



Wreck and Ruin (Forevermore #1)

Author: *Octavia Knightly*

Category: Fantasy

Description: AIRLIE

I was born in the devil's playground.

The place where Father keeps me.

There is no God here.

There are no saints.

The ocean and this cave are my home.

And I am Father's best kept secret.

When a man is left to die, a wreckage of flesh and bone tossed at my
doorstep,

I choose to save him.

A gift from the sea, that I intend to keep.

He is my stranger.

My pet.

Mine.

EZEKIEL

I am nothing more than a ghost.

No one outside the Mafia knows I exist.

I was assigned a mission of a lifetime.

Go undercover and take down The Royal.

A trafficking ring run by a group of corrupt elites.

When my best laid plans are ruined, I'm left for dead.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 1

AIRLIE

Twelve years old

I ghost my fingertips along the sharp edges of the damp stone, framing a small gap in the cave walls—a window of sorts, though far too small for me to squeeze through. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve tried. The air is chilly from the rain and seawater crashing against the rocks above, and I flush my tender cheek against the stone, still throbbing from the night before. I’m thankful for the mild relief the coldness brings. I wish there were a way to relieve the ache biting deep in the pit of my stomach, and the dull throb between my thighs.

I gaze blankly through the gap, watching the sky as the dark gray clouds float fast toward me. I count the seconds between each loud thunderclap, echoing through the cave’s hollow, rattling the black, furry spiders woven comfortably in their webs. They’re locked down here like I am, only they’re prisoners by choice, which has never made any sense to me. A smile tugs the corner of my lips with the thought that they might actually like being my friend.

Shifting my gaze, I scan the hollow behind me, squinting a little until my eyes adjust to the cave’s darkness. Father usually visits around this time, and despite last night’s rage, when he saw that I was bleeding, it didn’t stop him from wanting to play games with me.

I don’t like his games.

The rules have gotten worse these past few months. The whole time, all I could think of was, is something wrong with me? Am I going to die? Is that why he was so mad the three times that I bled? Did it remind him that I was sick, and it made him sad? The questions are always on the tip of my tongue, but the second they threaten to escape my lips, he reminds me what kind of man he's capable of being, so I keep my promise to myself and don't speak at all. I don't believe I'm allowed to ask questions, anyway.

Defective.

Failure.

Barren Whore.

I don't know what any of those words mean, but I know they can't be good. They were the last words he said to my mother before silencing her voice forever. Right here in this very cave.

It was my sixth birthday.

I decided then that if my mother couldn't speak anymore, neither would I. My words were the only thing I had in this world that were solely my own, and with my mom no longer alive to protect me from him, I knew I had to protect myself somehow. I know that it was a long time ago, but I still miss her terribly.

Father said he had to do it.

That he and my mother had spoken about it and that if she were ever bad, she would die. I don't remember her ever being bad, but Father, on the other hand, is bad all the time.

I close my eyes, tilting my head to the side, listening for his footsteps. I struggle to hear anything over the howling of the wild wind and the angry roar of the waves warring beyond these walls. Still, careful not to make too much noise, I slowly descend from the rocks and away from the window to wait for him. The roughness of the jagged cave stones and the rocky ground doesn't bother my hands and feet like it used to, and I find it easier to move around in a hurry and hide what I've been up to. Nervously, I look at the rock pool in the corner of the cave, wishing there was something big enough that I could use to hide it from him. Well, maybe not hide it. He does know about it. After all, this is his cave. It's always been there, and it's the only way I can clean my body after the games. I just hope he doesn't find me out. Knowing that I can hold my breath for fifty-three seconds and reach the other side of the cave, both excites me and makes my stomach feel strange, like I'm going to be sick. There is only one thing Father hates more than secrets.

Lies.

And I fear he will sense that I am guilty of both.

I run my hands over my stained cotton dress, which is far too short for me now that I've grown a little. I don't dare wear it while I swim, just in case he smells the sun on it. I kneel on the ground in the center of the cave, ignoring the scratchiness of the stones and sand digging into my shins and bony knees, and rest my hands gently on my bare thighs, palms skyward.

Father prefers it when I greet him this way, giving myself to him in offering.

He told me so.

As if I summoned him, the sound of chains clinking together bounces off the stone walls, piercing my eardrums. I cringe internally at what's to come, but I am desperately hungry. It has been days since I've eaten. He says it's for my own good.

That a woman always feels better when she's hungry, and now that I'm officially a woman, at least, that's what Father says I am, he feeds me less and less.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 2

EZEKIEL

Present day

I hope the blood that flows through the veins of every sick, depraved fucking cunt on this ship boils from the inside out when they're all thrown in Hell. It's funny because some would argue that with the current state of the world we are all living in, we're already there. And I'd have to agree. Especially if the past four years are anything to go on. I've seen and uncovered things about these people that nobody, not even Satan himself, would believe, and it's because of this fact that I cannot wait to blow the smirk right off all their fucking faces.

“Ren, honey, I'd like you to meet Captain Gregory Lancaster, Lady Jane's new Captain. I told him all about you. All great things, though, I swear,” the bitch from hell, Valerie Jensen, wouldn't know what a great thing was if it bit her in the ass, chuckles, sauntering over to me lingering by the bar. Her arm is linked with my unnoticeably uncomfortable offsider, Spencer Philips, or Captain Lancaster to any of these assholes. He and I exchange a glance that tells me everything is going according to plan, and, at this stage in the operation, we can't afford for it not to, not even a little.

There is way too much hanging on tonight, and one wrong move, and it will all be over. Everything I have worked so hard for would have all been for nothing. I don't just mean over for Spencer and me, but also for every innocent person caught up in this world whose lives have been destroyed or even lost, in the name of sex, money,

and power. After tonight, if everything goes as planned, I will be one step closer to freeing them. Or at least, uncovering as much information as possible that will help in that process. I just need to find their location first, which has proven to be rather difficult, considering nobody around here knows where they are. Not even Valerie, and she's one of the ringleaders who runs this fucked up society.

The less the elites know about the details of their sins, the less likely they'll get caught, I suppose, and there are a lot of big household names walking around this ship who wouldn't think twice about burying anyone who threatened to expose them.

They're basically untouchable, and they all know it. That's not even the worst part. The worst part is that the people who claim to work tirelessly toward eradicating and protecting people from sexual violence, sex slavery, and human trafficking in this world, with all their corporations and lavish fundraisers, are all in on it.

I know this because each and every one of them is at this party. Exchanging well-rehearsed smiles and fake pleasantries with each other, dancing around this over-the-top, expensively decorated deck without a single care in the world. Oblivious to what's coming for them. Together, they're known as The Royal. A secret society no one has any proof of existing, built on blood, money, corruption, and pure evil. They don't even bother masking their identities. They all have enough money and power to change history, and their bullshit privilege only grants them immunity for their fucking crimes.

They walk around like gods.

Untouched by the consequences that control the lives of the rest of the world.

Fuck all of them, I say.

I place my scotch glass on the marble bar top before shaking Spencer's hand.

“Captain, it's a pleasure.”

“Oh, it's all mine,” he replies in a slow, deep, purposeful tone that I'll never, ever get used to hearing.

That's the thing about being undercover. To successfully convince the worst of humankind that you are a friend among them without attracting any unwanted attention whatsoever to the contrary, you have to destroy the parts of your core. The essence of who you are, what makes you good, and replace those parts with something so immoral that no one would ever guess that you're the guy waiting to press the button that will send them all on a one way ticket to meet their maker.

If we're on Lady Jane, it means that we've succeeded in that.

The thought alone is enough to make me sick to my stomach.

There hasn't been a day that has gone by where I haven't fantasized about all the twisted ways I could torture them to death for what they've done, what they're still doing, and what they'll continue to do to blameless women and innocent children if we fuck this up. Torture won't work with these types of people. They would rather die before ever breathing a fucking word about The Royal.

Spencer and I are under strict orders, and the only way we are ever going to get out of this is either with the coordinates of where they're running their trafficking ring or with us in body bags. After tonight, the latter doesn't matter.

“Valerie was gracious enough to finally extend an invitation after almost begging her for years to invite me. Sailing the glorious Lady Jane is just an added bonus,” he says with a wink, smiling down at a motionless, plastic, lifeless complexion that only worsens the more work she gets done.

She's got about thirty years on us, and while I have nothing against anyone getting any sort of surgery or beauty enhancements, I draw the line when the blood of innocent people is what pays for it.

"Oh, Captain, you didn't beg, but that doesn't mean I don't love it when you do," she leans into me with a gleam in her eyes that I despise. "He's just being silly. I think you'll like him, Ren. You both have that same look, and you know I can't get enough of it." I smile at her words, masking how unnerved I am by the comparison because any correlation between us at all is a huge risk, and I have worked painstakingly toward never getting caught. That's also why Spencer and I haven't so much as laid eyes on each other in years until tonight.

We won't fail.

Not unless we're found out.

Kissing the top of her bleached head, I wrap my arm around her silk-clad lower back, pulling her closer as if to inform the new Captain I do not share. Even though, technically, she's free game. She's fucked every man and woman here countless times, either all together, individually, or by herself, while everybody watches. Unfortunately, I am also on that list, and despite not being even remotely okay with it, it must be done. Fucking her is one of the many, many messed up things we each have to do as part of the initiation into The Royal, and Valerie eats it up whether anyone likes it or not. All the while, hundreds of other members sit behind a camera and watch from the comfort of wherever the hell they are. It's sick, but it doesn't stop there.

If there's one thing I've learned about this woman over the years, it's that she wants nothing more than to feel important and desired. And for this to go as planned, Spencer and I have had no other option but to humor and distract her and anyone else from looking too closely at us. Not that they'd find anything, nothing true, at least.

We are what the mafia refers to as ghosts, which basically means that our lives are inconsequential on almost all levels. There is no valid record of us ever being born other than the fake backgrounds created on our behalf when we were assigned this mission. That doesn't mean that the members of The Royal wouldn't kill us if they smelled a rat. Two people newly invited into their top secret inner circle, whose DNA records don't match those they'd find on any files, scream 'red flag' even to me, and they wouldn't think twice before taking us out on speculation alone.

Valerie has been a part of this world for decades, and because she's the wife of Charles Jensen, The Royal's founder and the man responsible for the thousands of innocent people sold each year, she was our best bet. Our way in.

This is my second party on Lady Jane in the four years I've been a part of The Royal, and Charles didn't even show up last time. Probably a test of loyalty. Though, it only prolonged the inevitable because here I am, once again, pretending my ass off at a party in pursuit of sending these fuckers to a watery grave. It has taken me years to learn that the only way to destroy this trafficking ring in its entirety is to cut it off at the head. And I have since discovered that there may be multiple heads, which is why they've all got to go.

The moment I get to be in the same room as him, I'll take him and everyone else down. Only then will all of this shit be over.

The husband and wife dynamic between Charles and Valerie Jensen is unconventional, to say the least. The guy is elusive as fuck, and I don't think I've seen them so much as stand beside each other, let alone hold each other's hands. The fact that Charles even showed up tonight is nothing short of a miracle, and my skin is crawling with the desperate need for justice.

"I'll leave you both to talk," Valerie whispers, kissing my earlobe, which has the opposite intended effect. She does absolutely nothing for me, but I can't let her know

that.

“C’mon, baby, you just got here.” Sick. There is a sickness in my head. It works because she hands me the keycard to her room before excusing herself and walking away to greet more guests.

Little does she know that while everyone was boarding earlier, I hacked into the ship's check-in software underneath the concierge's noses and switched the key details assigned to Charles with Valerie's, leaving zero traces behind.

Spencer looks at me wide-eyed, surprised it's all playing out as I anticipated. I would be fucking useless at my job if it didn't. I just spent years working by their sides, earning their trust, and ugh... fucking them . I try to remind myself that I am still a good person. That this is so much bigger than me and my morals. That the lives that are hanging in the balance depend on me not to screw this up. Everything I do, or whatever happens to me, is a small price to pay for their freedom. There is nothing in this world that I wouldn't do to ensure that no one is harmed by these fucking animals again.

The energy in the room intensifies, and Spencer and I share a look that tells the other we're ready to get this show on the road. He steps in closer, and the subtle motion of his finger along my suit jacket sends a cold shiver through me, not out of attraction or any genuine desire, but the reality of the performance he and I are putting on. It's nothing more than staged intimacy. A ruse to show bystanders that the new Captain and I share a chemistry that would explain any sudden disappearances from either of us. Everything we are doing right now is completely calculated. And we both remain silent as we gaze longingly into each other's eyes. And I've got to give it to Spencer. He's pretty convincing.

Fake laughter and party chatter softens as the elites take their bullshit party elsewhere.

Finally.

“You ready, man?” I ask, looking over Spencer’s shoulder to watch the last few people leave the bar room.

Spencer shifts almost uncomfortably, but his gaze remains focused. “Alright, yeah, let’s do this,” he answers, determination now clear in his eyes as he takes my hand and guides me into the atrium.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 3

EZEKIEL

“So, where’s the co-captain?” I ask casually, finally free enough to talk a little now that we’re out of earshot of the party, though I’m not foolish enough to drop my guard altogether and say the wrong thing.

“Dead.”

“Of course he is,” I mutter, half to myself. Leave it to Spencer to not only say whatever the hell he wants, wherever he wants, but to kill the only other person on board who might actually know how to sail this fucking thing. I suppose it doesn’t really matter. The ship’s on borrowed time anyway. Spencer has never been one to do things by halves, that’s for damn sure, yet, that’s one of the reasons why he’s here. As much as I’d like to think I’m the best ghost in my field, even I can’t be in two places at once. With The Royal’s eyes on me at every waking moment and with every move I make scrutinized, I needed someone I could halfway trust not to mess this up.

This assignment isn’t just an assignment to us. It’s personal, which is why we were given it in the first place. The mafia, more specifically, our boss, Titan King, has been watching The Royal closely for a little over eighteen years now, around the same time he rescued Spencer and me from a sketchy organization much like this one, only it’s not a scratch on The Royal. We were just kids then, and instead of putting us in the system or doing anything remotely above board because, god forbid, we follow the law around here, Titan took us under his wing, threw us in the deep end, and we’ve been working for him ever since. Working for the mafia has never bothered

me, really. It was the least I could do, considering he saved us from a fate far worse than anyone else working in the underground could handle.

While I've been undercover, Spencer has been like a quiet shadow behind the scenes, only stepping out from the dark at the right time a couple of years ago. It's taken years to set everything in motion, and the groundwork we've had to lay, the sacrifices we've had to make, and the innocent people who were left behind are unforgivable. We've reported anything that could be used to take these bastards down. Not to the feds. They're just as corrupt as everyone here. No, we report to Titan, himself. But, it has never been enough. Never enough to stop this shit from happening, and never enough to save the souls left behind for no other reason than the circumstances were far too dire, and we needed to avoid our cover being blown at all costs.

The consequences of those failures will be carried out tonight, and if I'm being honest, I've made peace with it. This is the price I've chosen to pay, the cost of being part of something much bigger than me.

Bigger than us.

I watch the numbers on the elevator dial glow and change as we ascend higher. I want to tell Spencer everything. I want him to know what's about to happen. But I know better. I can't leave anything to chance, and if there's even the slightest bit of resistance from him, this will all go to shit, and the fuck if I'm allowing that to happen. Stepping out of the elevator, we scan the hall for onlookers, but as predicted, they're all salivating over this evening's live entertainment in the lower-level theatre. We keep quiet as we casually walk along the blood-red and black extravagant carpet, not daring so much as a whisper between us. They're always listening, and when you think you're alone and the world has gone quiet, you bet your ass they're watching, waiting in the darkness for you to get cocky.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Spencer whispers, his head shifting in every

direction as we reach the end of the hall and stand before room 42B.

We don't have a fucking choice.

"The time for questions was years ago, brother, and we have exactly ten minutes before our boy Charles and his bodyguard walk in here, so we need to be ready," I say, not wasting any time by looking up to see if he's doing okay or not. Violence and even death are something we're both familiar with. And we don't have the luxury of processing how we feel. My only goal is to get what we need from Charles.

That's it.

Then, there might be a spare moment or two to say our goodbyes before finally facing our doom, but not a minute before. If this fails, and we, by some miracle, live to tell the tale, we'll be as good as dead anyway because our bosses will not accept failure. Not with something of this magnitude.

A muted beep fills the quiet, and I look up to see that the light on the security camera fixed to the ceiling has vanished.

"The tape is in the system now," Spencer says with a quick nod.

Thank fuck.

I've got to say, I'm a little impressed. It was a genius idea. One I only found out about last night when he sent it to me. If somebody were to tap into the ship's security network, they'd have a front-row seat to an artificial, albeit seemingly accurate as fuck videotape of Valerie's whore, aka me, running off to make out with Lady Jane's new Sea Captain, not only giving us an alibi to those watching at home, but also throwing Valerie off when she inevitably checks the cameras to see where we both went. Fooling The Royals is not easy, and even as dread gnaws at the pit of my

stomach, its teeth making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end with the thought that something is off, I swipe the keycard anyway, successfully unlocking the door to Charles's room.

A smile tugs on the corner of my lips despite the sinking feeling in my gut, and I tilt my head, raising a brow at Spencer, questioning whether or not he's ready for all the shit that's about to hit the fan. His eyes widen, whirling with all kinds of emotions, but it's the fear in them that I focus on.

We're supposed to be ghosts.

The entire fucking point of our job is to be emotionless at all times. Especially in situations like these. I totally get that we've both been through a lot. Shit that you don't just forget about overnight, that's for sure. Believe me, I've tried and failed.

There isn't a single ghost in the history of the underworld that was ever permitted to show their feelings. It's the greatest sign of weakness, and the mafia doesn't do weakness. If we ever compromised a mission for no other reason than we couldn't get our head in the game, we'd be dead by morning. Or worse, wishing that we were.

I look him square in the eyes, narrowing mine slightly, and toy with the idea of confronting him on whether or not he's fucking in this one hundred percent with me. This is why I have gone rogue. I can't trust anyone else not to let this fail.

His expression shifts between emotions. Fear, acceptance, before finally settling on indifference. That-a-boy. I blow out a shaky breath, turn the gold door handle, and slowly creep inside.

It's time to meet the devil.

Moonlight shines through from the balcony window, casting silvery hues across the

walls and carpet as we quietly close the door behind us. The lingering scent of men's cologne hangs in the air, confirming that this is, in fact, Charles's room and not some sort of placeholder he's set up as a distraction to sway us off his trail, though it would've been wise of him to do that now that I think about it. I glance at Spencer, the moonlight highlighting and hollowing parts of his sharp features, as he looks down at his watch, checking the time.

"Six minutes," he whispers, more to himself than to me, and I don't miss the tension laced in his tone. He comes to a standstill, turning around to face me in the middle of the room.

"Closet." I gesture to my left, my eyes flicking to the doors.

We need to stick to the shadows. I've kept things as vague as possible with Spencer. Part of the reason why I've made it this far is because the plan, while flexible, has always depended on maintaining control and keeping my finger on the pulse. And control is not something I hand over regularly. Every detail has been calculated down to the second, a feat made all the more difficult when you have to leave room for error. But no matter how many variables are in play, there's one thing I'm absolutely sure of, and it's that these people, The Royal, and whoever else is associated, will not be leaving Lady Jane alive.

I won't be 'bringing them in' for exposure. There are no helicopters, newspapers, or reporters waiting for them at the end of this. No. Fuck that. These people don't get to live another second for what they've done. Allowing them time will only aid them in setting their contingency plans in motion or paying off who they need to and striking a deal to secure a lesser sentence. I'm not interested in any of that, especially with the number of corrupt cops and lawyers on their payroll. Innocent fucking lives are at risk here, and I refuse to let them down any more than I already have by being part of this in the first place. Whether or not I'm undercover, I'm guilty by association alone. I'll never see it any other way. I've stood by and watched some of the most heinous

crimes play out before my eyes, and I didn't do a damn fucking thing about it. I couldn't do a damn fucking thing about it. But in my mind, those are one and the same. Not to mention the sick and twisted things they made me do, and I had no option but to go along with it, all in the name of the bigger picture.

Either way, it all ends tonight. No matter how this goes down, this ship and everyone on it won't be alive long enough to order dinner because the moment Charles walks in here and flicks on the light switch, a timer will be activated, silently triggering the bombs hidden at each end of every floor on this ship. I'll have about ten minutes to kill the bastard, cut through his skin, retrieve the microchip buried in his arm, and put it in the fireproof vault located behind the desk in the lobby, along with the signet ring on my middle finger. A tracker.

The vault, a new, however integral part of the plan, is designed to preserve whatever contents are placed inside in the event of fire or water exposure, which means that it's the only safe space to store both the tracker and the chip. It's the only way that Titan will have a chance of finding it when we're all swimming with sharks.

I saw the chip today when I hacked the ship's check-in as Charles passed through the detectors. Once I realized what it was, everything fell into place. He's never around. He's always the eyes and ears behind the cameras, never letting anyone see him. And on nights like tonight, he doesn't stick around long enough for anyone to notice he's gone. He's built an impenetrable fortress around himself, and now I know why. He is the literal key to everything, and the weight of that certainty makes each second all the more critical.

Following Spencer, we huddle in the closet, our shoulders brushing as we wait for the end. Even if he isn't aware that we're on borrowed time, the air is still suffocating, as our shallow breaths eventually grow even. But his voice breaks through the silence, just as the darkness presses in on us.

“I’m sorry, brother,” is all I hear, and for a heartbeat, I feel everything.

No! What the hell is he doing?

The sharp sting on the side of my neck is all I feel, as the man that, up until this moment, I call family betrays me. My body immediately submits as I lose control over my limbs, his arms now around me, as he drags me from the safety of the closet.

How could he do this?

‘The fucking children!’ I want to shout, but my tongue feels swollen behind my lips.

I’m numb.

Paralyzed, save for my eyes, darting around the room, but there’s no use. Nothing will stop this from happening, not when I can’t feel my fucking body.

He doesn’t know about the chip.

Those innocent lives.

They need him.

Locating the microchip is the only way they’ll be saved.

“I didn’t want it to be like this, Ezekiel, but I have no choice. This is my shot, brother. Exposing The Royal is my ticket to a new life, my one and only chance to get out of the underground. I can’t let it be you. I’m sorry. ” If I had a heart, It’d probably be shattered by his admission.

We grew up together.

We were born from the blood spilled by monsters like members of The Royal. If it weren't for the mafia, we'd both be fucking dead by now. Instead, we get to live out the remainder of our lives.

Is that not enough?

Does he not see that even so much as breathing is a privilege? A privilege so many of the other kids we knew back then didn't fucking get. I know firsthand how complicated the past is and how hard it is to ignore. In fact, it's damn near impossible. Especially when the memory of it swirls beneath the silver scars that mark our bodies, serving as a daily reminder that we made it out of there alive, to hell with how. I made a choice, and I decided to channel my suffering into purpose because the way I see it, if I am worthy of a second chance at life, a life the others didn't get to have, then I'll spend the rest of my days making sure that it all stops or die trying.

Spencer throwing a spanner in the works...

That's the real betrayal here.

Part of me knew he'd do this. I heard it in his voice years ago and saw it in his eyes tonight— the pain.

The ghosts of the past that haunt me haunt him, too, and he can't rise above them. Right or wrong, he wanted out. There's one thing he's always craved more than justice, and that's freedom. The freedom to walk away from this life and escape from the weight that the mafia holds on us. I get it. I really do. And if I thought it was at all possible, I would have let him take this for himself if he had asked. Hell, I'd have offered it to him even if he didn't, but that's just it. There is no way that the underground will ever let us go. Let him go. Not that any of that matters now. Lady Jane and every one of our damned souls will burn and sink to the bottom of the

ocean. It's only a matter of time.

I want to tell him this.

I want him to know that despite his best efforts to double-cross me, I was always a step ahead. I wasn't leaving anything to chance.

His hands grip my arms, pulling me back toward the balcony.

He's gonna throw me off the fucking boat.

Well, that's one way to go out. There's certainly fuck all I can do about it. He's about to be blown to Smithereens, so I think I'll get the better end of the deal here. A captain always goes down with his ship, after all. I want to smile, but I can't feel my face. He's about to be shark shit, too, and I'm the only mother fucker who knows.

None of us, not a single fucking one of us, can be saved. And without someone discovering that chip, those innocent people, the reason I've spent the past four years doing this shit with these fucking criminals, won't ever be found. And unless the microchip is in that fireproof vault, they will all rot. The only consolation is that the people responsible will rot, too. Dropping my arms to the floor with a thud, he opens the balcony doors. They swing open with the force of the wind, slamming hard against the wallpaper.

There's a storm.

How fitting.

He grabs me again and holds my body upright, my back against the balcony railing.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please, forgive me," his voice barely above a whisper, but I

catch it in the wind.

He's not sorry. He's guilty. There's a difference. I accepted that I wasn't ever getting off this ship. I also accepted that he wouldn't leave the ship either, so I'm not mad at him for this. I'm fucking mad because this was all for nothing.

I failed.

And as my body rolls over the edge of the railing, I don't bother begging God for forgiveness. He didn't give a shit when I needed him the most. Instead, I close my eyes and silently cry. Not because I'm about to drown but because I am just so sorry.

I am so fucking sorry. I failed.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 4

AIRLIE

“T ighten that wet little cunt around my cock one more time, and I’ll snap your fucking neck before switching holes,” Father growls as fire courses through my aching body with each of his deep thrusts. My bare back is flush against his exposed, sweat-soaked chest as his warm, uneven breaths fan the side of my neck, causing my skin to prickle. “I know what you're doing, little whore , and we’ll finish when I fucking say so.”

The thick stench of blood and salt clings to the air, its raw, metallic scent mixing with the smell of frankincense and candles as they flicker and burn, curling and twisting my stomach, making me feel sick. I recoil and bite the inside of my mouth, forcing my eyes shut. I just need to focus on something else—anything but the unholy, acrid stench of God . The sharp, stinging sensation beneath his fingernails slicing into my left hip does the trick, as warmth spills from beneath his touch and my blood slowly trickles down my leg. He must notice because he adjusts his grip on me, wrapping his arm around my waist instead, still pinning me against him.

He has always been disgusted by my blood.

But he sure loves to sit by and watch me bleed.

His large, wooden crucifix is hard up against my throat, held there by his free hand with a weight that no longer frightens me. Fear is what he wants. Fear is what keeps him coming back for more. Like a ravenous lion circling a poor helpless lamb,

waiting for it to stumble before finally taking it into its mouth and feasting on its bones. He never fully restricts my airflow, always giving me a moment to catch my breath when he sees that I need it, yet the relief he gives me is never enough to stop me from bruising. I see them peppering my skin, scattered across my body whenever I stare into the salty water.

I used to despise these scars.

They were proof of my suffering, after all.

When I look at them now, all I see is art. The way their colors lighten and fade over time, from various shades of black and deep green to navy blue and gray before finally disappearing. Reminds me of seaweed, tangled and swaying in the moonlight beneath the ocean's surface.

Every scar on my skin sculpts me into something different, something Father can't take away. These scars are mine, and I have to remind myself that I am not his. Even if he says, I am.

“That’s it. Ugh— yes . By grace, your cunt is so—ugh,” he says between pants before he drops the crucifix to the ground, then bends me forward, splaying his hand out on my back, forcing me still as he pounds into me faster. “You’re my filthiest sin,” he confesses. “I want to feel your swollen, dripping flesh between my teeth as I eat you,” he says—promises, I think, his voice hoarse as he shifts his arms to hold my hips with both hands . He speaks like this a lot lately, and as unsettling as it is, I can’t help but wonder if he really thinks I'd taste good.

We each walk a delicate line when it comes to sin. I find myself captivated by it, drawn to it, intrigued by how much pain and torment my body can endure before it finally surrenders and the darkness devours me whole. Before he devours me whole.

Father says I have a sickness.

That there's an evil festering deep within my core that only he can save me from.

It's why he plays with me.

He forces my head back with a jerk, pulling on my long hair and wrapping it in his fist. The sharp tug sends a jolt of pain from the base of my skull as heat pricks my ears, and I bite down on my tongue, holding back a whimper. I gasp inwardly as his grip continues to tighten, and he drives his hard length into me. His movements grow rigid. His cold, wrinkly skin rails against my bones as he continues to bury himself in my broken body.

Muted grunts and labored breaths bounce off the stone, filling the candlelit darkness surrounding us. He thrusts one last time before finally spilling inside me, and I'm flooded with relief when he lets go of my hair. I ignore the urge to rub my head as he steps away, and I stay bent, knowing he'll want to observe me like this. I open my eyes, widen my legs, and watch his shadow move and crouch behind me in the dim amber light reflecting off the stone. He runs two fingers over my sensitive flesh, diving them in and out of my burning cunt. I wish I could tell him to stop, but I know he won't.

“ You will keep my seed inside of you, Whore,” he says, his tone now laced with indifference, though I recognize the threat within his words.

I nod in response, and then he turns away. I use this moment to straighten slowly. My body thrums with the aftermath of his assault, and I'm thankful he was in a good mood tonight because it wasn't so bad this time. I turn around to face him as he sits back on his weathered, wooden chair, running his fingers along the worn edges of his brown leather Bible resting in his hands as he waits for me. His dark, intense eyes bore into mine, contempt and hunger swirling within them, sending ice-cold chills

down my spine.

Instinct takes over, and I reach for the washcloth draped over the back of his chair, pushing through the sharp sting on my side from his nails. I dip it into the bucket on the floor by his feet, wringing out the soapy water, and then I kneel before him, bathing his skin clean of me as he reads to me, asking Christ for forgiveness.

God will forgive me because he loves me, or so I am told.

But not enough to save me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 5

AIRLIE

There are a lot more insects than usual. The candles don't always burn for as long as they did last night, but Father's good mood kept him reading late into the evening, and he lost track of time. I stare down at their tiny, lifeless bodies. Mosquitos, sandflies, and little white moths lay unmoving, all drawn in by the warm glow of the flames, only to meet their death. I wonder if they knew it was coming.

Their end.

Or if it was a beautiful surprise.

I contemplate whether or not they would have been afraid but quickly dismiss the thought. They probably weren't. When you spend so long playing with fire, you no longer fear the burn. I get it. Maybe in another life, I was a moth too. Caught between danger and freedom, with wings that could carry me far away from here, no longer tethered to one place.

To this place.

I sweep the insects into a small pile before me, then scoop them up in my palm. I carry them to the far side of the cave, closest to the window where my spiders sleep. They'd be starving. I place the insects in two separate piles beside their web, then lightly tap my finger on the stone nearest their bodies to rouse them from sleep. Flipper, the larger, more fluffier one, is the first to wake, quickly racing to his dinner

before Sea realizes they're there and eats them all. They always fight over food, so I've learned that separating them at meal times is a must. I give Flipper a scratch, then pause to listen for signs of footsteps in the caves, petrified that Father will find me out. It's been quite a while since I've been on the other side, and I feel the weight of that closing in on me. I need to escape, even if it is only for a few minutes.

I tiptoe to the rock pool once I'm satisfied that the coast is clear, and stare down into the water. The neon blue is a stark contrast to the dark roughness of the walls, and I waste no time removing my dress, wincing as the rough fabric scratches against the wounds on my side, opening them back up and causing them to bleed all over again.

I clench my jaw tight and bite down on my tongue to distract myself from the pain, inwardly berating myself for forgetting they were there. Not wanting to get blood on the ground, I dip my toes in the water, giving myself a long minute to adjust to the temperature. I slide in, carefully muffling my gasp. It always takes me a little while to get used to it, even if this is my favorite thing to do.

After a beat, the chill is like heaven, and I let it soak through to my bones, past my bleeding skin, still on fire from last night. I wish I could stay like this all day. I lean my head back on the rocky edge, and extend my arms on either side of my body, resting them on the stone for support. I'm wasting precious minutes, so I force myself to sit up, take a deep breath, and dive under, slicing through the water and swimming toward the bottom. When I reach it, I swim to the right and slip through the tunnel's blackness before finally emerging on the other side.

* * *

Sand clings to my hands, calves, and thighs, sticky from the saltwater splashing against them as I trudge through the open-mouthed part of the cave. When I step out, I'm immediately whipped in the face with my hair as the strong, angry wind tries to take me away. It howls around me, and I bunch up my hair as best as I can, wetting it

in places to keep it somewhat still. The damp, red strands cling to my face and neck as I lose the battle completely.

Nuisance.

I look at the ocean that stretches out in front of me. The sky looks terrifying, bruising, and darkening to an almost black color.

Another bad storm is coming. We get alot of those here. Which means I haven't got long before being out here becomes dangerous. The waves crash violently against the rocks, each surge deafening, and I take a step closer to the edge of the drop-off, my uncovered feet barely gripping the wet stones as the wind tugs me along. Is today the day the waves will finally sweep me away? There isn't much of a beach on this island that could save me from falling into the ocean.

There are sparse patches of sand in places, but the ground is mainly made up of sharp-edged stones and broken pieces of cliff rock, sometimes slippery with algae. I sit, deciding it's probably my safest option, and stare at the storm.

I look over my shoulder at the towering cathedral, or perhaps it's a castle, carved into the rock formation. Its tall, dark spires touch the sky, and I wonder if the wind will blow them away one day.

Can Father see me from all the way up there? I've always wondered where he goes when he's not in the caves with me, but I assume it's somewhere in the cathedral. He will never tell me, and I don't ever plan on asking him about it. I'm not sure how Father would react or what he might do to me if he ever caught me on one of my adventures.

I try to be careful at all times.

I'm slow when I climb over the rocks to prevent any injuries, and I check myself over before returning to the cave.

I turn back to face the water, nervously biting my lower lip, contemplating Father's wrath. Maybe I should move further down, just in case. Slowly, I grip the stones behind me, my fingers clinging to the cold, uneven surface. I lower my legs one at a time, avoiding the serrated edges of the stone as best as I can, but the sharp parts still threaten to break through my skin. I try not to slip and fall, as water splashes my face and hair, but at least my hair is damp enough that it's too heavy to fly around like it did earlier. I glance around, searching to see if I can move to the lower rocks when I see... something.

It's a flicker, barely there, a dark shadow tangled within the water and stone. The sky is much darker now, and the waves make it so much harder to see. Still, I know something is hiding down there. A slight movement from the creature or person, I realize now that I'm closer, and my breath catches in my throat. My chest tightens, and my heart starts to race, thumping and pounding hard against my ribs. I fight the urge to run away.

The cliff is playing tricks on me.

My mom told me stories about how being out in the sun for too long can make you dehydrated and how it sometimes can make you see things that aren't there. That was before I had ever been outside. As if she knew that I would one day be brave enough to venture away from the comfort of the cave. I'd believe her theory if it wasn't almost dark and the sun wasn't hidden behind layers and layers of ominous storm clouds. As the realization that someone is down there hits me, my legs shake in protest, each step growing heavier as the wind pulls me closer to the shadow.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:54 am

Chapter 6

EZEKIEL

Death.

I can feel it.

Taste it.

Like metallic earth and salt as it burns me from the inside out, clawing at my skin and stomach. My lungs fill with acid fire as my breath battles against the thief that is the sea, lapping at my freezing, unmoving body. Am I suffocating, or have I already? All I want to do is sleep, though the cold won't release its grip on me. The lower part of my body is in the water, and the other is clinging to something solid.

I'm half alive.

Wait, am I alive?

I'm trapped here, and every attempt at moving has me falling deeper into the ocean. If this is Hell, and I have to die like this over and over again, I'm going to be pissed off. The last thing I remember was falling from the ship after Spencer, the fucking asshole, needled me in the neck with some sort of immobilizing drug that wore off the minute my body came in contact with the water. It clearly wasn't that good if I'm still breathing, which is up for debate at this point.

Once I came up for air, I swam as far as I could away from Lady Jane, pushing my body through the roughness of the waves before fire tore through the sky's darkness, igniting like fireworks in slow motion.

It was beautiful.

Every wretched soul blazing across the water, Charles and Spencer included. Part of me thought I was spared so that I could watch it all happen—a gift from the unknown for exterminating the true evil of this earth.

After what seemed like forever drifting and bobbing in the water, watching it all burn and sink into the dark depths of the sea, I clung to the nearest piece of floating debris, remnants of the explosion, and hung on for dear life. Apparently, it wasn't enough because here I am.

My body shivers involuntarily, and I can hear my heartbeat slow in my ears over the waves as they crash around me. I try to open my eyes, but after a night spent immersed in salt water, my retinas burn with each blink. I can feel myself drifting, like an untethered sailboat, slipping weightless in and out of a misty haze. The roaring sounds that surround me blur into muffled white noise, and I force myself to fight back, summoning every ounce of strength that I have left, even though my heavy arms protest, begging to submit to the exhaustion I feel. I try to focus on my breathing, each shallow breath harder than the last, when something soft and gentle brushes against my arm.

I continue to slip in and out of consciousness, and each time I come to, I realize that I'm moving. The pain of my body being slowly dragged for what feels like hours against razor-sharp edges is exactly what I imagined Hell would feel like. Brutal and unforgiving—and God-fucking-damn-it—I knew I was dead.

Gentle hands grip mine, pulling me. They're smaller than mine. A woman's? Has

Lady Death come to collect what is left of my broken remains and deliver me to my maker? Or is she a Siren? I open my mouth to say something, anything, yet nothing but puffs of air escape my lips as the wind is knocked from my lungs over and over again with each hard thud against my ribs. For a moment, everything stops.

Water fills my mouth and face, but it doesn't taste like salt. Something scrapes against my lips, a bottle, I think, encouraging my mouth to open and drink. My head is elevated slightly, angled enough to make swallowing easier. My eyes are washed free of the ocean, though I haven't opened them yet. I can feel myself start to slip again, but the cold water splashing against my skin jolts me awake each time.

The sound of muted footsteps pattering around me fills my ears, the storm a little quieter as I try to listen, instincts from my training evading me with each wave of pain, forcing me to focus on my surroundings instead. My black wet hair hangs in my eyes, and I lift my arm to swipe the wet strands away when I'm met with resistance. Confusion floods my already groggy senses. Not because I'm still paralyzed but because I'm tied up. My brows furrow, and then I open my eyes slowly, squinting at what looks like rusted shackles and chains locked around my wrist.

What the?...

I blink them into focus, then turn my head to look at my other arm, also chained. My body screams as I force myself to sit up, my head whipping side to side to see where the hell I am, as a wave of dizziness floods me.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

God, I feel like I've been fucking beaten. My rib cage is on fire. My back and shoulder blades grate against a hard, solid object coated in a layer of something gross, probably fucking sea slime. I feel its stickiness seeping through my drenched button-down dress shirt. The pungent scent of damp earth, fish, and mildew clings to

everything, but it isn't enough to distract me from my pounding head, splitting in two and hammering like it has its own heartbeat. I bite back the bile gathering in my throat as my ribs threaten to cut off my air supply. Every breath is sharp and short, and wherever I am, whoever has found me, has a huge fucking advantage, and I don't like that one bit.

My eyes dart around, taking everything in as much as my blurred vision will allow—a cave. Okay, I'm in a cave. I can work with that.

Hopefully.

It's dark in here. The only way out that I can see is through the gap, the only source of light, about twenty feet in front of me. It's big enough that my body wouldn't touch the sides if I crawled through. I hear footsteps again, but before I can think better of whether or not pretending to be passed out is a good idea, vibrant aquamarine eyes pierce mine, defying the shadows, as a small, slender frame slowly creeps into view. The woman straightens, her features now half cloaked in the dark, but I don't miss her wide-eyed gaze slowly rolling over me, taking me in. She keeps her distance, and I don't blame her. I may be in a compromised as fuck physical state, but I'm not above looking for an advantage and running with it if it means that I'll survive—defeated body be damned. Sickly pale skin illuminates the darkness as my eyes rake over her body.

She's naked.

Maybe she is a siren.

Her hair drips with water, the color of pomegranate in the dim light, long enough that it covers up most of her body. I don't think I've seen hair this red before. It's mesmerizing. In another life, I could have been drawn to it. But right now, chained to a fucking cave wall, a half-drowned rat almost beaten to death, survival is the only

thing on my mind. I snap out of it and avert my gaze, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable. I stare down at my shackled wrists resting in my lap. I may not be above killing, but I draw the line at perversion. The sound of crinkling plastic fills the space, and my eyes immediately flick to where it came from.

Water.

She's brought me water, two bottles to be exact, and she bends down beside me, lining them up so they're within my reach. It's dangerous for her to get this close to me. I could wrap my arms around her neck and choke her out with the chains she's shackled me to.

If I could just lift my arms .

I watch her, perplexed, as she runs out of the cave, only to return a few minutes later with two rusted metal buckets, one filled with water splashing everywhere as she carries it inside, the other empty. She sets them down on my left within arm's reach.

Oh great, she's building me a fucking bathroom.

I know how these things go. I've been in this position before. It feels like a lifetime ago, and like it was just yesterday all at the same time. And I've done a great job forgetting about that part of my life until now, bound to rusted chains without so much as a blanket. And with the raging storm outside, it's fucking freezing in here. I'd be lying if I said that all that water smashing against the rocks doesn't make me feel slightly unsettled. How far away are those waves? They sound pretty damn close to me.

Perhaps I'll drown after all.

I squint my eyes and turn in the direction of the woman. We're swallowed in

darkness now, but it's still light enough that I can make out the outline of her petite frame. She's just standing there, silent and unmoving . Odd. She hasn't uttered a single word this entire time, and usually, in situations like these, when someone holds you against your will, they'd have said enough for me to at least figure out their motives by now. On the other hand, silence is the most powerful weapon you can wield, especially in my world, and given her small stature, she will need to rely on every trick in the book to gain any sort of an edge on a man like me.

Tilting my head, I strain to listen for others because surely she's not here alone. It's pointless. I can't hear a damn thing, no thanks to the chaos on the other side of this cave. Am I half delirious? Yes. But I'm going to have to push all that aside because I need to hurry this along. I can't stay locked in a fucking cave. I just can't.

I open my mouth to speak, but my words vanish when she closes the distance between us. I stiffen. The lack of lighting is a problem, so I focus on my other senses as much as my circumstances allow. I didn't notice any weapons on her earlier when I checked her over, but in my condition, with my body broken like this, all it would take is for her to breathe near my ribs, and I'd be putty in her hands. Hers for the taking.

Prepare yourself for anything, Ezekiel.

I compartmentalize my pain, shoving it inside a little room in a corner of my mind and ignoring it. I straighten. My fists clench on instinct as her shadow hovers at my side.

I say nothing.

Two can play that game.

I jump when a slight tug on my shirt pulls at my wounds, and it takes everything I

have to keep that room in my mind locked down tight. Her fingertips lightly brush the bare skin of my torso, and I realize she's waiting for permission to remove my shirt. I don't like how close she is, not while I'm borderline defenseless. I'm surprised that she seems non-hostile, considering she dragged me through what felt like the depths of Hell and chained me to a fucking wall. I'm guessing she did more for her own protection than anything else if her demeanor is anything to go on. Still, I don't fucking trust her.

When I don't respond to her touches, she taps my arm again, like a child silently asking an adult for ice cream. Against my better judgment, I relax my posture. Maybe a softer approach will get her talking. I can't envision many others visiting here, wherever here is, so she probably isn't used to having guests. She must notice my tension shift because she moves from my side and crouches before me. She lifts my shirt, and my vision blurs in an instant, my breath shaky behind my teeth, now clenched, as the fabric pulls hard against my wounds. She immediately removes her hands, dropping my shirt.

Is she trying to help me or hurt me ?

A moment passes, and I decide to throw her a bone. If not for anything, then to save myself the fucking trouble of blacking out from whatever pain that may be coming for me tonight. I'm exhausted and haven't even begun to process The Royal, let alone being stranded in a cave somewhere.

"It has buttons. My shirt. It has buttons," I say, my voice hoarse.

Each strained word is an effort to breathe out as the skin that covers my ribs throbs in agony. A searing burn sweeps across my entire body, and I fight to keep my reactions stifled, though I am fully aware of the shit job that I'm doing.

A whimper falls from my lips, and fuck if it isn't embarrassing. Pain is a weakness

that I can't afford right now, and I can't say I'm a fan of feeling vulnerable, especially in the hands of someone else. I'm exposed for the first time in a long, long time and I blame it all on these stupid chains.

She moves in even closer, hovering in front of my face, parts of her features mere shadows. I stare into her eyes and hold her gaze, not looking away from them as I remember that she's naked. I'm a jackass. I dared to feel exposed when she hasn't got a single stitch of clothing on. Although, I've got to say she seems pretty unbothered by it.

At a pace slower than a fucking tortoise, I raise my hands to undo the buttons myself, the chains rattling with each movement, and I fight back vomit with each rattle. I make it as far as the third button before she gently swats my hands away and takes over. She fumbles a little, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say she's never undone a button before.

Strange.

Once she reaches the last button, she removes half of my shirt, and, with a featherlight touch, dances her fingertips across my chest. I assume, by the way she touches me, pressing at my skin, that there's blood. Of course there's fucking blood. She dragged me by the hands over cliff-rocks that might as well have been butcher knives. I've had my ribs broken about a dozen or so times before, and each time, I swear the pain gets worse. I wince as she scrapes my skin, biting down on my tongue to stop myself from crying out, and a slight gasp from her lips tells me that my broken ribs are the least of my problems.

Don't I know it.

She starts tending to my wounds and my eyes start to blur from the exhaustion and pain as it overwhelms my cold, trembling body. My tongue is still caught between my

teeth to prevent me from screaming, but it's the blood filling my mouth and trickling down the sides of my face that stops me. I try to focus on something else—a distraction. The slither of dim light seeping through the entrance before me, the silvery hues that blend with the surrounding shadows, the redhead, a siren in the dark, my captor, until everything fades to black.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 7

AIRLIE

I gaze down at my stranger.

His features are shrouded, but not so much that I fail to notice the blood staining his chiseled jaw. He's been in and out of consciousness for a little while now, finally losing the battle with sleep after I cleaned and wrapped his injuries.

He needs to rest.

It's the only way that he will heal.

I'm not an expert at treating injuries by any means, but I've been dressing my own since I was little, and they seem to have healed just fine, all things considered. I only had his shirt to work with as a makeshift bandage. I washed it, rinsed as much blood from it as I could, and allowed it to dry before wrapping it carefully around the deep gashes that mar his torso. My chest tightens with guilt. A heavy knot twists inside me, knowing I'm the one who caused those wounds. He was just so heavy, and the only way I could hide him in one of the outside caves was by dragging him there. My only other option was to leave him at the mercy of the ocean and pretend I never saw him. I wouldn't sleep a wink again if I did that. Not knowing that my mom is in the skies watching over me.

I slowly trace my finger along the bloody trails. His jawline is noticeably different from Father's. Where Father's is heavy and lined with age, my stranger's is angular

and sculpted. I gently smooth the pads of my index and middle fingers over his pulse. Counting. His heart is beating fast, but the steady rise and fall of his chest is much more controlled than it was before.

He will be okay.

I reach for the washcloth, gently wiping what I can see of the blood from his face before it dries and clings to his skin. I wish I could ask what kind of darkness led him to this place. If fate had been so cruel, it condemned him to the unforgiving sea, where he would be forced to meet God alone.

Or could it be that he, himself, is the cruel one, and he is simply facing his punishment?

I don't get the same feelings around him as I do with Father. I don't feel unsafe or like I'm in trouble with this stranger. Yes, I've only just met him, and yes, his presence is commanding, even though he is in a state of delirium, but there's an undeniable warmth in his presence that wraps around me, a gentle feeling I've only ever felt with my mother.

That warmth has awakened the parts within me that still resemble her, compelling me to create a safe space for him, a home, and to fill it with whatever he might need, whatever I'm able to give. Which isn't much, really, but I can only hope it won't disappoint him. He will have to be quiet out here, of course. Father can't ever know about my stranger.

This cave will just have to do on short notice. He's far too heavy for me to keep dragging around, and I don't have time to search for another one. I cast one last look at him, studying the sharp contours of his face and committing them to memory.

He is undeniably captivating.

Excitement swirls within my chest at the thought of seeing him tomorrow. If he's feeling better, perhaps he could meet my spiders, though I'll have to figure out a way to show him. They cannot swim, I don't think. I rise to my feet, and tip-toe out of his cave, and make my way back to my own before Father realizes that I'm gone.

Chapter 8

AIRLIE

When I returned, I danced around to dry my body quickly, then pulled my dress back on. I've been lingering by the window for what feels like an eternity, allowing the wind sweeping through from the storm to dry my hair. Father doesn't like it when it's wet. I know that he'll be here soon. He's hardly ever late. I do hope he brings food. I must be on my best behavior now that I have my stranger. I can't risk being denied dinner. I never get much to begin with, but now that I have to take care of him, I'll have to split what little I get.

Distant murmurs echo through the cave, and I immediately stiffen as ice-cold tendrils trickle down my spine.

Something is off .

My body goes rigid as Father's low, unsettling voice drifts through the air. A warm amber light flickers in the dark, dancing with the shadows cast on the jagged walls as he approaches.

Is he talking to himself?

I sure hope so because my night is about to go horribly south if he's bringing her with him. Ursa. She is cruel, venomous, and malevolent. Her only desire is to see me suffer, but not in the same way that Father does. She's everything my mother wasn't. Jealous and vindictive. She morphs into a putrid shade of red that almost looks purple

whenever Father and I play together, yet she still insists on watching us whenever she's around. I think she likes the torment almost as much as she likes to hurt me, standing by and watching me suffer as she tells Father to do bad things to me. I don't know why she likes it. I don't know why Father listens to her.

I climb down from the rocks and settle into my usual position, on my knees, palms resting upright on my thighs. The jarring clink of keys rattles against the iron bars, the sound discordant as Father unlocks the gate. He visits almost every night recently, though I wish he would at least stay away long enough for my wounds to heal.

He's whispering something, but the wailing wind outside drowns out his words. It's all I can do not to take the chance of facing my punishment by pretending to be asleep just to escape the sight of Ursa altogether. But no, I can't do that. I need every scrap of food I can get, so I'm just going to have to suck it up.

Footsteps thud heavily on the ground as he emerges from the tunnels. I know better than to look up, so I keep my gaze fixed downwards, as I always do. The hollow is much brighter now, and I focus on the silhouettes shifting about in the shadows on the floor. The sound of the gate slamming shut echoes through the stillness around me, followed by more footsteps and male voices drawing closer.

Male voices?

Where's Ursa?

On second thought, I don't care where she is.

Father brought a man down here—no, not a man.

Men.

My stomach churns, and a wave of pure apprehension, unlike anything I've ever felt before sinks into the pit of my belly. My chest tightens as if there are thousands of tiny insects fluttering around my heart. A pair of black polished dress shoes, not Father's, appears in my line of sight, but I refuse to look up. I don't understand. Other than Ursa, he's never brought anyone down here before. Father was the only other man I had ever seen until today when I found and saved my new friend.

Surely he didn't see me out there?

What if he was in the tower earlier, watching me in secret as I rescued the man from certain death, waiting until now to deliver my punishment?

Oh God.

My stranger.

He's already so hurt. If Father finds him and hurts him even more, he will die, I'm sure of it.

"I see you've been holding out on us with this one, Father Grimsby," the man before me says, his voice menacing.

Grimsby?

I didn't know his name was Father Grimsby.

The man runs a finger along my shoulder, then traces it across my upper back to the other, walking around me, circling me like I'm his prey, before settling to stand on my left side.

Why do I feel like I am his prey?

It takes all that I have not to flinch, but I keep any reaction to myself.

I don't like this.

“Yes, well. She is but a broken vessel, leaving me no choice but to seek other... measures . I've done all I could, but it seems that it isn't within God's plan,” Father replies, his voice weary and defeated.

What does he mean by 'other measures.'

I'm not broken, am I?

I've been good.

Haven't I?

Well, aside from today, but I refuse to believe he saw me out there because the reality of that being true is too tragic for me to think about. I'm always careful when I leave the cave. I came back, I do every time. I don't run away from Father or this place. Where would I go?

“How old is she?” Another male voice sounds from across the hollow. His voice is more profound and rougher than the man who spoke before. He steps forward, laden with curiosity and judgment, then positions himself on my right.

“Eighteen years. She's one of the original vessels born here at Atlantara, and until recently, she's been something of a favorite of mine. Her obedient disposition has made for an irresistible source of satisfaction if I do say so,” Father says, still standing back in the shadows watching as the others wait at my side.

They're close.

Too close.

Their bodies brush against mine, but their full attention is on Father. When he doesn't continue, one of the men asks, "If she hasn't yet bred a child, why is she still breathing?"

Still breathing?

A child?

What is he talking about?

My heart grows even more frantic as the man to my left kneels down beside me, fisting the back of my hair, turning my head roughly so that I face him. He is much younger than Father and not much older than I am. He wears the same clean black clothing as Father but without the white collar. He moves in closer, running his nose along the nape of my neck, then to my jaw, breathing me in.

"Mmm. She smells like heaven and sin," he says, his hot breath fanning my neck and cheek as he continues to smell me.

The walls close in around me, and a cold sweat crawls down my back. I force myself to breathe, pushing down the panic rising in my chest. I want to tell him to stop. I want to push him away. I don't know these people, yet Father is letting them touch me.

"This one isn't like the others, Deacon Falon. Let's just say that this particular vessel is part of a far more personal agenda," Father replies. His casual, detached voice is like a stab through the heart, and I'm not even sure what he is saying.

He's letting them touch me.

“She’s a pretty little dove, isn’t she, Jeremy?” The man on my left says hungrily into my hair.

“What would you like us to do with her, Father Grimsby?” The other man questions. His voice is smoother than when he spoke before, making him sound less intimidating. But then, his hand travels to my chest, slipping underneath the neckline of my cotton dress, resting it right above my breast, and any illusion of safety instantly evaporates.

“Isaac spoke to Abraham, his father, and said, ‘Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?’ Father says, virtually to himself, and I think he may be losing it a little because I don’t know how that has anything to do with me.

He stalks toward me, and the man on my left releases his grip on my hair, allowing me to turn and face Father, now standing before me. The other man removes his hand from inside my tattered dress, tearing it a little as he does. Father waits in silence, his silver eyebrow raised, wearing a look of impatience that I’ve seen him wear many times over the years.

“Well, gentlemen, here’s your fucking lamb.”

I go completely still.

A sharp, stinging sensation forms deep in my chest as my breath threatens to give away my fear. I’m not quite sure what I’m supposed to do at this moment, but I decide that he would want nothing more than for me to follow through with whatever he asks, and honestly, that might be my safest option. Without a word, he reaches for my hands and holds them like he does before we begin our games.

Father and I have always had a silent understanding. We read each other in ways that come with years of knowing someone intimately, making secret keeping damn near

impossible. But as I stare up at the only man I have ever known, I see nothing but wreckage, pain, and rot as dread crashes over me, stronger than any of the waves I'd seen outside in the storm today.

He killed my mother.

I don't know why I forget about that sometimes. I just do. The evil swirling in his irises only triggers my memories because it's the same look he wore the night he took her life.

Is he going to kill me too?

The weight of that thought settles in my chest like a boulder, and my body starts to tremble. I close my eyes for a split second, composing myself. Do not let them see my fear. They like fear. If he kills me, my stranger will likely starve to death. If he kills me, they could find him and hurt him in ways that would have him praying for hunger to take him out instead.

"Rise," Father commands, and I do as instructed, pushing myself to my feet. I don't see that I have any choice in the matter. My hands are still clasped between his larger ones, and the men to my side distance themselves, giving Father and me some space. Thank the skies for small miracles. "Let's give our guests a warm welcome, Child," Father says, pulling me towards the cave wall. This is where he likes to begin our games.

Are they going to watch Father and I play together like Ursa does?

No, Father wouldn't allow that to happen.

Father reaches for my shoulders and then presses me back against the stone, "Deacon Falon, will you do the honors of removing this whore's filthy dress?"

No .

He can't let them do that? I want to tell them not to touch me. I want them to leave me alone and let me sleep. They can keep their food.

I'm not hungry anymore.

The man, Deacon Falon, strides over. His tall, dark frame towers over me as he reaches for the hem of my dress and lifts it over my head. His eyes rake over my body, focusing on the wounds on my side, then the place between my legs. I look away. I don't want to see his face, but I can feel their eyes on me as Father closes the gap between us, giving me little time to process the others' scrutiny.

Without having to think about it, I raise my arms and hold them out to each side of me, muscle memory taking over. He takes my wrist and locks a shackle around it, then moves to the other, fastening it with a clink that echoes around us. He gestures to the other man, Jeremy, I think, who then steps out from the shadows and stands at Deacon Falon's side. The flames from the candles flicker in his dark, hungry eyes, and I look away as my lips threaten to betray me with a tremble. I bite down on my tongue to keep myself from revealing any more of me than they are no doubt bound to take.

"Chain her legs," Father instructs, and Jeremy drops to one knee, shackling my left ankle, and then my right, his eyes never leaving my cunt.

I can feel his heavy breaths on my skin, and I bite down even harder on my tongue. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth as I hold back a sob.

How could father let this happen?

I thought he loved me.

I know he isn't perfect and sometimes does bad things, but so do I.

“Feast, gentleman. Do with her what you wish. Fill her with your seed, and don't waste a single drop,” Father orders, then steps away.

He can't be serious.

Wait, he isn't going to leave me here alone with them, is he?

I stare pleadingly into his cold, obsidian eyes. Silently begging him not to do this. But the corner of his mouth tips to a half smile, and my stomach sinks as a wave of nausea floods me.

No. No. No.

“Thank you, Father Grimsby. We know exactly what to do.”

He can't let them do this to me!

“We'll have your stomach full of us in no time,” one of the men whispers against the side of my face as Father's silhouette dissolves into the darkness, leaving me alone with Satan's beasts like I am nothing.

My vision blurs as tears brim my eyes, though I don't let them fall. My jaw slackens as blood spills from my lips and drips down my chin. Falon notices, leaning in closer to trail his tongue along the blood as it drips from my mouth. I focus on the sound of Father's footsteps as he retreats, anything but the fingers trailing over my body and the evil man hovering near the place between my legs.

“Do you think she tastes sweet, Falon?” Jeremy asks, and I can feel his breath on my sensitive skin.

“There is only one way to find out, now, isn’t there. Why don’t you fuck her pretty cunt with your tongue? While I fuck her tight ass.”

I force back a whimper and squeeze my eyes shut. I want to kick and scream, but it would be pointless. I’m chained, powerless against them.

“Don't worry, Dove. I can go again, and again, and again,” Falon whispers before his tongue wraps around my earlobe and he sucks it into his mouth. “You should be thanking us, really. You're as good as fucking dead without us. Father Grimsby has been trying to get you pregnant for years, but between you and me, that old bastard doesn't have a decent fuck left in him these days. I don't know why he didn't tell us about you sooner. It seems that you—” He trails his tongue along the side of my face, then hovers over my ear before continuing, “You are his dirty little secret, aren't you?” Goosebumps prickle at my skin, and I’m equal parts terrified and completely devastated.

“He must like you, you know,” Jeremy says, still on one knee before me. His eyes shift from mine to focus on the place between my legs again, and I remind myself that any form of retaliation will not end well for me. “Because he lets you shave your pussy. Or do you let him do it for you?” he asks, hunger lacing his tone as he continues to stare at me.

Father says I look better this way, and I never minded him shaving me for that reason. When I oblige, he treats me better, and to be perfectly honest, what happens to me is none of their business. They are not my friends. They are not kind. I used to think Father cared for me, even if he didn't always know how to show it. But that thought, and any other pleasant feelings I may have had toward him over the years, all died the moment he walked away from me, leaving me alone and defenseless with these animals. It never occurred to me that the pain that he inflicted on me was deliberate, let alone that he wanted to get me pregnant. How do I get pregnant? If he had told me, I could have tried. I would have done anything to stop this night from happening.

“Do you know where you are, Little Dove?” Jeremy questions, but I remain stoic and unbothered by him, forcing as much hatred and indifference into my expression as I possibly can. When I don't reply, he continues, “This place is Hell, and the only way out for you is death.” My brows furrow. Everything I had known this place to be, my home, the ocean, can't be Hell.

“This is Atlantara. The place where people like us are either born, stolen from our families, or sold,” Falon says, and I audibly gasp, then quickly shut my mouth before one of them comments on it.

That cannot be possible.

God may have disregarded a few things that have happened around here recently, but there's no way he'd allow for someone to be stolen or, even worse, sold.

“No reaction?” Jeremy chuckles, grinning up at me. “There are hundreds of people like you here.” The breath from my lungs almost disintegrates with that piece of information.

Hundreds .

Why?

What is Father doing with hundreds of people like me?

He's lying.

There's no way Father would do something like that. And if it were true, the fact that they are telling me all of this can only mean one of two things. I won't be alive long enough to tell someone, or Father told them I do not speak, therefore keeping their secrets safe.

“She's spiraling,” Falon sing-songs, smiling as he gently runs his finger along my face, where his tongue was moments ago. It only makes me feel sick.

“The real mystery is why he's kept you down here all these years and not up there with the rest of us.” One of them speaks, but I don't know which, as my mind spins.

The rest of us?

Are they prisoners, too?

Am I a prisoner?

I'm so confused.

It's like they're clawing their way into my mind.

I can't let them.

The sharp pain in my ear from Falon's teeth drags me from my warring thoughts as he moves his mouth from my ear down to my breast, leaving behind trails of saliva and blood before wrapping his mouth around my nipple. It hardens in response, and I silently curse myself.

“Do you see that, Jeremy? This dirty little slut loves the feel of my tongue,” Falon says with a smirk.

I'm being punished.

God saw me save that man today, and somehow, He told Father. This is all my fault, and now he hates me.

“Let’s see how she reacts to mine,” Jeremy says at my feet, gripping my hips to steady me, and after another breath, he lines up my core with his mouth and then drives his tongue into me.

I stifle a cry as his fingers dig into the wounds at my side, still raw from Father’s cruelty last night. Falon pulls me away from the wall and closer to Jeremy, my flesh still in his mouth, then settles in behind me. His hard length is pressed up against my naked bottom through the fabric of his clothes, and I just want to die. I want to see my mother. I don’t know what I did wrong. I close my eyes, refusing to open them again. I never imagined I’d ever wish that it was Ursa who Father brought down here instead. I can do this, I tell myself. Because if I don’t, they’ll find my stranger.

Don’t make a sound. They don’t deserve to hear my voice.

They don’t deserve me.

I know that any reaction I give them right now, especially those drawn out of me by pain or humiliation, will only encourage them to hurt me even more.

I will not scream.

I will not react.

I will simply... be .

Until they are done with me.

Chapter 9

EZEKIEL

Faint murmurs surround me, pulling me from a dreamless sleep. I jolt awake. My heart thrashes in my chest as the world around me spins in and out of focus. My head is pounding, and there's a searing, stabbing sensation drilling deep into my skull from moving too quickly.

Where the hell am I?

My body aches and burns, like I took on a pit of serrated blades or something. Spoiler alert, the blades won. My arms are heavy as I try to move them, and my every muscle screams in protest, but I push through it, grasping for some fucking clarity. I wrap my arms around my body to support my broken ribs, and I manage to sit in an upright position. Confusion floods me, before I'm suddenly aware of the chains digging into my wrists, followed by memories of the woman responsible for putting them there. It all comes back to me in bits and pieces.

The storm.

The waves that threatened to pull me into the water.

Her.

My eyes are dry, but I force them open anyway, blinking quickly to shake off the sting. I can't see shit in the dark, but it still doesn't stop me from searching for her.

My stomach growls, aching with hunger, and I wonder how long I was passed out.

Hours?

Days?

I feel for the familiar weight of my signet ring, but it's long fucking gone. So much for the tracker. Without that ring, I'm basically invisible. Titan will think I'm dead, and if it weren't for Spencer throwing me overboard, I guess I would be. Yet, somehow, I've ended up here, and I haven't decided whether or not being here is some sort of blessing or big fucking misfortune. I'm sure I'll find out soon enough.

“ Speak! Or we'll make you fucking scream! ” A male's deep, loud, and hoarse voice cuts through the silence, and my body freezes.

There are others here.

I close my eyes to block out the whooshing of the waves and focus on the silence that follows, hoping to catch any noise that might tell me what the actual fuck is going on. I'm too far away, but I know there's more than one person by the back and forth echoes. Their voices are muffled, which tells me they're probably on the other side of the stone wall behind me. I'm not stupid enough to shout for help because it would be just my luck that whoever's out there eats men like me for breakfast, and I'm in no fucking shape to play, not today, and probably not tomorrow, either.

A long moment passes by before the sound of a woman's blood-curdling scream reverberates through the cave, followed by male laughter. Panic floods my veins, and every hair on my body stands to attention.

She's still screaming.

What the fuck are they doing to her?

My every thought is hijacked, and my skin pricks with unease as she cries, no, wails , from the fucking torture they're putting her through.

It's her .

I just know it is.

My muscles tighten, and my jaw clenches. The pain in my ribs is an afterthought, and all rational thinking is thrown to the wayside as I try to stand. My legs betray me, and I stumble back against the wall, my body slamming against the cold surface with a sickening thud. The pain is almost blinding.

Come on, God dammit! Fucking move!

I rip away what used to be my shirt from around my torso, the fabric grazing against the gashes, and blood instantly spills down my body.

Come the fuck on, Ezekiel.

With as much strength as I can summon, I wrench at the chains, hoping they're brittle enough that I break them and better my chances of finding her. Saving her. Because she saved me. She's still fucking screaming. The skin beneath the shackles starts to tear, but I keep trying, my fingers slipping with the slickness of my blood.

“He's not going to fucking save you! Don't you get it? No one is!” Another voice booms and echoes around me.

They're taunting her. Torturing her. I almost growl, my body shaking with the effort as I fight to break free, each movement sending waves of pain across my body. It's

fucking impossible. I'm in no shape to play save the damsel, but I'd feel every scrap of pain all over again, tenfold, if I could just break free and try. Whoever it was that told her that he wasn't coming to save her, was right, and that thought is sharper than the shackles digging into my split, bleeding wrists.

Fear.

Pain.

Emptiness.

I hear it all in her screams.

Pain is a language I learned when I was a child, and it feels like she's speaking directly to me.

What are they doing to her?

Despair, helplessness, from the top of her lungs, she screams while they laugh, making a mockery of her terror.

Then nothing.

Silence.

Silence isn't good.

Did they kill her?

I swear to fucking God, if I get out of this shithole, they're all fucking dead.

“This is the real Atlantara!”

What?

No fucking way.

My mind spins, each thought even more confusing than the last as I try to make sense of what the hell was just said. Conversations with Valerie flood my mind.

Atlantara .

This is it.

This is where Charles has been running his whole operation. It's fucking genius. There is bound to be some sort of port or dock situated somewhere on this island for cargo. With the ocean separating this place from the rest of the world, it's about as untouchable as The Royal was. He could ship whoever and whatever the fuck he wanted here, and nobody would blink an eye.

All of this can only mean that I've just landed in the devil's fucking playground, and the beautiful siren who rescued me, if she's still alive, is in big fucking trouble. A strange feeling hits me in the chest as my stomach sinks with the weight of knowing that someone has hurt her, and hurt her badly. She saved me . She chained me, yes, but that doesn't make us enemies. The problem is, by saving me, she may have just signed her death sentence.

Chapter 10

EZEKIEL

Three years earlier

Grief is like a constant, quiet ache that settles deep inside your chest, entwining with the core of your being. The essence of who you are before it finally takes hold of you completely and consumes you. And right now, grief is the only word I can find to describe what I am feeling as I stare at the naked woman bound to the king-sized bed before me. Only, it isn't her that I grieve. Though, part of the reason I feel this way is because of what I'm about to do to her.

The person I'm grieving is myself.

The man I used to be.

The man that, up until last year, I was happy to be, all things considered. Because after tonight, there's no going back to him. Any hope that I'd had of happiness is long gone. Everyone watching on the other side of the blinking red light on the video camera in the corner of this penthouse will see to that.

"Are you ready, Ren, baby?" Valerie asks as she traipses around the room for no other reason than to draw attention to herself. We have company, and God help their eyes be on anyone else in her presence.

"Of course, I'm ready, Valley Girl," I reply, the words coming easier now that she

and I have become more acquainted these past few months.

Though, I'm not so sure it sounds convincing. I remind myself that I'm not defined by the things I'm forced to do as a member of The Royal, like it's some sort of pathetic, daily affirmation I repeat as I suit up, ready to play the monster. I'm just humoring myself at this point because the longer I'm involved in this shit, this world, and this godforsaken society, playing their fucking games to prove my loyalty, is making it easier to forget that there was anything good about me in the first place. This Jane Doe is not the first woman I've had to sleep with to pledge my allegiance to them, and she certainly won't be the last. But she is the first woman I've had to kill while I fucked.

An unsettling emptiness pulls me from my thoughts, and for once, I'd rather be lost in my head than stuck here in the present. I look toward the camera. The security guards who should be outside guarding the door are now standing with Valerie, Leo Riley, a renowned film producer and actor, and Stuart Bohman, the chief executive officer of St. Agatha's Women's Hospital. They aren't here to help her. They're here because they paid to watch. A substantial amount, I might add. Well, Leo did. Stuart wrote Valerie an IOU, forfeiting his entire fucking family if he doesn't come up with the money by noon on Tuesday. It's a regular fucking Sunday to them. To me and to the woman chained to the headboard, it's Hell. I'm relieved they positioned the camera far enough away that they'd only hear me if I spoke loudly.

I could talk to her.

I shouldn't.

“Okay, Honey, you're live,” Valerie calls out, but she knows I'm already aware we are. It's just another way for her to tell me to hurry the fuck up and give the viewers what they paid for.

For a beat, I say nothing. I don't even look at her. Nobody in this room is aware that, in this moment, all I want to do is fucking die. I want to turn the tables and switch places with this innocent woman. Let her give me the punishment that I have earned. The punishment that I deserve to receive. But I can't. I have to convince The Royal that I'm committed to this. To them. No matter how much this breaks me.

I step closer to the bed, holding the woman's gaze. She couldn't be any older than twenty, twenty-one, maybe. She's beautiful in a way that shows she's far too perfect for this world and the life she's most likely lived because of Charles Jensen. She knows what's about to happen here but appears unbothered by it. Her power is on full display. Unbroken in the face of the death she's about to endure. I don't want to do this, and I think she sees it in my expression as I stare down at her. They're all watching, but I can't move. Not until I somehow subliminally convey... something .

An apology.

I silently tell her that I don't have a fucking choice, just as much as she doesn't. Her eyebrow raises slightly as if amused at my obvious inner turmoil. If I don't do this, we're both dead. If I do this, she's dead. But the difference is, she's not the one striving to take down The Royal and finally put an end to this shit once and for all. That fucking burden falls on me, I'm afraid, and it's tearing me apart.

Slowly, I run my index finger along the soft, delicate skin of her leg, only stopping when I reach her upper thigh. She doesn't flinch. She doesn't give me anything. Nothing that will appease Valerie, at least. I'm proud of her for her strength, though I'm sure she's probably crumbling on the inside. Life is always so much harder for a woman. It's unforgiving, especially for the women trapped in this world, surrounded by these people. And while ever a man has a cock swinging between his legs, they cannot be trusted. Yet, they somehow hold all the power and call all the fucking shots where women are concerned. Deciding who is worth something and who isn't. Like they are nothing more than prizes to be won or entertainment for them to enjoy.

There aren't any emotions glistening in her wide, dark eyes as she watches me, seemingly bored to death, but still, she doesn't look away as I make a point of not staring at her body. It won't erase or dilute the darkness of the act I'm about to commit against her, but it's the only mercy I have to give, even if it means nothing in the grand scheme of things.

Her stoicism only means that I have to force the reactions out of her, and anything else that happens beyond this point isn't even close to making the list of things I want. I swallow hard, my throat dry and tight. My eyes glaze as the emotions I want so desperately for her to see press against the surface, but I push those parts of me down deeper into my core and try to fully detach myself from my body. It's the only way. I grab the knife placed on the foot of the bed, wrapping my fingers around it tightly. My movements are slow and calculated, and I hope that they at least come across as eager when, really, I'm just stalling the inevitable.

"Get it over with," the woman says, barely above a whisper. I narrow my eyes and climb on top of her, pressing the knife against her throat as she stares up at me emotionless.

"I don't want to do this," I plead, my proverbial mask crumbling. My face is close enough to hers that the camera won't be able to ascertain our features, allowing us some freedom, if you can even call it that.

"I know," she whispers with a hint of an accent, and for the first time tonight, I detect a flicker of vulnerability in her flat, lifeless expression as tears fill the corners of her eyes.

"But I have to," I tell her, my voice growing quieter with each word.

"I know," she replies, as a lone tear breaks free, falling down her face.

As if on instinct, I move in closer and trace my lips along the dampness of her cheek before whispering, "I'll make it quick, I promise, but I'm gonna need you to give them a show," I say, digging the knife in harder against her skin with my left hand and dragging my other up her body, cupping her breast.

"There isn't anything left for me to give. They've taken everything. What you're doing, ending my life, is a kindness."

I lean down and kiss her, but she doesn't kiss me back. Good . They don't want her to want this. I don't want her to want this. Not because I enjoy her struggle or resistance, but because this is beyond fucked up, and nothing and no one deserves to be treated this way.

"Do you know where they're keeping them?" I ask foolishly. Laying everything out on the line is the worst possible thing for me to do right now, but I'm desperate. I just want this to all be over. I don't think I can take any more. And I'm not even the one on the receiving end. Not this time.

"The church," she whispers.

What fucking church?

I remove my hand from her breast, sliding it down to cup her pussy, shaking my head slightly in disgust as I start to finger her.

"I'm so fucking sorry," my whispered words crack, and she struggles beneath me. The knife, still pressed to her throat, slices her skin as she cries out in pain. She's doing this on purpose because her expression says something else entirely.

"My daughter, Mikaiah, she's only seven. They took her," her soft voice cracks and trembles, and I can feel my blood pound in my ears in cold-blooded fury.

If her daughter is seven, then she must have had her when she was no older than fourteen. I look down at her, letting her read the silent message on my face, telling her what I'm about to do. She nods slightly. Then, a beat later, I drive my cock into her as she frantically kicks and twists to fight me off, her voice thick with pain as she begs me to stop.

Bile rises in my throat, but her next words have my thoughts spiraling, and my focus shifts from the guilt of what I'm doing to her words instead.

“The church,” she keeps repeating. I want to ask why. Instead, I place my free hand on top of her head, fisting her dark hair before yanking it backward, letting my fist knock the headboard with each thrust, giving them the illusion that there is more of a struggle going on with every sound.

“I promise you. I will do my best to save your daughter,” I whisper in her ear between labored breaths.

Then, I pull her earlobe into my mouth with my tongue and bite down hard. Her blood pools in my mouth as my teeth slice and bite through her skin, removing her entire earlobe as I rip my head back with a forced jolt.

This time, her screams are real.

Her eyes squeeze shut as she rides out the pain. I'm so fucking sorry. I'm sorry. I don't say this, though. I want to. Instead, I say nothing as she wails in the agony I'm putting her through.

“Tell her that I loved her... t-till my very last breath. That everything I did, I did for h-her. To save her. To f-find her. Tell her, please. But most importantly. Tell her that I am proud of her, and I'll be watching her from the skies,” she chokes up, her now quiet voice raw and breaking as blood and tears mix together, coating our scarred,

naked bodies. “Tell her that her m-momma loves her more than all the stars,” she sobs now, and I know what I have to do. This is the most disgraceful, un-fucking-forgivable thing I'll ever do in my miserable, good-for-nothing life.

“I promise. I have to say goodbye, Angel. I can only follow through with this if I can't hear you cry.”

“Thank you. I don't hate you for this. Please just save my baby.”

“I'll die trying,” I say before pressing my lips to hers again, only this time, she kisses me back.

I grip the knife tighter, lifting it away from her throat, then lean back slightly. Not allowing myself any time to think, I drive the knife downward and into the place between her eyes with every bit of strength I have left in me, her blood now dripping from my face. I move my body, staying in place long enough that it looks convincing as I fake my release, hating every minute, every second that I breathe afterward.

Guilt wraps its claws around my broken, tainted heart, and it's all I can do not to turn this room into a fucking bloodbath, starting with Valerie. But I just made a promise. And it may not be much, but I can't let her down.

I remove myself from her slowly, committing her face, the scene to memory. I deserve to see the aftermath of what I've done, and to live with the torment that will undoubtedly follow me until I'm nothing more than a pile of rotten bones.

“That was so romantic!” Valerie shrieks, jumping up and down in one spot, clapping like a lunatic.

Someone throw that fucking cunt a fish.

“It was the most visually poetic thing I've ever seen.” This comes from one of the bodyguards. My head spins in his direction. He's wearing a brightness in his eyes like he's just met his idol for the first time. His face is familiar, and it takes me no more than three seconds to put together that he works for the president.

How fucking appropriate that he's here.

“Now, why don't you go and have a shower, Ren? As mesmerizing as it is seeing you covered in that bitch's blood, we have a plane to catch.” With any luck, it will fall from the sky.

On that note, I turn away, leave the room, and head straight into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I rest my hands on either side of the basin, looking at myself in the mirror. I turn on the faucet and frantically wash the blood from my face, neck, and hands.

I am filth.

I am the product of death and pain.

I am wreck and ruin, and if I get out of this alive, my fractured soul will forever be a prisoner to this night. They finally took from me what I've worked so hard to hold onto this past year.

My humanity.

Chapter 11

AIRLIE

Present day

It's such a cruel contradiction that a world so gifted at creating such beauty, can also harbor those with a darkness that runs so deeply through their veins, that they're capable of hurting somebody the way they hurt my stranger.

My eyes follow the lines of his sculpted muscles, trailing the dozens of silver scars etched into his strong, sleeping body. Tiny grains of sand cling to his sun-kissed skin in places, and I'm tempted to reach out and touch them, though I think better of it.

"Have you finally come to take me?" he murmurs. His deep, gravelly voice is thick with sleep and dry like he hasn't had water for a few days. I really did try to get to him sooner, but I was too weak to risk the swim.

Three days have passed since I last saw him, and he hasn't had any food. My eyes flick to the empty water bottles, crumpled flat and tossed across the cave, wishing I could offer him more than the three that I brought with me today. Father only left me with five this time, and I've been drinking from one sparingly so that he wouldn't notice that I'm running out quicker than usual.

My footsteps are soft and quiet as I tip-toe toward his body, splayed across the stone floor. He's lying on his side with his back facing me, his cheek resting atop his bloodied hands, using them as a pillow. I kneel beside him, and with trembling

fingers, I sweep a strand of his black, disheveled hair away from his neck and gently tap his shoulder to wake him. When he doesn't move, I nudge his shoulder again, this time a little harder, careful not to disturb his body too much, not wanting to reopen the gashes or aggravate the dark purple bruises covering his ribs. His body shifts with the contact, but still, there's no response.

Needles jab at the inside of my chest as fear claws at my heart. The possibility that something may be terribly wrong with him hits the pit of my stomach. I know he hasn't eaten in days, but I'm almost certain it hasn't been more than three.

How is it that I managed to keep my pet spiders alive on nothing more than mosquitoes and moths, but I struggle with a pet man?

I scramble closer to his head, still on my knees, and place a finger beneath his nostrils to feel for any sign of air. The faintest breath brushes against my skin. I'm not at all sure if it's enough to keep him alive, but I'm not leaving it to chance.

With what little strength I have, I move his body, pushing and pulling until, finally, he rolls onto his back. A second later, I straddle him without hesitation.

I'll worry about his wounds when I am positive he's not dying.

He lets out a grunt with the movement, but nothing more. Somewhere between panic and helplessness, I press my ear to his chest, blocking out the sound of the waves, focusing only on the steady thrum of his heartbeat. I haven't got a clue what I'm doing, but the thumping beneath my ear is strong enough to offer me a sliver of hope. I lean back slightly, my hand coming down to slap his face, and I feel a jolt of something between my thighs. It only takes a second for the reality of my position to hit me, and I start to slide off his body, but before I can, the sound of shifting chains fills the cave. Then, his warm hand presses gently on my upper thigh, anchoring me in place.

Panic floods through me, and my breaths become shallow. I grab his hand, trying to remove it, but in an instant, I'm flipped through the air, and before I can comprehend what's happening, I'm lying beneath him. His weight presses down on me, the rough ground digging into my back. His forearm is pushed up against my neck, the cold bite of the shackles digging into my skin, and his expression hardens into a look that I can only describe as lethal.

His brow furrows, and he pulls back slightly, piercing me with enchanting blue eyes. They're beautiful, bright like the sky. But it's the darkness within their depths that I'm drawn to. It's something I feel, not see, a force that dances with the constellations as he stares at me, his intensity so powerful, it could almost burn through me.

He removes his arm from across my neck, resting it somewhere above my head, but his body remains pinned against mine, unmoving, his eyes taking me in.

"Tell me you're real," his voice is barely a whisper, yet the softness of his tone doesn't mask the fear, or maybe it's relief? It's hard to tell. Fear doesn't seem right. He clearly has the upper hand here. Still, none of that matters in this moment. The only thing that matters is that he is okay.

I feel like thousands of little spiders are racing through my chest, but I keep the nervousness locked inside, not brave enough to let him see my reaction to him.

I feel an exchange of intense energy wrap around my core, pulling me to him. As though our souls are communicating. Telling each other things that we cannot verbalize. An unspoken understanding orbiting between us that I've not had with anyone else.

Not even with Father.

I'm being absurd. This is just my body reacting to him. Nothing more. Father doesn't

like it when I disobey him, and there is a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that these thoughts I'm having are all wrong.

Father would be furious.

I'm unsure whether or not my stranger is just as unforgiving, and I can't say I'm eager to test that theory.

"You're alive," he breathes, but it sounds more like a plea than a statement.

Of course, I'm alive. Why wouldn't I be?

The look on his face is a tangled mess that I refuse to try and unravel, so I muster up as much courage as I can and shoot him a look, one that demands he move away from in between my naked legs, hopefully snapping him back to reality. The reality where Father would unleash Hell on Earth if he caught us like this, much less that he is tied up here in the first place.

I brace myself for whatever punishment is coming, but he catches the hint instead, his expression shifting before he quickly peels himself off me, his back hitting the wall with a sharp breath as he slumps against it, trying to steady himself.

"I'm...sorry. Forgive me. I, uh, must have dozed off."

Dozed off feels like a slight understatement.

His eyes flicker to mine before dropping to the rest of my body, and I realize that I'm still lying on the ground. I scramble to my feet, then take a step back, looking down at him. My gaze lingers on him for a moment, as he stares back in absolute horror. It's all I can do not to turn and walk away, just to escape the crushing weight of his obvious disappointment as he takes in the sight of my body. I've never felt this way

before. I'm not quite sure what this feeling is, really. I wonder if it's the shame that Father always talks about.

“ What did they do to you ?” His voice is even worse than the look he's giving me, and it only makes every sore muscle in my body tighten. The spiders in my chest start dancing again, sending shivers of unease down my spine.

He needs to eat. He needs to drink something, and fast.

I grab a water bottle, hovering it in front of his face, shaking it gently. He finally takes it, and I step back, putting as much distance between us as possible so he can't reach me. There is a good chance he's starting to lose it, but hopefully, once he gets some food in his system, he'll pull himself together.

I spent most of the morning by the rocks, my fingertips numb from scraping and digging through the shallow pools, gathering whatever clams I could find, all so he could eat.

The idea I had of sharing whatever rations Father gave me was poorly thought out. Swimming would only spoil the food, and the only way out of my cave is to swim. Or through Father's gate, but he locks it behind him when he leaves, and despite trying, there is no way I can break through it. For now, he'll have to make do with eating the tiny, stubborn shell creatures I've gathered instead.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 12

EZEKIEL

I set the now empty water bottle down on the ground beside me, my eyes lingering on the woman, my captor, standing far enough away so I couldn't hurt her.

Not that I would ever try to, but she doesn't know that.

She's protecting herself. She's learned how to survive in a world filled with corruption and cruelty, and has no idea that we have that in common.

She's alive .

That's all I can think about as the hunger gnawing at my insides dissolves into nothing, my only focus is her. I've spent days thinking she was dead because of me, because she saved me. Torturing myself with the memory of her agonizing screams and the haunting silence that followed the moment they stopped.

I pleaded, hopelessly begging the phantom in the sky for a sign that she was still alive, if for no other reason than to give me hope that there was still a chance that I could save her. I heard nothing above the crashing tides and the wind blowing through the hollows of the stone formation until, finally, the exhaustion of staying awake for who knows how long knocked me on my ass.

I didn't hear her when she arrived, much less register that she was trying to wake me.

I pieced it together once I was awake enough and came to my senses, realizing the position I had her in.

Nope. Don't think about it.

She stands unnervingly still, frozen beneath my gaze as I try but fail to hide the anger and revulsion clawing its way up my throat, forcing me to speak before I think.

"I heard them," I choke out, clearing my throat before continuing, "what they did to you. Your pain, I mean. I knew it was you, I just..." I trail off. My voice is hoarse, but my eyes are glued to the bloodied and burned crucifixes sliced and branded deep into her frail, delicate skin.

They're dead motherfuckers.

Her aquamarine eyes, now even brighter in the daylight, lock onto mine, but there's no understanding there. Only confusion as she gives me a look that lets me know that she thinks I'm out of my fucking mind. I'm a lot of things, baby, and crazy may be one of them, but I'll be damned if I let what they did to you slide.

"Your body is covered in scars and wounds from those fucking assholes. You can't hide the truth from me, beautiful," I say as she plays with her hair, hiding as much of her nakedness from me as she can with the long, red strands. She's embarrassed by her scars, but there is no reason for her to be. I avert my gaze anyway, giving her some privacy.

I meant what I said. She really is beautiful. Mesmerizingly so. In fact, of all the women I've met in my life, the glamour, the money, the falseness. I hate all of it. And if you ask me, this Little Siren leaves them all for dead.

Her scars aren't ugly. The rotten fuckers who put them there are. They're proof that

she's a survivor, just like me. And after what I heard her go through the other night, and live to tell the fucking tale, not that she's telling me anything, but we'll work on that. Hearing the desperation in her cries did something to me.

Maybe it was the guilt I felt, thinking she was only being tortured because she saved my life, who knows? What I do know is that this woman endured unimaginable torture a few days ago and is standing before me like nothing ever fucking happened. That automatically makes her stronger than half of the trained men I worked with back home. Maybe it's that common ground that we share, that familiarity, that has me drawn to her.

She should stay far a-fucking-way from me.

Of all the things I imagine this world has given her, a man like me barging in and adding to that fucking list is the last thing she deserves.

"What's your name?" I ask. Her eyes instantly snap back to mine, but she doesn't reply. "Do you have a name?" I add. Reminding myself of the situation she's in. I didn't have one until I was fourteen, and that only came to be because I chose it for myself.

When Titan found me, that was one of the first questions he asked. Ezekiel was the only name I had heard of before that day, and it belonged to another kid in our cellar who unfortunately didn't make it.

Not acknowledging my questions at all, she crosses the cave with purpose, scoops up a handful of... clam shells, and drops them on the ground at my feet. She doesn't meet my eyes once as she spins on her heels, putting distance between us again. I look up, confused, and her gaze flicks to the clams, then to her hands, mimicking an eating motion.

Gotcha.

“You bought me dinner, and I don’t even know your name yet. Interesting,” I tease. A smirk plays at the corner of my lips when hers twitch, a smile barely hidden, though she doesn’t let it escape. She’s so fucking pretty, and I catch myself wanting to make her smile. God knows she, of all people, deserves to.

I move around a little, still seated, deciding that standing will only intimidate her more. Then, I smash the clamshell against the stone wall, successfully cracking it open. It’s a little shabby, but it did the trick.

“I’m guessing you don’t talk,” I question, the words slipping out between bites. She doesn’t answer, shocker , but the way she pulls her bottom lip in between her teeth has my full attention, and I can’t look away.

It’s a simple thing, but my gaze lingers on the curve of her full, pink lips before I force myself to look back into her eyes again instead.

She nods her head, no , then starts to clear the shattered shells now peppering the ground.

Raw clams taste like shit, but I’m starving, and the alternative isn’t an option.

Silence stretches between us as she watches me, leaning against the stones that act as a frame at the entrance.

My thoughts are anything but quiet.

Atlantara.

It was nothing more than a word I had assumed was a password or a code to

something until the other night. I had spent years combing through websites and maps, hacking into databases attached to every Royal member I could find, which wasn't easy. They have their shit locked down tight, not to mention the Valerie problem. Alone time was a foreign fucking concept to her, and her hovering around every goddamn second ruined my chances of ever digging deep enough to find anything crucial that could incriminate them.

The only proof that I had was myself. And a long list of rotten things they made me do. I couldn't turn myself in because who would I turn to? I'd be wiped from existence, as well as anyone they thought might have been associated with me. Though, they would have had a hard time finding anyone who'd miss me.

Seeing this through was my only option. Relaying information to Titan wasn't enough after a while. I had to dig my claws in deep. Get them to trust me. Even then, they didn't, and just as well. Otherwise, I'd have known about this place.

Atlantara isn't even on the map, for Christ's sake.

The Royals were always good at covering their tracks. If there were witnesses, they'd go missing, as well as their families. If there were rats, they were abused and beaten till they were begging for death, not before watching their loved ones butchered before their eyes. Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. Children.

The Royals don't fucking care.

Whatever becomes of me being locked up here, I won't deny the dark satisfaction bouncing around in my brain that I'm still alive. If I died, I'd have missed out on the sweet taste of pride and appreciation that those rapist fuckwits are all dead because of me.

Yet, my problem didn't disappear with them. I've traded one nightmare for another

because here I am. Prisoner to the Hell I've spent four fucking years trying to find. Only I am at a huge disadvantage now.

Nobody that would ever give a damn about me knows about Atlantara, much less that I'm still alive. And my fate, and the fate of anyone else trapped here, rests in the hands of a woman who not only doesn't speak, but is also holding me fucking hostage. Whether she's oblivious to the bigger picture or not, I'm still in chains.

She's the only shot I have at ending these bastards for good, which is why I have to get out of here. If they catch wind that Charles Jensen is dead, who knows what contingency plans they have up their sleeves? They'd think that someone is coming for them, given the nature of their bullshit, and they'd think correctly. Because when I get out of here, it's fucking over for them.

When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose. And it's high time that the world gets a fucking wake-up call because I plan to kick the pedestal they've put some of these low-life scumbags on out from underneath them.

All I need is a way out of these shackles.

"Do they know about me, the people I heard the other night?" I give her a pointed look, studying her expression. I half expect that she'll avoid me altogether, but to my surprise, she's shaking her head, looking me dead in the eyes as if to say no .

It's the truth. I'd know if she were lying.

But, if they don't know about me, that means they were either punishing her for something else that she did or that torturing and raping her is a common occurrence.

That thought is like a punch in the fucking stomach.

“Who are they?” I seethe. I have to know what I'm working with here. Which I fucking regret because her body tenses, and she begins to withdraw.

Discomfort washes over her as she twists her hair around her slender fingers, looking everywhere else but at me. She's hiding. While she might be here in a physical sense, I can see the retreat in her eyes as they glaze over.

I will not let her run away from this.

“You gotta give me something? I can help you. I can help us. If you let me go, I can get us both out of here. You just have to trust me. You can trust me.” Her eyes widen, her mouth hanging open, her hair forgotten as she starts pacing back and forth, still keeping her distance, sticking close to the entrance. She's going to run, but I can't help my desperation at this point. I'm so close to this all being over.

“This place... It isn't good, and I know deep down you know that too.” My voice is softer now, and any hope that I had that simply talking to her would be enough is slowly dissipating.

She's afraid.

I can see it in her eyes.

Raw, unadulterated fear clings to her like a second skin, coiling in the air between us. Whoever holds her prisoner in this place has done everything they can to shatter her in every way possible.

“Are you even supposed to be out here? Or are you free? Cause, I gotta tell ya, being chained to a fucking cave wall isn't exactly fun, Little Siren,” I say like a giant sack of shit. It's too late to take it back now. I said what I said.

I watch every flicker of emotion that passes across her face. She hesitates, uncertainty clouding her features before her eyes finally shoot to mine, and if they were daggers, I'd be fucking dead.

I silently say goodbye to the possibility of her ever trusting me.

Whatever thoughts had been racing through her mind, she clung to the one that would make this whole situation so much fucking worse for me.

A heartbeat later, she turns and walks away, not sparing me a second glance.

I blew it.

I scared her.

God fucking dammit!

I should've known better than this, of course, she ran. She doesn't know me from Adam. How can I expect her to trust me, to risk her life, because that's what helping me would do, and she knows that? I foolishly asked her, no , begged her to put the fate of her future in the hands of a complete fucking stranger over a life that's fucking familiar to her?

A life that she's clearly grown accustomed to because she'd much rather cling to the sick comfort of barely surviving than take a chance, or even risk the possibility that it might all fall apart and she winds up dead anyway.

She's in survival mode. I can tell.

She retreats to the quiet corners of her mind. A secret refuge that she runs to where the brutal grip of reality cannot reach her. When it all gets too much, and any

evidence that hope does not exist, that's where you'll find her.

I know this because once upon a fucking time.

I hid there, too.

Chapter 13

AIRLIE

I used to think that the ocean held all our secrets. That, within its blue and silver depths, were creatures much like us, only they lived beneath the water. Rising to the surface to observe, never to harm, before returning to their kind with stories of the outside world.

Sometimes, if I look hard enough, I swear, I see them. Their pale shadows twirling within the waves, convincing me to join them. I know they're not real. But I would always wonder if they'd take me away if they were.

My mother used to tell me stories about them before she died. Though, I think it was her way of distracting me from the nightmares of this place, shielding me with foolish tales to take my mind off the games Father played with her. Eventually, he started playing them with me, too, and I couldn't pretend any longer.

My heart feels heavy in my chest at the memory of my mother. I don't have many, and there are times that I forget.

That's the part I hate the most.

Forgetting.

For my mind to erase the special moments I shared with her feels like the greatest betrayal.

The cruelest kind of sin.

So much time has slipped by since she died, and I'm mostly on my own, so I don't know if these memories are actual memories or if I created them out of the emptiness I feel deep within my soul that she's gone.

I trace my index finger along Flipper's hairy little back and place Seba on the moonlit window rocks. They keep my secrets, too, and I know it's because they trust me. I wish they didn't have to see me play Father's games. I only hope they forget things too.

Father hasn't visited in weeks. Not since handing me over to those men. He leaves me food and water at the gate before turning around and walking away for days at a time. As much as I'm thankful he hasn't been around, I wish he would at least leave his candles behind so that I could collect tiny insects for my spiders to eat. I tried feeding them some of my food, but they didn't seem to like it.

With Father not being around as much, I've had a lot more freedom to visit my stranger. I savor those quiet moments with him, hidden away in his cave. I can't seem to stay away no matter how wrong I know keeping him here is.

Whenever he tells me to let him go, it feels like a knife is twisting inside my chest, knowing that he wants to leave me. I respond by walking away. And now, when I visit, I choose times when I know he'll be asleep to avoid any thoughts of him being gone altogether.

He doesn't understand that releasing him is an awful idea. He says that he will help me escape too, yet he fails to remember that there are others here. Others, like Father, who would hurt my stranger if he was caught. Especially if Father learned that he means something to me.

All Father does is take from me. My mother. My body... everything. And I refuse to let him take my stranger too. Tying him up is for his own good.

A deep cry rips through the cave, a man's cry, and my heart stops dead in my chest. The blood drains from my face as the deep, gravelly tone grows louder. It's him. My stranger. I quickly descend the jagged rocks, my skin catching on them on the way down, but the sting is an afterthought.

My heart screams the words that my mouth can't, and without a second thought, I plunge into the rock pool, my body moving on instinct, muscle memory guiding me through the darkness.

If they have him, Father, those men, we are both as good as dead. That much is true. I may have only recently discovered Father's true colors, but I knew before then not to trust him when it came to my stranger. And with Father not giving a damned winter's day in Hell about me anymore, and with my mother gone, the stranger and my spiders are all I have left in this world.

He is mine to keep, not theirs.

My pet.

And I will not let them hurt him.

Chapter 14

AIRLIE

The second my feet are out of the water, I run as fast as I can toward his cave. Sand and rocks flick up behind me, slapping the back of my thighs with each desperate step. The roughness of the ground barely registers, drowned out by the pounding of my heartbeat, loud and frantic in my ears. As I near the entrance, I begin to slow as fear and dread pull tight at my chest. The only light guiding me is the glow of the full moon as I tip-toe inside.

I hold my breath, straining to listen for signs of other voices over the waves crashing against the stones. The cave walls are shrouded by the night, as my eyes scan the hollow for my stranger.

“ Please ,” his cries are softer now, yet the desperation still coats his sorrow-filled voice. I stop dead in my tracks, ignoring my instincts to run to him and search the shadows for signs that we aren’t alone instead.

This might still be some sort of trap, and knowing the malice that lurks within Father’s lifeless eyes, I would not be surprised if he was hiding in the shadows, waiting for me. Knowing it’d be more fun if I were forced to watch whatever sick games he had planned.

The moon’s blue rays spill through the cave, casting beams over my stranger’s restless, sleeping body as he tosses and turns on the rough ground.

Once I'm satisfied that we're alone, I rush to his side, my heart racing with worry, not at all convinced that he isn't already hurt. My hands frantically feel his face, and then the rest of his hard body, desperately searching for any signs of injuries.

When suddenly, a strong hand wraps around my wrist. A sharp breath escapes my lips in surprise.

"Siren?" he whispers, his voice a combination of exhaustion and relief. I can't see his face, but I've studied him closely while he's slept, enough to imagine that he's confused and that there is a crease forming on his forehead.

When I say nothing, he removes his hand, the chains clinking and dragging along the ground as he starts to sit up.

There are no words to describe the relief I feel that I was wrong.

He's okay.

He was only dreaming.

He's safe.

I reach out and touch his face, his stubble now longer, scratching against my skin.

He pauses.

"Did they hurt you? Did they come back?" His voice hardens with anger, replacing any traces of sleep. Shame pricks at my neck, then my face, and I avert my gaze.

I had been so sure something was wrong.

So sure Father was hurting him.

He places his left hand gently over mine, still resting against his cheek, before using his other hand to tilt my chin, urging me to look at him. All I can see is the sharp contour of his square jaw and a shadowed version of his piercing blue eyes, as he stares down at me in the dim moonlight.

I breathe him in.

Savoring his natural scent.

He smells like midnight, like the earth and rain as it falls from the sky.

It's intoxicating.

I want to answer him. I want to tell him that I am okay and that he doesn't have to worry about me. That Father doesn't bother me anymore. The words stay trapped in my throat, so I shake my head in answer.

I don't want to move, fearing that if I break free of his touch, the sense of safety, like an invisible shield wrapped around us, will fall away, too.

"The things I'd do to hear you speak to me, just once... are far from normal, Little Siren," he says. His voice is dark and dangerous. Ominous even, yet I am not afraid.

He moves his hand away from my chin and brushes his fingertips, a featherlight touch, across my cheek, sticky from my swim.

My hand is still beneath his other one, pressed against his face, and I look away. Stirring beneath his touch until he releases his hold on me. I straighten beside him slightly, water from my short, cotton dress that I forgot to remove before swimming,

pooling around me.

I want to stay like this, in this cave... with him .

I make a mental note to dry my dress when I get back.

Father can't ever smell my stranger on it.

A long moment passes, and the moon grows brighter as it shifts higher in the sky, allowing me to see my stranger's features more clearly. His dark, prominent eyebrows are furrowed, his usual deep crease marking his forehead. I hold back a smirk at how predictable he is becoming.

His black, unruly hair, a little longer now, is thick with sweat from a restless sleep, sticking to the sides of his neck in damp strands. He stares down at me, his eyes heavy with sleep, framed by dark, long lashes that only make him look even more dangerous.

There's something wild about him. And it calls to a part of me that only surfaces when I'm around him. An unfamiliar urge to hug and comfort him in this moment surges deep in my belly, but I force myself to hold back, not wanting to make a complete fool of myself.

His soul is tortured.

I can see it when he stares at me this way.

He looks like he's felt the pain of a thousand bloody, and brutal beatings, and survival itself is his punishment. It's this vulnerability that urges me to take a leap of faith and place my trust in him.

I haven't been fair to him recently. I've not given him any opportunity to talk to me, leaving him alone, when he only wants to be freed. I understand that better than anyone, yet I can't bring myself to do it. Not with knowing the risks.

I will be alone again.

And even if he doesn't leave me, Father will take him from me anyway.

I search my thoughts for something I can do or give him, to show him that I'm sorry, but there's nothing.

I have nothing to give.

Nothing but myself.

“Airlie . My mother used to call me Airlie.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 15

EZEKIEL

I draw in a sharp breath, unable to release it as her voice cuts through the silence.

Cuts through me.

My mouth is hanging open, but I don't care what I look like right now.

This woman.

This shy yet lionhearted woman is anything but fragile. She just showed me a part of herself that I'm not sure she's ever shown anyone else, just by how she's looking at me. I can't say for certain, but I sense the courage it must have taken her to speak to me at all.

A stranger.

A man.

My chest tightens as an unfamiliar feeling digs its nails deep into my heart, reminding me that I have one.

I think I might be falling for her.

Not just anyone.

Airlie.

She can't be fucking older than nineteen, what the fuck is wrong with me?

Her hands tremble, and I reach out to hold them without thinking. My fingers brush against her delicate, almost translucent skin as she willingly places her small hands in my much larger ones. It's all I can do not to lift her in my arms and claim her as mine, right here, right now, but I won't, even if it's what my soul is compelling me to do.

That's not what she needs.

Airlie needs to know that she's protected, that allowing a man, allowing me, to see her raw and vulnerable, wasn't a mistake, and that for once in her life, her heart is safe.

She's safe with me.

Even if my soul, that seems to be calling all the shots right now, is damned.

I spent half my miserable life thinking I'd never be happy and the other half believing I didn't deserve happiness at all.

Is the latter still true?

Fuck yes.

But right now, with her hands in mine, I'll take whatever she's willing to give. She's avoided me for weeks, and I've been going out of my fucking mind. And now, she's right here in front of me.

“Airlie, I—” I choke out. I can’t even talk right now with how she’s smiling up at me with those wide, blue-green eyes.

The darkness isn’t strong enough to hide her beauty from me, but it’s her tenderness that catches me off guard, leaving me completely speechless.

She reminds me of the sun as it sets, its warm glow dancing across the earth, and everything pure and beautiful.

Everything I am not.

She should run.

Her instincts to do so have clearly left the building because she’s here, like this, with me. Not hovering on the edges of the cave but a breath away from being in my arms.

I’m fucking terrified.

I am terrified that the darkness that has been seething beneath my flesh for the thirty-two years I’ve been breathing will swallow her innocence, her light, leaving nothing but emptiness and pain in its wake.

I’m not good , certainly not good enough for her.

For anyone.

And now I’ve gone and complicated shit by catching feelings for her. I don’t know how or when. But there’s no use denying it. In the short time I’ve known her, she’s cared for me in ways no one else ever has.

The chains, well, that’s neither here nor there at this point. Part of me thinks she only

chained me up to keep me hidden. The other part of me believes that she's afraid that I'll leave her, and I get it.

I understand her because I think she understands me.

We don't need words.

We don't need anything, just us.

This world is lonely, yet I'm starting to think it doesn't have to be with her around. If she would only take off these fucking chains because the only way we will truly be safe is if every last one of those assholes is dead. And if I don't see this mission through, then the past four years of my life would have been for nothing.

Everything I did.

Everything that had been done to me.

The horrors I carry with me, and I'm forced to relive each night in my dreams.

If The Royal and any other bastard associated with them continue to exist, I'd be nothing more than a bad man. A monster just like them, who has done very bad things.

There will be no redemption for me.

I refuse to live the rest of my life knowing that all those innocent people, victims, by my hands or The Royals, died for nothing in a world that doesn't even fucking care they existed. And that's exactly what failing would mean.

It would mean that I'd be failing them.

Failing Airlie.

“What's your name?” she whispers, her voice raspy and hesitant. Her voice is like music to me. I lean in closer, not enough to make her fear me, but just enough that she knows that I trust her too, which is a damn first, much like these strange feelings I have for her.

“Ezekiel,” I reply. She considers that for a moment, and her eyes roll over the shadows and contours of my body that the moonlight allows her to see.

“Ezekiel,” she says slowly as if trying my name on for the first time, and it fucks me up. “H-how did you... why are you here?” she questions.

“I blew up a boat,” I answer. Opting for the PG version of the story.

“What do you mean?” she asks. Her brows knit together, and I’m reminded just how little she seems to know about the outside world. I don’t want to embarrass or make her feel like she’s beneath me in any way, so I decide that I’ll tell her whatever she wants to know, whenever she wants to know it.

I can’t imagine too much of the truth being told around here, especially to Airlie, and she deserves to learn everything there is to know about this world, even if it is mostly horror. Then again, if she’s here in Atlantara and has experienced more than once what I listened to those fuckers do to her, I figure that, whatever stories I share, she won’t be all that shocked by them.

“I was working for monsters. People who hid behind their privilege and abused their power. I blew up their ship to keep the world safe from them,” I answer, and she looks away, taking it all in.

“Were you supposed to die too?” she asks, her quiet voice now filled with worry as

she stares up at me.

“Yes,” I say, not wanting to lie to her. I didn’t see another way out at the time. Didn’t want another way out.

“Do you kill people often?” she questions, not batting an eye. If she’s frightened, she doesn’t show it. I’m a little caught off guard because that wasn’t remotely where I thought this was going. Then again, she’s not like anyone else.

I thought she’d at least consider her safety, given her close proximity to a killer, or, at the very least, question why I wanted to blow up an entire ship full of people in the first place. The remorseful expression she wears shows me that she’s more concerned about how I feel about being a murderer than the fact that people are dead.

What happened to her that was so brutal that it has left her so desensitized by the mention of death?

She said before that her mother called her Airlie, as in the past tense.

I make a mental note to ask her about it later.

Now isn’t the right time.

“Yes,” I answer. My eyes search her shadowed features, looking for signs that she might be uncomfortable or at least a little afraid of me, but she gives me nothing. If anything, she seems more at ease.

“I don’t believe you are bad,” she says with finality, and my lip twitches, threatening to curve into a smile. I suppress it, not wanting her to think I’m mocking her.

“Oh, yeah, how so?” I challenge, raising an eyebrow. I’m not sure what she sees in

me that I can't, but she clearly isn't looking hard enough.

"Because you aren't. You could've hurt me, and yet, you haven't."

"Yet," I counter.

"You won't," she snaps back. An order. "You're not like them." I know by them, she means those mother fuckers who hurt her that night.

My jaw tightens, and an uncontrollable rage begins to simmer in my chest, surging through my entire body with the memory of her screams as they tortured and raped her echoes through my mind.

They will regret ever laying a fucking hand on her. I silently make a vow that I will remove their fucking arms with my teeth and feed them to the sharks the minute she lets me go.

"That's where you're wrong, Airlie. I am just like them. The question is, does that bother you?" While I may not be as callous about the sick and twisted things that I've done in my life, I am still guilty of them.

When she doesn't answer, I decide it's my turn to ask questions. Locking my anger somewhere deep down.

"Do you know where you are? This place. Do you know what it means to be here?" She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, unanswering, staring into the darkness behind me.

"Those men said that this was Atlantar— something, but no, I don't know what that means," she says, not meeting my gaze.

“That's right. Atlantara. The place where the Devil lives. It's a palace of skin and bones built with the blood of people like you and me,” her eyes shoot to mine, confusion etching her pretty features.

“Father says that the devil isn't real.”

Father?

“Who is your Father?” I all but snap at her. My mind is racing a million miles per minute, but I say nothing more.

Waiting.

Regret pinches the corners of her eyes, and if I didn't know better, I'd say that mentioning him at all was a mistake.

A long moment passes between us as she continues to stare into the shadows, lost to her thoughts.

“Father Grimsby. He isn't really my father. He's a priest.” My head is screaming, my heart on the brink of fucking failure while I conjure as much strength as I can not let her see my inner turmoil.

A fucking priest.

The church.

I want to beg her to let me go right the fuck now, but I remember her reluctance to hear me out the last time I begged for her to free me. Resulting in her not acknowledging me at all in the weeks that followed. I knew she had visited me by the water bottles and clams she left for me to eat, not to mention the housekeeping was

always taken care of. I can't say I'm over the moon about her doing that .

Still, she has only just started trusting me enough to speak to me, and I don't want to ruin it. I don't know what I'd do if I had to go back to staring at a cold stone wall all fucking day. Trapped in my head, fully aware of where I am, who is around me, and how completely fucking useless I am, not able to do a damn thing about any of it.

“There will come a time when you'll have to let me go, Airlie,” I say, and her grip on my hands grows tighter.

She is scared, but not of me.

For me.

Everything I suspected about why she chained me up here has turned out to be true. She's scared that she'll lose me.

She won't.

We may not have known each other for long, and the circumstances are not even remotely romantic or normal, but we don't exactly have normal lives. Time is either always insignificant or the only thing that matters, and I wish I could assure her that we have all the time in the world.

The truth is, I'm not sure what tomorrow holds for us. By now, The Royal would be aware that Charles Jensen and co are well and truly dead, and they'd most likely be on high alert, suspecting it was a takedown. It was, but they won't be sure.

The last thing we want is for them to start evacuating because they won't bother to take any victims with them. They'd burn this place down, along with every innocent person locked inside, and the thought of anything happening to Airlie is enough to

send me fucking mad.

She squeezes my hands, holding onto me like I'm her lifeline, and in ways that she won't fully understand, I am.

I move closer to her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and pulling her to my chest. She buries herself into me. Her long, pomegranate hair, still dripping with water, is cold against my warm skin.

I realize she's wearing clothing for the first time, if you can even call it that. I don't need to look at it to know that it's far too short to be called a dress with how her exposed, slender legs glisten in the moonlight.

"I won't let them take you from me," she whispers softly against me. Her breathing grows faster, and I hold her tighter, careful so that the chains don't scratch her sensitive skin.

I can't promise her that everything will work out. I can't give her the cliché nonchalance you see in movies or read about in books. She needs to understand the weight of what's happening, the bigger picture, because when the walls start crashing down around her, and one way or another, they will, those men, Father Grimsby, will leave her behind to rot. That is if they don't kill her first. If she knows what's happening here, it could ruin the element of surprise that they will no doubt get off on, giving her a chance to escape if I can't get to her.

Her breathing is softer now. Her too-tiny frame is swallowed by my muscular one as she begins to calm down. She's not asleep. She's content like this.

Here with me.

"You know that this all ends in blood, Little Siren. But if you don't let me go, it will

be our blood that spills, not theirs.”

Chapter 16

AIRLIE

We lay like this for what feels like an eternity.

Ezekiel.

His strong arms are wrapped around me, and it's like they belong here. I can't remember a time I've ever felt this kind of peace, and now that he's here, and I know what it feels like to be in his arms, I don't ever want to give it up.

We may have fallen asleep at some point because my back is pressed up against his hard body, his bicep beneath my head as a pillow. His other hand rests on my exposed hip, pinning me against him.

He must realize I'm awake because his fingers slowly trace featherlight circles on my hip, but I feel his touch everywhere. His warm breath fans my neck, and goosebumps pepper my skin in response. His hand slides up from my hip to my ribs, leaving a trail of heat behind him. My dress is a pointless barrier between us because it's bunched up beneath my breasts, exposing my scars to him.

I ignore the urge to cover my body, remembering he, too, has scars. Where some of mine are a mix of pink and purple, his are different shades of silver and blue.

We shouldn't be doing this.

Father would be furious if he saw us this way.

That thought only makes this all the more exciting.

I realize how strange that is.

When Father touches me, he leaves me cold and empty.

Defective.

And I'm forced to live with his torment curling around my mind like incense smoke, wrapping me in his rancid scent, until there's nothing left of me but the stain on my soul from his games.

Ezekiel's touches are warm and gentle.

New.

Yet nothing about this feels foreign.

They're kind yet menacing. Thoughtful, but I can sense his greed as he smooths his large hand across my stomach, then up to trace the skin beneath my right breast. My blood ignites, a rush of heat flooding through my veins, and my body quivers in his grasp, but it has nothing to do with the chill in the air.

His cold chains brush against my skin, but they are an afterthought as my body willingly melts into his. I sink back into him, wiggling my bottom against his hardness.

He must like it because he squeezes me into him more, groaning something inaudible in my ear, sending a wave of goosebumps across my skin.

The ocean crashes against the rocks, their thunderous roar melding in with the howling winds as it sweeps through the cave's hollow, though it doesn't drown out the sound of my heartbeat, thumping loud in my ears.

"I have waited my whole life for you, Airlie," my name on his lips is like a song composed by God Himself.

No, not God.

Someone not from this world.

Someone pure and magical, and I don't ever want him to stop singing it to me.

"Tell me you want this," he moans desperately in my ear.

His hold on me is tighter now, though he doesn't hurt me.

I do want this.

Ezekiel's touches are different.

Sacred.

Pure.

Should I want him to stop?

Is it bad that I don't want him to?

I'm not sure I care if it is.

“I need your words, Little Siren,” he demands, leaving a trail of warmth along my neck, the hair on his face prickling my skin.

“I want this,” I almost beg. My chest rises and falls, each breath shallow, mirroring his. “Ezekiel, I-” my voice cuts off, his commanding presence blurring my every thought.

“Say it again,” he asks. The words come out low and teasing, and I can tell he’s smiling, even though I can’t see his face.

“Ezekiel .”

“Whatever happens to me after tonight—” he whispers before rolling away from behind me, his movements slow and tender, and with warm, gentle hands, he guides me to lie on my back. He hovers above me, one hand outstretched above my head, supporting his body, the other caressing my cheek. He gazes down at me. His face is luminous in the moonlight as he runs his fingers through my hair and swipes a strand behind my ear. His knuckles graze across my skin, but he’s careful not to let his chains hurt me.

There is a kindness in his eyes I never thought anyone could possess. Granted, I have only ever seen a handful of people in my life. Still, with how he’s looking down at me, holding me, I feel like I’ve known him forever.

“I would have known what true happiness felt like,” he says, dipping his head and brushing his nose against my ear, breathing in my scent. “I’m going to replace their touches with my own,” he growls, pinning his hips against mine.

His large frame engulfs mine, but I am unafraid.

I feel safe like this with him.

He lifts his head, his eyes narrowing with worry, I think, as he meets my gaze. Before he can do or say anything else, I raise my hand and slowly trace the sharpness of his cheekbone, then the hair that covers his jawline. His eyes bounce between mine, reading me.

He knows I don't want to talk about them.

What they did to me.

"I could list a thousand reasons why you should stay away from me, Airlie," he says breathlessly as I lift my hips and brush against his hardness.

"I could list a thousand more reasons why I'm not going to," is all I get to say before he slams his mouth to mine.

My heart lurches in my chest. My breathing is uncontrollable as he hungrily parts my lips with his tongue. My back digs into the roughness of the ground, but I don't wince.

I revel in it.

I want him to mark me.

I want to wear the evidence of this sacred moment, tangled in the shadows with him.

At least for as long as I am alive.

Chapter 17

EZEKIEL

My fingers dig into her bony hips. My steel cock straining against my pants from her teasing. Her chest is heaving, her breaths uncontrolled as I slide my hand up from her hip to her chest, feeling for her heart. Its beats are wild and frenzied beneath her luminous skin, keeping time with my own as I kiss her frantically. My hand smooths down, then up to feel her warmth beneath the annoying, bunched-up dress, doing little to hide her lithe, petite body from me. I push back, breathing heavily, and then grip the useless fabric, silently asking her permission to remove it.

She stirs beneath me, and I pull further back, offering her enough room to sit up. She raises her arms, the graceful motion stirring something hot and feral deep within me. I tug the scratchy fabric over her head and then toss it to the side.

Airlie glows before me, commanding and contrasting in the shadows. Every part of her draws my gaze, anchoring me in the stillness of this cave. Her long hair catches in the dim moonlight, the color of bloodshed now that it's fully dry. She pushes it back behind her slender shoulders, fully baring herself to me.

I take this moment to stand, reaching for the button on my pants and unfastening it as she stares up at me wide-eyed. Her mouth opens slightly as she watches, transfixed on my movements.

I've never cared about being naked before. My life had desensitized me long before I ever knew that nakedness could ever be considered sacred. But standing here before

the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on, even though I am half cloaked in darkness, I feel raw.

Vulnerable.

Not in a way that has me itching to cover myself, but in a way that feels like I have just laid bare the fragile parts of me, the parts you can't see with your eyes. Airlie is the only one who has ever had the power to make me feel this way.

Savage and untamed, yet cut open and fragile.

Like a wild creature that will only submit to one master.

My life wasn't spared for me to just waste it by chasing down a fool's path. Though, that is exactly how Titan would see this.

My jaw tightens, and I grind my teeth at that thought.

Titan isn't here.

Airlie is.

And she's sitting before me, delicate and trusting, pinning me with a stare that I feel all the way to my bones.

She makes me believe that I am worthy of more than just love. She makes me believe that I am worthy of life. A life I didn't know I wanted or needed until I imagined it with her. Before she saved me, I was a burning match yearning for something to set ablaze.

Destructive .

Dark.

And while I still hear the darkness swimming in my bloodstream call to me, begging me to unleash it, I refuse to believe this will all end in flames. That the metaphorical fire that Airlie and I have built together won't burn us alive. Because for once in my godforsaken life, my tortured soul feels free.

I kick off my pants, the chains echoing throughout the cave with each movement, and I stare down at my beautiful siren. Her curious blue-green eyes take me in before she stands, moving closer to me. A silent gesture, telling me she wants this.

Wants me.

I reach for her, my hands cupping the sides of her captivating face, looking down into her eyes before she launches at me, her lips finding mine in the shadows.

“Airlie,” I whisper her name against her lips.

A promise, I decide, as she takes charge, commanding me.

I let her.

This thing we share is unique.

Incomparable.

Meaningful .

And I know she feels the same way I do. We have given ourselves over and over and over again to monsters unworthy of our innocence. But this, this is for ourselves. No one else. And if she finds her power, lost in these moments with me, who am I to

deny her?

She kisses me feverishly. Sinking her tongue into my mouth. Her desperation is unveiled as she runs her slender fingers through my hair, then down my neck and across the broadness of my shoulders, back up to grip my neck. Airlie holds me tighter, her lips never leaving mine as she claims me for herself. Our chests press together, craning my neck to reach her as I slide my tongue over hers, lightly sucking on it.

She tastes like pure fucking sunshine as I take her bottom lip in my mouth and bite down on it tenderly. She leans back a little, breaking our kiss, before trailing her fingers down the length of my arms and reaching for my hands. She draws a circle pattern on each of my palms, held out between us. Her smile, faint in the dark, is soft, making my heart skip a beat and leaving me weak in the knees.

“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” she whispers, unsure.

She’s worried I will judge her for this. But it does the total opposite as my chest grows tighter with a feeling I have never felt before.

“Never?” I ask for some stupid reason. I know she isn’t lying, but I find myself craving the reassurance that I am the only one who has tasted her lips.

“Never. You are the only,” she says, and I understand her unsure, unfinished sentence. There’s a double meaning there. I am the only one she has kissed. But I’m also her only. The only one she wants.

“I am gonna need you to tell me, Airlie. Tell me the things you show me. I need your voice.” Crave her voice, but I don’t say that part out loud.

“You are the only one. The only one I have wanted. I don’t want, have never w-

wanted, anyone else before you,” she whispers, looking down at my scarred chest. Her words may be slightly uncertain, but the way she hides her eyes from me shows me that she means them.

I tilt her chin with my thumb and index finger, not wanting her to hide from me. “Don't ever be ashamed of how you feel, Little Siren. Your thoughts, your feelings, are everything to me,” I say before pressing my lips softly against hers for one more kiss, and then I pull back. I reach for her hands, the chains rattling around us forgotten as she bites her bottom lip. “I want to taste you,” I almost beg before pulling her over to the stone wall. It's darker now. The moonlight is long gone as I gently lean her against the wall. “The ground is rough. I want you to be comfortable,” I whisper, guiding her back.

“Can I sit down? P-please?” she asks in a hurry, and I don't question it, but I sense that there's something about being against a wall she doesn't like. Noted . I push aside the rage coiling in my stomach, not wanting to spoil this moment I have with her.

“You can sit wherever you like, baby,” I reply. Her shadow shifts in front of me as she sits upright, her back flush against the stone.

“I like it when you call me that,” she says, a hint of a smile lacing her raspy tone.

“Oh, yeah?” I ask shyly before kneeling in front of her. I reach out, each hand resting on her knees as my fingers slowly dance across her delicate skin. “I want you in my mouth, Airlie. I want to taste your sweet pussy until you see stars,” I say, and she gasps. “Unless you don't want me to?”

“No. I want you to. I j-just...” her voice trails off, searching for the right words to say before continuing, “I can't imagine that it would feel good.”

“I promise, baby girl, it does. But if you don't want to try it, we can do something

else?—”

“I want your mouth on me, Ezekiel,” she says, orders, and it only makes my hard cock twitch in anticipation. I want her like I've never wanted anything else, but I know that deep down, she needs this.

She needs to feel beautiful.

Worshiped.

She needs to know that this is her body, no one else's, and that she calls the fucking shots here. The little voice in my head that says her body is mine is overpowered by the wish for her to be her own before she can ever be anyone else's.

She will always get a choice with me.

I lean into her closer. My knees biting into the jagged ground between her parted legs as I kiss her. I trail my hands from her knees to her hips, then smooth them over the skin on her sides.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I'm sure of you,” she whispers in response, and it's all I can do not to claim her right now against this wall. I want to make this good for her. I want her to see that not all touches are bad. That you don't always have to feel ugly when you're with someone like this. Because, for years, I had wished for the same revelation. That one day, sex would have meaning, and I feel like I have found that meaning with her.

I trail my tongue down her neck and across her skin to her ear. Pulling her lobe into my mouth. My breath is warm against her salty skin, and she shudders beneath me, leaning closer to my body. I kiss down her neck, then to her pronounced collarbone.

Kissing a path down to the curve of her right breast.

My mouth hovers above her nipple, blowing warm circles on her skin teasingly. She leans up, pushing her breast closer to my face.

She wants this.

She wants me.

I smile, taking the hint, then swirl my tongue around the hardness of her nipple before sucking it gently into my mouth. She gasps, her hand finding my hair, fisting it tightly, but I don't flinch. I'll take whatever pain she wants to give me. I move to her other breast, then shift my body back, granting myself room to trail my tongue along her stomach, to her navel, then lower, caressing the skin above her pussy.

"Are you wet for me, Little Siren?" I ask, reluctantly removing my mouth from her body.

"W-what?" she replies, dazed and confused, completely caught up in the moment.

"If I take your sweet pussy in my mouth, will I taste your need for me?"

"Y-yes," she says before I shift my body lower. The rocks scrape my knees and shins, but I don't give a fuck. Right now, this woman, my woman, has my full attention.

I trace soft kisses lower but pause when I realize that she's completely bare. I raise an eyebrow, though I decide that questioning it would be a bad idea. There's only one reason she'd be free of pubic hair, and that thought makes me want to rip the jugular from those fucking pieces of shit's throats.

I push those thoughts aside and smooth my hands over the backs of her thighs,

guiding her knees up over my shoulders, silently instructing her to rest her legs there. Once she's comfortable, I trail featherlight touches along her hip, then slide my hand gently across her concave stomach, freeing my other hand.

I breathe her in. Her sweet, irresistible scent has my cock seeking friction, but this isn't about me. I run my tongue along her center, licking light, purposeful circles, along her slickness, before closing my lips around her clit, and sucking. I move my tongue lower, desire driving me to taste all of her, but I pull back when I taste blood.

"Airlie, you're bleeding," I say as a courtesy because unless she tells me she no longer wants this, I'm not stopping for anything. A little blood isn't going to hold me back. She stiffens, her legs tightening on my shoulders, and she starts apologizing before I can tell her that it's okay.

"I—I am sorry, Ezekiel. I didn't know. I'm sorry," she says almost frantically. She tries to remove her legs, but I gently stop her.

"It's okay, Little Siren. It's just a bit of blood," I say, pulling her to my mouth again, showing her that I want this.

"You don't think I'm dirty? Barren?" If I wasn't a murderer before now, I sure as hell would be after hearing her say that.

Barren?

What the fuck is going on with these people? How could anyone believe that a woman's period made her dirty? Not only that, how could anyone brainwash a woman into thinking that not being pregnant was bad? Careful not to let her see my inner fury, I look up at her. Her features are hidden within the shadows, but her chest's rapid rise and fall tells me she's afraid.

“How can something that tastes this good ever be dirty, baby?” A second later, I drive my tongue deep into her pussy, before bringing my free hand up and trailing soft touches along her wet warmth until she’s shaking against me.

“Oh God, please!” she cries out, breathlessly. Her body quivering with need as she reaches out, gripping a fist full of my hair.

“Baby, when my face is between your legs, the only devil you answer to is me. Not your sick and broken God,” I growl. She shifts as if she’s nodding. “Your words, Little Siren,” I command.

“Yes, Ezekiel,” she replies before pulling my face into her pussy. I press my thumb against her clit, rubbing up and down as her hips buck against my tongue. I pull away slightly, leaving enough room for me to move as I plunge a finger inside of her, giving her a minute before adding another. I gently work her cunt, pulling my fingers in and out slowly before driving them back in knuckles deep.

“Ezekiel!” she holds back a scream as I finger her faster, leaning up on my elbow so I can work her deeper. “M-more!” she begs, sending a wave of pleasure across my own body. The warmth of her pussy has me drunk, and I can only imagine what it would feel like when I finally bury my hard cock inside her.

I twist my hand upright, fingering her faster now, brushing that sweet spot as her legs shake over my shoulders. I pull her throbbing clit into my mouth, my fingers working overtime as she comes. Soaking my hand and face.

Airlie’s blood coats my tongue.

I am dripping with her.

This is the best fucking day of my life.

Her breathing is erratic as I watch the outline of her frame slump back against the stone, completely spent, and I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful, even if the darkness is hiding her face from me.

"You taste so fucking good, baby," I praise. Moving up her body so that my face is in line with hers, the chains brushing against our connected skin, though I do my best to pretend that the fucking things aren't there at all.

"I never—" she rasps, clearing her throat. "I've never felt that before," she whispers.

"Get used to it, baby. Cause I plan to make you feel that way for as long as you'll let me," I reply, brushing my nose against her delicate skin. My face is smeared with her blood and arousal, but she doesn't seem to mind as she presses soft kisses against my lips, her tongue exploring, tasting herself on me.

I draw in a deep breath, groaning as her tongue slides along the corner of my lips, then into my mouth. I close around it, sucking it lightly before we are a mix of breaths and hands. Need courses through each of our veins, like an electric current, driving us closer to each other. Chains rattle against skin and stone, and I move to sit with my back against the wall, rolling her onto my lap as I go. She straddles me, rubbing her pussy along my rigid cock, my hands on her hips, guiding her back and forth.

Her mouth is still on mine as she takes what she wants from me. Like a radiant goddess, her power lay bare to me in the shadows, and I, a helpless mortal, simply unable to resist.

"I w-want you, Ezekiel," she says hesitantly, and it's music to my ears.

"Are you sure, baby? Only say yes if this is what you truly want," I whisper, tilting her chin up to meet my eyes.

Even though it's dark, if I sense the slightest trace of uncertainty, I'll stop.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life as I am of you, Ezekiel," she says, emotion lacing her soft yet raspy voice, and all bets are off as I slam my lips to hers.

I can't seem to keep my mouth off her as she writhes against me, still in my lap. My little siren doesn't waste any fucking time as she pushes me back and elevates herself a little before taking my cock into her hand and lining it up with her dripping pussy. Her eyes meet mine, I can't see them, but I know that she's gazing at me as she slowly sinks down on my cock, until she's completely filled with me.

She moves above me, her whimpers sending me completely feral as I thrust up into her, matching her rhythm as she grinds against my cock. She moans louder now, and I groan as she squeezes my shoulders, clenching her pussy tighter around me. Our heavy breaths echo through the cave, and for the first time since being here, I'm thankful the waves are loud enough to drown us out.

"That's it, ride me harder, baby," I plead, grabbing her hips as she does.

"Oh my," she says, her voice breathy and filled with desire, driving me fucking insane. She's taking charge, giving herself fully to me, and, fuck, if it isn't the hottest thing I've ever experienced.

"I want... more," she asks, no, begs, shyly. I shift, moving down the wall a little and she slows her movements.

"Lay down on me, baby. That's it. Hold onto me," I command. Her chest is flush with my own as I raise my hips, thrusting up into her harder.

"Please. Oh, please don't s-stop !" she cries, and I savor the way she grips around me so perfectly, like we are made for each other.

I reach for the back of her hair possessively, gripping it in my hand, and I pull her head away from my neck to taste her.

I need to kiss her.

I need every part of her body on mine.

The moment her lips meet mine, she comes undone. Her release and blood coat my cock as I thrust into her harder, faster. Tremors flow through her body above me, her slick walls gripping me tighter before I bury myself into her one last time. I spill inside her, filling her up with her name on my lips as the edges of my eyes blur.

This woman saved me, chained me to a wall in some cave in the middle of the ocean. Cared for me, fed me, mended me.

That last thought is what cuts me the most.

She mended me. Not in a physical sense. In a way that I didn't know was possible. She showed me her strength on day one. How she could walk through fucking hellfire, each and every single day, yet still make the time to care for an asshole nobody like me. And somehow, that healed whatever was broken within me. And suddenly, I wanted to live.

For her.

I do not deserve her.

Airlie's heart is pure.

Mine is tainted.

And I'm still getting over the shock of feeling anything at all, let alone realizing that I am falling in love with her.

Love.

That is what this is.

The endless wanting, needing, her around me all the damn time. I am halfway bored every other fucking minute, but that has nothing to do with it. I've never wanted anyone around me before. Not ever. Which is why I was okay with being alone. My life wasn't set up for a lover. I've seen love ripped away with bare, bloodied hands, and I wouldn't survive it.

I wouldn't survive losing Airlie.

Chapter 18

AIRLIE

Light filters through the cracks in the jagged cave stone, shimmering across the walls like angels dancing in warm golden hues. A fitting notion for how I feel this morning. The waves outside seem more at peace, taking a much-needed break from their usual, angry personality for once. Memories of last night wrap around me like a warm blanket, pulling me in with each soft crash of water against the cliff.

I don't bother holding back a smile, knowing that I get to sit alone in my thoughts all day and replay every breathless moment Ezekiel and I had together last night.

I close my eyes, relishing in this hazy, glorious feeling that I don't ever want to fade, much like the dull throb between my thighs. I want to feel his touch on my skin forever. I want to wear the aftermath of our lovemaking for weeks afterward because Ezekiel's touches are worth remembering.

I drift in and out of the warmth of the memory, letting the images play on repeat in my mind. His mouth on my skin, the raw, unrelenting need surging through me. Through us both. Changing us into two feral beings that would make even the most debauched hellion blush.

His lips.

His taste.

The way I could taste myself on him.

I may still be in shock. Yet, I can't deny that I feel completely awake.

Alive.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I truly know myself. Every thread that makes me who I am has finally tied together, waiting for me to uncover the truth of who I was meant to be.

I am a woman.

I am not a means to an end or whatever else those men or Father Grimsby said I was.

My blood is not repulsive. It shows that I am alive.

And alive is how Ezekiel makes me feel.

My beautiful haze starts to fade with thoughts of those monsters as the flickering light show on the stone walls is consumed by darkness.

Here comes the clouds again.

Scanning the space around me, it dawns on me that I didn't sleep in my cave last night. I look around, and I feel something warm brush against my shoulder. I gaze down at the shackled and chained wrist gently draped over my body. The warmth against my back, the blanket I had felt before, was Ezekiel. It wasn't just the memory of him.

Hot breath hits my exposed neck, sending a molten rush straight to my core. Every inch of my skin aches for him, because of him, but in the best way.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he says, his voice husky with sleep. Goosebumps prickle my skin as his hand traces my stomach. I roll over onto my back, needing to see his face.

His eyes are astonishingly blue. My new favorite color, I decide, as he brushes his nose against mine.

“Good morning,” I reply before he presses warm, gentle kisses to my lips.

His dark hair is a tangled mess, though. It isn't fair that he looks this good when he wakes up. I don't even want to know what I look like in the mornings. My hair is a nuisance most of the time. Always knotty, always flying around in the wind, flicking my face.

I wish I could cut it all off.

“You stayed with me,” he whispers, placing his hand against my own, palm to palm. His is much bigger than mine. My fingers are thin and pale, whereas his are tan and thick.

Even though he hasn't eaten much since arriving here, I am only just starting to notice a difference in his body. His shoulders are broad, much broader than mine, and there are defined veins on the inside of his forearm that had never occurred to me would be nice to stare at.

“I have to go, Ezekiel. I must return to my cave before somebody realizes I am not there, and I get into trouble.”

“Don't leave. Please. Don't go back out there. Stay here. You could look for a sharp rock or something , and I'll try to break these chains. I can get us out of here,” he says, his deep voice low and desperate.

Worry etches his features as dread sinks its claws into my stomach. His intensity pulls at me, and I don't know how I've managed to ignore him whenever he begs me to let him go for this long.

He makes me feel things. Things I never imagined I could feel. Part of that is because I didn't even know half of these emotions existed before meeting Ezekiel. He has peeled back so many of my layers, dragging out thoughts and vulnerabilities, but he never leaves me to deal with them by myself. I have been alone ever since my mother was killed, but I never feel alone when I am with him.

I wish he could help me understand these feelings.

Is it happiness?

Is it love?

I will have to think about it.

"I have a key," I admit, and his eyes light up as if he's just witnessed someone perform a miracle.

"Don't threaten me with a good time, Little Siren," he says, pulling his mouth into a smile.

I'm not quite sure what he means.

He must sense my confusion because he looks at me, his fingers now peppering little touches across the back of my hand.

I love it when he does that.

Reads me when I am unsure or don't know the right words to say. It makes talking to him all the more easier because he knows me almost better than I know myself.

“What I mean is, you gotta let me go, baby. And I know I've said it over and over again. But I can't stay like this,” he whispers, slowly moving his hand to play with my hair.

“I know. It's just... I am afraid that they will find you, and if they do, they will hurt you, Ezekiel?—”

“They're not going to hurt me, baby. I promise. At least not physically. There is only one way they can hurt me, and that's if they hurt you. And those fucking assholes have been hurting you. Which is why you have to let me go, Airle. I won't let them lay a single fucking crooked finger on your body again. Little Siren, ” his voice grows quieter. “I can't protect you if I'm locked away down here,” he stares into my eyes. His are bright like a clear morning sky, but beneath that calm surface, I know they're filled with storms.

I know that he means it.

I know that he would do anything to protect me. But I haven't been willing to risk it until now. He is all I have. I have no one. And if something happens to him, I will be alone forever.

I have to tell him what he means to me. I have to say to him that I love him. I don't know for sure, but I know I would die for him. I would let those men hurt me if it meant that Ezekiel was safe. If that means love, then I think I feel it.

“I know that I have been bad. And I know that God won't like what I've been doing down here with you, but?—”

“ God? ” he spits, chuckling a little, but I don’t miss the disgust lacing his tone. “Your God is not a nice guy, Little Siren. He doesn't give a single fuck about you and me. Or anyone else who is currently starving or fighting for their fucking lives,” he says, shaking his head.

Is he angry?

Have I made him mad?

I look away. Not because I'm afraid. I just need a moment to process.

“I have always been taught that God is all-powerful. He sees e-everything, created everything, and is the embodiment of all that is g-good and kind.”

“Baby, if he was all kind , could see the horrors of this world, and was all-powerful , wouldn't that make him a fake?” His words cut through me, and ice-cold tendrils trickle down my spine. How could he say that God is fake?

That can't be right.

Could it?

The thought races through my mind, dissecting everything I’ve been taught to believe.

Given the man who taught me, I know I have been lied to. There are so many lies I realize now that I think about it. But surely not about the existence of God? Where is my mother if she's not in heaven? The thought of her soul not being in a beautiful, peaceful place makes me sick to my stomach.

“How do those things make Him a fake? I d-don't understand.”

“If He was kind and had the power to change the world as we know it, the world that He created. Allegedly. And He hasn't lifted a fucking finger to help. To heal. To stop a man or woman from hurting a child. Stop them from taking away their innocence... that either makes him a fake or fucking evil.” Ezekiel’s voice is low and steady.

Patient, his fingers weave through my long hair, granting me silence to think and try to understand what he’s saying.

“How could God let His people that he apparently loves, His shepherds, messenger’s or whatever the fuck they call themselves, get away with crimes the Devil himself wouldn’t let slide?”

“Maybe God is real but has no power. Maybe He used it all up on building the world,” I say softly, the words tasting sour as they leave my mouth. I feel absurd saying it.

Emptiness spreads through my body as a heaviness assaults my chest. The thought of there being no eternal life after this is almost too much for me to bear. It would mean that I would never see my mother again. I would never hear her tell me that she loves me or ever feel her warmth.

Her love.

If there is no heaven or God to save us, what is all this for?

“Maybe. I am in two minds about it. I get that we all need to have something to believe in. And I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with that. I just know how unrealistic it would be for God to come down from His throne, or whatever the fuck he sits on, and fix everything. He just sits up there and lets us do the fixing, damning our souls to Hell in the process,” he sighs. “That boat that I told you about? The one that I blew up. Was connected to this place, these people,” he says, explaining the

events that led him here to me.

A sob ripples out of me as pieces of a puzzle I hadn't been aware of all fall into place. I am just a small detail in a very dark, very twisted story. I was starting to learn that Father wasn't the man I thought he was, but knowing he was doing this with others shatters my heart to pieces. Bile rises in my throat, and a few beats later, I am bent over in a corner of Ezekiel's cave, heaving into one of the buckets that I am grateful I cleaned yesterday.

"I am so sorry, Airlie. I am so sorry that this is happening to you," he says, his voice distant over my wrenching and the pounding of my broken heart in my ears.

"I know what I have to do. I will get the keys. I have them hidden between some rocks in my cave. I will set you free, Ezekiel," my voice shakes as tears blur my vision.

I am so scared that something bad will happen to him. I am so afraid that I will go back to being alone. Something tells me that if he isn't successful in getting us out, being alone will be the least of my concerns.

"Thank you, baby. I promise I'll come back for you. The minute I am free of these shackles, I want you to wait here. I don't want you to see what needs to happen up there. Do you hear me?" He cannot be serious.

"I am not leaving you!"

"Baby, you have to listen to me. It isn't safe. If they touch you, I will lose my damn mind. They will see that reaction and use it to their advantage. They will see that I love you, Airlie," he pleads. Admits.

The pounding of my heart in my ears ceases, and my vision blurs until the only thing

I see is him standing before me, telling me that he loves me. I cannot speak. My mouth moves, but all words evade me as I gaze into his eyes.

He loves me.

I want to say something. I want to jump into his arms and tell him I love him, too. I step forward, but a slow clapping noise surrounds us, pinning me in place.

“Awe, how cute,” a man's deep, menacing tone fills the cave, and both mine and Ezekiel's eyes shoot to the cave's entrance where one of the men, Jeremy, I think, stands, leaning against the stone.

“To think I almost missed the show.”

“What show?” this voice comes from a woman.

Not a woman.

Someone ungodly.

Evil.

Ursa.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 19

EZEKIEL

B oiling hot rage courses through my veins in a matter of seconds before piercing its claws deep into my bones as I stare at the piece of shit leaning against the entrance before me.

I recognize his voice.

It's kinda hard to forget the sound of one of the men responsible for torturing and raping the one I love.

The woman, whose voice sounds like someone dragging their dirty nails along a chalkboard, strides inside without a single care in the world, and my thoughts spiral.

I need to play this carefully.

If they touch a single fucking strand of hair on Airlie's head, I don't care if I have to chew my own fucking hands off to free myself.

I will do it.

And I will kill them all.

"You've been a bad girl, Dove," the dickhead says to my girl, and I imagine all the ways I am going to flay the skin from his soon-to-be shattered bones and use his hide

as fucking doormat.

I say nothing.

I want to say a whole lot, but Airlie is closer to him than she is to me, and my movements are otherwise restricted.

I can't get to her.

He must notice me seething internally at his nickname for her because he raises a brow, and the corner of his thin lips tilts into an ugly, smug smile.

I will start with his mouth. I will use his head as a footrest and slowly peel back his skin. I will make them all watch, too. One by fucking one, so they each know what's coming for them.

"Judging by your lack of clothing, I suppose it would be right to assume that you and our Dove have become... acquainted," his eyes rake over my body, from my feet and up to my face, disgust rolling off him. I don't bother covering myself. I've got nothing to hide, and I doubt this asshole has half of what I have. But then I remember what me and my girl did last night and that I probably have Airlie's dry blood all over me.

My eyes flick to my siren. Her long, beautiful hair is covering most of her nakedness as she stares at her feet, cowering like a small child.

I hate seeing her like this.

My girl bows her head to fucking no one.

She has closed herself off.

She's locked herself behind the door in that little room in her mind again, and there's nothing I can do or say that will get through to her right now. Not that I can do much of anything, which is why I need to think.

My eyes shoot to the woman standing beside the scumbag, looking like the cat that ate the canary. Her too-tight shirt is tucked into her black skinny jeans, but it's the belt wrapped around her waist that catches my attention. She's wearing a pocket knife holster, and wrapped around a belt loop is a set of keys. They're old and rusted, and I will take a stab in the dark and say that at least one of those keys will unlock these shackles. Why else would they be down here with them if not to take me somewhere?

They knew I was here.

Okay, so I don't know that for sure. It's just a feeling. But I've known for weeks that, eventually, someone would come looking. Not for me particularly, but to tie up any loose ends they may have here on the island before doing a runner.

"What exactly did you hope to achieve, girl? Did you honestly think we wouldn't find out about you sneaking out? Stupid, stupid girl," the bitch says, and I narrow my gaze on her.

Do I know this woman?

I wouldn't recognize her in a room full of people, but I swear I've seen her somewhere before. Straight hair, the color of dirt, that sits atop broad shoulders, and murky brown eyes that crease in the corners. Said murky eyes widen a fraction before she quickly schools her features.

Does she recognize me, too?

"Come on, Dove, we have a whole day planned just for you," the asshole steps closer

to Airlie, and my mask flies right the fuck off my face.

“Take one more fucking step toward her, and I’ll feed your nutsack to the sharks,” I threaten, my voice low and smooth. Calm. Which is the exact opposite of the unadulterated rage that I feel twisting through my insides.

He chuckles, shaking his head slowly from side to side, and he steps closer to me instead. Not close enough that I could reach him, which only tells me that he couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag.

I stay resolute, ignoring my instincts to reach for him, knowing it would be pointless with these chains.

The less you give these types of people, the better. They don’t know me or what I am capable of, and I want to keep it that way for now.

“Feeling left out over there?” he chuckles again, smiling like I don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of this going down the way I want it to. “Don’t worry, Ursa here has plans for you, too,” he says.

The audacity of this bastard.

“I meant what I said,” I reply, smiling right back, because unlike him, I can put my money where my mouth is and fight. Hell, I could do it with my eyes closed at this point, and I haven’t trained or eaten properly in well over a month.

“No offense, man, but you are in no position to throw your weight around. Why don’t you just sit down and get comfortable so you and Ursa can get to know each other,” he says, then starts walking closer to my girl.

I fight back the urge to try to break free, but I’ve attempted to do so too many times,

and it's fucking impossible. I need to save my energy. If this is going where I think it's going, I'll need all the power I can muster to help Airlie and get the fuck out of here.

"She's not going anywhere with you!" I spit, my voice laced with venom, and I pull at my chains instinctively. My throat is burning now. Lava surges beneath my skin, knowing that unless he is within reach of me, I can't do fucking anything to stop him from taking her.

My eyes fall on my siren, still focused on the ground, her body a mere shell of who she was with me only moments ago. And I will be damned if we don't get to share those moments again.

I'm at a total fucking disadvantage. He's going to take her. I have no weapons, and I can't exactly charge at him without being flung back and landing on my ass.

I have nothing but my words.

There isn't anything I can say that will change the outcome of this mess because they are only following orders, which is why I need to find his weakness—the good old-fashioned way.

I'm desperate, with nothing to lose but her .

"So you're the idiot I've heard all about. Got it ," I tease, going for fucking broke. His head turns to face me, eyebrows narrowing slightly.

I've got him.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he replies, insecurity written all over his basic frat boy features.

“No offense, man ,” I use his previous words back at him. “Do you honestly think Father Grimsby will be impressed if you leave behind the man responsible for the complete and utter take-down of his precious supplier? I guess you really are an idiot. I mean, these aren’t my words,” I raise my chained hands to either side of me in mock surrender. “That other guy sure had a lot to say about you when he was out here last,” I tease, digging the proverbial knife deeper.

I watch as his expressions change with each whirling thought. He wears his feelings on his face, like gossip in a local rag, on full display to me. He’s not just insecure.

He’s jealous.

I’m not sure about the nature of their relationship, the priest and that other bastard, and I sure as hell have no idea if they’re all intimate together or not. With the way he’s looking at me, all angry and confused, tells me he wants to ask questions, like some sort of jealous lover.

“You’re a liar.”

“Am I?” I reply, looking him dead in the eyes.

“He’s only distracting you, Jeremy. If you fall for his games, then you deserve to be called an idiot. Now,” the woman says, utterly immune to the fury radiating off me as she storms over to Airlie. “Come, girl,” Ursa grabs Airlie by the arm with unnecessary force and pushes her into Jeremy’s arms like she isn’t the sole reason I am breathing.

“Don’t fucking touch her!” I’m screaming now. My vision blurs, and my heartbeat hammers like a drum in my ears as Jeremy pulls my love away.

Airlie doesn’t struggle.

She doesn't so much as look at me as he drags her out of the cave and away from me.

"Let her go, you fucking coward!" I'm shouting now, pulling wildly at the chains as warmth starts to trickle down my forearms, my blood dripping to the rocky ground.

I feel nothing.

Nothing but fury and cruel, unrelenting heartbreak.

Please. Don't take her.

Desperation clings to me as fear wraps its talons around my throat, making it harder to breathe.

My gaze flicks to the wicked cunt standing off to the side, wearing a twisted expression, as her hollow eyes take me in.

She's fucking dead.

They all are.

Chapter 20

EZEKIEL

“Now that they’re out of my hair, let’s get down to business, shall we?” Ursa says, sauntering to my side of the cave, leaning against the stone wall opposite me. I only need her to take one more step, and I’ll rip her ass to fucking shreds.

“I’ve heard about you, you know,” she claims, but I don’t bother replying. I don’t care for a single word that falls from her mouth.

I have one goal and one goal only.

Kill her, and get my fucking girl back before they hurt her.

Or worse.

I make a conscious effort to calm down, slumping against the cold stone behind me, giving Ursa the illusion that I am tired and have given up.

They’ll need to kill me before I ever give up on Airlie.

“Valerie’s whore,” she states, the word ‘whore’ rolling off her tongue as if it’s supposed to be some kind of an insult. She will have to do better than that if she wants to get under my skin. Nothing she can do or say will affect me.

I take a leaf out of my girl’s book, choosing to say nothing because the truth is,

silence really is more infuriating, and I need to rile Ursa up if I have a chance of getting out of here.

It sounds counter-intuitive, I know, but people make horrible decisions when they're emotional, something even I am guilty of, despite knowing better. Still, Ursa flying off the handle is what I am counting on.

I was right to think they'd know who I was if they ever laid eyes on me. They all drink the same water in these parts, connected to each other like magnets, and it wouldn't surprise me if they're rounding up whatever's left of their soulless society to continue their dirty dealings elsewhere.

"You have nothing to say to me?" Ursa spits, and I look up, narrowing my gaze at her. She looks furious. I don't know what I did to piss her off, but her eyes have invisible fires dancing in them.

"Look at me!" she shouts, her face turning various shades of red, and it's all I can do not to smirk.

"What do you want me to say?" I question, which apparently wasn't the response she wanted because she reaches for her belt, lifts the leather flap on the holster, and pulls out her pocket knife.

Good.

That will make retrieving it a whole lot easier when the timing is right.

"You've taken everything from me!" My brows furrow, and I don't bother hiding my confusion. She paces back and forth, mumbling insanities to herself, still too far away for me to get to her.

I bend over, reaching for my pants, and Ursa's eyes flick to mine. She gives a slight nod, and I slip them on as she continues pacing.

"I don't know who you're talking about—"

"Bullshit! Valerie always said you were her favorite, but I don't see it," she points the blade at me, and that's when I realize.

Where Valerie was tall, slender, and held onto her dwindling youth like her life depended on it, which it sort of did, Ursa is shorter and appears much more youthful, naturally so.

"How could you!" Tears start streaming down her face, and I can see all traces of commonsense fade from her dark eyes as she gives into her grief.

I need to move this along.

"Look. I don't know who Valerie was to you, but she didn't give a single shit about anyone but herself. She obviously didn't think too highly of you because I am learning about you for the first time right now, and she told me almost everything," the last part is a lie. Hence the four years I spent pretending my ass off.

"She was my mother!" Ursa cries. I didn't know Valerie had a daughter. And why the hell would anyone want their daughter caught up in this mess?

"I didn't know," is all I offer her as I continue wearing a mask of indifference.

"You didn't know," she says, dragging out each word derisively.

"No offense, but I stand by my previous statement. Valerie didn't care about anybody. And the fact that she allowed her own daughter to step foot on an island riddled with

fucking criminals, much like herself, pretty much proves that.”

“You don’t know fucking anything about me!” she yells, taking a step closer.

Almost there.

“You’re right. I don’t know anything about you. Because she never mentioned you. Not once,” I inform her casually. Her eyes fill with more tears, and she lets them fall, carving streaks of pain and sorrow down her face, ruining her make-up.

It’s just like Valerie to abandon her daughter in a place like this. She didn’t have a maternal bone in her high-maintenance body.

A knot forms deep inside my chest as thoughts of what Ursa must have endured here on Atlantara come to mind. And the woman responsible for all of it was supposed to be the one person Ursa was the safest with in this world.

Relatable.

I gave up questioning how I wound up in a trafficking ring as a young boy because no matter what scenario I came up with, they were all too painful.

Was I stolen?

Did someone take me from my mother?

And if so, did she miss me?

Or was I sold at birth?

I’ve asked myself these questions my entire life, and nothing can ever change the

truth of it.

None of it matters anymore.

The chances of us finding our families after being trafficked are slim to none, and with no existing record of me ever being born, it's damn near impossible.

"She didn't mention me because she wasn't allowed to talk to or about me," Ursa whispers, resting the tip of her knife against her temple.

She's coming undone.

Surrendering to the madness that plagues our minds when both our hearts and heads have had enough.

She's showing way too many of her cards.

I say nothing because I'm not sure I care. Ursa handed Airle over to that scumbag like she was nothing more than dog food, sealing her fate. For that alone, there is no way I will let this woman off the hook.

"Not allowed, or didn't care enough to bother?" I question, throwing salt in the wound, I'm sure, but I need her to unravel so that she forgets her surroundings enough to take another step closer to me.

"Stop it! I know what you're doing. You're trying to get inside my head. It won't work. She spoke to me once a month. That was the deal. So whatever mind games you're trying to play, save them!" Ursa resumes her pacing, the same worried expression refusing to leave her face, and I can almost hear her heart breaking from here.

“When was the last time you saw your mother?” I ask, but she says nothing. She doesn’t so much as look at me as she paces back and forth, still mumbling to herself.

I’m not going to get anywhere with her. Despite her wrongdoings, somewhere deep down, she’s still a girl who loved her mother, despite what kind of person she was.

None of us are good people.

We’ve all done things we didn’t want to do in the name of the ‘bigger picture.’ But in Ursa’s case, whatever she’s done, it’s probably not a scratch on me. But watching how she treated Airlie was enough to send me off the rails.

Every minute I spend with this woman is a minute too long. I have to get to Airlie. My siren is in their hands, which is why I have about a second to process what I’m about to do and get the hell over it.

“It’s funny, Valerie wasn’t allowed to have contact with you, but it didn’t stop her from having a whole ass other family,” I lie, but I’m okay with it. This is just a game of survival, nothing more, and if I have to bullshit my way out of a situation to stay alive, you bet your sweet fucking ass I’m going to.

“You’re lying! You’re a fucking liar!”

“Believe what you want to believe. But while she had you locked away here in Atlantara, I was out there. Playing happy families with her, Charles, and the kids,” is all I get to say before she’s charging at me.

The pocket knife clasped tightly in her grip slices the air between us, but I dodge it. I duck just in time, kicking her legs out from underneath her. She hits the ground with a smack, and I move fast to straddle her body, her hands waving out in an attempt to stab me, slicing through my skin but not fully puncturing me.

What's another scar?

I grab her arms, pinning them above her head as she bucks and kicks beneath me, screaming obscenities, but it's no use.

"I'm going to give you one chance, and one chance only to tell me where they're keeping her, and if you don't tell me, I'll drive this knife straight through your throat," I warn.

"Fuck you! She's as good as dead, anyway," she says through splatters of spit, blood and tears. "She tastes sweet, doesn't she," she taunts through bloodied teeth, and I notice the blood pooling on the ground beneath her head from when she hit the cave floor.

Ignoring her comment, deciding that if Airlie wants to tell me about what happened here one day, she could, but that would be her choice. I don't think I can handle knowing otherwise.

I fight Ursa for the knife, still gripped between white-knuckled fingers, and her breaths start to rattle, growing shorter with each violent movement.

"Father Grimsby will fuck her to death as he does with all the girls who don't fall pregnant by their nineteenth birthday," she shouts, grunting beneath my weight.

"Oh, yeah, so why are you still breathing?" I snap back, successfully retrieving the knife from her. She fights harder beneath me, but I don't move as I stare at her.

"Because he's my uncle," she grunts, and I've heard just about enough.

I keep my promise by driving the pocket knife deep into the side of her neck. Blood spills across my shackled hand as I glare into her dark, wide eyes. Her sputters, and

movements are almost nonexistent as I watch the life drain from her face.

I wish I could say that I'm sorry, but I'm not.

These people have hurt more than enough innocent lives, and sparing anyone guilty of that would be the real tragedy.

I wrench out the pocket knife and use her shirt to wipe it clean before fleecing the keys from her belt loop.

The world is not big enough for these fuckers to hide in because I swear to their unholy God that I will find every last man or woman responsible for locking Airlie in this place.

I will avenge her.

In this life or the next.

Until every last one of them is dead.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 21

AIRLIE

Drip.

Drip.

Drip

My blood trickles to the floor in slow succession, the drops a subtle echo in this cold, unfamiliar room. Candlelight quivers on the walls, a pirouette of amber and warmth, though my heartbeat is the only proof of life. A slow, quiet thump pulsating in my ears.

I don't know how long I've been like this.

When that man took me from Ezekiel and handed me over to Father, it was like time itself had stood still. In other ways, it feels like I've been lying like this forever.

I don't know what Father has in store for me, but if my current position is anything to go on, I know it can't be good.

I squeeze my eyes shut and choke back a sob.

I don't want to cry anymore.

My tears only encourage Father, and I just want to forget.

I wish that my mind would take me away from here and free me from this horrible place, but no matter how hard I try, I cannot escape like I used to.

I have never feared death before.

In a life filled with uncertainty, death was always the one thing I could be sure of. The only promise ever made that I could guarantee would not be broken. The promise that there would be a time when darkness would come to greet me, and coax me into shadowed paradise where my soul would live an eternal life.

Only in death would I see my mother again.

But right now, as my blood spills from the rusted nails hammered into my outstretched hands and the cross that lay beneath my tired, broken, and naked body, I'm not so sure that death can hear me.

Or if God even exists.

Because I have begged death to take me, but it has not come.

I have begged God to help me, but He has not listened.

I don't think He ever did.

I fear that Ezekiel might have been right about that, which is what hurts the most. Knowing that in death, the sure thing I spent my whole life believing in, I may never find peace.

A creaking sound fills the air as the wooden door on the opposite side of the room

opens, closing a few beats later with a loud slam.

I don't dare look to see who it is.

Footsteps float around me, though I keep my eyes closed. If I open them, they'll see my tears, and I refuse to give them what they want.

The smell of frankincense and candle wax burns my nostrils, but it's the blood, so much blood, that makes me feel sick. Breathy murmurs and chants bounce off the walls, and my tired heartbeat picks up.

My body is weak.

My head feels like it's floating, and my hands and feet burn from the nails that Father Grimsby hammered into my flesh. My bones scream with each accidental flex as the thick, rusted nails stretch and pull at them.

I shouldn't have tried to fight them off me.

If I had kept still, maybe it wouldn't have hurt so much.

"O Precious Lord, accept the blood of the chosen, whose soul stains this earth, her lifeless womb rendering us all in great despair. We lay this offering across your sacred earth as the Lamb was slain once before. In the name of the Holy Father, we pray for your forgiveness for our failures and beg you to wash us clean of our sins with your blood."

Promises impersonating prayers are chanted in unison as the bodies swarm closer to where I lie. I don't know how many people there are, but I know that it's more than I've ever seen in one room before.

Don't look.

If I open my eyes, they won't be a figment of my imagination, and I desperately want them to be. I refuse to see their faces gawking at my body because if they're anything like Father, they'll be salivating over me like I am their next meal.

Given the nature of their prayer, I might be.

I've always known that deep down, Father wasn't a good man, but whatever spell he had me under for all those years has broken, and thanks to Ezekiel, I am seeing things a lot clearer now.

I owe everything to him.

He encouraged me to open my mind to new possibilities, and in doing so, I learned that this was all just a game to Father. And I repaid Ezekiel by keeping him chained up in that cave, abandoning him when he needed me the most, leaving him defenseless against Ursa.

I hope that one day, he can forgive me for leaving. I was afraid that they would hurt him if I didn't go willingly. I hope he gets away like he planned to and finds the happiness he deserves.

I hope he takes my spiders.

Silent tears slide down my cheeks, forming wet pools in my ears at the thought of never seeing them again.

Ezekiel.

My spiders.

I inwardly curse my body for reacting to these feelings because these people, whoever they are, do not deserve to know that part of me.

My pain is not theirs to revel in.

Don't open your eyes, Airlie. Keep them closed.

You will be okay.

It will be okay.

I can feel their gaze on me, and the tiny hairs all over my body prick with awareness as their eyes, like daggers, pierce through my exposed, bloodied skin. The invisible spiders I've come to know begin their dance within my chest, making breathing even harder.

"In turn, life will be born, and may we find justice in the flesh that remains of her lifeless body."

This is it.

This is where I die.

Don't look, Airlie. You're okay.

Deep down, I always knew that my life would end at the hands of Father.

Silent tears fall uncontrollably now, though I don't try to fight them this time. My lips tilt into a smile as I recall the last time I was happy.

I was happy with Ezekiel.

I never got to say how honored I am to have met him. Or how grateful I am to have experienced what real love feels like before leaving this world. Because of Ezekiel, I get to die knowing I meant something to someone, that I was more than a phantom locked behind stone, gazing out at the sea that nobody knew existed.

Because of him, I will die knowing that in my final, happy moments, I was someone worth saving, that my life was worth fighting for.

That I wasn't alone anymore.

And for that, I truly love him.

My mother told me once that love cannot be measured in any amount of time. She said that sometimes, our hearts decide who they belong to in one big conversation with fate, and we just have to play catchup.

That's how it felt with Ezekiel. I loved him before I ever really knew him and learned who I was along the way.

"We surrender her troubled soul unto you, in dark communion, and in your house, we will dwell forever, in the name of the Holy Lord our Saviour."

My sobs are louder now. My body is unmoving as fingers start gliding over my blood-covered skin, from the nails pinning me to this cross.

Don't look, Airlie. You're okay.

I will see him again, somewhere in the in-between, beneath the water and stone. I will wait for him there—the place where I first saw him, tangled within shadows.

Yes. That's where I'll be.

Tangled in shadows.

Until we meet again.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 22

EZEKIEL

The dock groans with the weight of the armed man pacing up and down the weathered timber above me. Waves surge against my body, the salt burning my eyes as I hide among the rocks underneath the dock like the ghost I am.

I study the guard, his head low, a battle axe held uncaringly at his side, as I peek through the gaps in the wood. You'd think he'd have a gun or something more practical, but apparently, they like to do things the old-fashioned way around here. It smells like dead fish, rotten wood, and whale shit under this dock, and I don't know how, but the guard seems pretty unbothered by it.

I can't relate.

This is where all of the depraved shit happens. The heart of what makes The Royal operational. Small wooden boats that I assume are used to ferry victims to and from the vessels are moored to each side of the dock, creaking and bumping into each other with the movement of the tides. The dock stretches out to sea, a far enough distance so that the vessels steer clear of the rocks beneath the water.

The guard turns, his boots dragging sluggishly above me as he walks along the gangway to the boathouse at the end of the dock. I choose this moment to swim out from underneath it, biting down on the pocket knife as my hands grip the rock's slippery surface. I pull myself up from the ocean and onto the rocky waterfront, thankful for the raucous waves disguising any noise as my feet purchase on the shore.

Careful not to slip, I steady myself, then scan the area to see if anyone else is lurking around before I creep down the dock toward the boathouse.

Time feels unmoving. Each critical second lingers for what feels like an eternity as fear sinks its serrated teeth into my bones, stabbing into my heart the longer that I'm out here.

They have her.

Airlie is up there in that cathedral, and it's all my fucking fault.

I should have done more, anything to keep that oxygen thief from taking her, and now, she's in their hands, not mine. I don't know where they're keeping her, but I will tear this shithole apart brick by fucking brick until I find her.

'Murder without love is just murder, Ezekiel. But in the name of the one you love, death is something else entirely.'

Titan's words fill my mind as I round the corner of the cramped, weathered shack, waiting for the perfect moment to take out the guard. I wasn't sure what Titan meant by his words at the time. Growing up alone with no family, the idea of love was foreign to me. Since meeting my siren, I've imagined life in ways I never thought were even possible for a man like me, and now, love has become my driving force.

My reason.

Before her, I was inconsequential in every sense of the word. In my career and in life. And now that I've found Airlie, even though it's obvious that I don't deserve her, I don't want to imagine a life without her in it.

I will do anything, be anything for Airlie, and I won't stop until she's safe in my arms

again. The gut-wrenching ache that sears through my heart from thoughts of what they could be doing to her is visceral. If they so much as scratch her perfect, delicate skin anymore than these assholes already have, I'll set every last one of them on fire.

My fingers blanch, my knuckles white as I tightly grip the knife's hilt. I crouch behind the tall figure. His back is turned, his eyes fixed on the sea, unsuspecting of the predator close behind him. I stand abruptly, my left hand reaching for the scruff of his hair, then I tilt his head back toward me. My face is inches from his as I slice the blade across his throat without a single sound slipping from his lips. Blood gushes from his neck, spilling over both our bodies, and I gently guide his now dead, slumping frame into the seat that overlooks the window. If anyone glances down from the cathedral, they won't notice that he's dead, not unless they can see the blood pooling on the floor surrounding his body from that distance.

I don't know how many Royals there are here in Atlantara, but I suppose I'll find out in about five minutes or less. I frisk the guard, searching his pockets for anything that could help me gain entry. I pull out a large set of rusted keys and pick up the axe he dropped to the floor in the attack.

Hurriedly, I exit the boathouse, sprinting back along the dock and out of sight of the windows that tower above. I hit the stone hard, my bare feet almost skidding against the slippery surface as I race up the staircase carved into the rock formation that leads to the only door I've seen into the building.

Waves crash around me everywhere, and sea spray clings to my hair and skin as I reach the iron door. My ragged breaths are heavy, my shoulders tight with awareness as I pull the keys from my pocket and try every key there is before it finally unlocks with a click, and I slowly push the door open.

It's the smell that hits me first.

The familiar, acrid stench of rotten flesh and shit blends with the putrid, metallic scent of blood, old and new, burning all of my senses. It's all I can do not to vomit. My eyes start to water, blurring the corners of my vision as bile rises in the back of my throat, threatening to make an appearance. There must be another entrance that I'm not aware of because there is no way anyone would come down here.

I cover my mouth and nose with my free hand, the other still holding the axe, as I silently walk through the stone hallway that opens onto what looks like an old church foyer. The floor is made out of concrete, blood-stained and wet in places, and I notice garden hoses woven around rusted taps, fixed along the walls every few meters. There is only one reason for those hoses, and that thought makes me sick and terrified of what I might find here.

My eyes scan the dark space for signs of movement, and I stick close to the walls and as out of sight as possible. There are doors lined up like old hospital rooms, and I don't need to look to know what's behind them. Tightening my grip on the axe handle, I raise it as if holding a baseball bat and quietly walk toward the first door on my left.

I reach out and twist the handle, but of course, it's locked. I risk everything by leaning my weapon against the stone wall and searching for the key that will likely fit. The door opens on the third try, and I pick up the axe and stand back, allowing enough space between me and whatever, whoever is on the other side.

I kick open the door and mentally prepare myself, but no amount of training could have ever prepared me for the horrific sight before me. Small, naked bodies are huddled in the corner of the tiny, dilapidated room. They cower, holding onto each other for dear life as I stand, unmoving in the doorway. My stomach twists with something unrecognizable, forcing me to lower my weapon.

"Hey, it's okay. You're going to be okay. I'm going to get you out of here," I whisper,

taking a few steps into the room, but I immediately regret it when my eyes flick to the other corner. The rotten smell is much more pungent now, and it's coming from the decomposing body lying on the concrete floor to my right.

Godfuckingdammit.

Biting my tongue, I hold my breath, lowering to my knees. I keep a safe distance from the victims because the last thing I want to do is scare them any more than they already are, and I can't have them making a scene, or alerting anyone that I'm here. I hold up my free hand, surrendering to them, a gesture to let them know I'm not a threat.

"I'll help you," I whisper again.

The woman, holding a child, peeks up through, long, unruly hair, hiding her face. Her eyes, almost swollen shut, blink slightly when her hair falls away, revealing her bruised features.

"H-help," is all she says, and I bite back the emotions clogging my throat. Memories of my childhood flood my mind, but I push them aside.

This isn't about me.

Airlie, baby, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I can't leave them here like this.

"I am going to close the door. It will be unlocked. I will come back for you. I will come back for everyone. Nod, if you understand me."

The woman nods, weak from starvation and who knows what else. I don't know how long they've had to live beside a dead body, but they're going to need to see a doctor.

I am way out of my depth here.

“Do you know how many guards there are?” I ask.

Any information would not go astray right now. She looks into my eyes, and I look away on instinct, trying to give her privacy. My stomach churns, mixing with anger and hatred at how anyone could let this happen.

They are people.

“M-m—” the woman whispers, absolutely petrified. I am patient with her. The moment I start throwing orders around, no matter how nice I say it, I will only make things worse for her. “They’re kids,” she whispers, crying silently, squinting her eyes closed from the tears that sting them.

For a moment, I think she’s talking about the little girl in her arms, staring up at me with wide, curious eyes, but I look to the corner at the small dead body, and I understand. This woman has had to watch as these men tortured these kids. She was probably beaten trying to protect them.

“I’m gonna get you both out of here, okay? I will come back for you. I don’t know what I am about to walk into, so I need you to stay out of sight of the guards. Do you know how many there are out there?” I ask again.

She fights to open her swollen eyes, and I feel so helpless. Nobody deserves this shit. I avert my gaze, choosing a spot on the wall, as rage simmers in my blood.

“T-Two,” her voice is quiet, and I want to rip the meat off the bones of whoever is responsible for doing this to them.

This is why I didn’t even hesitate when Titan brought this mission to me four years

ago. My goal has always remained the same. To put an end to this shit once and for all. Though, I thought I would have at least had backup when the time came to destroy them.

Standing, I walk out of the room and quietly close the door behind me, not wanting to raise suspicions. My body is vibrating with anger as I unlock every door that follows. Each room is filled with women and children, others filled with those who are already dead. I let them all know that I will come back for them, their hopeful eyes permanently branded in my brain.

Once I'm sure that the coast is clear, I climb the winding stone staircase, checking each room on every floor as I go. Some are empty, and others, I wish , were empty. The cold, gray stone walls are lined with biblical tapestry. Ornate ceilings soar above me, and there are sconces on the walls every few meters, but no light shines from them. The only light source on this level is the sun shining through the large arch window, stained blood-red at the end of this hallway. The beam of light reflects on the door to the right of the window, a beacon, and it looks almost like magic. Dust mites fly through the beam, and unease pricks at me, causing a wave of dread to fill my already vibrating chest. The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

I don't like this.

I walk to the end of the stone hallway and stop once I reach the wooden door. I twist the rusted handle, expecting it to be locked, but it turns in my hand, indicating that it isn't. My fingers tighten on the axe handle as the door slowly creaks open, revealing a religious, church-like set-up.

I step inside, surprised I don't burn my feet as I walk over the threshold. I am met with ominous silence, and the smell of burning candle wax, as I walk further down the aisle. My bare feet scratch against the vermillion red carpet, the edges frayed in places, stained with blood, and fuck knows what else. My eyes glance between each

pew to see if anyone is hiding behind them, but the room appears to be empty.

The walls are decorated with biblical scriptures and spiritual murals, but nothing about this room feels holy.

God isn't here.

And if he is real, the church is the last place he'd want to be, knowing what I know about this place. There's a white box freezer sitting atop the altar, and my eyes drop to see if a power cord is attached, but there isn't. Whatever is in that freezer isn't frozen. It takes every bit of strength I have to walk up to it, but I do, despite my instincts telling me not to. I roll my shoulders, and with one shaky hand, I lift the lid, and my blood runs cold at the sight. Bile rises in my throat, and this time, I lose the battle. I lean away from the freezer and vomit. I haven't eaten anything, and I'm thankful because I've been living on fucking clams. I collect myself, knowing I can't ignore it any longer, and I straighten, turning back to face the horrors within the freezer.

The body of a young girl lies pale, battered, and half-eaten. Chunks of flesh in the shape of human bite marks cover her small, malnourished body, and when my eyes meet hers, my breathing stops.

No.

Long dark hair sticks to bloodied, cold skin. Thick, natural lashes frame beautiful, dark eyes looking back at me, only there is no life behind them anymore.

I know those eyes.

Because I looked into eyes just like those once, and when I did, I made a promise. I stare down at the little girl. A wave of grief, stronger than any emotion I have ever

felt, hits me in my stomach, as the reality of what's in front of me sinks in.

I broke that promise.

Mikaiah.

I was too late.

I made a promise to a woman who died on a mission to save her little girl, and I was the one who took her life from her. I promised her that I would save her daughter in her place, but she lies dead in the freezer before me.

My vision blurs, my lips quivering as I choke back a sob. I drop the battle axe to the floor, and reach into the freezer for the girl, Mikaiah , not wanting her to be left here in this state.

In this place.

I pick her up gently, realizing that she hasn't been dead long enough to stiffen yet.

I am too fucking late!

I walk back down the flights of stairs, holding Mikaiah close to my chest, my heart breaking behind my rib bones. There isn't a single person in sight, and for a minute, I am not so sure I care. I walk to the end of the dock, stretching out to sea, and stare up at the sky.

“How could you let this happen?!” I cry out, my voice broken, my breaths heavy, and whatever was left of my blackened soul, completely destroyed. What happened to the man who was supposed to save us all?

“You’re a coward! You’re a sick, fucking bastard! She’s just a little girl and you let your messengers fucking eat her! They were eating her. She’s just a little girl,” I’m whispering now, because I know that God isn’t listening.

Heavy droplets fall from my eyes and slide down my face. A sharp stabbing pain ripples through my body, and I fall to my knees, begging for someone to wake me up from this nightmare.

I am too late.

I failed her, the woman, from all those years ago.

I imagine Mikaiah, all alone, wondering what she had done wrong to be taken away from her mother. Wondering when her momma would come to save her, begging for someone, anyone, to save her, but they never did.

Not me.

Not God.

No one.

“I am so sorry I failed you,” I’m sobbing now. “Why does everything I touch become sick with darkness and death?” I say to no one, because the only person who would care to listen was taken from me. “Why, no matter how hard I try, do I fail at everything?” I say this to myself.

I didn’t want to fail, not at this.

I stare into Mikaiah’s eyes, her mother’s eyes, and gently brush the strands of hair that stick to the sides of her blood covered face behind her ears.

“Your momma told me to tell you that she loved you more than the stars, till her very last breath. That, everything she did, she did for you. To find and save you, and, man, she tried, I just know that she did. She would have done anything for her little girl. Your momma was so, so proud of you, and god she was brave. And I am so sorry for what I’ve done. I don’t know what kinda waiting room she’s in, but I know that she’ll be right there by your side when you get there. She’s been waiting up there in the skies for you. She’s been there the whole time, watching over you. Your guardian angel. You’ll be safe up there with her, and you won’t have to be alone anymore. I’m so sorry that this world let you both down. I’m sorry that I let you both down. You deserved better than this life. Tell your mom—tell your mom that they’ll get what’s coming for them. Every last one of them will pay for what they did to you. Rest in peace, angel. I’m sorry.” With a shaky hand, I softly brush my palm over her eyes, closing them for the last time. I curse myself for the bloodied state that I’m in.

Mikaiah deserves better than this.

Carefully, I shift closer to the edge of the dock, Mikaiah still in my arms, and place her gently into the ocean. “Be free, angel,” I say as the tide carries her away.

Broken and empty, I stand. My head tilts to the side as I look up at the corrupt cathedral, looming over the sea like the horror story that it is.

They will pay for the pain and suffering they’ve caused. None of them will get out of this alive.

“I’ll save that fucking priest till last,” I tell myself, as I walk back down the dock to save my girl.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 23

EZEKIEL

My head is reeling, pulsing hard beneath my skull, and my stomach twists in knots as I climb the stone staircase up to the only floor I haven't been to yet. There are no signs of blood up here. It's much cleaner than the lower levels.

Let's fucking change that, shall we?

I don't give a single fuck if they can hear me coming. I want them to. I want that filthy fucking priest to shake in his boots, knowing his corrupt plans are all going to shit because of me.

I want him to know that he's about to die.

The concrete floors downstairs are long gone as I walk along the polished checkered marble. The walls up here are painted black, so I suppose it is easier to hide the evidence of their sins. The smell of incense fills the air, and I follow the scent like a fucking bloodhound.

I unlock the first door, pushing it open to see a woman sitting on the end of a stretcher bed, looking up at me, fear swimming in her bruised eyes. She's wearing a dress, rags, much similar to Airlie's, and I'm starting to realize a trend here.

Father Grimsby has favorites.

I raise a finger to my lips, gesturing for her to keep quiet, and then I hold my hands up to either side of me, showing her that I am unarmed. These victims aren't the ones who should be afraid of me.

"You're safe. You're safe. I need your help. Nod if you understand," I whisper. The woman straightens her shoulders a little, nodding her head in answer, as her eyes roll over my blood-covered body. "Do you know where they are?" I ask, and her shocked expression changes from one of panic to hopeful in a matter of seconds.

Her bloodshot eyes flick to my left, followed by a slight nod of her head, silently confirming that she knows exactly who I mean by they .

I didn't notice any other stairs, which means that this must be the top floor. Airlie has to be in one of these rooms. I feel sick as dread coils inside my stomach.

"I need your help. They have my girl, and I think they're going to kill her. I can't save everyone on my own. Can you help me?" Her eyes widen in surprise, and she nods. "Good. I need you to get everyone out. Tell them not to wait for you and to go straight to the dock outside. Tell them not to make a single sound. Their lives depend on it, do you understand?" I ask, and she stands, just as eager to leave this wretched hell behind. "There are children, young children, and they will need to be carried. We can't risk them falling behind. Nod, if you understand," she nods, tears brimming her tired, beaten eyes, and I reach out, passing her the keys.

Her movements give me pause as she raises her index finger and holds it against her lips. She moves behind me, turning around slightly, and gestures for me to follow. I don't have time to fuck around, and I'm sure she knows this place better than I do, so I have no choice. Control has always been hard for me to relinquish. And given the severity of the situation, I can't afford to be double-crossed, not like last time. Then again, I have the worst fucking luck when it comes to any and all my plans, so handing over control is probably for the best.

We leave the room, the woman in the lead as she tip-toes to the opposite end of the dark hallway. She looks up, pointing to the two medieval-style maces hanging criss-cross on the stone for decoration. I reach for them, careful not to make a sound so nobody is alerted that she's out of her room.

I don't want any more innocent blood spilled.

The maces are made of iron, with spikes as sharp as knives on the rounded end. It would bludgeon their faces clean off their skeletons with the right swing, and I intend to do just that. The corner of my mouth tilts into a grin. I don't know why I didn't think to use these before.

I look down at the woman, not a word spoken between us, and I think it's because they're close. The woman turns, facing the door to our right, then looks back at me.

My girl is in there.

Walking over, she puts the key in the lock, and before she twists it, she shares another glance that asks if I'm ready.

With every fiber of my fucking being.

I square my shoulders, and the rage simmering within my core mutates into a chronic thirst for their blood as adrenaline and the urgent need to save my girl propels me across the threshold. The woman is long gone as I take in the sight before me. My tainted heart stops, flying straight to my throat, and everything moves in slow motion.

Seven dark figures surround an altar, hovering over something . Their candlelit shadows flicker against tapestry and stone, and all I smell is blood.

My siren's blood.

I catch a glimpse of red hair hanging long over the side of what I assume is a table of sorts, and that's all the confirmation I need. Without hesitation, I step forward, placing one bare foot in front of the other, and like a man possessed, I raise my weapons and start swinging.

My mace connects with the back of a skull, successfully pulverizing it as I wrench back my weapon, and the tall figure falls back, hitting the floor with a thud. Brain matter and blood splatters, covering not only me but also the surroundings.

The cult , all wearing clerical costumes beneath black Ferraiolo capes, soulless monsters tilting their heads to look at me, blood coating their lips and falling down their chins. I catch a glimpse of one of the men, standing with a golden chalice held tight in his hand, way too slow to register what's about to happen to him.

To all of them.

They're drinking her blood.

An audible exhale escapes me.

"You're all fucking dead!" I scream, my throat hoarse and raw with emotion as I swing for the nearest cunt posing as a man of God, my eyes honing in on his face.

Pieces of minced flesh and shattered bone fly haphazardly across the room, and as my weapon comes down, I swing the other, held tightly in my grasp. It's as if they've finally joined that party and have stepped out of whatever trance they were in because resounding male screams echo through the room.

" No, please. Pleaseeee!" is all I hear from the man lying on his back, cowering in the corner like the fucking weak piece of shit that he is, before I raise both arms and swing, his head history as both weapons collect either side of his face.

My eyes are red, and I wipe them with the inside of my right arm as chanting and prayers for salvation replace any signs of fear, each seemingly accepting their fucking fates.

They're not even going to bother to fight back?

"Where the fuck is your God now? Do you think he is going to save you? You sick, twisted fucking scum!" I say, as one by one, my weapons meet flesh.

And I don't stop until their pulverized heads are embroidered across the religious tapestry.

With blood dripping from my face and into my eyes, I glance down at my girl.

"Baby," I almost cry.

My voice is unrecognizable as I rush to Airlie's side, my bloodied hands shaking from the undiluted adrenaline and fear that quickly replaces it. Her hands are nailed, fucking nailed to a cross. Her fragile, naked body is laid out on stone. My eyes drop to her hands, bruised purple from blood loss and movement against the nails, and my chest feels like it's about to collapse.

Her pale skin is even paler, her beautiful pink lips now a shade of violet as my eyes search her face for something, anything that tells me my girl is okay. I hold two fingers against her neck to check her pulse. She's breathing, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath, but she's lost a lot of blood. The nails protruding from her palms seep with crimson, and I look down at the silver buckets filled with her blood.

"Airlie, baby, stay with me. Don't you dare die on me! You can't fucking die on me!"

Panic and sheer desperation fuels me, and I advance on one of the bodies that lay on the floor at my feet. I start ripping off pieces of material from his deservingly slaughtered corpse, then run to the stoup and frantically wash as much blood from my hands as possible. I return to Airlie's side, and my breathing stops as I struggle to pull the nails one by one from her hands. She cries out, her eyes opening wide before they turn on me.

"It's okay, baby, shh... It's me. It's me. I'm so sorry. You'll be okay. Try not to move," I soothe, but I have never felt more terrified of anything in my entire life than I do seeing her like this.

"My stranger," she sobs, half delirious, and the smile on my face is nothing more than a mask.

"That's right, baby girl. It's me. You're okay. We're gonna be okay, you and me," I choke, my marred fingers struggling to pull the nails from deep within her flesh.

I don't ever want to hear her cry like this again. I vow to kill anyone who causes a single fucking tear of sadness to fall from her eyes once we're out of here.

Her body slackens, a wave of exhaustion hitting her as she cries quietly. I remove the last of the nails in her palms and wrap them tightly to stem the bleeding. There are no signs of bruising other than the damage caused to her hands and feet, but the blood that coats her inner thighs gives me pause. Those sick fucking bastards better not have hurt her.

I lean over, pressing my lips to her delicate skin—first, her eyes, then her nose before placing them gently on her lips. My bloodied hands hold either side of her face, but I don't care.

I need to touch her, feel that she's okay.

“You're mine, Little Siren,” I whisper against her lips.

She looks up into my eyes, a roller coaster of emotions playing behind them. “Until death,” she replies, and I know I've rubbed off on her.

“And in every life that follows, baby,” I whisper, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and then I place a final kiss on her cheek before tending to the wounds on her feet. “This is gonna hurt, Airlie,” I warn, not liking that I have to put her through this.

“I'm used to pain,” she says, her voice weak from the blood loss and tears still staining her cheeks.

I hate that she's used to any sort of harm at all.

Chapter 24

EZEKIEL

One by one, I dislodge the long, rusted nails that skewer her feet.

Her agonizing cries make me want to slaughter the corrupt bastards who did this to her all over again. Once I remove the nails, I reach for the remaining ripped fabric and wrap her wounded feet. Blood seeps through the material and onto my crimson-stained hands, and I retrieve more cloth from one of the bodies, hoping that some extra pressure will be enough to stop the bleeding. Something is better than nothing, so this will have to do for now, at least until I figure out how to get help to Atlantara.

A deep voice reverberates over the silence, and Airlie's body stiffens in response. "It's about time, boy," a man calls out, and I turn in the direction of the voice to see a tall figure standing at the head of the altar, wearing a similar costume to the others, only this guy has a white clerical collar beneath his cape.

I narrow my gaze, sensing Airlie's panic a breath away, but she has no reason to be afraid. Not with me at her side.

The priest.

Finally, I can put a face to the monster.

"I'm glad you could fucking join us. I was hoping to save your death till last," I say, promising, a tight smile forming on my lips, but there is only contempt beneath it.

I'm going to enjoy tearing him limb from fucking limb.

Grimsby steps out from the shadows and into the muted candlelight. "I think we needn't exchange pleasantries. I've known about your existence for long enough, and I must say, I feel like I already know you," he says, his deep voice aged, his tone matching my disdain. His presence does nothing more than rekindle the outrage I felt earlier.

Of course, The Royal let the cat out of the bag. For such a secretive society, they didn't waste any time telling every Tom, Dick, and Harry about me.

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to get free and come looking," he says, gazing down at the massacre that decorates the floors and walls from atop the altar, though he doesn't dare to come any closer.

What the fuck does he mean by 'get free'?

How long has this asshole known about me?

Or how long has he known that I've been here at Atlantara?

I keep these questions to myself and give him a poignant look of impassivity. The proverbial mask I've come to know so well falls straight into place, just like old times. If this asshole thinks he can best me, he has another thing coming.

"I can't say I'm in the mood for whatever depraved bullshit that spews from your fucking mouth. I've been otherwise occupied, if you can't tell," I retort, and my eyes shoot straight to Airlie's, needing to reassure her that everything will be okay.

Her expression is a mix of fear and uncertainty, solidifying that I have to make this quick. She's seen enough death to last a lifetime, today alone. And as much as I'd

love to prolong the priest's torture, my girl needs medical attention.

“Oh, on the contrary, Ren, or is it Ezekiel? I can't be sure. You are a liar, after all,” he scoffs as if he isn't the fucking worst of humankind.

Maybe he knows a little more than I thought. I don't remember Airlie saying my name before, and that can only mean that he's either done his research on me or he has been spying on us. Nothing would surprise me at this point with these people.

I step forward. The only thing on my mind right now is how good it will feel when I finally beat his face to a bloody pulp, and he's lying lifeless on the floor with the rest of them. Whatever he says is irrelevant, knowing the things he's done to my girl and to the countless other innocent victims whose lives he's destroyed. Whether or not there are survivors when all of this is over, their lives have been scarred and ruined. Because to survive is to be forced to live the remainder of their days with his face burned into their memories.

A life sentence far worse than any prison.

“Cut the shit, priest . You don't get to call me a fucking liar when you lie to yourself, and everyone, else each day that you wake up and hide beneath that collar. Besides, we both know how this ends, so why don't you save your breath while you've still got it,” I seethe, contempt coursing through my veins. The word priest feels like poison in my mouth as I stare up at the man who hurt, no, abused, the woman I love.

“I knew she'd be safe out there with you. I was only hoping that your relationship would move along a little faster than it had, in the physical sense, but unfortunately, it didn't. It would have been nice for her to have fallen pregnant. At the very least, it would have earned back her keep.”

Heat pricks my ears as I am consumed by the hatred I feel toward this scumbag.

How fucking dare he speak about my girl like that.

“Speak of her again, and I will force your entrails down your throat,” I threaten, my words like promised venom, but he remains nonchalant, taking another step.

“Actually, boy . I will say whatever the devil I want. Not even you, brave or not, will stop me. I do not take orders from the likes of you. And to be perfectly honest, I’m not so interested in talking to you, period. It’s her I want.” Before I can respond, he stares down at Airlie. Not a hint of remorse for what he’s done flashes across his face. He doesn’t care about anyone or anything.

He’s sick.

Twisted in the worst way imaginable, and there is no God strong and powerful enough to fucking save him.

“Her mother and I were acquainted before her stay here at Atlantara. And if it weren’t for that good-for-nothing Titan King, we would never have met at all, would you believe it? But alas, she died in the end. Tragic, really.” His beady eyes form into slits as he says Titan’s name, only smiling when he speaks of Airlie’s mother’s death.

He will die for this.

How the fuck does he know Titan, and what does that have to do with Airlie’s mother?

I decide to humor him. For no other reason than for Airlie to get some sort of information about her mother. “What does Titan have to do with it?” I question, feigning indifference, as his dark, narrow eyes scan the tapestries hanging on the stone.

“Titan is Airlie’s biological father,” he says matter-of-factly, then brushes it off as if he didn’t just drop a bomb on both Airlie’s and my life.

He walks over to one of the tapestries and pulls it off the wall with two hands, revealing a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the dock. Bright, blinding light fills the room, forcing me to squint as my eyes adjust to the onslaught.

Well, this is brand new information. Titan told me fucking none of this. I never questioned Titan’s motives regarding all things The Royal because any other reason, other than the obvious, didn’t matter to me. Taking down the biggest human and sex trafficking ring on the planet was motivation enough for me, so I didn’t need convincing.

To top it all off, if this is true, it means that I am in love with my boss’s daughter. Boss, as in, the head of the fucking mafia.

Making Airlie a mafia princess.

Does Titan know about this? Surely he can’t.

If I live through this, I’m a dead man.

I’ll climb that mountain when I get to it, but for now, Airlie is the only thing that matters to me. If I kill the priest right now, she might never know the truth of how she came to be, and I can’t deny her that. I know what it feels like. The never-knowing. And this is her only chance to question the priest before I rip his jaw off its hinges.

My eyes scan Airlie’s wide, vivid, aquamarine ones, her expression filled with agony, but I detect a hint of hope swirling around in them. I can hear her words almost as if she spoke them to me out loud.

She has a family.

Life is a long, long, lonely road when you're forced to live it on your own, and despite Airlie not being alone anymore, now that she has me, I want nothing more than for her to be happy and experience a family she deserves. I only hope that's what comes of this.

That thought is what persuades me to question Grimsby further.

"If Titan is Airlie's biological father, why did her mother end up here... with you?" I ask, not taking my eyes off him now that he's closer. His very live presence makes me uncomfortable because my every fucking instinct tells me to kill him.

"Oh, you don't know? I thought Titan would have at least told you, considering he's had you spy on us for the best part of four years." His temper rises, his holier-than-thou facade slipping, as he spins around and pins me with a menacing glare.

I reach for the cape draped over the shoulders of one of the dead bodies and lay it over Airlie, a blanket covering her naked body from his wandering, rapist eyes. I don't give a single fuck what he does to me, but he won't get the chance to do anything to my girl again.

I can tell that he doesn't like how I am with her by the sweat beading on his wrinkled forehead, put there by anger and jealousy. I glower at him. Daring him to challenge me, but he doesn't. Instead, he continues speaking.

What is it with priests and their sermons?

"Her mother, Charlotta, was just like the rest of them. Riddled with sin. She didn't want a child. So, she ran to the nearest church and begged God for forgiveness because she wanted to abort her unborn baby. She claimed that the father was a

dangerous man, and his lifestyle wasn't safe to raise a child. Of course, we couldn't let her follow through with it, now could we?" he explains, and I can feel Airlie's heart breaking with this information.

I reach for her hand on instinct but remember her wounds, so I rest my hand atop her arm instead.

"We learned that Titan was investigating The Royal about a year ago, but we weren't aware of your involvement." He gives me a pointed look, but I don't respond. "It wasn't until Captain Lancaster, or rather, Spencer Philips, spilled the beans about what you had all been up to. He sang like a canary when Charles cornered him. Well, as far as I know, it was the other way around. Your friend wanted money. They always do. And, of course, he wasn't going to get it. That's not how we do things around here. Charles did a deal with him to hand over cash if he took you out of the equation," he says, shaking his head and gazing out the window, staring out at the ocean.

Spencer, that rat fucking bastard.

I knew he wanted out of the Mafia, but I didn't think he'd sell us all out. As well as the souls of thousands of innocent people, women, and children, and for what, money? It makes me feel a whole lot better about blowing him up.

I say nothing as I contemplate the priest.

There is no soul hidden behind all that garb and aged skin. He's made a lot of people money, and if it weren't for me throwing a spanner in the works, he'd be making way more for a lot longer. He will want revenge for that, making me his number one target.

"Later that evening, I learned that my sister and her husband were sent to God as

nothing more than ashes and dust,” he adds, his ears turning red with anger, simmering just below his surface.

I hate to break it to this idiot, but if he thinks Charles and Valerie Jensen were worthy of deity tickets, then he’s fucking delusional. I’ve met my fair share of pretentious, arrogant dickheads who all thought way too highly of themselves. Being in The Royal was rather eye-opening in that regard. But I am not delusional enough to believe that our souls would be even remotely salvageable after what we’ve all done here on Earth.

“How did you know I was here?” I question, growing rather bored and impatient with his bullshit.

He turns to face me, a crooked smile tilting at the corners of his thin, disgusting lips. He reaches into his pocket, and I stiffen, my body ready for anything as he pulls out a... ring .

My signet ring.

He twirls it around his middle finger and then glares at me with hostility. I keep my mask of indifference, despite being tempted to laugh in his fucking face.

“One of the guards found this, washed up in a little rock pool about a week after I learned of the death of my sister. I asked the guard to search the island for other potential belongings from the ship, but to my surprise, he discovered you chained to a wall instead.”

He circles us, an old wolf holding onto his last shred of supremacy before he’s taken out by a much younger, much stronger alpha. I look down at Airlie, not wanting her to feel unseen or for her to feel like she’s alone in this. I need to remind her that I am and always will be right by her side.

I would have done anything to hear her words, but she and I are so far beyond words that it isn't funny. We speak in a language that no one else would ever understand. She's the only person who knows me, the real me, not the man behind this invisible, bloodthirsty mask. And no matter what happens, that is one thing that will never, ever change.

I love her.

The priest surrounds us, whispering prayers to each and every single one of the decapitated bodies that lay in pieces on the floor. Each slow step he makes is calculated, an attempt at intimidation, hiding behind prayer.

Newsflash, it won't work.

Fucking poser.

And that's coming from me, an undercover ghost.

The half-wit doesn't realize that he's been waving around a tracking device, and I can only assume that Titan was alerted by its movement and will be sending help. Hopefully, sooner rather than later. Now that I know why the mission to destroy The Royal was so important to him, I don't doubt for a second that help is coming.

Chapter 25

AIRLIE

I have a family.

A father, a real father.

And Ezekiel knows him.

The revelation replays through my mind as my heart beats rapidly in my chest like a wild beast is chasing me. Faster than it did before Ezekiel arrived. I can hear whatever's left of my blood whooshing loudly in my eardrums while I lie here and watch the array of emotions cross Ezekiel's face as he and Father Grimsby talk .

Sharp, searing pain radiates through my palms and pulsates on a loop throughout my entire body.

I almost died today.

If it weren't for Ezekiel, I know that I would have.

The offensive, metallic stench, a combination of blood and flesh, permeates the air around us, masking the noxious smell of incense and burning candle wax, and for that, I am thankful.

I hate that awful, holy smell.

Because whenever Father burns them, the opposite of anything holy happens.

I knew that if Father Grimsby ever found out about my pet man, the consequences, not just for me but also for Ezekiel, would be dire. Yet, it still didn't stop me from keeping him.

I'm glad that I did.

The problem we are faced with now, with Father being aware that Ezekiel and I love each other, is that Father wants me all to himself. The two horrible men did say something like that to me. Why else would Father hide me from the others all these years if he didn't want to share?

Ezekiel will not allow Father to touch me ever again.

I know that for sure.

It's one of the very prominent tells on Ezekiel's beautiful, blood-covered face whenever he looks at me. Father would notice this, and I fear his reaction to that the most.

Ezekiel traces small, soft circles on my skin, yet his eyes do not waver from where Father Grimsby stands, twirling around a small, gold object and whispering prayers for who I assume are the dead men lying on the floor before him. I cannot see them from up here.

Ezekiel doesn't look like he cares about Father's discovery, but I sense that his coldness may just be on purpose. That gold thing is important to him.

Father walks out of sight and, behind where Ezekiel stands by my side, his shoulders noticeably stiffen, his manner morphing into something I don't recognize as he shares

one more glance at me and winks a sky-blue eye.

What? What does that mean? What is he planning?

I don't move. I don't really have a choice as my exhausted, tired body writhes in pain. My inability to move prevents me from seeing Father approach Ezekiel from behind and hurting him with... something .

I want to cry.

I want to ask Ezekiel if he is okay, but he spins on his heels, retrieving the small blade protruding from beneath his ribcage, almost on the side of his back.

"A bit obvious, don't you think, old man?" Ezekiel reaches around, taking his eyes off Father, and pulls the blade from his skin, dropping it to the floor.

Blood gushes from the wound, but Ezekiel appears completely unbothered by it. My eyes flick to Father, and I don't think I've ever seen him this mad.

"You think you can destroy years of hard fucking work, boy? All because of one insignificant girl? That's the only reason Titan bothered to take us down in the first place, and we both know it. He wouldn't have cared about The Royal otherwise!" Father says, his voice betraying the array of emotions written on his face.

He's afraid.

I've never seen Father fearful of anything before. Not in my nineteen years.

Ezekiel says nothing as he glares down at Father. I realize now that Ezekiel is taller, his body much more powerful, and broader than the older man who stands before him, and for the first time in my life, Father looks small. Ezekiel takes a step toward

him, and then another, until he is standing toe to toe with the man who has hurt me in every way possible.

“She and her mother may have been the reason why Titan came for you and your fucking pedophile ring, but I can assure you that it was me who killed Charles and Valerie,” Ezekiel growls as he leans in closer to Father, getting into his face. Blood still drips from his body, saturating the skin surrounding the wound where Father stabbed him. “It was me who killed your precious niece, Ursa,” he takes another calculated step forward, forcing Father to tread backward.

He killed Ursa?

Unfamiliar excitement coils in my stomach as I watch the love of my life morph from man to beast.

“And it will be me who gets the honor of killing you. And when I tear your fucking limbs off for laying a single fucking hand on a child,” Ezekiel's neck tilts, making him appear ungodly, and the fear in Father's eyes will be like a scar, forever etched in my brain. “It will be me who gets to brag about your death when Titan comes to get his daughter.”

My chest tightens as a deep thrill clings to my weakening heart when Father falls back to the floor, tripping on a dead body. I careen my neck and adjust my hips a little, conjuring the strength to do so from somewhere, before rolling onto my side as far as I can to watch as Ezekiel kills Father.

Ezekiel's on him in a matter of seconds. His fists meet Father Grimsby's face with bone-crunching punches, pounding his head over and over again. The sound of Father's muffled cries of pain is something I've never heard before. I wait for Ezekiel to stop, but he doesn't. Not until a loud bang fills the room, causing him to pause.

Ezekiel's arm is raised mid-air, and my heart lodges in my throat.

He's hurt.

Father hurt him.

That noise.

Father shifts, taking advantage of Ezekiel's distraction, or is it pain, before he stands, kicking him hard in his injured ribs. I have to do something. Ezekiel is hurt, and I'm finding it hard to think straight. I try to stand. Liquid fire courses rapidly through my stiff muscles, igniting me from the inside out. I bite my tongue, careful not to alert Father of my movements because whatever loud noise has hurt Ezekiel, it could hurt me too, and then I won't be able to help him.

I look up. Father has dragged Ezekiel over to the large window that touches the ceiling, but Ezekiel is fighting back. It looks as if he has been swimming in blood, but I cannot tell if it belongs to him or the dead men with missing faces and decapitated heads lying haphazardly on the floor.

Disgusting.

I'm proud of him.

Blood gushes from my mouth as I bite down on my tongue, my teeth piercing through it as I try not to cry out in pain. My skin prickles in a sheen of sweat as I move my bloodied feet, inching my body closer to the edge so I can hang my legs over the side of the stone table where, just minutes ago, I almost died.

My vision blurs, and my body trembles, a bout of queasiness crashing into me as I try to stand. I look over at Father. His body leans over Ezekiel's, whose back is on the

ground, fighting and intercepting each of Father's blows.

Another loud bang fills the air, and the window glass shatters into millions of infinitesimal shards. Shivers of glass hit my face and body, its broken pieces now covering most of the floor. Ezekiel is shouting something at him, but I cannot hear his voice. I can't hear anything over the sound of my heartbeat, hammering loudly in my ears as I will my body to keep moving.

It's odd, really.

Part of me feels the pain. The other part of me feels like I'm on the outside looking in, watching the scene unfold from another's eyes. I take advantage of this grace and slowly bend to pick up the small silver blade Father used to stab Ezekiel. It's covered in blood, and I wipe it on the cloak wrapped around my body so it doesn't slip from my fingers. My hand clutches the hilt tightly, sending fire surging down my arm, but I pretend it's not there.

I need to help Ezekiel.

He's the only thing that matters to me, and I won't let him die for me.

"You will not win this, boy! You will not kill me!" Father screams, Ezekiel's skin a little paler as his head hangs out the window and over the edge of the frame. His body is still inside, allowing Father access to punch the delicate place covered in scars on his ribcage. Scars that are only there because I was too weak to carry him to safety the day I found him.

Slowly, I walk over and stand behind Father, and Ezekiel's eyes meet mine.

Leave.

Run to safety.

He is absolutely mad if he thinks I would leave him like this. Despite the look on Ezekiel's face, I hold out my shaky hand and grip the knife even tighter. Pushing past the searing pain in my palm, I raise my free hand, fisting a handful of Father's hair, and wrench his head back sharply toward me. Ezekiel's words are muffled as I slide the sharp blade across Father's throat with as much strength as I can rally, making sure the wound is deep and precise. He falls back, and a vulgar, gurgling noise comes from his now gaping throat. I hover above his dying frame and stab everywhere I can.

I want him dead.

I want him to suffer for hurting Ezekiel.

The blade stabs through the fabric covering his large stomach, his heart, and then his chest.

I can't stop.

I don't want to.

Flashes of memories fly through my mind.

His filthy hands all over my body.

His filthy hands on my mother's body.

I raise the blade and bring it back down with more strength than I can afford to use, slicing through the material, his exposed protruding stomach now a mess of flesh, blood, and intestines.

He was going to sacrifice me to his men. They were going to eat me. They were drinking my blood, and they weren't going to stop until my heart finally stopped beating. He took everything from me. But he still doesn't have me. And I hope his soul suffers for all eternity in the purgatory in the sky.

The room spins around me, Ezekiel's words even quieter as a coldness surrounds me, like a blanket of ice draped over my body. My body is screaming, but I can't speak from the pain. I move my hands, distorted and doubled, and all I see is gore and blood. Ezekiel holds me in his arms, rocking back and forth, but I don't feel it. I don't even feel like my body is my own anymore, yet I feel everything at the same time.

"It's okay now, baby. I'm so fucking proud of you. You got him, Airlie. He's dead," Ezekiel's voice brings me out of my trance, and a breath escapes my lips. "You're in shock, Little Siren, but you're gonna be okay," he soothes, kissing atop my head and then my forehead.

His face and body are covered in blood, but I think he looks spellbinding like this.

Enchanting.

I open my mouth to speak, but my throat feels dry. Instead, I move in Ezekiel's arms, rolling my eyes over his body to see how badly he's hurt. He must notice because he looks down at his side, where blood pools from a small, dark red piece of flesh missing from the side of his body.

"I'm okay, baby. It's just a flesh wound. The bullet only scathed me."

I don't know what he means, but I nod. I have yet to learn about the outside world, but I mentally note that I should ask him what a bullet is.

I'll ask tomorrow.

Burrowing deeper into his hold, I realize I never want him to let me go. My eyes fall on the man who lies dead at my side. His grey hair now blood red, and his dark eyes are even darker, black, I realize, as his evil, demonic soul leaves his lifeless body on a one-way ticket to Hell.

My head is pounding, my body throbbing, but nothing feels as bad as when I saw Ezekiel hurt. "I-I love you, Stranger," I whisper. My throat feels like I've swallowed glass, and considering we're sitting in a pile of it, it wouldn't surprise me if I have.

"Say it again," Ezekiel says, his bloodied face lightly caressing mine before he nuzzles into my neck and hair.

"I love you."

"If anything happens to me after this moment, I'll be dying a very happy man, Little Siren," he says, wearing a coy smile.

"Why is that?" I ask. I want to know everything about him. How his mind works, what he likes and doesn't like. I want it all with him.

"Nobody has ever told me that they love me before, Airlie. I don't know a single person who would have saved me. Out on the rocks the day you found me, and here a few minutes ago. No one is waiting for me back home to talk to, to tell them I'm alive, let alone how my day went. I am just me. I have no family. Nothing. I have nothing to offer you. I'm just a ghost, baby," his voice cracks, his warm breath heavy on my neck as I take in his words.

He's torturing himself, but it isn't necessary.

I know what I want, and I'm no longer allowing a man to tell me what that is.

“If you're a ghost with nothing, Ezekiel, then I am a phantom with everything. Because now that I have you, there is nothing else in this world that I could possibly want more.”

Bright blue eyes meet mine, and my heart stops at how remarkably wonderful he is. He leans in, pressing his bloodied lips to mine, and I've never tasted anything more beautiful. He leans back, his hand gently wiping away the tears that I didn't realize were falling down my face.

“Now, about your father— Titan,” he quickly corrects, and I can see why the word father would be like acid on his tongue.

I look up, tilting my head to see what that strange sound is coming from outside.

What is that?

Ezekiel follows my gaze, and his crimson lips tilt into the broadest smile I have ever seen anyone wear.

“You couldn't write this shit,” he says, still wearing a triumphant grin, as he holds me tightly, not enough to hurt me, and I burrow into his body as we watch the monstrous machine-like thing hover above the water. There are people, lots of people, standing outside, staring up at the strange building in the ocean.

“It's a boat, baby, more like a ship, kinda like the one I was telling you about,” he explains, and I feel silly. My cheeks heat with embarrassment because when he mentioned that he blew up a boat, I imagined an arc-like thing, and it looked nothing like the ship outside. “And those things over there,” he points to the large, loud black birds in the sky. “Those are helicopters. They are what is gonna get us out of here. And down there, baby, is Titan,” he says.

His voice sounds different. He sounds free, like an enormous weight has lifted away from his shoulders.

“He came for you,” I say in awe. Ezekiel turns to me, his eyes brimming with tears of joy, I think.

“No, Little Siren. He came for you.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:55 am

Chapter 26

EZEKIEL

Strong wind pushes and pulls at my tired, bleeding body, and I hold my girl a little tighter in my arms as I walk along the wharf to where Titan stands, searching the bodies for signs of familiarity. If I had known what all of this was for, how much this actually meant to him, then perhaps things would have played out a little differently than they did.

Women and children are now draped in blankets as Titan's medics, all dressed in mafia black, tend to their wounds.

My own wounds throb incessantly, radiating ripples of pain throughout my body with each step that I take.

I push it down.

I wasn't the one almost drained of blood.

Airlie's eyes widen as she takes in the scene before us. "Who are all these people?" she whispers, staring upwards from my arms, wonder swimming in her captivating, blue-green eyes.

Bewitching and hypnotizing.

She has the kind of eyes a man like me could get lost in, and you know what? I just

might. There are dark circles surrounding them from exhaustion, pain, and blood loss, but I've never seen anyone or anything more spectacular than she is. Tiny purple veins, like little lines on a map, are sketched across her nearly translucent skin, hidden beneath the deep vermillion red blood belonging to her abuser.

Despite killing the priest, Airlie isn't tainted by death like I am.

Her heart remains pure and kind, and nothing, not murder or decay, could change that about her.

I wish I could say the same.

The truth is, my soul was damned a long time ago. Blackened by death and iniquity before I ever knew what it meant to sin. I only wish that I was half as innocent as she is in all this.

It was Airlie's unrelenting kindness that first drew me to her. Not to break her and certainly not to hurt her. But to keep her.

My guiding light. The sunshine to the dark, ominous storm that is my tortured, troubled mind.

And there is nowhere else I'd rather be than in that sacred place, our sacred place, tangled in the shadows together.

That's where we come alive.

Somewhere between night and day. Like a fire igniting across the sea, warring with the waves. Two halves, opposite to one other, yet somehow together, are beautiful.

That's how it feels to be with my siren.

This woman is stronger than anyone I've ever met, including myself. She saved my life twice now, and about an hour ago, she was nailed to a fucking cross by her palms and feet. I remind myself that she is safe, and that piece of shit priest and those other fucking assholes can't hurt her anymore.

I gaze down at her, glancing back at me like I hung the moon in her darkest sky. Thousands of questions glint in her eyes, and I vow to answer every last one of them until the day that I die.

"They are being rescued, the people. They, too, were prisoners here. They were locked away in the Cathedral. The others, the ones you see wearing black, they work with me. And that man over there," I nod toward the tall figure standing off to the side as we slowly approach where he stands, still searching for someone in the crowd.

I know who that someone is.

"That man is Titan King," I whisper, her eyes widening, her mouth parting slightly as she turns her head and studies him, my boss, her biological father, for the first time.

Titan turns, scouring the multitude of faces until they land where I stand. I hold Airlie tightly, waiting for his green, weary eyes to meet mine. They widen, realizing that the man, covered head-to-toe in blood, is me, then redirects his attention to the woman I'm holding in my arms, my siren.

I watch as all the breath leaves him, the most ruthless, cut-throat man I know, and he falls to his knees at our feet, staring up at Airlie in disbelief.

"Char-Charlotta?" he chokes, his voice as broken as he looks.

There are no signs of the man I came to know so well over the past eighteen years. This is a man undone, the product of a chase fueled by endless, insurmountable

heartache and grief.

His notorious, tough exterior, forgotten.

Airlie stares into my eyes, voicelessly conveying that she isn't ready to speak to him yet. Titan will just have to get used to it because my girl doesn't have to talk to anyone unless she wants to. And when she's ready, I'll be with her every step of the way.

“Sir, this is your daughter,” I say, and suddenly, I'm overcome with a rush of nervousness and a type of possessiveness that I've never felt before.

Wide, afflicted eyes lock onto mine, and I feel like a young boy again. This man raised me, and I'm not going to pretend that he'll be remotely pleased with Airlie and me being together.

Too fucking bad for him because I'm not going anywhere.

She is mine .

His eyes fall to Airlie, then back up to me—thoughts whirling within his mind a hundred miles a minute. Instinctively, I strengthen my hold on her, and she snuggles into my blood-soaked chest in response.

I will always respect Titan, and while I am grateful to him for saving my life all those years ago, putting a roof over my head, clothes on my back, and food in my stomach, over my dead fucking body, will I ever give this beautiful woman up.

He must catch my protectiveness of her because his face transforms from bewilderment to something unreadable.

“My ...my daughter? I—I have a daughter.” It’s a statement, not a question. His voice is trembling, taking me aback a little.

Then again, I understand.

I, too, know what it’s like to have her taken from me, and I made a right dick of myself in the overly emotional department.

“Are—are you okay? Is she okay?” he questions, his face etched with worry as he examines his daughter.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing him so rudderless and lost.

I look down at Airlie, searching her expression for signs that she may like to talk, and I smile when I see her nibbling her bottom lip.

She’s curious.

I don’t want to pressure her, so I just smile. She knows that she is safe with me and that I’ll be right here by her side no matter what happens, whether she decides to speak or not.

“I’m okay,” she rasps, her voice barely above a whisper. Tears brim in her eyes, but they’re not tears of sadness. Titan is the only other person she’s spoken to, and one day, she’ll tell me why.

Or not.

She will always get a choice with me.

Tears fall unchecked from Titan’s eyes, and he buries his head in his hands and cries.

I kneel before him, not wanting him to be alone in this.

This man is my family.

He looks up at us, now level with him, and Airlie reaches out her hand, blood still trickling from the holes where the nails were, and presses it gently to Titan's cheek.

"I'm Airlie," she says, and I see the similarities in their eyes.

I don't know how I didn't see it before. Where Titan's hair is dark and peppered with silver, Airlie's is red, the color of pomegranate. But they share the same eyes.

"Airlie, she named you Airlie," Titan says, then pauses, gathering his emotions before continuing. "Airlie was my mother's name. She died."

Airlie's hand is still pressed to Titan's face, a strange gesture, but that's just her, and I love her for it.

"My mother—" her words cut off. As if saying the words out loud will make it seem too real, she's already been through enough. I decide that I will help her, and Titan deserves to know.

"Charlotta's gone, Titan. I'm sorry."

Pain.

Disbelief.

Agony.

Those are the feelings that flash across his face. This man has spent years turning this

whole globe upside down, searching for the woman he loves, only to find out that she's dead. Now that I think about it, I've never seen him with a woman before. He's never taken a wife, which is unheard of in our world.

"When?" he chokes.

"When I was six," she replies, and my eyes search her in disbelief. How she can be this strong is beyond me.

"You are eighteen?" Titan says, tear-stained eyes narrowing as he glares at me.

Okay, so he's obviously figured out that she's mine.

"Nineteen," she says, removing her hand and tucking it back behind the bloodied cape still draped around her body.

A medic approaches and Titan stands, allowing them to tend to Airle's wounds. I lay her down on the mat that was placed on the ground for her, and as I begin to stand, her voice stops me.

"Ezekiel?" she questions, not caring that there are others around who can hear her. Smiling, I place a kiss on her lips. I don't give a shit about the blood that marks her skin. Nothing could ever stop me from wanting her lips.

"Yeah, baby?" I reply.

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, and my eyes fall on them. They're full, beautiful, mine. I refrain from kissing her again now that I know she's my boss's daughter. The last thing I need is my balls in a vice because he will do it.

I've seen him in action.

“My pet spiders. They’re alone, down in my cave. I love them. I can’t leave them behind,” her eyebrows furrow, and I realize just how lonely she has been.

“I’ll get them for you, baby, don’t worry. Where is your cave?” I ask, and she excitedly rattles off directions to a cave I’ve never been to, but I promise her I’ll find her spiders and bring them back to her.

I ask the medic for a plastic container or something to carry them in, and then I start walking back to the cathedral.

I’d do anything for her, and if she wants her spiders, she’ll get her fucking spiders.

I start walking across the dock, spider container in hand, when a deep voice calls for me to wait. I stop, turning to face Titan, showing his age more now since the last time I saw him four years ago.

“Ezekiel, I—” he pauses, looking up at me, emotions raw and fully displayed. I’m right there with him. It’s been a rough four years. And in my darkest hour, when I didn’t think I could make it through, it was him that I thought of.

The man who saved me.

“I don’t know the words to say that will encapsulate how grateful I am for what you’ve done for me. Your sacrifices. Your sheer determination. You saved my baby girl. I can never repay you for that.”

“You would have done it for me if the roles were reversed.”

“Yeah, I would have,” he replies. He holds out his hand, and I take it as he brings me in for a hug. He’s never hugged me before, but we’re going all out today.

“You love her?”

“With all that I am, Sir,” I reply without hesitation.

Wrong choice of fucking words, Ezekiel.

My heart feels cut open, exposed because I know that Titan is aware of all the horrible, heinous things I’ve done. Not just as his offside all those years ago, but the disgusting things I had to do when I went undercover. He would have seen it all to keep tabs on me, and half of what I did was broadcasted across every dark, depraved corner of the internet. Because, of course, it was.

I am by no means a good man .

But it doesn’t change the fact that I love Airlie with every fiber of my fucking being, and as long as she’ll have me around, I am never letting her go.

“Good,” he says to my utter, fucking surprise. “There isn’t a man on earth I could think of who would be better for my daughter.”

My chest tightens with something, and I bite back my emotions. He’s never given me a compliment before. And the honor of his blessing fills me with... happiness.

Would I walk away from her without it? Not on my life. But that doesn’t take away from the warmth I feel from his words.

“Sir—”

“Now. Go and get the girl her damn spiders. Meet me back here. We’ve got a lot to talk about because you, my son, are taking over for me when we get back home.”

What?

Take over?

Me?

A mafia don?

Surely, this old bastard is losing it.

Pride swirls in my chest, and I feel like everything has fallen into place for the first time in my life, like pieces of a very twisted puzzle. I didn't know what it looked like until the puzzle was completed. I am at a loss for words, but I straighten even with the shock of Titan's declaration, knowing how monumental this is in our world.

"It would be my honor, Sir," I reply, swallowing the lump in my throat. I must look like a complete idiot because he pats me on my shoulder, turns around, and walks away.

His words replay through my mind as I head toward the Cathedral. If the little boy version of me could see himself now, he'd be overjoyed and maybe even proud.

Because he finally did it.

Failure after constant failure, I still conquered the monsters. I stared deep into their eyes until their darkness and shadows consumed me, making me a monster, too.

But in spite of that darkness, I found someone, or rather, she found me. Tangled in shadows beneath water and stone. Two helpless souls bound together by tragedy and fate, and as I walk toward my future, I realize for the first time that I have everything I have ever wanted.

I am loved, and I have a family.

I am Ezekiel King.

And I intend to make Airlie my queen.

Airlie

Five years later

In most fairy tales, the villain doesn't get the girl, at least not in the books that Ezekiel leaves on my nightstand for me to read each night before bed. There's something about those stories that leaves me with more questions than answers.

What if the one who saves you, your champion, is part villain and hero? And the one you're taught to believe is trustworthy and good for you is actually the most cruel one?

Because I'm surrounded by villains each day, and they aren't a scratch on the true evil I've seen in this world.

I steady my gloved hand, the constant buzzing coming from the fluorescent light shining brightly above me fills the room. I focus on it. Attempting to drown out the whimpers and endless complaining coming from the large, muscular man who lies on the surgical table before me.

Gauze pinched between my sterile tweezers, I lightly dab the blood welling around the bullet wound, soaking through his skin. Billy-John, one of Ezekiel's men, drones on about some "asshole" that shot him in a meeting that went wrong earlier this evening. He winces, hissing in pain as I dig for the bullet that's lodged beneath a layer of ripped fat and flesh on his bottom.

I want to ask him why, of all places, he allowed himself to get shot in the backside,

but think better of it.

I'd never hear the end of it.

Katia, mafia doctor and my teacher, strides into the room, takes one look at Billy, and laughs hysterically, her back hunched over, her hands placed on her thighs as she howls with laughter.

“How do you expect me to take any of you seriously if the only time I see you is when you’re all naked?” she says, almost breathless, as she walks over and stands at my left, watching over me as I successfully retrieve the bullet.

“You should see the other guy,” Billy says, a smirk pulling at the corner of his lips. Katia rolls her eyes. “What? I’m serious. The other guy is dead,” Billy says, but Katia isn’t impressed.

I drop the bullet in a petri dish and put it on the stainless steel worktable to my right.

“Airlie, why don’t you wash up? I can take over from here. The boss is waiting for you outside, ready to rip my head off for working you too hard,” she says, her full lips tilted into a broad smile.

My brows furrow.

Surely, she’s joking.

Ezekiel wouldn’t rip Katia’s head off, would he?

I’ll have to talk to him about it.

Ezekiel is possessive, and everybody in the city knows it. Since taking over as the don from my father, he’s made it known that I am his queen in every sense of the

word, even if we are not officially married.

Marriage isn't for us.

Our love is too pure to be regulated by laws like other sanctioned unions. Our souls do not need permission to be as one.

They just are.

It took a little while for my dad to come around to the idea of us not having a wedding. He said it's non-traditional, and the families wouldn't like it. But eventually, he supported us, wanting nothing more than for us to be happy, and it's true, I couldn't be happier.

I'm not fully ready to live in the outside world, so when Ezekiel suggested I work with Katia four years ago, I jumped at the opportunity.

He knows me.

He knows that I love to help people.

To fix what is broken.

And with how often Ezekiel's men are in here, I get more than enough practice.

I see them more than I do him, and that explains why my heart is beating frantically inside my chest with excitement that I get to see him earlier than I had planned.

"No! Don't leave me with Doc. She hurts me! Airlie, please . I'll do anything," Billy begs, and I squeeze my lips together, trying not to smile. He sounds like a petulant child, which is odd considering how big and scary he looks.

Katia isn't afraid of him. In fact, it's more like the other way around.

"Excuse me, Billy-John, but unless you want to experience the boss's wrath, I suggest you buckle up and stop being a giant baby. Besides, I'm gentle," Katia says with a wink in my direction.

"Airlie, I can confirm that she is not gentle. But neither is the boss, so you're off the hook," Billy says, burying his face into the bed as Katia slaps him up the back of his head.

I wash up, remove my scrub cap, and put on my jacket, intermittently listening to the back and forth between the two opposites behind me.

I wave goodbye, but they are not looking, so I turn and head out the door to the parking lot where Ezekiel will be waiting for me.

Closing the door behind me, the cool night air whips my hair and face, causing my nose to itch with the cold. I look over to see Ezekiel leaning against his blackout SUV, which he insists on driving when he's with me for extra protection.

He's overprotective, but I love that he makes me feel safe.

"Hey there, Dr. Siren," he says, and he's absolutely ridiculous.

"I'm not a doctor," I correct him for the millionth time.

"Yet," he says, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his warm body, gently pressing his lips to my now cold ones.

He pulls back, staring down at me. Street lights brighten the dark parking lot, and a cold, foggy, vapor-like mist escapes our mouths with each breath we take. His long, thick, black woolen coat looks delightfully warm, and all I want to do is snuggle up

and hide beneath it, wrapped up in his warm arms.

“Come, I want to take you somewhere,” Ezekiel says, my hand now held in his as he opens the passenger door for me to step inside.

Once he's in the car, he turns up the heat, and I place my hands in front of the vents to warm them.

“Where are we going?” I ask, but he just smiles in answer.

I hate surprises, and of course he knows that, which is why he likes to surprise me all the time.

The city lights blur and twinkle in my side mirror as Ezekiel drives away from civilization, and into the darkness. Before too long, forest trees replace tall buildings, and there's nobody else but him and me on the highway. We start to slow, and he pulls off the highway and onto a dirt road, leading us further into the dark.

It's beautiful.

We haven't left the city in what feels like forever, and I didn't realize how much I needed a break from it until now.

We pull to a stop, and he gets out, walking around to open my door. My skin immediately pricks with ice-like needles as I take his hand, stepping out of the vehicle and onto the crisp soil.

“It's freezing, Ezekiel!” I say, my teeth chattering behind my lips.

“You like the cold,” he teases, and it's true, I prefer this weather over the warm, tropical temperatures.

We slip through the cover of darkness, and I'm led through a dark forest. I look up at the tree canopy soaring above, and I catch glimpses of the night sky, peaking shyly through the leaves. The glow of the moon shines on the path ahead, and I already feel at home.

The sound of leaves and twigs crunch under our booted feet, causing the late-night wildlife to scatter. Their little patters are rampant as we weave through the forest. I see ahead the beginnings of a clearing, and as we approach the edge of it, my boots dig into pure white sand, luminous beneath the now clear moonlit sky.

Ocean.

The waves are gentle, the salt air fills my lungs, and I breathe in the familiar salted scent, stronger now the forest is behind us.

"This is where I want to be, right here beneath the night sky. No interruptions, just you and me," Ezekiel says, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

I look further along the beach, noticing a campfire already ablaze, the flames reaching for the night sky as they dance with the cold air, beckoning me. Blankets and pillows lay haphazardly, and there's a large picnic basket open, showing its contents of wine, glasses, and a mountain of various snacks. My stomach growls in response, emotion takes over and I smile in delight at the thoughtfulness of Ezekiel.

A midnight picnic with him is just what I need.

"No clams?" I tease, raising an eyebrow and he laughs, a sound I could die listening to.

"No, Little Siren. God, I fucking hate clams."

We say nothing for a while, listening to the roar of the waves that caress the shore.

“Ezekiel?” I say, my voice betraying just how nervous I am.

“Yeah, baby,” he answers, his fingers brushing through my long hair, a little shorter these days, however, it's still a nuisance.

I look up, staring into his sky-blue eyes, the reflection of the flickering fire glowing brightly in them.

“I wanted to give you something,” I say, not sure what he will think about my gift because it's not at all what someone would call conventional. And somehow, that's what makes it perfect.

“Hey, I brought you here to give you something, not the other way around,” he smiles, rolling me onto my back, hovering above me in the firelight.

We're perfect like this.

Him and I.

My other puzzle piece.

“Oh, you first,” I say, as he presses kisses on my forehead and along my jaw, then down to my neck. His breaths, warm, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. He pulls away, and I immediately miss his warmth as he reaches behind the picnic basket and retrieves a clear container. For a second, I'm not sure what it is that I'm looking at, but when he holds it out to me, I gasp.

A large, fluffy, black spider stares back at me, and my lips start to tremble.

“I know it was hard losing Seba and Flipper, but I thought this little guy would be perfect for you. Not to replace them or anything,” he says, a little unsure, and there's a tenderness in his tone that only I get to see.

“Ezekiel. He's perfect.”

Losing my spiders a couple of years ago was hard for me, and Ezekiel was there for me through all of it. I'm just glad I got to have them for as long as I did.

Ezekiel understands me better than I understand myself sometimes.

I reach into the pocket of my jacket and hold out the red velvet organza bag. I bite my bottom lip, even more nervous now because there's nothing I could give him that will top a pet spider.

“It's not much, but I thought you'd like it,” I say as I watch him untie the little red drawstring before opening it.

“Airlie, is this what I think it is?” he says, his eyes wide, the start of a smile forming across his sharp, handsome features. He twirls the pendant between his fingers, the gold chain glinting in the orange light.

“It's a vial of my blood. You know, because you love my blood so much,” I say, a little quieter now because I'm still learning about what is considered normal and what isn't when it comes to gift giving.

“Baby girl, this is the best damn thing, aside from you, that I've ever been given. I will wear this with pride. Everywhere.” He reaches for me, his lips landing on mine, and I gently place my spider safely back behind the basket.

My hands cup the sides of Ezekiel's face, pulling him into me more, wanting him closer as his tongue parts my lips and then smooths over mine. When we are like this, it's like the world around us stops spinning. There are no sounds but the sputtering flames and ocean waves as they fight to drown out our heavy breaths.

He removes his coat and then his suit jacket until he's wearing nothing but a white

button down dress shirt, much like the one he wore the day that I first saw him. His huge, muscular body presses into me, my back against the soft blanket, the sand beneath it, like a pillow.

He keeps his beard trimmed nicely, but his hair is much longer now, always styled up beautifully in a bun that only makes him look wild and feral.

A dark knight, dressed in even darker finery.

Though, it doesn't matter what Ezekiel wears, he always looks perfect.

He lifts my leg, removing my shoe, and then shifts to remove the other. Before I know it, I'm wearing nothing but skin beneath him. He runs his large, calloused hands along my calf muscles, spreading my thighs before his right hand inches higher, sending invisible shockwaves of pleasure along my skin before cupping my pussy.

A breath escapes me, arousal coursing through my body, as his blue eyes, wild in the amber light, gaze down at me with raw, animalistic hunger.

He leans in, sliding his wet tongue along my center, and I lurch forward with his touch. He grips my hips, his strong hands holding me tighter now as he sinks his tongue deeper into me. His mouth closes around my sensitive clit, licking and sucking, his wet tongue sliding up and down until my legs start to shudder.

“Oh no, baby. I don't think so. I want you to come on my cock,” he says, pushing away from me to stand.

I want to hit him.

I shoot him a glare that tells him I'll do it, not bothering to hide my impatience. I need him, aching so, and he chuckles.

“Did you think that I was going to bring you all the way out here without my cum dripping down your thighs when we leave? You know I can't get enough of you,” he growls. His own need is like electricity skittering over his skin, his face flush, making my stomach flutter deliciously in anticipation. “Did you want that, Little Siren?”

“Y— yes ,” I whisper desperately. My body prickles with heat that has nothing to do with the fire, crackling, and fizzing beside our bodies.

“What was that?” he says, teasing , because I know that he heard me.

“Yes, Ezekiel.”

He leans back and gets to his feet, towering above me. He removes his shirt, exposing the scared contours of his mouth-watering chest to me, and then he undoes his pressed black slacks, the whole time, his eyes never leave mine as he undresses above me.

Dinner and a show, I decide, as his large, hard cock springs free, hitting his stomach.

My eyes widen.

I'm never going to get used to seeing him like this.

He kneels, towering over me, part villain, part hero, and his eyes flash with something dark, menacing even, and within seconds, his powerful body is all over me.

His large hands reach for mine, raising them above my head, pinning them in place as his mouth explores mine. I raise my hips, wrapping my legs around his torso, needing him to know just how desperate for him I am. He leans back slightly, glancing down into my eyes before they move to watch the place where our bodies connect. His eyes glaze as he watches while he slowly presses inside and then buries his entire length

deep into me.

I want to feel him for days.

I want the world to know that he is mine as much as I am his.

Our mouths tangle in an open mouthed kiss that I feel all over my body. My pussy convulses with each of his thrusts, now faster, greedier, as I clamp harder around his solid cock and chase my release.

“Airlie,” he cries out before capturing my bottom lip between his teeth and moving his hand to cup my breast. He pinches a nipple between his fingers as his thrusts become more forceful, hitting me deeper until I see stars.

“Baby,” I gasp, incoherent to the words that I’m saying as he pounds into me. “More,” I beg.

He growls something unintelligible in my ear as he pistons into me faster. My vision blurs, my body quivering beneath him as tension coils in my stomach before I completely come undone beneath him.

“You feel fucking incredible, baby. The way your tight cunt grips my cock. You’re such a good girl for me,” he praises, and I dig my nails deep into the skin on his back, marking him. I know It’s not enough to replace the scars that mar his body, but right now, It’s me that he’s feeling, not the wicked people who hurt him all those years before.

I hold onto him like this, not wanting this to be over, as he thrusts once more before spilling inside me, coating my inner walls with his cum. I spasm around him, a satisfied, low groan ripping from his throat, and then he crashes his mouth to mine, both of us riding the wave of euphoria together.

* * *

We lay in each other's arms for a long moment, nestled beneath the blankets, the fire dwindling, losing the battle with the cold night air. Ezekiel's tired eyes gaze into mine as the sound of the waves crashing gently against the shore surrounds us. The moon, now half hidden beneath clouds, shines muted, silver hues, highlighting the contours of his face.

"Airlie, I don't know if I've ever thanked you for saving me. Not just that day, but every day since," he says, raw emotion clogging his throat. "Baby, I love you with everything I am." I hold my finger to his lips because we don't need words.

From where we came to where we are now has been a journey for us both.

And through it all, we saved each other, and I will never let him go.

The darkness in him calls to the darkness in me, and together, we are one. There is no separation between us, not for all eternity.

He is my solace.

My sacred promise.

Our souls are bound eternally.

Dark heart and dark soul.

Ghost and Phantom.

Tangled within shadows forevermore.

The End