with repulsion as he zones in on the blood smeared across my inner thighs.

“Wynter, I’m sure you will fit into my family perfectly,” he says, holding out his hand.

I don’t take it, and he retracts it, smirking.

“Shall we get on with it?” he asks my father, who nods.

I watch in horror as he proceeds to take out a book from his drawer. He opens it out

and signs it before turning it towards Silas. He also signs it then turns to me, holding out the pen. “Are you going to sign or shall I forge it?”

“What is it?” I ask, knowing full well it’s the register for marriages.

Silas grabs my hand, pushing the pen into it as he pulls me over to the desk. He keeps his hand over mine as he scribbles in the box next to where he’s signed. “Well done,” he praises, releasing me.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Morales,” Father announces with a smile.

“That’s it?” I demand angrily, dropping the pen onto the desk. “Not even a ceremony?” I don’t want any such thing, but the fact they can just force a woman to sign her life away is ridiculous.

“We thought it would be better to keep it behind closed doors. We all know you like a show.” Father smirks, slamming the book closed and placing it back in his drawer.

“We should go home. My wife and children are waiting to meet you,” says Silas, grabbing my hand again. I try to pull free, but it’s no good as he just squeezes tighter.

“Good luck,” Father offers, shaking Silas’s free hand.

“I don’t need luck,” he replies. “I’ll have her whipped into shape in no time.”

My father gives a jovial laugh, following us to the door and opening it. “That’s why I knew you’d be the perfect candidate.”

The walk back to Silas’s home feels like the longest of my life. He doesn’t bother to speak to me as he marches at a pace faster than my legs want to carry me, causing me to stumble a few times along the way.

A woman is waiting at the door, and she smiles warmly, nodding. “Welcome back, sir,” she says to Silas. “Would you like me to show Wynter to her room so she can freshen up?”

“No,” he says coldly. “Where is everyone?”

“Very well,” she mutters. “In the lounge.”

He throws open the double doors and shoves me in front of him. Five adults all turn to me, and I lower my head as embarrassment burns my cheeks. “This is Wynter,” he says. “We’re married, and she will reside in my room.”

A woman around my age steps forward, assessing me through cruel, narrowed eyes. “She forgot her clothes.”

“Perhaps you can get her an outfit, Pearl,” Silas suggests firmly, in a tone that makes it clear it’s an order. She rolls her eyes, shoving past me as she leaves.

“That was my daughter, Pearl,” he tells me with a tight smile. He nods at the others, who are still watching me with confused expressions. “This is Katherine, my other daughter, and then my sons, Adam and Reginald.” I offer a small smile, but it isn’t returned.

The woman by the window joins us, running her eyes over me. “My replacement,” she utters.

“Ava,” he says fondly, “Wynter is an addition, not a replacement.”

“And when the bed is full?” she asks, arching a brow. “Will I sleep on the floor?”

Silas slaps her. It’s so sudden, I gasp out loud before rushing to her side with concern.

“Are you okay?”

She glares at me while gripping her cheek and then shoves me away. “I’m fine,” she says through gritted teeth.

Adam steps forward, slipping an arm around my shoulders. “I’ll show you to the bathroom,” he says.

Silas smiles. “Good idea.”

He leads me away and up the stairs. The feel of the fluffy cream carpet is a welcome sensation, but it doesn’t offer me much comfort when I know I’m as unsafe here as I was when I lived in the Sanchez home.

The bedroom he shows me to is huge. There’s an oversized raised bed in the centre of the room that’s so high, there’s a step all the way around. The four posts have sheer curtains hanging down, neatly pinned back. “The en-suite is through there,” he tells me, pointing to a door.

I head that way then realise he’s following me.

I open the door and gasp at the beauty. The marble units are luxurious, nothing like the ones my mother picked for her bathroom.

There’s a walk-in shower with enough room for a small gathering, and in the centre is a free-standing bathtub filled with hot, bubbly water.

The woman who greeted us at the door dries her hands on a towel and smiles.

“I thought you might want a bath.” I nod, grateful she’s being nice.

“Aurelia, get out,” Adam barks, and she rushes off. He turns to me, and his eyes run up and down my body in a way that makes me shift uncomfortably.

Before I can respond, Pearl saunters in. She takes in the scene before her then laughs. “If you think Daddy will let you go there before him, you’re stupid.”

“He seemed happy for me to show her to the bathroom.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean you could sample his new wife,” she says firmly, placing the clothes down on the side. “Should I get him and check?”

Adam smirks. “He’ll rush up here to watch.”

I fight my tears, determined to be strong this time, but the thought of doing what Wrath and I just did makes me sick to my stomach.

“Actually,” I almost whisper, “I should wash first. The warrior that—” Before I can finish the sentence, Pearl grabs my face, squeezing hard and forcing me to look at her.

“You will not mention the warriors or what just happened in the caves,” she hisses. “Now, get into the bath. You smell terrible.” She shoves me away and leaves. Adam smirks but turns and follows her.

I sigh in relief and turn to the bath. No amount of fear or worry can stop me sinking into the warmth of it right now, so I strip off quickly and slide in, closing my eyes in delight as I lie back.

Aurelia appears ten minutes later, and I sit up quickly. She glances back like she’s worried someone will come. “Sorry, I just wanted to see if you need anything.” I shake my head. “I’m the first daughter,” she informs me, and I instantly relax. “So,

I'll take care of anything you need."

"I was a first daughter too," I whisper.

She smiles. "I know."

"Is he cruel?" I ask.

She thinks over my words. "Yes, and my brothers are worse. There's no point me lying to you, you'll find out for yourself." She steps closer. "Pray you are pregnant," she whispers.

"Pregnant?" I falter, letting her words sink in.

"By the warriors. He won't touch you if you are."

"Daughters of warriors are not supposed to get pregnant," I mutter.

She glances back, checking the coast is still clear. "He will tell everyone he is the father."

"Why?"

"To make him look like a better man," she whispers. "The same thing has happened to my mother. Sometimes a warrior, other times one of the other three forefathers. My father has no blood-related children."

"He can't have them?" I frown as she shakes her head.

"They tried for many years. Even before they came here. She almost left him, apparently, so he convinced her to come here."

“Where she couldn’t leave him,” I mutter.

“I should go. Convince him you’re pregnant as soon as you can.”

“What if I’m not?”

She looks away. “Pray you are, Wynter.” And then she leaves.

Wrath

The guards all stare at me in disbelief. I hunch over, placing my hands on my knees as I take deep breaths. “This isn’t helping,” says one. “You can’t keep smashing things.”

I pick up my stool and throw it his way. He ducks and it hits the wall next to his head. “We’ll have to use this,” he warns, holding the yellow gun.

“I already tried that,” says the other. “He’s too far gone for it to affect him.”

They back out, closing the door, and I shout out angrily. Until I see her, no one is coming in here.

I slump down on my bed frame. The mattress was the first thing I destroyed. Burying my head in my hands, I picture the way Wynter looked at me . . . making me feel every bit the monster I know I am. Everything I feared happened in that room today. I’ll never forgive myself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WYNTER

“Rules,” says Silas, sitting behind his oversized desk with a drink in his hand.

He nods to the seat opposite, and I lower into it.

I was summoned from the bath, and my hair is still wet, soaking the shirt Pearl gave me to wear.

“When outside my home, you will conduct yourself in a respectful manner.” I nod.

“If you cause any trouble, you will regret it.” I nod again. “Your father thinks you’re rebellious.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” I mutter.

“You will attend events with me and speak only when spoken to. And you will not converse with your family.”

“But my sister?—”

“I do not like repeating myself, Wynter. I set the rules, and you follow them. It’s simple. If you step out of line?—”

“I’ll regret it,” I reply, and his jaw clenches just like my father’s does when I do

something or say something that annoys him.

“You will show respect at all times, especially to Ava.”

“Actually, I have a question about that.”

His fist tightens, and he takes a drink before nodding once. “Go ahead.”

“The bedroom situation,” I begin. “It’s a little odd.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Won’t she mind me being there? I don’t want to upset her, so maybe I should sleep in the spare room.”

“The decision is made. Find Aurelia and give her a list of foods you like or dislike. My wife is overweight, and you will not become like her.” I choke back the words I want to say because his wife is curvy but definitely not overweight.

“You’ve lost the extra you were carrying,” he adds thoughtfully. “Being in the caves did some good.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I push to stand and head for the exit.

I find Aurelia in the kitchen preparing dinner. “Can I help?” I ask.

She smirks. “That would not go down well.”

“He’s busy, so he won’t know,” I say, grabbing a spoon and stirring the thick gravy. She smiles gratefully and slices beef from the joint.

“Do you eat with the family?” I ask, and she nods. “I was sometimes allowed to,” I tell her, “but mostly I had to watch everyone else eat.”

“As long as you don’t upset him, he’ll treat you fairly.”

“Did he coach you to say that?”

“You learn quickly,” she replies.

“I’m supposed to tell you what foods I like, but I like most things.”

“If you’d like extra, I can add it to our allowance.”

“Ah, well, he specifically said I should not get fat like his wife so . . .” I trail off when I see Ava in the doorway. “I’m sorry,” I mutter quickly, placing the spoon down next to the hob. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“Clearly.” Her expression is like stone, emotionless and cold, similar to my mother’s.

“I don’t like you in my daughter’s clothes,” she adds. “We’ll go into the village to find you something else.”

I glance down at the shirt and jeans. It’s the most comfortable outfit I’ve ever been given, and for once, I don’t feel like I stand out from the others. “I have some things at my father’s house,” I say. “I could go and get them?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she spits. “He can’t stand you. It’s why we’ve been burdened with you.” She turns her back and strides away. “Come.”

I glance at Aurelia, who gives a weak smile, and then I follow.

Ava walks fast as we head for the village, and I struggle to catch up.

I assume it's from years of trying to walk at Silas's pace.

But with everything I've been through in the last few hours, my body aches and my legs are weak.

She glances back a few times, eyeing me with irritation.

I'm relieved when we finally reach the clothes shop.

It's one of three and a place I've never been inside because my father always chose our clothes.

Besides, I'd spent most of my time wearing an apron while I scrubbed floors and cooked.

Inside, Ava breezes around, grabbing things and throwing them at the shop assistant who gratefully places them over her arm while eagerly following us around.

It's a small shop, and there's not a lot of choice, but Ava seems to find a couple things.

She pulls back a curtain and turns to me expectedly.

I stare blankly, and she groans in annoyance.

"In there," she barks. "You need to try them on."

I go into the small cubicle, and to my horror, Ava keeps the curtain back. "Undress," she orders impatiently.

I unfasten the shirt and slowly remove it, aware I have no underwear on because the only set I own felt dirty and the knickers were bloody. I push down the jeans and gasp at the blood stains in them. “Oh,” I whisper, feeling my face burn with embarrassment.

“Jesus,” she hisses, turning to the shop assistant. “Find her some underwear. Something plain.”

She returns seconds later with some knickers and a few bras.

I take a set and slip it on quickly. Ava hands me a long dress, and I slip it over my head and turn to the mirror.

It hangs loosely, and with no belt in the centre, it gives me no shape at all.

The fact it’s covered in pink flowers only makes me hate it more.

“I don’t think this is for me,” I say, turning to face her.

She grins. “It’s perfect. Next,” she says as she thrusts another in the same design but with a different pattern.

“Erm, maybe we could get a smaller size?” I suggest.

“These dresses are coming from my allowance,” she snaps, “and you’ll be grateful for them.”

I give a stiff nod and try on the second. It’s almost as hideous as the first, but Ava looks delighted.

I start to remove it, and she laughs. “What are you doing?”

“Getting my clothes back on.”

“They’re not yours. They’re Pearl’s. These are now yours, so keep it on.” I drop the hem and take one last look in the mirror before following her to the counter, where the shop assistant bags the first dress and Pearl’s clothes.

We go to the next shop, and I gasp at the beautiful dresses.

It’s the sort of place my mother must have come to get her gowns for my father’s events.

“We attend the ceremonies,” says Ava, “and you need to look your best.” She picks a short black dress with a low-cut neck.

It’ll show more skin than I’m comfortable with, but I remain quiet as she also picks a loose-fitted dress that will come to my knees but hang off me like the others she picked.

We move to the underwear section, and she picks plain white cotton. She then gets two nightdresses that will come to my ankles and practically cover me from head to foot. It suits me just fine—the last thing I want is her husband seeing me in anything that’ll give him the wrong idea.

When we get back to the house, dinner is ready, and I’m led into the dining room where everyone is already seated. Silas sits at the head of the table with Ava to his left, and he points to the empty chair on his right for me.

My stomach growls as Aurelia serves each of us with roast beef, and then we help ourselves to vegetables from the bowls in the centre. I’m pleased when she joins us, realising that at least Silas isn’t as cruel as my father.

We eat in silence, and once dinner is finished, Silas tells Ava to go to bed.

She does so without question. Pearl and Katherine leave the table, and Aurelia begins to clear the plates.

I stand to help, but Silas takes my hand in his and smiles.

“Let’s go into the library,” he says, and a nervous lump forms in my throat.

I trail behind as he leads me to another room, and Adam and Reginald follow.

They close the double doors, and Silas pulls me close to him. “Finally, we’re alone.”

I glance at his sons and mutter, “Well, not exactly.”

His arm wraps around my waist, holding me to him while his spare hand runs through my hair. “Pretend they’re not here.”

“That’s hard to do,” I almost whisper.

His hand moves down my arm and to my dress. He begins to gather it, pulling it up, and my heart slams harder. “Actually,” I say, forcing a smile as I press a hand to his chest, “I’m bleeding.”

He drops the dress, narrowing his eyes. “Are you trying to put me off?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s just that after earlier with the warrior—” He slaps me so hard, my ears ring. I clasp my face, fighting the tears that spring to my eyes.

“You were told not to mention that again.”

He shoves me away, and Adam catches me, smirking as his arms wrap around my waist. “We should check,” he tells Silas, who waves a dismissive hand but nods.

“I’m telling the truth,” I argue as Reginald lifts my dress. I try to push him away, but Adam grabs my hands, holding them at my sides. I begin to hyperventilate as the earlier incident seeps through my mind, stealing my breath and forcing me to relive it.

Reginald taps my cheek a few times, and I blink, inhaling sharply. “Stay with us,” he snaps.

He tugs my cotton knickers down and stares at the blood. “Does it matter if she is?” he asks, looking back at his father. Silas huffs and joins him, looking into my underwear with contempt.

“Go to bed,” he snaps, and Adam releases me.

I’m so relieved, I almost fall to my knees as tears trickle down my cheeks and I rush from the room.

“Aurelia,” he bellows, “come here.” I turn back just as she rushes from the kitchen.

We exchange a look, and she gives a sad smile before disappearing into the room.

Adam and Reginald leave, closing the doors.

I turn and rush up the rest of the stairs, not wanting to risk them ignoring their father.

Ava is sitting in bed reading. She sighs heavily when I enter the room and slams the book closed before placing it on the dresser.

I go to the bathroom and change into the awful nightdress she chose and then go back

into the room.

She watches me as I go to lift the sheets back on the opposite side of the bed.

“I don’t think so,” she snaps, grabbing a thin pillow and throwing it my way. “Floor.”

I hold the pillow to my chest and stare at the spot beside the bed. “You want me to sleep on the floor?”

She smiles cruelly. “Yes.”

I sigh, dropping the pillow and lying down. I hear her moving, then the cold air begins to blow through the air conditioning, and I roll my eyes. I don’t blame her for hating me as she’s his wife, but seriously, if she thinks I want to be here, she’s delusional.

I drift off to sleep, my eyes heavy from the day’s events.

I wake sometime later because the light flicks on, flooding the room in white.

I blink a few times, covering my eyes until they’ve adjusted.

Silas is standing over me. “Why are you on the floor?” he demands.

I slowly sit and glance over at Ava, who looks away.

“Erm, I wasn’t sure where to sleep,” I whisper.

“Did Ava tell you to sleep here?” I stare at the floor, unable to lie but equally unable to speak the truth.

He reaches down and takes me under the arms, pulling me to my feet.

“You’re freezing,” he snaps, pulling me to him and wrapping his arms around me.

For a second, I forget myself and close my eyes, enjoying his warmth.

“Ava, swap places with Wynter,” he orders.

“Silas, surely you don’t believe her over me?” she asks.

“Wynter might be pregnant,” he bellows. “She cannot sleep on the floor, especially with no blankets.”

She sighs heavily, grabbing a throw and making her way around the bed.

Silas takes it from her. “I don’t think so.

” She slowly drops to the floor, and he gives a satisfied smile, lifting the sheets back and patting the bed for me to slide in.

I do, and he gets undressed, throwing his clothes over the chair.

I try not to look, but his manhood is right there, and when he sees me staring, he smirks and climbs in beside me.

“Where did you get that godawful nightdress?” he asks, pressing the boost button on the air conditioning so it blasts colder.

“Ava chose it,” I mutter.

He laughs. “Of course, she did. Take it off.”

“Erm, I have nothing beneath it.” Apart from knickers, I’m naked, and I don’t want him seeing me again.

“Take it off,” he repeats more firmly.

I do so, and he reaches down beside the bed and grabs a handful of Ava’s hair.

She screams in fright as he drags her to her knees.

“Swap,” he tells her. She stands, and I notice the sexy black silk slip she’s wearing.

It’s not something I’d ever wear, and I certainly don’t want to now, but I’m not sure I should question it when she looks so scared.

She slips it off and hands it to me then pulls on my nightdress.

Once Silas is satisfied, he turns out the light and lies down.

I settle beside him, my heart still racing.

I feel his hands reach for me, shuddering when he pulls me into his arms and throws his leg over mine. The fact he’s completely naked and pressed against me makes me feel sick. The only man I want near me is Wrath.

My mind wanders back to earlier. The humiliation I felt was horrendous, but if it had to happen, at least it was with Wrath. I just hope he isn’t suffering from it.

The fact we could have made a child together warms my heart . I have to get us out of here.

Wrath

Jaycee enters cautiously, glancing around at the mess of the room.

She keeps her hand out in a placating manner, all the while inching closer.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and I glare at her.

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll try my best to get it.

But you have to stop this. They’re talking about killing you, Wrath.

They’re meeting the forefathers tomorrow to ask for advice. ”

“Wynter,” I mutter.

She frowns. “You want Wynter?” I nod. “All this because you want Wynter?” She laughs, shaking her head. “Jesus, we thought you were having a breakdown. Okay, I’ll see what I can do. But no more funny business.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WYNTER

Silas wakes me by kissing me on the cheek. I start, my eyes wide with fear. He smiles, cupping my cheek and placing a kiss on my forehead. “Shower and join me for breakfast on the terrace,” he says, pointing to the double doors that lead out onto the terrace.

Once I’m showered, I step out, and the heat from the sun warms me instantly.

Silas pulls out the seat beside him, and I sit, staring at the array of sweet pastries on the table.

I’m surprised that Ava isn’t here, but he distracts me, pouring tea into my cup.

“Once we’ve eaten, I thought we could go shopping,” he says.

The fact he’s being nice concerns me, so I remain quiet.

“The dresses Ava chose are not really you,” he continues.

“I’m not sure what is me,” I mutter.

“There’s a ceremony this evening, and you’ll need a dress that fits.”

I only manage one pastry, delighting Silas as he comments on my small appetite.

Once we've finished, he takes my hand and leads me downstairs to where Ava is waiting in the hall.

She looks tired as she approaches and stands on her tiptoes to kiss Silas on the cheek.

"Good morning," she greets, smiling up at him.

He stares blankly until she looks my way, "Good morning, Wynter."

"Morning," I reply, knowing full well she's been forced into this fake niceness.

"I'm taking Wynter shopping," he announces, and her expression changes to shock. "You can help Aurelia get Pearl ready for this evening."

By the time we get to the village, my mind is racing with questions. I assumed he would have Ava by his side, but his sudden change in mood towards her worries me. If he's not concentrating on her, his full attention will be on me.

We enter the same shop as yesterday, and the assistant looks concerned. "Were the dresses not acceptable?" she asks Silas.

"My wife has terrible taste," he tells her. "My new wife is younger and thinner, and she needs to dress appropriately."

The assistant smiles. "I have some new items out back. Let me get them."

Silas browses the underwear, picking out a few items that don't look like underwear at all. He hands them to me. "Try these on."

I take them, not wanting to be the reason his mood sours.

I go into the cubicle and close the curtain, relieved when he allows it.

I stare at the red bra. It's lace and there's no coverage, and the matching knickers are worse.

I sigh before undressing and slipping them on.

I scream in surprise when he tugs the curtain back, and I wrap my arms around myself.

He sniggers, slapping my arms away and taking a step back to admire me.

His appraising eyes don't make me feel warm and loved like Wrath's do, so I turn away to look in the mirror and gasp.

The reflection doesn't look like me. I look . . . sexy .

The assistant returns holding an armful of clothes.

"Okay, this is in season," she says, holding up a short black dress that looks like I'd need a machine to stretch it over me.

She dumps the pile and begins to wrestle me into it.

When she's satisfied, she steps back smiling.

"Perfect." Silas is also smiling, nodding in approval.

I spend the next hour trying on different items, all of which Silas loves, and we end up taking everything. After, he slips his hand in mine and leads me across the road to the bakery. When he senses my reluctance, he pauses. "What?"

“The owners don’t like me,” I mutter.

He stiffens. “Why do you care?”

“Because I’m the reason they lost their child.”

He tugs me forwards, leading me inside. Abel’s father glares at me but smiles at Silas.

“Are you eating in?” he asks, and I frown.

I’ve never been invited to eat in, and I’m surprised when Silas leads me through a door into a café area.

I recognise two wives from the other families, and they smile in Silas’s direction.

We’re seated and brought coffees. “Don’t slouch,” he murmurs, his lips hardly moving.

I sit straighter. “Sorry, I’m nervous.”

“There is no need to be.”

“You put a lot of pressure on me,” I whisper, and he almost smiles. “I have to be on my best behaviour, remember?”

“Are you happy with the clothes?” he asks, stirring his drink, and I nod. “Words, Wynter.”

“Yes, Silas, thank you so much.”

He grins. “You like sarcasm.”

I shake my head, worried I’ve annoyed him after spending a nice hour in his company. For a while, I almost forgot who he was and how much I hate him. “I’m being genuine.”

He nods. “I’m glad you like them. When you’re happy, there’s a light in your eyes,” he says, hooking a finger under my chin and tipping my head up to meet his gaze. “You’re very beautiful.” I’ve never really had a man compliment me, and I blush. “Eyes greener than the ocean.”

I smile. “I’ve never seen the ocean. Isn’t it blue?”

He thinks for a moment before adding, “It appears blue, but from above, there are definitely green areas too. Maybe one day I could take you?”

My heart skips a beat. The thought of leaving the village thrills me, and I have to take a breath to calm myself. He grins wider. “You like that idea?”

I shrug, acting casual. “I’ve never thought about being outside, but I think I’d be safe with you.”

My praise works, and he tries to hide the smile as he takes a sip of his coffee.

Clara, Adrian’s wife, approaches. “Silas,” she greets, “is Ava not well?”

He places his cup down and stares until she wilts slightly. “She’s helping Pearl get ready for this evening.”

“Of course. We’re very excited for you all.”

“I’m sure you remember Wynter,” he continues. She eyes me warily. “She’s my wife now, too.”

“Oh, I wasn’t aware.”

“Were you supposed to be informed?” he asks, arching a brow.

She smiles, stepping back. “I’ll leave you to your coffee.”

He rolls his eyes as she scuttles off back to her friend, probably to gossip. “Nightwear,” he announces, standing. I jump up, surprised by his sudden outburst. “You need better nightwear.”

We go into the third clothes shop, the one we didn’t visit yesterday.

I gasp at the full wall of underwear. There’s not one item made of white cotton in sight.

As we pass, he selects a few pieces, and when we reach nightwear, it’s mostly like the slip Ava wore.

He sighs. “I was hoping for something different.” The assistant smiles knowingly and leads us out back.

She opens a few boxes, and Silas roots through, pulling out the things he likes, which mainly consist of silk but in different styles.

“We also need shoes,” he tells her. “Heels.”

I stare at the red heels held out in front of me.

“Try them,” the assistant says, plopping them on the ground.

I kick off my canvas flats and slip them on, wincing at the way they squeeze my feet.

I wobble, grabbing her arm to steady myself, and Silas grins.

“You’ve never worn heels?” I shake my head.

“You can practise when we get home.” He turns to the assistant. “We’ll take them in red and black.”

By the time we get home, I’m exhausted. Silas leads me to the bedroom and dumps the bags on the bed.

Ava appears from the bathroom, eyeing the bags in annoyance.

“Just the person,” says Silas. “Help Wynter practise walking in those things,” he says, pointing to the shoe boxes, and then he leaves.

I sit on the edge of the bed, slip off my shoes, and rub my feet.

“He’s smiling,” she mutters, lifting the lid from the box and arching a brow. “Red.”

“He chose them,” I utter.

“Of course, he did. He likes his whores to be in slut colours.” She drops the shoes at my feet, almost hitting my toe, and I wince. “Well, put them on.”

I push them on and grab the bed post to steady myself. “I didn’t want this,” I tell her.

“Yet here you are.”

“My father forced me into it,” I spit.

“Because you’re a temptress,” she hisses angrily. “And now, you’re doing it to my husband.”

“I’m not a temptress,” I screech.

“Your mother saw it, and I do too. You tempt the men around you, making sure they give you whatever you want.”

“I do not,” I snap. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Silas re-enters, stopping when he senses the frosty atmosphere. “Ava, are you helping her?”

“Of course,” she says through gritted teeth. She takes both my hands, leading me like a toddler as I walk across the floor. Silas sits on the bed, watching as we walk back and forth until I’m doing it unaided.

“Try on these,” he says, reaching into a bag and retrieving the red lace underwear.

I stare wide-eyed then glance at Ava, who is looking at the floor. “Right now?” I squeak out.

“Right now,” he confirms with the hint of a smile. “With the heels.”

I slip from the summer dress he purchased, realising I don’t feel as self-conscious with both of them here anymore.

Maybe everything that’s happened has forced me to let go of any embarrassment.

I remove my white bra and replace it with red.

I do the same with the knickers and slip the heels back on.

I feel like an animal in the zoo as Silas stares at me. “Walk,” he orders.

He watches every step, his eyes darkening. “Ava, leave,” he orders, and my step falters. I can’t be alone with him dressed like his whore.

Once she leaves, he approaches me, his stance tall as he crowds me.

He cups my face in his large hand and tips my head back slightly, pressing his lips to mine and swiping his tongue into my mouth.

“You’re stunning,” he whispers. His hands rest on my hips, and he glances down between us.

“With the body of an angel.” He pulls me against him, and I feel his erection pressed to my stomach.

“But for now, I’ll leave you be. I know you’re probably sore and still bleeding.

” I nod, relief flooding me. “But soon, my love. Soon.”

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I hear screams of pleasure as I pass Silas's office and head for the kitchen, where Aurelia smirks. "It happens often," she tells me, "but not usually with Mother."

"Oh," I whisper, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"I like the dress. It suits you."

"Thanks."

There's a knock on the kitchen door, and we exchange a surprised look. She opens it, and I gasp at the sight of Martha, rushing to her and wrapping her in a hug. "I'm so glad to see you," I cry.

"We don't have time. Come," she whispers, taking my hand.

I glance back. "I can't. If he finds out?—"

"I'll cover," says Aurelia. "Don't be long."

The second we're alone, Martha turns to me. "I've been so worried about you," she whispers.

I smile. "I've been worried about all of you. Is Wrath okay?"

"Not really. They pulled all the warriors out two nights ago, took them off, and he's been acting crazy since they returned. He's smashed his room and won't eat or drink." I begin to walk towards the caves. I have to be with him. "Where are you

going?” she asks, rushing to catch up.

“To see Wrath.”

“That’s not a good idea,” she says, grabbing my arm to halt me. “Jaycee managed to get through to him, so he’s calmer.”

I narrow my eyes. “How did she get through to him?” I’m surprised by the feeling building inside me. The urge to keep Jaycee from him is overwhelming.

“He talked to her, opened up a little.”

I stiffen at her words. “He talked?”

“Only to her.” She gently pats my hand. “It’s a good thing, Wynter. Since you’re now here, how else will we communicate?”

The one thing I had with Wrath that no one else did was the fact he trusted me enough to talk to. “Look,” she adds, “he said your name. I think he wants to see you, so Jaycee begged me to come here to get you.”

I nod, heading for the caves again. This time, she rushes to get in front of me, stopping me for a second time. “What, Martha?” I snap, instantly regretting it. I never raise my voice—it reminds me of my father too much. “Sorry,” I mutter.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. If you get caught, I’d hate to think what they’ll do to you.” She glances past me at the large house. “Are they treating you well?”

I frown. “How did you know I was here?”

She looks to the ground. “Your father told me, said you wouldn’t be returning

because you'd married a Morales."

I scoff. "I was forced to sign my name in a book, does that count as a marriage?"

She looks me up and down, and I shift uncomfortably. "You sure look married."

"I'm fighting for my life here," I hiss. "Keeping on his good side is my top priority so he doesn't beat me, or worse, set his sons on me."

Her eyes soften. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be sarcastic."

I take her hands in mine. "I still plan to get us out of here," I tell her, "but you have to be patient while I figure this situation out."

She nods, taking a deep breath. "Maybe I can give Wrath a message?"

"Tell him I'll come and visit him soon. I just need to let things settle here before I can sneak off."

When I go back inside, Silas is just entering the kitchen. He eyes me suspiciously, and I smile. "I needed some air."

"Next time, tell me so I can come with you. There's a dress upstairs on the bed. You'll wear it for the ceremony."

I stare at myself in the long mirror. I don't recognise the person staring back.

Silas had Aurelia apply makeup to my face, something I've never worn before.

I was so fascinated with all the things she applied, I lost track of what she was doing, but as I look at my reflection now, I'm stunned into silence.

Aurelia fidgets beside me. “Do you hate it?” she asks nervously.

I slowly shake my head, glancing her way before moving closer to the mirror. “I look so . . . so . . . different.”

“Good different?”

“Yes. Unbelievably different. I’m glowing.”

She smiles, relief flooding her face. “Thank the Lord, I was panicking there for a second.”

I turn to her, taking her hands. “You have a talent.”

She laughs, blushing. “I practise in secret at night.”

“Yet you’re not wearing makeup whenever I see you.”

She scoffs. “My father would kill me . . . literally. Anyway,” she grabs her bag of tricks, “I have to sort Mother’s next.”

The bedroom door opens, and Ava enters. She looks me up and down with hatred before taking a seat at the vanity table. Aurelia joins her, clipping her hair away from her face.

I step into the long, black dress and pull the thin straps over my shoulders. It clings to my body like a second skin, and as I’m trying to zip the back, Silas enters. He audibly gasps when he sets his eyes on me, and I find myself smiling under his praise.

He approaches, immediately taking the zip and pulling it up.

Then he turns me to face him and removes the clip that Aurelia used to pin my hair up.

It tumbles down, and he gently guides it over my shoulders.

“I like it down,” he whispers, kissing my cheek.

“You look amazing. Join me for a drink.” He takes my hand and leads me from the room.

We step out into the garden, where there’s a small table set up for two with glasses and a bottle of something.

“Your first ceremony as my wife,” he says proudly, taking the bottle.

“It’s a reason to celebrate.” He pops the top off, laughing when it flies through the air and some of the contents spill out over his hand.

He half fills each glass, handing one to me, then he gently taps his glass to mine.

“To us.” I follow his lead, taking a sip and coughing when the bubbles hit my throat. He grins. “So, how has it been so far?”

“Huh?”

“Being my wife?”

I stare out across the green fields. “It’s been different.”

“How so?”

“Not anything like I expected. All I’ve ever known is how to take care of others, and suddenly, I don’t have to do that anymore.”

“I know Ava’s been . . . cold towards the idea,” he mutters, “but she’ll soon settle.”

“How is it for you?” I ask, frowning as my words tumble out unexpectedly.

Silas looks just as surprised. “You’re asking me?” he almost whispers, and I nod. “I’m pleasantly surprised, Wynter. Being around you brings back memories of how I once felt about Ava.” His smile fades. “I didn’t expect that.”

“What did you expect?”

He grins. “Trouble. Your father was very clear that you were not easy.”

“And yet I haven’t caused you any trouble at all,” I say innocently. We both laugh.

“What if Ava doesn’t accept me?” I shouldn’t care, but deep down, I do. I don’t want her to hate me or resent me, and she most certainly will if he keeps being nice to me like this.

“She has no choice.”

“Would she be allowed to marry another man?” I ask. His eyes come to mine, and his brow furrows slightly. “Is that a possibility? If men can marry more than once, can women?”

He smirks, finishing his drink. “We should make our way to church.”

Wrath

I squeeze my eyes closed as my heart slams faster in my chest. My feet pound hard on the running machine, and sweat drips from me, soaking my shirt.

I slow the machine when I hear the door open.

Jaycee comes in. “I need to be quick,” she whispers.

“Anna is distracting Alex for me. Martha saw Wynter. She said she will come to see you soon. She just needs to slip away unnoticed.”

I frown, stepping from the machine and grabbing my towel. The chain on my ankle clanks, and I growl in frustration. “Where is she?”

“At home with her family.”

“No,” I say, because I don’t believe it for a second.

“That’s all I know, Wrath, I swear. You can ask her yourself when she comes. Until then, you need to eat something. I think you’re fighting tonight.”

“Why?”

“You’ve not been yourself, and the guard went to Sanchez. If you lose tonight, the winning warrior will take your place.”

“Good.” I sit on the bench.

“No, not good,” she snaps, dropping to her knees before me and looking into my eyes. “What do you think they’ll do to you if you’re no good to them? You’re not going to end up somewhere nice for a retirement. You have to fight and win. Otherwise, you’ll never see Wynter again.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WYNTER

I fidget uncomfortably, and Silas places a hand on my knee. “Relax,” he whispers.

“It reminds me of before,” I mutter, lowering my eyes.

“You’re looking at it all wrong,” he replies. “This is an honour. Pearl has been waiting for this day since she was a small child.”

I watch Pearl lying in wait, noting that she doesn’t look nervous like Summer did. The familiar sound of chains causes me to jump with fright, and I lower my head again, praying it isn’t Wrath. I sigh in relief when I peek up and see Zeus practically pulling his guard towards Pearl.

“Can I ask a question?” I whisper.

Silas nods but looks mildly irritated and keeps his eyes on the scene before him.

“Why are they so . . . feral?”

“They’re given medication, and they watch things to stimulate them. They need to be ready to fulfil their duty.”

I glance up just as Zeus braces his arms either side of Pearl.

It reminds me of the caves and what I had to go through, instantly causing me to feel

sick.

Pearl groans, but I keep my head lowered, fear gripping me until I can hardly breathe.

Ava whispers in Silas's ear, and he takes my hand and squeezes it.

"You need to watch," he mutters. "You're making me look bad. "

"I'm sorry," I murmur, tears filling my eyes at the sound of grunts and breathy moans. "I can't help it."

His arm moves around my shoulder and his hand goes into my hair, taking a firm grip and tugging my head up.

"I have a wonderful evening planned. Let's not ruin it.

" I swallow the lump in my throat and stare at the statue of Jesus behind where Pearl and Zeus are in ceremony.

"Good girl," he praises, and I shudder with repulsion.

It feels like it goes on forever, and just when I think I can't take another second, Zeus roars and Pearl begins to sob. At first, I think it's from the pain, but as she sits up, I see they're tears of joy. I glance over at Summer, who catches my eye and offers a weak smile. At least it's over.

We gather outside, and the forefathers stand off to one side to talk. Ava smiles wide as their wives approach and purposely stands in front of me so I can't be part of their conversation. That suits me—I don't want to see my mother and pretend we're all happy.

Summer joins me, and I notice her hand placed carefully over a small bump. “How are you?” she asks.

“I’m okay,” I reply. “You?”

“Okay.” Then she smiles sadly. “Not okay, actually. Scared. Father is meeting with Silas tomorrow to discuss a marriage between me and one of his sons.” I gasp. “Are they that bad?” she asks, panic lacing her words.

“No,” I lie, forcing a smile. “Of course not, I’m just surprised.”

“I always thought he’d choose Lucas Perez. At least he seems nice.”

“Try not to worry too much, Summer.”

“I’m starting to think that what you said before, well, you were right.”

“Shush,” I hiss. “If anyone hears you . . .”

She smirks. “I used to say the same thing to you. Now, all of a sudden, you’re shy about your true beliefs?”

“I’m not shy, it’s just difficult with prying ears. Ava hates my guts and will do anything to get me into trouble.”

“I don’t want to bring my baby up here,” she whispers, her voice breaking as tears fill her eyes. “I’m sorry for the things I said. I was upset, but I need you.”

I slip my hand in hers. “I’ll think of something. I promise.”

Silas leads me through the caves, and I try to keep up in the stupid heels he made me

wear until we break out into a large area where lots of other men are.

I spot the occasional woman, but there are mostly men.

And there, in the centre, is the fighting ring.

I glance up to where the cove is in the cave wall, wondering if Jaycee and Anna are up there watching again.

“What is this?” I ask innocently.

Silas smiles. “I’m taking you to your first fight.”

I look around. “Fight?” I repeat. “I didn’t think I was allowed to this sort of thing.”

“I make my rules,” he says proudly. “Besides, it’s a big night,” he adds. “Your father thinks his warrior is declining.”

“Wrath?” I ask on a gasp.

“Yes. They all do eventually. Your father didn’t use him wisely.” He looks gleeful about this. “They need equal fights to ceremonies,” he explains like he’s some expert. The sickness in the pit of my stomach returns. “So, Wrath will fight for his life tonight.”

“Life?” I whisper, looking around the room in the hope I’ll catch a glimpse of him.

“Yes. He’ll fight up-and-coming warriors until he beats them all.”

“And if he doesn’t?” I ask, my hands now shaking with fear.

Silas grins. “He’ll die. Only one warrior will walk out of here tonight.”

A stray tear falls down my cheek, and he pulls me closer, wiping it with his thumb. It reminds me of the way Wrath did it once and a sob escapes me. I clamp my hand over my mouth. “Sorry,” I mutter.

“Why are you sad?”

“I’m not. I’m excited,” I lie, “but I think I have allergies down here.”

He seems to accept my lie and leads me closer to the centre. “I got us ringside seats.”

Once we’re seated, drinks are brought to us, and then my father approaches. I notice the way Silas tenses. He immediately takes my hand and smiles up at my father. “Anthony.”

“I hope your money is on the right warrior,” he says with a grin. He doesn’t bother to look in my direction, but I take comfort from the fact Silas is holding my hand tight. I don’t think he’d let my father hurt me.

“Actually, I haven’t made any bets as yet,” he replies, turning to me and smiling as he adds, “I was going to let my beautiful wife choose for me.”

I blush slightly. “Bet?” I ask.

“You’re so innocent,” he whispers. “I like that.”

“I’ll send someone over to take it,” my father mutters before sauntering off.

“What’s a bet?” I ask again.

“We place money on who we think will win the fight. If they do, we’ll get extra money back.”

I smile. “That sounds fun.” And then I remember that we’re actually betting on someone to win by killing others and my smile falters.

The men begin to jeer and become rowdy, and I sit closer to Silas, who looks pleased and wraps an arm around me. “I’ll keep you safe,” he reassures me. I hate to admit it, but I believe him.

My breath is taken when Wrath enters the ring.

His head is bowed, and his hands are chained in front of him.

I want to go to him and wrap my arms around him just to feel his nose pressed to my hair as he inhales.

I want to kiss him until my toes curl. Most of all, I want him out of those damn chains.

Another man gets into the ring, and this one is smaller than Wrath and looks terrified.

A man approaches us. “Bet?” he asks.

Silas looks to me. Smiling, he asks, “Who will win?”

I glance back at the warriors, even though I know who I’m going to back.

“Wrath,” I confirm, and as if my voice is carried through the crowd, Wrath’s head lifts and he turns in my direction, his eyes searching until they land on me.

For a second, it's like the entire room has stopped and it's just the two of us.

God, how I wish that were true . Relief passes over his expression, and then his eyes track to Silas, who is still sitting close as he thumbs through a wedge of bank notes and hands them to the man.

He throws his arm back around me, oblivious to the fact Wrath is watching.

His relief turns to fury, and my vision blurs from tears.

A bell rings, causing me to jump with fright.

It breaks our intense eye lock, and as I look around, it rings a second time, and the guards remove the warriors' cuffs.

It rings a third and the warriors charge at one another.

I wince as they crash together, Wrath landing on top of the other and sitting over him.

He hits him over and over with his fists, roaring like an animal as blood splatters across the floor.

I wince, turning away, unable to watch him transform into this monster while at the same time rooting for his victory.

The bell sounds again, and I finally look up. The opponent is being dragged from the ring, lifeless, and he's discarded to the side, covered in his own blood.

Wrath circles the ring, unphased by the splatters that drip from his own body. Is it wrong that I'm glad? I'm happy it isn't his blood.

The next warrior enters and the bell rings, signalling for the guard to remove his restraints.

Wrath stops pacing and stares at the warrior from across the ring.

This one looks a little less nervous as he balls his fists, and for the first time, I realise it could be Wrath they drag out and dump next.

I swallow the bile in my throat, forcing a smile when Silas glances my way with a huge grin on his face.

As I look around, I see the other men all calling for blood like hungry wolves, and it only intensifies my sickness.

The bell rings again, and I almost cry out and beg for this all to end.

Wrath doesn't charge this time. Instead, he stands poised, ready to pounce but in no rush.

His opponent is eager, and he closes the gap only to be met by Wrath's hand, which wraps around his throat and forces him back to his corner.

The warrior tries desperately to fight back, but his arms don't quite reach Wrath, making it impossible to hit him away.

I almost smile, relieved Wrath has it all under control.

When the warrior slumps, Wrath releases him, watching as he slides to the floor of the ring. The bell rings, and the man's dragged out and dumped alongside the other.

Wrath looks my way, but he's not the same warrior anymore.

His eyes are lifeless and cold. He's in the zone, the zone to kill and fight for survival.

I offer a weak smile, but he doesn't return it.

I've taken no notice of Silas as he continues to place bets on Wrath to win, but suddenly, I tune back in as he hands over a third wedge of cash and says, "Satan."

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“Good choice,” the man replies, handing him a ticket.

Silas leans closer. “This new warrior is a beast,” he tells me excitedly. “Wrath doesn’t stand a chance.”

I take a calming breath as the next warrior enters the ring.

He’s huge, bigger than Wrath and angrier-looking.

He almost smirks as the bell rings and his chains are removed.

I look over to Wrath, who’s still looking at me.

I offer another reassuring smile, and he tips his neck from side to side, flexing his fingers before turning his focus back to the ring.

The next bell rings and Wrath runs forward.

Satan sidesteps him, and Wrath misses. My heart sinks, only for it to lift seconds later when Wrath hits him over the head from behind.

Satan hardly flinches, and I clasp my hands together in a silent prayer.

Satan spins, grinning like a madman as he makes a grab for Wrath and body slams him to the floor.

He scrambles to sit over him and begins to rain punches down on him. “No,” I

whisper.

“We’re cheering for Satan, remember,” says Silas, laughing. “Come on,” he calls to the fighters. “Keep him down.”

Wrath suddenly roars, half sitting and shoving Satan from him.

He falls back, and Wrath climbs over him, fists balled as he slams them against Satan’s head and face.

“Yes,” I scream, jumping out my seat. A few men look my way, and I gather myself, realising all too late that Silas is also staring at me in shock.

I lower back into my seat and give a small smile.

“Sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

He smirks. “I do,” he says, brushing my hair over my shoulder and leaning closer. “Bloodlust,” he adds, pressing his lips to mine. I don’t react at first, shock freezing me, but as his lips work against mine, I close my eyes and lose myself. Just for a second.

But it’s enough, and I feel the storm before I hear it.

I look up just in time as Wrath growls and charges our way.

Silas stands in front of me, keeping his promise to protect me, even against the man I

.

. . love. Love. Christ, I love Wrath. What the hell am I doing getting lost to another man, a man like Silas who finds this shit fun.

I go to move around him, but before I get a chance, Wrath falls to the ground, his eyes wide and his body jerking.

There are wires attached to his chest, and the guards stand over him with their stun guns drawn.

I watch helplessly as they chain him, and then the six guards each grab a limb and take him away.

All the while, his eyes are on mine, only he's back.

It's the Wrath I know and love, but this time, they're full of sadness.

Silas flags the man taking bets and hands over his tickets.

The man gives him a payout for the first two fights, and then Silas turns to me, unphased by Wrath's sudden attempt at an attack.

"Let's go and have dinner," he suggests, taking my hand in his.

I'm too lost in my own head to object, and really, how will it help anyway?

We head back to the house. My heart hurts, and my mind is full of the things I need to say to Wrath, even though I have no idea when I'll get to see him again.

Realising my true love for him changes everything, I can't sit by and watch another death match like tonight, and I certainly can't watch him have sex with anyone in a ceremony. Duty or not.

Ava is on the porch, and she stands, kissing Silas on the cheek in greeting. "Did you have a nice evening?"

“Is dinner ready?” he asks, ignoring her question.

“Of course. Out on the terrace, like you asked. Am I to join you?” she asks with hope in her eyes.

“I’d like to spend some alone time with Wynter.” She nods before rushing off into the house.

“I’m happy for her to join us,” I say, following him through the house and out to the terrace, where the table is set for two. Aurelia steps out to light the candles as we seat ourselves. “The table looks lovely, Aurelia,” I remark. “Thank you.” She bows her head and goes back inside.

Silas stares at me from across the table as he pours us each a drink.

“I chose the wine from my oldest collection,” he tells me, nodding for me to try it.

I take a sip, nodding in approval, and he grins, topping my glass up some more.

“You thanked Aurelia for carrying out her duty,” he muses, sitting back in his chair.

“Manners cost nothing.”

“She’s supposed to move around this house unseen and unheard, but I get the feeling if I asked you to respect that, you’d only make her more seen.”

I take a large gulp of wine, hoping it calms my nerves. “She’s still human. She shouldn’t be ignored. No one should.”

“This is what your father was talking about, no?”

“He beat me many times for not adhering to his rules.”

“You didn’t like being ignored?”

“Who does?”

He smiles, taking a drink of wine. “Well, you’re seen now.”

“Shouldn’t we all be equal?” I ask, feeling braver as the wine warms my insides.

Aurelia returns, placing a dish in front of each of us. Salmon sits on a bed of salad, and I smile. “Thank you.”

“Aurelia,” he says, and I look up, hoping I haven’t got her into trouble, “do you think we should all be treated as equals?”

She looks terrified and eventually says, “I think everything is just as it needs to be, sir.”

He smiles, satisfaction dripping from him. “See, she’s happy.”

“That’s not what you asked her,” I point out as she scurries away.

“Do you know why I chose you?” he asks thoughtfully, and I shake my head.

“I was bored.” He laughs to himself. “Bored of this life. Bored of the rules and my family.” He takes another drink before placing the glass down.

“I didn’t realise that until after you came.

I thought I’d chosen you because I craved the control I would have over you.

” He smirks. “I had all kinds of creative ways to punish you, to break you.” His eyes meet mine and the blue shines a little darker.

“Some for my pleasure, others for yours.” I blush, looking down at my plate.

“We should eat,” he announces. “Tuck in.”

I take a small amount and savour the taste.

I’ve never eaten so much luxurious food, and I’m conscious of looking greedy if I eat too fast or eagerly.

We eat in silence. I’ve noticed he likes it this way, and as we finish, he holds out a hand for me to take and leads me onto the decked area.

He presses something on a small remote from his pocket and music begins to play.

It’s not often music is played here, and we don’t have radios or any kind of device to play it on.

But it’s refreshing, and as the soft sounds from a violin fill the air, he pulls me to him and wraps his arms around me, slowly swaying to the music.

When we’re like this, I can almost pretend the bad stuff didn’t happen.

That Wrath didn’t fight for his life tonight.

And that there aren’t people counting on me to get them out of here.

Wrath

My head aches as I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling.

She kissed him . I wasn't prepared for it.

Wynter had given me hope of happiness, and I was even starting to believe that she liked me too.

I was a fool because why would she when she could be with a man like him.

A man who roams freely. I have nothing to offer her down here.

But what hurts more than anything is she talked about a life outside this place.

She almost had me believing we could get out of here.

When I saw her sitting beside the ring tonight, I had something to fight for.

It was a sign to keep going. I won't live like this anymore.

I give up. Without Wynter, there's no point.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WYNTER

It's been a week since I last saw my sister after Pearl's ceremony.

I had to get special permission from Silas to meet her, which I asked for while snuggled beside him in bed earlier today.

I've learned very quickly that I get what I want when I catch him off-guard.

Silas agreed, on the condition I take one of his guards with me.

She's sitting on a wooden bench that overlooks the small park. She smiles as I join her, and my guard goes to speak with hers, meaning at least we can catch up without them listening in.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Father spoke with your darling husband," she says in a sarcastic tone. "God, I hate him," she whispers.

I slip my hand in hers. "Silas never mentioned it."

"I'm to marry Adam."

My heart squeezes. "I'm so sorry."

“I guess at least we might see one another more?”

“When will you marry?”

“After the birth.” She buries her face in her hands. “He’s made some requests that Father granted without speaking to me.”

“Like?”

“He doesn’t want me to breastfeed.” I frown. It’s the only way women feed their babies here because the forefathers don’t agree with formula unless there’s a specific reason. We even have wet nurses. My mouth falls open in surprise as I realise what he’s suggesting. “A wet nurse?”

She nods. “A wet nurse and a nanny. I can’t even raise my own child.”

“It’s not unusual to have a nanny,” I say gently.

“This is my child,” she snaps. “I want to feed it, and I want to raise it.”

“If it’s a boy, he might change his mind and be more accepting.”

“How is the marriage?” she asks on a sigh.

I shrug. “It’s not awful.”

The news surprises her, and she stares at me through wide eyes. “Really?”

“Ava hates me, but that’s to be expected. He’s awful to her.”

“But how does he treat you?”

My heart aches, unable to lie but not wanting to admit the truth. “He treats me well,” I say honestly. “He eats dinner with me on the porch. He plays soft music, and we dance.” I think back to the other night and tears fill my eyes. “He took me to a fight.”

She winces. “They’re not nice.”

“No, not at all. When I was in the caves, I made friends with the warriors.”

She twists to face me. “What?”

“They’re not bad, Summer,” I whisper, glancing nervously at the guards.

She pulls her hand from mine. “After what they did to me?”

“And me,” I add, and she recoils. “Father chunked me in there too, as punishment, I guess.”

“At least you made friends with them,” she spits.

“You don’t understand,” I hiss. “Did you know they’re taken from out there?”

” I ask, pointing to the wall surrounding the village.

“They’re just little boys when they’re stolen and brought here.

And then they’re forced to fight, and they have teachings rammed down their throats about our beliefs, or at least theirs,” I tell her, looking back up the hill at the four looming houses.

“They force-feed them pills and make them watch things, explicit things, Summer, and then they send them into the ceremonies all riled up. They don’t know any

different. ”

She knots the hem of her dress around her finger. “It all feels such a mess,” she whispers.

“I know,” I agree, “which is why we need a plan.”

She nods eagerly. “Okay, any idea what’s beyond that wall?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly, but I know people who lived out there before. If we can just make it out, we can find more help.”

“We’ll never get past the guards. They man the gate twenty-four-seven.”

“The caves lead out,” I say in a low whisper. “We just need to find a way.”

“If there’s a way out, why hasn’t anyone ever left?”

“How do we know they haven’t?” I ask. “I’ve got an idea, but I don’t know how it will work out. I’m winning Silas over.”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s not worth it. He could have you killed.”

“Not if he loves me,” I say with confidence. “Just trust me. Maybe he has a map of the caves or something. How else do they know where to go? If he lets his guard down, I can look in his office.”

“Wynter, it’s not going to be that easy.”

“Trust me,” I say, standing.

“I have a dinner with Silas tonight. Are you going to be there?” she asks. I shrug. “I really hope you are.”

Silas is waiting on the porch when I return. He stands, greeting me with a kiss on each cheek. “How was Summer?”

“Nervous,” I say. “You didn’t mention she is to marry Adam.”

He looks away, slipping his hand in mine and leading me inside. We go into his office, a place he doesn’t allow anyone. “If you haven’t noticed, there’re not a lot of options for marriage amongst the four families.”

“It wasn’t well thought out,” I point out.

“On the contrary, it was my idea to allow the forefathers to have more than one wife to stop this from happening again.” He takes my hand and smiles. “Did you enjoy time with your sister?” I nod. “We’re having dinner with her this evening. I would like you to be there too.”

“Whatever you think is best,” I reply.

I descend the stairs after spending an hour getting ready. I’ve never had to worry about having my hair or makeup just right, and even choosing an outfit is complicated these days.

Silas waits for me at the foot of the stairs with his right arm hooked out for me to take.

Ava appears from the kitchen and takes his left arm.

He waits a beat before saying, “Tonight is important. I do not want any problems or

tension. You will get along and put on a show. Anyone who cannot follow my orders will face severe punishment.”

“Of course,” I reply.

Ava nods, and he waits, glaring straight ahead until she answers properly with a defeated, “Yes.”

Satisfied, he glides through the hall towards the living room. The guard opens two large doors, and we enter like royalty. For a second, I understand why Silas and the other three fathers are addicted to the power.

My step falters when my father turns to face us with my mother on one arm and Anastasia on the other, his fake smile wide.

My mother’s smile is tight. She’s had her hair curled to perfection, and her lipstick’s brighter than the red dress Ava chose to wear.

I went for a subtle navy blue, and I notice Silas is wearing a matching tie.

It’s almost like we’re in sync without meaning to be.

He shakes hands with my father, who moves to kiss Ava on the cheek. My mother follows suit and then Summer appears from behind her and does the same. Anastasia lingers longer on Silas than necessary.

My father turns away, and I feel Silas stiffen as my mother then Anastasia follow like sheep. He clears his throat, and Father turns slightly, arching a brow. “You forgot to greet my wife,” Silas says firmly, a challenge in his tone.

Father laughs. “When I agreed to this farce of a marriage, I made it clear she was no

longer a part of my family.”

Silas matches his amused expression. “Exactly. She is my wife. You didn’t greet her.”

My father’s smirk fades, and he sighs before stepping closer. “Wynter,” he mutters, leaning in and briefly pressing his cheek to mine. Before any of the others can do the same, I turn to Silas and smile. “I need the bathroom.” He kisses my cheek and gives a nod.

I spend at least five minutes trying to steady my racing heart.

I didn’t expect my father to attend, which, now I think about it, is stupid.

Why wouldn’t he? But either way, I hadn’t prepared myself, and I feel both nervous and sick at the same time.

How can I have dinner with a man who treated me no better than a dog and make conversation with the woman who gave birth to me like she’s no more than an acquaintance.

When I rejoin them, they’re seated for dinner, and I take my place to the left of Silas. I’m relieved Summer is beside me, and she gives my hand a quick squeeze under the table. Adam and Reginald have also joined the family, with Adam seated at the opposite table end to Silas.

“Welcome to our home,” Silas says as Aurelia tops everyone’s glass with something fizzy.

“Champagne,” Father says, holding his glass in the air as if to examine it. “Classy.”

Silas sniggers. “Only the best for such a celebration, don’t you agree?”

He nods, smirking as he holds it more to the centre of the table. “To our families merging.”

“To families,” repeats Silas, doing the same with his glass.

Everyone else seems to follow so I do the same, clinking glasses before we all take a sip.

I wince as the bubbles hit the back of my throat and almost push out through my nose.

I giggle, and Silas smiles, handing me a napkin.

“Although we already merged after I married Wynter, no?”

It’s met with silence, and I stare down at my empty plate. I feel my father’s anger rolling from him as he sits straighter and fixes Silas with a glare. “She is the daughter of a warrior. She isn’t ranked high enough to be part of any family, let alone a celebration of merging the two.”

“Maybe it’s time we changed that.” I lift my head to stare at Silas in surprise. “Maybe lots of things need to change.”

My father smirks, placing his glass down. “Like?”

“If we continue to marry amongst our four families, our bloodlines will become muddy.”

“Your point?”

I glance around to see everyone with their heads slightly bowed, except Adam and Reginald, who are watching their father through surprised eyes. “You know the risks of mixing bloodlines.”

“What risk?” I blurt out, instantly regretting it when my father chuckles in that cold way he has that makes me feel stupid.

“Do you see what is happening here, Silas? Talking business in front of the women isn’t wise.”

“Because what we think isn’t important?” I ask, frowning. “Even though this mixing of bloodlines might affect the same women who carry your children?”

“Are you allowing her to speak to me like that?” Father asks Silas.

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Silas places a hand on my knee and gently squeezes as a silent warning to behave. “You’re right,” he says with a smile. “We will discuss it at the next meeting. Aurelia, we’re ready for dinner,” he adds, and she nods, disappearing into the kitchen.

Dinner is served, and I’m pleased when Aurelia joins us, much to my parents’ horror.

We eat the meal in silence, like always.

When everyone is full of roast chicken and fresh vegetables, Aurelia begins to collect the plates.

As she picks mine up, I grab her wrist and smile warmly.

“Thank you so much, Aurelia, that was delicious.”

I feel my parents watching the exchange, and Silas sees it as a chance to rile my father some more, so he also thanks her. She’s so surprised, she just nods before rushing off to the kitchen.

Silas suggests drinks out on the terrace, and we break out onto the decked area. He keeps hold of my hand, pulling me to him. “I think you’re rubbing off on me,” he murmurs close to my ear.

“I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

He smirks. “Although your father doesn’t seem to believe it, I am his equal. All forefathers are.”

It's the first time he's mentioned my father with a negative tone, and I take the chance to steer him in the right direction. "Really? He always talked about being in charge," I say innocently, feeling him stiffen. "He always led us to believe he had a final say on everything."

"Interesting," Silas mutters.

"When he talked about making changes, I assumed you were all in on it."

"Changes?"

I pause. "Maybe I shouldn't say."

His eyes narrow. "Wynter, your loyalties are with me, not your father."

I place a loving hand on his chest. "You're right," I whisper. "He talked about being the leader . . . the only leader." I let him take that in before adding, "He doesn't believe he should run things by you and the others. He wants sole charge."

"When did he say this?"

"In the caves," I tell him. "Right before you came and saved me."

He places a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Go and spend time with your sister." Then, he heads off to speak with my father.

Summer grabs my hand. "He makes my skin crawl," she whispers.

"Who?"

"Adam. He's creepy."

I nod in agreement. “Try not to worry. I’ve already set the wheels in motion,” I say excitedly.

The plan wasn’t even a plan until the opportunity presented itself, and now, my mind is racing with possibilities.

I glance around to make sure no one is listening before adding, “If I put doubts in Silas’s mind about Father, maybe things will unravel. ”

“How?”

“Let’s talk about this in the office,” Silas shouts, and I turn to see my father marching towards me with a furious expression. He strikes me before Silas can reach us, and I land in a heap on the floor.

“Telling lies is a sin,” he screams, grabbing my arm and pulling me to my feet.

I grip my face, letting my tears fall freely. “I haven’t lied,” I say.

Silas breaks us apart. “How dare you come into my home and assault my wife?” he bellows, and I shudder.

It’s the first time I’ve heard him sound so angry and out of control.

“You think you’re above everyone?” He exams my face, wiping my tears with his thumbs.

“Are you okay?” he asks gently. I nod, amazed that amongst all the chaos, he’s checking in on me.

He turns back to my father. “My office. Now.” He surprises me by taking my hand

and leading me there too.

Once we're inside, my father spins to face me. "You have lied. You will be punished."

"I am the only one who can punish her," snaps Silas.

"I haven't lied," I repeat, the nerves getting the better of me as the gravity of what I've said hits me. If my father convinces Silas I lied, I dread to think how my life will suddenly change again.

Silas takes my hands in his and looks me in the eyes. "Tell me again what was said."

I nod. "My father told me he created this place where marriage means everything, and that he is God." Silas glances at my father with a raised brow. "He said one day he would rule it alone."

"I did not," Father yells, and Silas holds a hand up to silence him. It's a good feeling to have someone boss him around for once, and I can just imagine the fury burning through him right now, not that I dare to look for myself.

"He said you were just a means to an end so the villagers would trust in him. He wanted to hang those children so he could later blame you and the others. He plans on more public punishment."

"Why are you listening to this crap?" Father demands.

"The hangings were your idea," Silas states.

"Which we voted on and you agreed."

I resist the urge to pull away at hearing how he'd vote to kill innocent children. "Because I wanted Wynter," he bellows, "and you basically said that would happen if I backed you." His words stun me momentarily. I assumed he chose me after he saw what happened in the caves.

"I cannot believe you're letting this . . . this whore convince you—" Silas rushes him, and they crash against the bookcase. He lands a punch, and my father splutters in confusion.

"Leave," Silas tells me as they grapple for control.

I don't wait to be asked again, rushing from the room.

I pull the front door open, and the two guards stand straighter.

I wince then smirk as another plan forms in my mind.

"You're needed in the office," I say with panic lacing my words. "They're fighting."

Wrath

I close my eyes and try to picture her. Wynter. Her green eyes begging me to kiss her. I'm so weak, I can hardly bring myself to smile, and just as quickly as I conjured her, she disappears.

"Wrath? Wrath?" I prize my eyes open and there she is again, leaning over me with her small hands gripping my shirt as she shakes me awake. I want to lift my hand and touch her face to see if she's real, though deep down, I know she's not.

"He's refusing to eat or drink anything," I hear a woman say, and I frown. Wait. Is she real? I try to lift my head to see, but it hurts too much. I groan.

“Get me the water,” I hear Wynter order.

I feel a gentle hand supporting my head and then something is pressed to my lips. At first, I refuse to part my lips. “Please, Ares. Drink for me.” My vision begins to clear, and she’s smiling back at me.

“Wynter,” I whisper, my voice cracking from dryness.

“Yes. It’s me.”

“But . . .”

“Drink, Ares,” she repeats. “You have to drink something.”

I sip the water and it cools my throat. After a few more sips, she takes it away and cups my face in her hands. “Why are you doing this?”

“You left me,” I murmur. The kiss comes back to me full force and I try to remove her hands, but she holds on with tears in her eyes. “You’re one of them.”

“I’m not, Ares. I’m not one of them.”

“I saw you,” I snap.

She releases me as someone hands her a bowl.

She scoops something from it and holds it to my lips.

“Eat so we can talk,” she orders firmly.

I shake my head, and she groans with frustration.

“Why? What will you achieve by refusing to eat or drink? You’re giving up, and then they’ve won.

” My stomach growls as the smell hits my nose, and my mouth begins to water. “You want to eat, so just try, for me.”

I open my mouth, feeling like a child as she places the spoon in. I close my eyes, savouring the taste of warm porridge.

After a few mouthfuls, I turn my head away, and she sighs, placing the bowl down.

“I didn’t want to leave,” she says, her voice quiet.

“I had no choice, just like you have no choice being in here.” She waits a beat before adding, “One of the forefathers decided he wanted to marry me.” I clench my jaw, and she finally meets my eye again. “Say something, Ares. Please.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WYNTER

His eyes are sunken, and he's got a lost look in them. The second I entered the caves, Martha was alerted, and she was relieved to see me, wasting no time begging me to encourage Wrath to eat.

There are no guards down here currently, only Alex, who seems to be on our side, surprisingly. Martha didn't have to convince or beg him to let me see Wrath.

She lingers in the doorway with a worried look on her face.

"Where are the guards?" I ask her.

"They've taken Jax for the main entrance and haven't replaced him yet. With the warriors in here locked away, they seem to think we'll be fine. They only send extra guards when moving them."

"How long has he been like this?" I ask, watching Wrath stare at the ceiling with a tight jaw and clenched fists.

"Since you left really. He got worse after the fight."

"Does my father know?" Wrath tenses further.

"Yes. He's giving him until the end of the week and then he'll have him removed."

My chest tightens. “What does that mean?”

“Killed,” mutters Wrath, and he brings his eyes to mine. “I can’t wait.”

I gasp. “You don’t mean that.”

“I have nothing, and I’m tired, Wynter.” I’m so enthralled by his raspy voice, I almost don’t hear his words.

I focus and scowl. “Just hold on. I’m trying to get us out of here.”

He sits suddenly, almost knocking me from the bed. “Let’s go,” he says, holding out a shaky hand. I stare at it, and after a few seconds, he retracts it. “You have no intention, and I don’t blame you. You have no reason to leave now.”

“It’s not just us I’m fighting for,” I say.

“If you’re holding out for your new man to leave, I think you’ll be waiting a while. He seems very settled here in his fancy house.”

“I know it looks bad,” I mutter, averting my eyes.

“It is bad,” he yells, and I flinch. “You gave me hope, Wynter. I’ve even started to see her again,” he adds, tapping his head, “in here.”

“Who?”

“My mother.” I clap my hand over my mouth to stop the sob escaping, and tears fill my eyes. He sighs again. “I gave up hope of ever seeing her, but you’ve shown me it’s possible.”

“I’m working on it.” The pressure I’m feeling weighs me down as my heart beats faster. If my plan doesn’t work by coming between my father and Silas, I’ll have to find another way, and Lord knows how long that will take. Looking at Wrath, I’m running out of time.

“What sort of things are you doing to get his help?”

I shake my head, confusion furrowing my brow. “Silas isn’t helping me.”

“Really?” he scoffs. “You can’t even look me in the eye.”

“I haven’t done anything,” I cry.

He shakes his head sadly, pushing to his feet. “It’s not as if you owe me anything, Wynter. Just go. You’re safer up there playing happy families.”

“My father forced me to marry Silas. Right after you . . . we . . .” I sigh. “After what happened in the caves, Silas forced me to sign a register and then took me to his home. I didn’t get a say.”

He stares at the ground, his hands resting on his hips. “I think about that day a lot.”

“Me too,” I admit, swiping my tears away.

“The look in your eyes,” he mutters, his voice cracking with emotion, “I don’t think it’ll ever leave me.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I tell him, stepping closer. Our eyes meet, and I gently run my hand over his cheek. “I don’t blame you.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

More tears roll down my cheeks, and I force a smile. “Me too.”

“You should go to him,” he eventually says, turning away.

“Don’t be like this,” I cry, frustrated at the way he so easily dismisses me. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

He spins back to face me. “I can tell you what I don’t want you to do,” he snaps, closing the gap between us until I have to tip my neck back to see his angry face. “I don’t want you to kiss him, Wynter. I don’t want you to close your eyes and lose yourself in his kiss.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“I don’t want you sharing his bed.” He takes a calming breath. “Are you sharing his bed?” The pain in his expression hurts me even more.

“Don’t do this,” I mutter.

“Did he buy you these clothes?” he asks, plucking at my dress. “And the fancy hair and makeup?”

“It’s just part of the game,” I explain, desperate for him to understand.

“Game?” he scoffs. “You even sound like them.”

“I have to fit in until I can find us a way out.”

“There is no way out, Wynter,” he yells, and I stumble back in fright. “It was easy to believe you when you were down here like the rest of us, suffering and full of hatred. But now . . . now, you’re with them, living a good life, an easier life.”

“Easy?” I cry, almost laughing. “You think I have it easy because I get to eat dinner and dress in clean clothes?” I wipe my wet cheeks and rub my hands down my dress.

“I spend most of the time reminding myself to breathe because I’m so damn terrified that one wrong move will have me hanging in the town hall.

And then all the people who are relying on me to get them out will suffer.

I have to avoid his wife in case she stabs me in the back, literally.

I hide from his sons because they’ve made it quite clear they like to share with their father.

And Silas,” I take another breath and slowly nod, “I could easily forget he’s the bad guy. ”

Wrath growls, his hands curling into fists as his eyes burn into me.

“But as nice as he’s being, I’m under no illusion he can flip it and be equally as cruel.

So, yes, I lie beside him at night, but do I rest?

” I shake my head. “No, because all I can think about is you, Ares. And if he found out . . . well, we’d both end up hanging. ”

His head is bowed, and his eyes are fixed to the ground. “You’re mine, Wynter. He can’t keep you.”

“Just eat and drink and do what you need to do to survive because I can’t keep worrying about you, Ares. I’m going to get us out of here,” I say with as much conviction as I can muster.

He finally lifts his gaze from the floor. “Okay,” he mutters.

I give a stiff nod and head for the exit, not looking back in case I break completely.

The second I step into the house, Silas rushes from his office and sweeps me into his arms. “Where did you go? I’ve been worried sick.”

I’ve been so lost in thought, I forgot I might have broken a rule. “Sorry. I needed some fresh air.”

“You didn’t take a guard.”

“They were dealing with you and my father,” I mutter, pulling free to look around. “Have they gone?”

He nods, cupping my face in his hands. “You look pale,” he says. “Are you hungry?” I shake my head. I haven’t been feeling well all day, and food is definitely the last thing I want. “I could run you a bath and get you a book to read?”

I smile gratefully. “I think I’m just going to go to bed.” The last few nights have been awkward because Ava has joined us. Silas is always in the middle, and usually wrapped around me, but it still feels weird.

“I like my idea better,” he says, taking my hand and leading me upstairs.

Ava is nowhere to be seen, and I’m thankful but sigh heavily when Silas goes to the bath and begins to fill it with scented bubbles and hot water. “Undress,” he tells me, then he hands me a plastic pot, “and you’ll need to pee into this.”

I frown. “Why?”

“All will be explained,” he says with a smile.

I do as he asks, first peeing in the pot and then undressing. Silas returns to the bathroom naked. I gasp, automatically covering my own body best I can. He smiles. “Wynter, we’re husband and wife, we’re allowed to be naked together.”

“It’s just . . .” I glance at the door. “What about Ava?”

He takes my hand and leads me to the bath. “It’s just us tonight.”

I swallow the dread in my throat. “Why?”

“You need to relax, and I noticed when Ava is around, you aren’t.”

He climbs into the bath and slides down into the water then holds his hand for me to take.

I hesitate, eventually taking it. I slide between his parted legs, and he pulls me to lean back against him.

I immediately feel his erection pressed against my back and sit upright.

He laughs. “Your innocence is adorable. Turn and face me,” he orders.

I take a deep breath before following his direction, and he takes my hand.

“I don’t expect sex from you yet, but we should get to know one another.” He wraps my hand around his penis, and I gasp, feeling my face flush with embarrassment. “It’s okay, Wynter.” He gives a small laugh. “I’ll show you how.”

He places his hand over mine and begins to guide it up and down in a slow motion.

“That’s it,” he whispers, his eyes darkening and his breaths quickening.

He watches me carefully as his free hand massages my shoulder.

“That feel good?” he asks. I nod even though I’m panicking inside.

Maybe I’ve been naïve to think he’d not touch me after lying beside me night after night and only holding me.

After the first few nights, I’d stopped worrying, so this has taken me by surprise.

His fingers trace over my skin and across to my breast. He watches carefully for my reaction, and when I don’t move, he drags them over my nipple.

I inhale sharply as a warm sensation shoots through my body.

My cheeks burn brighter, and I can practically feel the heat from them.

Silas smirks, taking my nipple between his fingers and rolling it. “It feels nice, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think we should be doing this,” I whisper, hating how my voice sounds breathy.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” he reassures me, leaning forward and capturing my mouth in a deep kiss.

I wince as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, pushing against my own.

He forces my hand to move faster, squeezing it tighter around his length.

He breaks the kiss, panting as he looks down between us. “This is what married people do.”

“It feels wrong,” I mutter.

“It’ll feel good, I promise.”

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His hand travels down my stomach, and when he presses it between my legs, I shift back suddenly, pulling my hand free and spilling water over the side of the tub and onto the tiled floor.

He stares at the wet floor, and I notice his jaw clenching. “I’m trying to be patient,” he says, his voice sounding unsteady with annoyance. He makes a grab for my wrist and hauls me to him, sitting me between his legs. “You’ll enjoy it, you just have to let me show you.”

I clamp my legs closed, and he sighs, pulling them apart and placing his legs over mine to keep them in place. His hand is back there, and I cry out in horror as he rubs me. His free hand cups my breast, teasing the nipple. “I promise it feels good, Wynter.”

His fingers part me, and I push back against him, trying to buck away.

“Relax, it’s going to be over soon.” He pushes his finger into me, and I begin to cry, sobbing uncontrollably as memories of the caves fill my head.

His heavy breaths in my ear make me feel sick as he uses his thumb to press against my sensitive area.

I feel too full, and as a warm sensation burns my body, I twist away, unsure if I need to embrace it or fight it.

“Don’t I treat you well?” he whispers in my ear.

“Like a queen?” My body is buzzing with a feeling I can’t describe, and I try to remove his hand, but he’s too strong.

He nips along my neck, and I shudder. “That’s it, just let go.

” I’m not sure what he means, but the feeling inside gets more powerful until I can’t fight it any longer.

It zaps through me like a volt of electricity, and I have no control as I convulse against him, groaning.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. The feeling begins to edge away, and his rubbing slows. He takes my hand and pulls it behind my back to take his erection again. “Grip it hard,” he instructs.

“I don’t want to,” I whisper, unable to stop the feeling of shame as he turns me to face him.

“Two hands,” he orders, forcing me to take him. “Now, do what I just showed you.”

“Please,” I sniffle, allowing a tear to escape down my cheek.

“Wynter, we just need to get it out the way, and then you’ll feel better about it. Trust me, it’s a good thing.” His head leans back, and he closes his eyes, gasping as I move my hands like he showed me.

My arms ache as I continue to touch him.

I watch as his abdomen tenses and he arches slightly, groaning before tensing.

I stare in amazement as liquid squirts from his penis, coating my hands and his

stomach.

I immediately let go, and he takes over, continuing until no more liquid squirts out.

His heavy breathing fills the silence, and I push my hands into the water to clean them.

He sits up, smiling. “See, it felt nice, didn’t it?”

” He grabs a sponge before I can reply and loads it with soap.

“Back here,” he orders, pulling me to lie against him.

He runs the sponge over my body, squeezing it so the bubbles trail over my breasts.

I zone out, letting the guilt of what just happened sink deep within me.

Wrath

“She needs us,” says Martha, and I turn my back and close my eyes. “I know you can talk, Wrath, I was here when you spoke to Wynter.”

“Leave.”

“You think death is the best option, but you’re wrong.”

“She’s falling for him.” It was written all over her face, and although she might have every intention to get us out of here, the more time she spends with him might mean things change.

“Who? Silas?”

“I saw it in her eyes.”

“You’re wrong. But either way, it changes nothing. She still wants out. Wynter won’t abandon us. I know she won’t.”

I roll onto my back and turn to look at her lingering in the doorway. “We should make a plan for ourselves, just in case things don’t work out with Wynter.”

She frowns. “What if we get caught?”

“And you didn’t think that was a possibility when Wynter was making the plans? Isn’t it worth the risk to get out of this hell?” I push to sitting. “We’ve all just accepted our fate here.”

“And you just want to leave Wynter?”

I shake my head. “I’m not going anywhere without her, even if I have to kill every man who stands in my way, including her husband.”

The guard appears behind Martha. “What’s going on?”

I lie back down, and Martha steps farther into the room. “He’s like us,” she tells me. “Alex wants out of here too.”

I scoff. “It’s true,” he says, nodding. “I’m just as trapped.”

“You have keys,” I snap.

“Not to anything important.”

I laugh, sitting up again and staring in disbelief. “You hold the keys to all the warriors

in here.” Alex shrugs, looking baffled. “The four strongest men here.”

Martha sighs. “The others might not want to join us,” she says. “Wynter built a connection with them, but they’re not as trusting with us.”

“Then let them out,” I say.

Alex laughs, his smile soon fading when he realises I’m deadly serious. “They might turn on me.”

“We need Wynter,” says Martha. “They trust her.”

Footsteps have us all looking towards the door, and I inhale sharply at the sight of Wynter.

Her hair is wet, and she’s wearing a thin night dress.

She’s been crying, and I stand, immediately growling when my chains restrict me from going to her.

“Unlock me,” I yell. Alex hesitates, glancing at Martha for permission.

She nods, and he carefully approaches, eyeing me suspiciously.

He unlocks the metal cuff on my wrist and it falls away.

The red mark is clearly visible, and I rub it.

It’s the first time I’ve been without the metal there in a long time.

I grab the blanket from my bed and go over to where Martha is comforting Wynter.

I wrap it around her shoulders, and she stares up at me with red, tear-filled eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. I pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her.

She buries her face into my chest and sobs, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

“We’ll be right out there,” Martha whispers, nodding to the door before grabbing Alex and pulling him from the room.

Wynter looks up at me again, this time sniffing as tears leak from her eyes and trail down her cheeks. “I love you,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.” She breaks into a fresh round of sobs.

“And what about him?” I ask, holding my breath. I’m nervous for her answer because if she chooses him, I have to leave her behind, and the thought of that is paralysing.

“I don’t want him,” she reassures me. “I was confused. He was nice to me, and I thought if I could win him around, I could get us out of here. But I’ve realised that if we want to leave here, we have to overpower the forefathers.”

“I agree.”

She almost smiles. “You do?”

I nod. “Alex is on board. With your help, we can convince the other three warriors to help fight our way out.”

She shakes her head, pressing her hands to my chest. “That’s not what I mean, Ares.

” I wait for her to continue. “There are too many people relying on me to get us out, and I can’t do it if the forefathers are there to stop me.

I can't reach Summer if my father is still breathing.

"Her words settle, and I give a slight nod. "I want to kill them, Ares."

"Okay," I say.

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

I nod, cupping her face in my hands. "Let's go."

She smiles, relief flooding her face, but it soon fades. "There's got to be a plan," she mutters. "I need a little more time."

I shake my head. "No. You're not going back to him."

"It'll be easier this way," she reasons.

I run my fingers into her hair and gently tug her head back to look up at me. "I love you, and I'm not letting you go back there so he can hurt you again."

Her eyes glisten with more tears. "How did you know?"

"I know every expression you have, and the last time I saw this," I murmur, rubbing my thumb over her cheek to smear her tears away, "was when I was forced to?"

She reaches up, slamming her mouth to mine. We kiss, slow and gentle, and then she pulls back. "I don't blame you for any of that," she whispers, forcing a smile as more tears spill. "You've been made to do so much." Her breaths shudder as she sobs. "But I'm glad it was you."

I pull her back to me. "So, now what?"

“I have to talk to the other warriors,” she says against my chest.

“Okay.”

“It might be best if you wait here,” she adds.

I smirk, lacing our fingers together. “Not a chance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

WYNTER

I enter Maximus's room first. When he looks up, he appears genuinely pleased to see me, and I smile. But when he sees Wrath behind me, he jumps up from his seat, and Wrath throws me behind him, filling the doorway with his large frame.

"No," I yell, squeezing back between the pair. I hold my hands up, praying it's enough as they smash against Max's chest. "Please," I squeak out. "He's with me."

"I can see that," Max snarls.

"We want to talk," I add, and he takes a step back but still looks wary. I hold up the keys Alex gave me. "I can unlock you."

He watches as I remove his metal cuff, then he rubs his wrist, just like Wrath did. "What's going on?"

"We want to leave here," I state, and he frowns. "And to do that, we need your help."

He begins to laugh. "That's never gonna happen. This place is locked up."

"Are you at least willing to listen?" I ask, and he gives a stiff nod. I step to one side. "Okay, wait out there while I get the others."

His frown deepens. "Out there?" he repeats warily.

I take his hand, and Wrath grumbles behind me. “It’s okay, I’m right with you.” I lead him from the room, and the second he sees Alex sitting with Martha, he begins to back away. I take both his hands to reassure him. “They’re on our side.”

I move to Zeus next and get the same reaction. “You left,” he says accusingly.

“I know,” I whisper, smiling sadly. “It wasn’t because I wanted to.”

He glares at Wrath. “Why is he out?”

“He’s helping me,” I explain. “I’d like you to help too.” He nods, holding up his cuffed arm without question. I smile, unlocking him and taking him to join the others.

Abe gives me a hard stare then turns his back. I made Wrath wait just outside the room this time, knowing Abe would be more difficult, but as I step farther in, I feel him lingering near the doorway.

“I’m sorry,” I say. Abe doesn’t respond. “I didn’t want to leave.”

“We had to . . .” he pauses, sadness passing over his face. “We almost hurt you.”

I smile sadly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I can’t stop the feeling of guilt and?—”

I rush to him, pulling his head to my chest and cradling him. “It’s okay,” I whisper, running my fingers through his hair. It’s the first time he’s allowed me to touch him like this, but he falls against me so easily, I wonder if he’s ever been held.

Wrath stands in the doorway, and Abe’s attention is drawn to him. He dives up, and I stumble back. “He hurt you,” he yells, pulling when his chains restrict him.

“He didn’t want to,” I say, trying to push him back into the chair. “Relax,” I order, and he brings his eyes to mine, then they narrow.

“Why is he out?”

“Long story, but he’s helping me.”

“How?”

“To get us all out of here.”

Abe laughs. “Because it’s so easy.”

“With the four of you together, it can be.”

He glances back to Wrath. “You’re releasing all of us?” I nod. “Wynter, it’s too dangerous.”

“I need you all,” I tell him.

“We can’t control ourselves,” he snaps, now glaring at Wrath. “Tell her,” he orders.

“You can,” I argue, crouching before him. “They told you that you were monsters, but it’s not true. You can control yourself.”

“The things I’ve done,” he cries. “That we’ve all done.”

“I know,” I say, nodding, “but you didn’t do any of it because you wanted to.”

He laughs, and it’s cold. “Is that what he told you?” he asks, nodding at Wrath. “You think he hates the fucking?”

I glance at the floor, my cheeks colouring slightly. “Please,” I whisper.

“Of course, we like it,” Abe yells, getting in my face. Wrath moves fast, but I hold my hand up, halting him.

“You’re scared,” I state, looking Abe in the eye. “It’s okay, I am too. We all are. But I swear, we’ll stick together from this point on, and we can be scared or brave together.” I hold up the keys, waiting for him to agree. He eventually nods, and I uncuff him.

We all stand in a circle, the warriors glancing at one another with confusion and disbelief on their faces. Jaycee and Anna have also joined us, and I’m so relieved they’re both okay.

“So,” I begin, “there’s only one way to do this.”

“Walk right out of here?” asks Abe, his voice full of sarcasm as he rolls his eyes. “You’ve all lost your minds.”

“We end the forefathers,” I reply.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snaps.

“It’s the only way.” I look around the circle. “Without them, no one will know what to do, they’ll be in a state of panic.”

“And what, we just walk away?” asks Martha.

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I do know that while they’re still alive, we’ll never truly be free.”

“There’s an announcement tomorrow,” says Martha. “Everyone has to meet in the town.”

I frown. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“Wouldn’t it be the perfect time to strike?” asks Alex.

My stomach churns with knots of nerves. “What about the bar?” I look to Jaycee. “The one we visited before.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not a good idea. I’m certain the guards have made sure to tell horror stories about this place, telling people it’s some sort of secure unit for mentally ill people. If we all go charging in there, especially with these big bastards, we’ll only scare them.”

Alex nods in agreement. “Lenny made sure no one could leave that way.”

“Looks like the meeting in the town centre is the only way. At least they’ll all be together,” says Jaycee.

“Look, if you’re going to go through with this, isn’t it better to conquer and divide?” asks Abe. “There’s four of us and four of them.”

I chew on my lower lip, a plan forming. “Or,” I say, stepping into the centre, “we could lure them into the caves.”

“How?” asks Martha.

“Keep me here.” I turn to Wrath and smile. “Tell them Wrath is refusing to let me out.”

“They’ll send guards down with weapons,” says Alex, shaking his head. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“If they have weapons, they’ll come anyway, no matter what we do,” Anna says.

I groan. “I don’t know what to do.”

Abe steps forward. “We conquer and divide,” he repeats. “We partner up. Lead us to the forefathers’ homes, and we’ll take them out one by one.”

I take a minute, thinking over his words. “It’s the middle of the night,” I say. “That could work if we go now.”

“I have an idea,” mutters Wrath, and I turn to look at him, smiling because he’s finally spoken in front of everyone and I know that wasn’t easy for him.

“We round them up and bring them to the place where ceremonies take place.” He takes a deep breath, and his fists clench as his sides.

“Alex will go to each home, tell the guard on duty that Anthony Sanchez is requesting them to come alone to the church for a celebration.”

“What about Anthony Sanchez?” asks Alex.

“I’ll tell him myself,” he says firmly.

“And if they question it?” asks Martha, looking worried.

“Tell them I am the one on the communion table,” I say. “They’ll believe that, and Anthony will come, no questions asked,” I add.

Jaycee smiles. "I'll take the warriors over to the church."

"I'll help," adds Anna.

Wrath looks to Martha. "I need lemons, or maybe a cleaning product?"

She nods. "I have both. I'll get them."

"You're going to clean up after?" I ask, smirking.

"It'll be a different kind of cleanup," he replies.

I step closer and slip my hand in his. "Are you ready?" I ask as the others begin to file out.

He kisses me. "There's a fire burning in my soul," he mutters, not quite meeting my eye. "I need to know that you'll understand or at least forgive my actions. I want them to pay."

I nod, stroking a hand over his cheek. "Me too. Whatever happens tonight stays in that church."

We head up the hill, making sure to hide in the trees. Alex is just behind, ready to deliver the message to the other guards. As we approach the large gate to my old family home, I feel a sense of peace. After tonight, I might actually be able to set everyone free.

Wrath taps on the gate and steps back behind the brick pillar.

The guard opens it and frowns at me. I smile, offering a small wave, and before he can question me, Wrath moves from the shadows and hits him hard in the face.

The guard stumbles back, and Wrath grabs his jacket, hauling him against the wall and pressing his arm to his throat.

The guard gasps, trying desperately to tug his arm away and free his windpipe, but it's no use, Wrath is too strong.

A minute later, he stops fighting and his head slumps to one side.

Wrath carefully lays him on the ground and removes the taser from his pocket.

As we approach the front door, I notice the office light on and sigh in relief.

If Father is awake, this should be a lot easier.

The door is unlocked—they never bother to lock things here—and we slip inside.

We head straight for the office, and I carefully press the handle down until the door releases then slowly open it, sticking my head around just as my father looks up from his desk.

He frowns at the sight of me. “Evening, Father,” I whisper.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asks, jumping out his chair and rounding his desk. I wait until he's closer before stepping to one side and letting Wrath fill the doorway. I smirk when his step falters and he comes to an abrupt stop. “What's going on?”

“We need you to come with us,” I say, still smiling.

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, it’s not a choice,” I say sweetly. “And if you don’t come quietly, Wrath’s gonna make you.”

“Where are his chains?” he hisses.

Wrath punches him in the face, and he crumples to the floor, passed out cold. I grin. “Wow, you’re good at that.”

“Plenty of practice,” he mutters, grabbing my father’s arm and hauling him over his shoulder.

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By the time we arrive at the church, the other warriors are pacing.

They look relieved when we return and dump my father's unconscious body on the stone altar.

Wrath looks around. "I need some rope," he says, and Abe points to a curtain covering the doorway.

There's a thick tie back on each side, and I rush to grab them.

I find four in total and take them to Wrath, who picks my father up and carries him to the cross looming over the altar.

Abe and the others help him hold my father against the cross, and Jaycee and Anna tie his limbs to it.

When they all step back, I stare up at the man I've spent my entire life being terrified of.

He doesn't look so big and scary anymore.

"Remove his clothes," I mutter, and Wrath looks back at me.

"He should be as humiliated as we have all been."

Martha grabs the dagger which has been displayed on the church wall for as long as I can remember, and she hands it to Zeus, who makes quick work of removing my

father's clothes. I scoff, rolling my eyes. I always knew he'd have a small dick.

The doors open and Alex enters, followed quickly by the forefathers.

Silas pushes past him, his eyes searching frantically until they land on me.

They soften immediately, and I almost feel bad for what's about to happen.

He heads towards me, seemingly unaware of everything going on around him.

Wrath blocks his path, and Silas gasps, finally looking around the room to see everyone staring back.

"What's going on?" he demands, and I detect a waver in his usually confident voice.

Alex closes the church doors with a bang, and all three forefathers spin around in fright. "What the hell are you doing?" snaps Adrian.

"Sorry we had to get you out of bed," says Abe, smirking. "We'd like to present your leader," he adds, flinging his arm in the direction of the cross. The men stare wide-eyed. "You should take a seat."

Max moves towards them, and they scuttle into the nearest pew and sit down. "Wynter, what's going on?" Silas asks.

"Don't speak to her," Wrath bellows, and Silas shrinks back.

Groaning comes from my father, and he begins to stir, slowly lifting his head. He blinks a few times before frowning then tugging on his restraints. He glances down, seeing his naked body, and realisation crosses his expression. "Nice of you to join us," says Wrath.

He goes to the nearest stained window, the one where Jesus is spread on the cross, and he smashes it with his fist. He picks up a large shard and takes it back to where my father is hanging.

“I never believed in the bullshit you forced us to learn,” he tells him.

“Do you remember me, Anthony?” My father doesn’t answer, instead taking a large gulping breath.

Wrath places the shard to my father’s groin.

“All those days spent in your office,” he adds, and I frown, glancing at the other warriors to see if they know what he’s talking about.

None of them look surprised as Wrath adds, “The days spent bent over your desk while you fucked the devil out of me?” I gasp, slamming my hand over my mouth.

“Newsflash,” he whispers, “It didn’t work.

” He slides the glass into my father’s abdomen, and he screams in agony.

“I lost my voice after everything you did. How ironic that it was your daughter who brought it back.”

Wrath

I shake with adrenaline as I grab hold of Anthony’s flaccid cock and pull it towards me.

“All the times you whispered prayers in my ear while you got yourself off.” I drag the glass down one side and feel the skin break away.

I inhale the heady scent of his blood and smile.

“And every time you came in my ass, I pictured this moment,” I whisper, slicing through the delicate skin and detaching his penis.

His screams suddenly stop and his head slumps again.

I shake my head in annoyance and slap him across the face until he wakes.

His eyes are wide with fear, and when he opens his mouth to scream again, I ram his member between his lips and hold my hand over it until he chokes.

I feel a gentle hand on my back and glance to my left to find Wynter.

My chest heaves as I stare into her innocent eyes and realise what I’ve just done.

But instead of horror, I see love, and she smiles.

She produces a rag and taps my arm so I remove my hand, and then she shoves the rag into his mouth, making sure he chokes some more.

“Why was I so scared of you?” she asks him, tipping her head to one side as she stares at her father.

His eyes are wide and panicked as he tries to breathe calmly through his nose.

“I warned you, didn’t I,” she asks, smirking, “that the people would rebel.” She laughs.

“Bet you didn’t think I’d be leading it. ”

She turns back to the other forefathers. “Who’s next?”

“Wynter, we can work this out,” Silas pleads desperately.

“Looks like we have a volunteer,” says Zeus, grabbing him by the collar and dragging him from the pew to kneel at the altar.

“This isn’t you,” Silas whispers, his eyes begging Wynter to listen.

Wynter takes the glass from me and circles Silas. I can’t deny she looks more beautiful than ever holding all the power for once. I take a seat, watching as she stops in front of him. “I almost fell for it,” she tells him. “That act you put on.”

“It wasn’t an act,” he argues. “I’m in love with you.” I clench my jaw, resisting the urge to end this fucker.

“You were so nice to me,” she adds thoughtfully.

“The clothes, the dinners on the terrace, the dancing under the stars . . . you even promised to take me out of this hell to see what’s beyond the walls you’ve imprisoned me in.

” Her words cause an ache in my heart at the thought of him doing all those things with her, things I should have been doing.

“We can still do that,” he rushes to tell her. “I can take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I want my freedom,” she snaps.

“Done,” he tells her, nodding. “We can leave together and forget about this place.”

I stand, anger burning through me, but her next words still me. “You ruined it all,” she whispers, her voice breaking with emotion, “when you made me . . . touch you.”

My fists tighten into balls of fury, and I step closer. The thought of him putting her through any more trauma is killing me. “It’s what married couples do,” he argues.

“No,” she screams, shaking with anger. “I told you I didn’t want to, just like I didn’t want to go to the ceremonies, just like I didn’t want to share your bed or your marriage.”

“I only want you, Wynter,” he tells her, holding out his hands like he’s trying to reason with her. “It’s always been you.”

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head. “That’s not love,” she adds.

“Please,” he begs. “Don’t do this.”

She steps closer, until she’s within reaching distance, and he pulls her to him, pressing his forehead against her stomach. My heart twists as she begins to cry, running her fingers through his already dishevelled hair. “Please,” he sobs.

I hold my hand out to Martha, and she gives me the bleach. I remove the cap, but before I can use it, Wynter raises her hand, slamming it down and piercing his neck with the shard of glass. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “but you can’t live in this world with me.”

His hands release her, and he clasps his neck.

Confusion plays out on his face as he tries to hold the wound closed.

Wynter takes a few steps back, staring at her bloodied hands, and I move in, gripping

his hair and tipping his head back so he's staring up at me.

"You saw her naked one too many times," I tell him, squeezing the bottle and pouring bleach into his eyes.

He cries out, trying to wipe them clean but smearing it over his face.

The second it touches his open wound, he screams, and I cover his mouth so all he can do is inhale the strong chemical into his nose.

Satisfaction brings a calm feeling that settles into my bones.

I never thought this would be possible, and yet here we are, winning the war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WYNTER

I take a seat next to Anna, still staring at my hands. I'm shaking uncontrollably, and Anna smiles, gently taking my hands and using a cloth to wipe them. "It's the adrenaline," she explains.

"Am I a monster?" I whisper.

She shakes her head, glancing back when Cornelius is dragged from the pew begging for his life. "No, you're a survivor of something terrible," she says. "We all are."

"But I didn't feel sad," I admit. "I felt good when I stuck that glass into him."

She nods. "It's called empowerment. You're finally taking back what you should have had all along."

The warriors begin to beat both Adrian and Cornelius, all their frustrations flowing freely. "I don't know what to do next," I mutter.

She tucks my hair behind my ear and sits straighter. "You gave us the strength to make a stand," she says. "So, now, we stick together and leave this place behind."

"I don't know what's beyond those gates."

"It's not as bad as what's behind them."

I stay seated, staring at my father hanging limply, as the others begin to carry the bodies down into the crypt.

Alex knows a room beyond it where the forefathers hid other bodies.

Wrath joins me, and we sit in silence for a few moments, the gravity of the situation settling in.

“Are you sad because you loved Silas?” he eventually asks.

I turn to him. “No. Of course not.”

“Because I’d understand?—”

I cup his face. “I don’t love Silas and I’m not sad he’s dead. I’m sad it came to this, that we’ve been forced to do this, to have blood on our hands.”

“It was the final time,” he says, taking my hand in his.

“We have to tell the villagers,” I say, and I feel him stiffen. “There are too many bad men here, hiding behind this fake place created by those monsters. The women here should have the choice of freedom.”

“They might not be grateful, Wynter,” says Abe, rejoining us. Wrath shifts closer to me and almost smiles. “They’ll be scared.”

“Aren’t we all?” I ask. “I know I’m terrified.”

“Are you going to tell them what happened?” he asks.

I shake my head, pushing to stand. “No. We all need to shower and freshen up. When

the village wakes, we will meet them at the town hall and say that the forefathers have left us.”

Zeus is cutting the ropes from my father, and he falls into a bloodied heap on the floor, groaning. “Should I finish him?” he asks, looking to me for guidance.

I shake my head. “No. Let him die slowly amongst the rotting bodies he sent down there.”

Martha begins to squirt bleach onto the floor as he’s taken away, and Jaycee appears with a bucket of water and a brush. Between them, they wash away the blood.

I take a breath. “Let’s go back to our rooms and clean up,” I say. “We will meet in the village hall at sunrise.”

“Should I spread the word in the village?” asks Martha, and I nod.

Wrath takes my hand before I can walk away. “Where are you going?”

“To see my mother,” I say, standing on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“I’ll come,” he offers. “The guard may be awake now.”

We step into the house and we’re met with hushed whispers and the sound of panic. I head for the kitchen, and Summer spots me first. She gasps, taking in my bloodied hands, and runs to me, wrapping me in her arms. “Oh my god, Wynter. Someone took Father,” she cries.

I nod, unwrapping her arms. She glances down at my hands again, this time arching a brow. “What did you do?” she whispers warily. Then she sees Wrath and backs away with a horrified expression.

Annastasia begins to cry, and Mother stands. “Where is he?” she demands.

“He’s not coming back,” I say firmly.

Mother remains quiet as she assesses my face, but Annastasia wails like a heart-broken lover, and I wonder if he treated her better, like Silas did me. Summer is quiet, her eyes still fixed on Wrath. “All of you sit down,” I say firmly, and they do. “This is Ares,” I add. “He doesn’t talk much.”

I move to the sink and wash my hands, smiling as the water turns red with blood. “You might be able to wash it away, but it’s still going to haunt you at night,” snaps Annastasia.

“Oh, shut up,” Mother sneers. “I am so sick of your whining.”

“You can’t speak to me like that,” yells Annastasia.

“All of you shut up,” I yell, and they immediately fall silent.

I smile again. “I can see why he was so addicted to the power,” I muse.

“We’ve been trapped in this circus for far too long and it ends today.

There will be a meeting for the villagers in the town hall at sunrise.

They will learn that the forefathers have left us, and that from now on, there will be no more stupid ceremonies or warrior fights.

The young boys will be released, and we’ll be contacting the appropriate authorities outside of this village. ”

Mother sits up straighter, her brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“The boys were stolen, Mother,” I tell her. “Taken from families and forced here so they could be made to fight and become warriors.”

“No, that’s not true,” she mutters, frowning.

“I was one of them,” says Wrath, and I squeeze his hand to encourage him. “I was with my mother, and while she was in the store, I was taken and brought here.”

They all stare in shock. “I need the code for the safe,” I add. “The keys to the gates are in there, and from today, they will never be closed again.”

“They keep us safe,” Mother snaps.

“From who?” I cry. “Everything they told us was a lie, Mother. There is a real world out there, a normal one. You can leave here today and never have to fear him again.”

She stares at me open-mouthed. “Where will I go?”

I shrug. “I don’t have all the answers, but maybe someone out there will.”

I go to Summer. “You can keep your baby,” I say with a smile, and she returns it. “And you can meet the warriors. They’re not bad men.”

She recoils slightly. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she admits, and I nod.

“Okay. But they’re leaving with me too. They’re my responsibility.”

Wrath steps forward. “No one will hurt you,” he reassures her. “I promise.”

I use my old bathroom to clean up, and Wrath does the same. When I return to dress, he's lying on my old bed, staring up at the ceiling. "You know the other warriors will be with us for some time," I say, sitting beside him.

He brings his eyes to me. "I want you to myself," he admits, "but I understand you feel responsible for them."

"For all of you. Anyone who leaves here today will be with us."

"What happens to the ones who don't want to?"

I sigh. "I guess they can stay and live off the land as they were. But once outside authorities know about this place and the horrors, surely, they'll close it down."

He shrugs. "I've been thinking about my mother a lot." I lie beside him, and he wraps his arm around me. "Wondering if she's still alive, if she still thinks about me."

"She'll be the first person we track down."

He sighs heavily. "I don't even remember her name."

He sounds so lost, and my heart aches for him. I can't imagine what it felt like as a child to be dragged here. And she must have been out of her mind with worry. "I won't give up until we've found her."

"Are you ready to face the village?" he asks.

The truth is, I'm so nervous, I feel nauseous. "I owe it to them to explain everything before we leave."

"What about the families of the forefathers?"

“Without them leading, they’re nothing. I’m not afraid of them.”

He sits up. “I’ll be by your side.”

“Always,” I reply, smiling.

The villagers gather, everyone speculating and voicing their confusion. When the families show, they’re more than surprised to see me at the lectern. The warriors are all behind me with their hands behind their backs. No one suspects they’re free as I didn’t want to scare anyone.

Martha instructs the families to join the villagers, much to their disgust. I tap the microphone, wincing when it makes a squealing sound that pierces my ear drums. “Good morning,” I say clearly, and everyone starts to quiet down.

“For anyone who doesn’t remember me, I’m Wynter Sanchez, and I want to explain a few changes to this place.

” I take a calming breath. The pressure of having everyone stare at me is too much, but I can’t crumble now.

“Behind me are the four warriors,” I continue.

“Ares, though you know him as Wrath, Abraham is Michael, and Maximus and Zeus, who no longer recall their real names.” The crowd becomes unsettled, whispering to each other.

“They were taken when they were just boys, ripped away from their own families on the outside and forced to come here to serve the forefathers.” More unsettled chatter continues.

“Today, they are free to leave.” There’s an audible silence, followed by some outbursts of shouting about them being monsters.

I hold a hand up, waiting for them to settle down.

“They’re not monsters. They’re not warriors.

They were trained to fight, force-fed medication to make them bigger and stronger.

We were lied to,” I add. “We’ve all been lied to, especially the women.

” I scan the crowd until I find Summer, and when my racing heart calms a little, I ask, “How many of you were on the outside?” Lots of people raise their hands.

“How many of you are women who were being hurt outside this village by the man who convinced you to come here?” No one raises their hand, and I smile.

“You’re safe. I promise they won’t hurt you from this day forward.

” After a few seconds, hands begin to raise.

“Those men brought you here to keep you tied to them forever. They were promised a life with you where divorce wasn’t possible.

They took away your freedom, your money, your families, so they could keep you to themselves and make you fully dependent on them. ”

A man approaches the front, and Wrath steps forward, stopping him in his tracks. The crowd becomes hysterical. “Calm down,” I yell. “He won’t hurt you. He isn’t a monster.”

“Where are the forefathers?” someone yells from the crowd.

“They aren’t coming back,” I reply. “They’ve been found out and they’ve ran.”

“They wouldn’t leave,” another yells.

“The gates are open,” I inform them. “Only they have the keys.”

I hear sirens in the background and my heart rate spikes. Martha told me she’d make the call from my father’s office and explain things.

“I need you all to be calm,” I say. “The authorities are coming, and anyone who doesn’t want to stay here should speak to them and get help.

I have been assured they’ll help anyone who needs it, but you have to step forward.

They will keep you safe.” I scan the crowd, picking out the men in particular.

“And for those who have held their wives here, shame on you. You no longer hold the power.”

Wrath

The noise of the sirens is too much, especially with the blue lights flashing.

I glance at the other three warriors, who are all squeezing their eyes shut.

Wynter notices too. “Can they turn the lights and noise off?” she asks the woman who introduced herself as Officer Jayne Smith.

She talks into the radio attached to her vest, and one by one, they begin to turn off.

There are so many, it's almost a comfort.

The fact they listened to Martha and actually came is another hurdle crossed.

A man wraps a foil blanket around my shoulders, and I flinch, hating the feeling of being touched by someone I don't know. He apologises immediately, and I give a stiff nod. "Have you got a name?" he asks.

Wynter turns from her conversation with Jayne. "It's Ares," she says. "He doesn't like to talk."

"And the others?" he asks.

"They can talk, but I don't know if they want to."

Abe clears his throat. "Michael," he mutters.

"Zeus," says Zeus.

"Max," adds Max.

"We're going to move you all to a nearby temporary hospital to be checked over by medics," he says, and I immediately look to Wynter, who gives me a reassuring smile. "It's just on the field next door," he adds. "We've set it up especially for you guys."

Summer joins us, led by another woman in uniform. I turn to the warriors. "She's nervous around us, so be nice."

"Suddenly you're the boss?" mutters Zeus.

“We’re all in the same boat here,” I reply, “and these women are afraid of us after what we did. Do you blame them?”

He shakes his head, offering a small smile Summer’s way. She doesn’t return it, instead taking Wynter’s offered hand.

We’re led to the next field, where doctors and nurses are rushing around assessing some of the villagers.

I glance over to where a small child is crying and notice the long line of warriors-to-be, all sitting on the ground huddled together.

A sense of pride fills me. Wynter has saved them from suffering years of torment.

A nurse approaches me cautiously. “I’m Helen,” she introduces, smiling. She makes eye contact with the three other warriors. “If you all come with me, we can get started.”

Wynter kisses my cheek. “Go. I’ll come and find you.”

“The ambulance is this way,” adds Helen, leading us towards a vehicle. “Don’t worry, we’re not taking you anywhere, we just need to run some tests.”

“What kind of tests?” asks Abe.

“Your friend, Martha, told us you might have been given a cocktail of medication, but she wasn’t sure what. We need to determine that so we can find a way to wean you off it. If that’s needed, of course.”

“Steroids,” I mutter, and she turns to me. “I saw a label once.”

“Viagra,” adds Zeus. “They were the blue pills.”

She nods. “Okay, that doesn’t sound too bad, but we’ll still need to run tests. Some medication has to be withdrawn slowly so you’re not hit with bad side effects. Can we take some blood from each of you?”

I nod, stepping into the back of the ambulance. What’s one more day of being prodded and poked?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WYNTER

I sip the hot water and close my eyes in appreciation. The police officer, Jayne, watches me through curious eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want anything in that?” she asks. “I have some herbal tea.”

I shake my head. “Just having a warm drink is more than enough,” I say, smiling.

She glances at her partner, Detective Carl Stern, with raised brows, and I suddenly feel stupid.

Call me cautious, but I don’t trust these people yet.

I’ve spent hours in that field, rushing from one villager to the next to reassure them that these people will help us.

Convincing them that this was the right choice, even when I’m not convinced myself.

So, now that I’m alone in this police station, with these two strangers, the gravity of the situation is hitting me full force.

I glance around the nice room. It’s warm and cosy, with two couches and some blankets. On the door is a sign saying ‘Interview Room’.

“So, Wynter,” says Jayne, tapping her pen on her notepad, “we have to record this

interview.” She points at the two cameras, one in the corner of the room and a funny-looking device pointing at me from beside her.

“That’s for evidence.” I nod. “And I’ll be making some notes.

Is that okay?” I nod again. “We have officers talking to some of the other villagers too. Everyone seems worried.”

“They’ve spent a long time in that place.”

“What is that place called?” she asks.

“I didn’t really know it had a name until someone told me different.” I sip my drink. “Paragon Village.”

“And you were born there, is that correct?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Who are your family?”

I think over her question. “I have a sister, Summer. My mother, Grace, and my father, Anthony.”

“And you lived on top of the hill in this house?” she asks, turning a picture of my family home towards me.

“Yes. Another woman, Annastasia, joined us too. She married my father.”

Jayne makes notes, nodding as she writes. “Where is your father now?” asks Carl.

I shrug. "I think he left."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe he knew his time was up."

Jayne leans closer, her eyes narrowing. "What do you mean by that?"

My heart slams faster in my chest. "I set the warriors free. I told the forefathers that we were going to leave."

"The forefathers being Cornelius Perez, Adrian Garcia, Silas Morales, and your father?"

"Yes."

"They were keeping you at Paragon Village against your will?" she asks.

"Yes."

"How?"

I shift uncomfortably. "The gates were locked and there were guards."

She nods. "Okay, tell us about your life at Paragon Village."

I place my drink on the table and take a breath. "The real version or the one we were sold? Because recently, I've learned a lot, like that the warriors were stolen and made to fight and take part in ceremonies."

"Ceremonies?" Carl asks, exchanging another curious look with his colleague.

“Yes. The second daughters from the forefathers were taken to the church and laid out for the warriors.”

They exchange a more concerned look. “What did the warriors do?”

“Get them pregnant.”

Jayne inhales sharply, scribbling notes. “And you saw this?”

I nod. “All the families did. We had to sit in the church and watch. My sister was one of them. She’s pregnant.”

“Right. And did that happen to you?” she asks gently.

I frown. “Not in a ceremony,” I admit. The first daughters are born from warriors, therefore, we’re treated as slaves for the family.

But because I wouldn’t conform, my father got sick of me and took me into the caves, where the warriors .

. .” I sigh. “But they aren’t bad people,” I rush to add.

“The warriors didn’t know any different.

They’re given drugs and made to watch things. ”

The door opens and a woman enters. She’s got kind eyes, and she immediately makes me feel at ease. “Sorry I’m late. I’m Anita, and I’ll be your social worker.” She sees my confusion and takes a seat. “I’ll be taking care of you while you find your feet.”

I’m exhausted. I spent hours going over everything with the police, and when we

were finished, Anita took me to get some food while we waited for Summer to finish her interview.

We stop outside a large hotel, and Anita twists in her driver's seat to look at us huddled together in the back. "Try not to worry. You'll be safe here until we can find something more permanent."

She takes us to our room, handing us each a key. "I'll be back in the morning. The police haven't finished interviewing you both."

"Where will Ares and the others be?" I ask.

"All on this floor," she says. "The hotel isn't used by anyone at the moment, and so there are a lot of people from your village here. But you shouldn't venture outside until I've shown you around the area."

"But I can see Ares?" I ask eagerly. Since he went off in the field, I haven't seen him at all.

She looks hesitant. "He's been rather quiet."

"He doesn't like to talk," I explain with a sad smile.

"Right now, he wants to be left alone."

I frown. "He said that?"

"Look, you really need to rest, Wynter. Your tests came back just now," she says gently. "Did you know you're pregnant?"

I gasp, and Summer grips my arm. "What?" I whisper.

“So, you need to rest and take it easy. You’re eight weeks.” I have no idea how long a woman is pregnant for, and when I stare blankly, she smiles. “Women carry a healthy pregnancy for nine months full term. That’s about forty weeks.”

“Oh.”

“I’m six months,” Summer announces proudly. “I had a scan.”

Anita smiles. “Rest, girls. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

The second she leaves, I head for the door. Summer grabs me back. “What are you doing? You heard what she said.”

“I have to see him, Summer. He needs me.” I kiss her on the cheek. “Sleep, and I’ll be back soon.”

I go to the next room and tap on the door. It opens and Zeus’s annoyed expression immediately softens at the sight of me. “Is Ares with you?”

He shakes his head and points to the room across from mine. “Try there.” I turn to knock, and Zeus adds, “You did good today, Wynter. Thank you.”

I’m still smiling when Ares opens the door. His eyes focus on Zeus, and he scowls before taking my arm and pulling me into his room, slamming the door closed. I giggle. “You can’t keep me to yourself, Ares. Zeus is my friend.”

He pulls me to him, holding me tight against his chest, and my smile fades as the heaviness of everything takes over. Tears swell in my eyes, and I blink them away. “Are you okay?” I whisper.

“Are you?” He pulls back slightly to look at me.

I shake my head. “Not really. Everything feels so big now.”

He nods in understanding. “I hate being away from you,” he admits.

I smile again, kicking off my shoes. “Lie with me?” I ask, leading him to the bed.

I settle against the soft pillows, and he climbs in beside me, groaning in pleasure.

The mattress he’s used to was nothing more than a mat, so I imagine this feels like heaven.

I snuggle into his side, and he wraps his arms around me.

“The only time I feel at peace is with you,” he mutters, pressing a kiss to my head.

“At least they’re taking us seriously, because honestly, with each new thing I tell them, I realise how mad it all sounds.”

“Yeah. I spent hours being questioned about the ceremonies.”

I stiffen slightly. “How come?”

“I guess they need to work out if I did all that of my own free will.”

“I told them you had no choice.”

“Without the forefathers to answer for their crimes, they only have our word.”

“And the words of all the villagers.”

He rubs a hand down my back, his fingers caressing me gently. “Let’s pray they’re

honest.”

“Do you regret it?” I ask, glancing up at him. “Ending them?”

He smirks, shaking his head. “Not even a little.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you,” I say, sitting up and facing him, because when I deliver this news, I need to see his reaction. Having a child is something I never thought I’d do. It wasn’t in the cards. But now it’s happened, I can’t help feeling a little hopeful. “I’m pregnant.”

A range of emotions passes over his face, anger settling as he sits too. “To that monster?” he snaps. “I thought you said?—”

I smile, placing a hand on his. “No, Ares. The baby is yours.”

His expression softens. “My baby?”

I nod. “I guess you might have others out there,” I mutter, knowing there are children from the forefathers’ daughters who may have a child from Ares.

“It’s good news, right?” he asks, trying to judge my reaction.

I nod, smiling, and he sighs in relief. “I didn’t expect it, but I think I’m happy.”

He pulls me to him again, lying back. “I love you, Wynter. We’ll make this work.”

“There’s so much to consider,” I say. “And you need to find your mother.”

“I have some news about that.”

I brace myself, waiting for bad news, but he kisses me on the head. “The police have a report, filed twenty-eight years ago, about a missing boy called Ares Torej. They’re going to make contact with my mother, providing she’s still got the same contact details.

I gasp. “Oh my god, that’s amazing, Ares. You must be so happy?”

He nods. “I am. I have a name, a full identity, and when they told me, it felt right. It was like I knew the name, but I’d just forgotten.”

I can’t hide my happiness as tears fall from my eyes and drip onto his shirt. “I’m so happy for you. I can’t imagine what you’ve both been through.”

Ares

I straighten my shirt for the hundredth time, and Wynter laughs, tapping my hand away and slipping hers into it. I smirk, admiring her beauty as her beaming smile lights her face. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt this nervous and happy all at once.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:55 am

Anita knocks on the door, and I hold my breath.

The second it opens, I'm hit with a million memories, all of her.

My mother. Esmae Torez. She gasps, her hands covering her mouth as tears stream down her face.

She reaches for me, and Wynter releases my hand so I can wrap my mother in my arms. She's a small woman, so I have to crouch slightly, but the second we touch, I close my eyes and relax. I'm home.

She eventually takes us inside, keeping a tight hold on my hand.

I have to duck down to go through the doors in her bungalow, but as I move into the living room, I'm met with photographs of a little boy with blue eyes.

I go to them, studying each one, trying to remember them.

Esmae joins me, pointing to one. "Blackpool Beach," she tells me, smiling fondly.

"Our first house in London," she says, pointing to another of me in a garden.

"You were so happy we had a garden," she adds.

"This was an outdoor swimming pool just up the road. It's closed now, but you loved going there. "

Wynter wipes her eyes, sniffing quietly as she takes in the pictures of my lost childhood. “This is Wynter,” I almost whisper. The urge to clamp my mouth closed again is overwhelming, but I refuse to give in to it.

Esmae hugs her. “You saved him,” she whispers, kissing her cheek. “I don’t know what to say.”

“We saved each other,” Wynter replies.

Anita lingers in the doorway. “Would you like me to leave you for an hour or two?” she asks, but honestly, Anita has been on this journey as much as we have. She’s helped us every step of the way, and having her here feels right, so I shake my head. “Stay.”

She smiles with relief and takes a seat. “I’m Anita, Ares and Wynter’s social worker.”

Esmae sits too, and I sit with Wynter on the couch.

“I never thought this day would come,” she admits.

“I never stopped thinking about you.” She takes a box from the side of her chair and places it on the table.

“I kept everything. The police reports, the failed sightings that gave me false hope . . .”

I pull it closer and peer inside, taking out the first thing on top, which is a newspaper article.

I scan it, my eyes settling on a picture of my mother holding up a photograph of me.

“It was a circus,” she mutters. “They had people calling the helpline who said they’d seen you walking off with a group of kids, others saying you were in different countries.

And the nutters,” she shakes her head, “they came out in full force. Some even said they’d spoken to your spirit and you were at peace.

” She pats a tear away on her cheek. “They were the hardest to deal with.”

“I’m so sorry you went through that,” says Wynter.

“I saw it all on the news,” she adds, nodding at the television in the corner. “They’re saying it was a cult.” I shudder, not wanting to taint my mother’s house with talk of them .

“Did your family liaison officer explain things?” asks Anita.

Esmae nods. “She left out the details, but said you’d both been held in a village.”

“What matters is now,” says Wynter, knowing I’ve been worried about revealing any details to my mother. I don’t want to break her heart further, and if she knew the things I’d done . . .

“Whatever happened there,” Esmae says carefully, “it wasn’t your fault. I’ll never judge you.” I give a stiff nod. “Anita says you’re staying across town in a hotel?”

“It’s really nice,” Wynter says.

“But you can’t stay there forever,” she replies.

“The local council are working on flats or houses for everyone, but some people will

have to move out of area,” Anita cuts in.

“I have a house,” Esmae says. “It’s just up the road. It’s yours.”

I frown, glancing at Wynter. “We can’t take your house,” she says.

“My brother left it to me in his will. Your uncle,” she adds, smiling at me. “I have no use for it as I love my bungalow. I was thinking of selling it, but I can’t bear to part with it. He’d want you to have it.”

Anita stares at me with hopeful eyes, and I give a slight nod. “That would be amazing,” she says. “And it would get Ares off the waiting list for a property.” She looks to Wynter. “It’s not too far for you to visit him.” Wynter nods in agreement, but I narrow my eyes and take her hand.

“Where I go, she goes.”

Wynter glances nervously at Esmae, who smiles wider. “Of course. It has four bedrooms.”

“Summer too,” I say firmly.

“And the other guys?” Wynter asks hopefully.

I sigh, nodding, even though the thought of being around the warriors twenty-four-seven stresses me out.

“That would be amazing,” says Anita eagerly.

“And it would ease the pressure on us to find more places. It would just be temporary, until we find the guys something more suitable.” She looks back to Esmae. “If you’re

sure?”

“Yes, I’m one hundred percent. I don’t want to lose him again. If he’s just up the road, I can visit?” she asks hopefully.

I smile. “Every day.”

She relaxes back in her chair. “I’ve gone from having no one to a family again.”

“And a grandchild,” adds Wynter, and Esmae’s eyes widen. “We just found out.”

WYNTER

One month. One month since we left Paragon Village. Two weeks since we moved into our new home. And it's beautiful. Even Summer is wowed by its modern technology kitchen, which Anita spent ages showing us how to work because none of us could figure it out. The coffee machine blew our minds.

Coffee. That's my new addiction, although I've had to have decaf because apparently too much caffeine isn't good for the baby.

I lay my hand over my tiny bump and smile. I have a scan booked in for tomorrow, and I'm excited. Summer discovered she's having a boy and she's over the moon, although she'll need to have the baby tested to reveal who the father is.

She's accepted Michael, Zeus, and Max, and they've made a real effort to show her they're good guys.

They even fight to make her breakfast each morning, and that fight continues throughout each day to make sure she's comfortable and looked after.

I think they're all secretly hoping to be the father because they seem to have a soft spot for Summer.

The guys are doing well. They have therapy sessions, some one-on-one and others as a group.

Anita said they needed to face what happened to them and work through it, and she

was right.

The night we moved in here, Summer and I were woken over and over by the nightmares that plagued them, causing them to call out in fright.

They've gotten less frequent, but they still happen.

Ares got the guys jobs as security on the doors at a local nightclub.

It made sense with nightmares keeping them awake.

They sleep more peacefully when it's light outside.

Anita gives me regular updates on the others from the village. Most are doing well. Martha visits us regular, and she even has a job cooking dinners at the local school. Jaycee and Anna live together too, and we met up with them just last week to see they're thriving.

My mother . . . she wanted to stay in contact with me and Summer, and after many discussions, we decided against it, at least for now.

Anita explained she's moved out of the area and is attending counselling to deal with everything.

I know she was a victim too, but there are things she did, things she said, that make me think she's just as bad as he ever was.

For now, it's best we heal individually.

Ares and I are happy. He hates being away from me and follows me around like a lost puppy, but I don't mind it. Having him close makes me feel safe again.

The door opens, and Ares grins, immediately stripping out of his shirt and kicking off his trousers.

He drops beside me on the bed and pulls me to his chest. We haven't tried to be intimate yet as neither of us are ready, but snuggling and kissing is our favourite thing to do.

The rest will come naturally, according to Summer.

I sigh happily. "I love you," I whisper as he strokes his fingers up and down my arm.

"I love you too," he replies.

"Forever?" I ask, and I feel him smile.

"And ever."

Our start in life wasn't a good one, but we're more determined than ever to keep moving forward, to get the life we deserve.

Together. Forever and ever.