

Changeling Press



DEATH SEQUENCE

ANN VREMONT - MEN OF O.D.I.N.

Men of O.D.I.N.: Death Sequence

Ann Vremont

All rights reserved.

Copyright ©2010 Ann Vremont

ISBN: 978-1-60521-391-0

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF,

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Katriena Knights

Cover Artist: Ann Vremont

Adult Sexual Content

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Legal File Usage -- Your Rights

Payment of the download fee for this book grants the purchaser the right to download and read this file, and to maintain private backup copies of the file for the purchaser's personal use ONLY.

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this or any copyrighted work is illegal. Authors are paid on a per-purchase basis. Any use of this file beyond the rights stated above constitutes theft of the author's earnings. File sharing is an international crime, prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Border Patrol, Division of Cyber Crimes, in partnership with Interpol. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is punishable by seizure of computers, up to five years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000 per reported instance.

Men of O.D.I.N.: Death Sequence

Ann Vremont

Six years ago, Wendel Spears murdered his best friend's abusive father. Too bad he was being watched by government agents. Forced to become one of the agency's Berserkers, he thought he'd lost Jericho Bastillo forever, only to find that she followed him into the agency and is one of the Director's Valks.

Since then, he's kept her at arm's length, wearing his disdain for all Valks as a shield against his feelings for her. But when a computer code falls into the wrong hands, threatening Wendel's life and that of every other Berserker, he has no choice but to work with the woman he loves but can never trust to love him back.

Chapter One

Yreka, population 929 and falling, had been something of a real town once. That was before the car bombs, California's Second War for Independence and a decade of infighting among the remaining factions who had claimed the former state's ruined cities. Now Yreka was a few streets with run-down businesses, battered houses and rusted out travel trailers.

The only thing keeping the town going, aside from a few stolen fuel cells plugged into an aging power grid, was a deep hatred for the Pan-American Union. Any outsider with half a stick of sense would have approached the town quietly, camouflaged in the shapeless cotton dresses of Yreka's women or the torn jeans, ripped t-shirts and faded flannel jackets of its men.

Anonymous had never been Jericho Bastillo's style. Leaving the pockmarked remains of Old Interstate 5, she headed west down Miner Street driving a vintage Honda Rune retrofitted with hydrogen cells. In the California twilight, the bike's dark red finish blackened like spilled blood, transforming it into a rolling piece of art that made the good folks out on the street stop and stare. The motorcycle's open throttle drew those inside to the windows as Jeri rumbled over the dirt road, the tires kicking up gravel.

"Got what you wanted yet?"

The question filtered through the small computer membrane attached to her eardrum. It was Paulson, her tactical support team leader. That he sounded more irritated than usual made her smile as she slid her tongue across the roof of her mouth to activate an embedded wet chip microphone.

"Negative, that." Another swipe of her tongue disabled the mike.

Let him be annoyed. He was a couple dozen miles away, safely tucked into an armored vehicle with at least eight more members of his team ready to roll. His punk ass could sweat a little. It was her show, not his. And if she wanted to sweep into town and set the local tongues wagging, then Paulson needed to keep his own mouth shut and wait for her signal.

She was the agent, he was tactical support. That meant he was in the rear with the gear until she called him forward. Sure, he had his areas of expertise -- flashbangs, sound destabilizers and suppressive fire to name a few -- but history had already shown that he didn't know the first thing about capturing one of the agency's rogue Berserkers.

She, on the other hand, had spent four long years being trained and customized for the job.

Another smile playing along her lips, she parked the Honda in front of a supply store. Paint peeled from the building's concrete wall. Red lettering advertised beer, tobacco and lottery tickets. The next Powerball date was two decades old, but it didn't matter. All she wanted was information and enough time for Wendel Spears to realize that O.D.I.N. had finally sent someone to reclaim him.

But it was Paulson's first time supporting her and the brilliance of her plan was lost on him. For all the time he'd already spent leading teams, he was still too dense to understand -- no one but another Berserker could approach Wendel on the sly and hope to survive.

So Paulson would just have to worry over the shit that might get stirred by the appearance of a woman, alone, clad in black leather that molded itself to her petite, muscled body and riding an expensive antique bike. The store and growing crowd on the sidewalk were necessary evils.

Swinging one leg behind her to dismount, Jeri frowned. The clothes pulled everything tight, including her smallish tits. Mirrored sunglasses hid her eyes and her jet black hair was cut short at her collar and slicked back. She didn't exactly look like a woman -- at least she didn't look like one of Yreka's women.

She needed the information reaching Wendel to be accurate. While he couldn't be certain O.D.I.N.'s Director would send Jeri after him, he would know that it would be a Valk sent to retrieve him. That was just the way things worked at the agency. Send a Berserker to catch a brother agent and chances were there would be two agents AWOL or dead.

Sighing, she stripped a glove off and fluttered red-tipped fingers at the crowd. Tilting her head, she let the sunglasses slide down her nose and, in a move born solely to emphasize her crimson lip gloss, she ran one nail along the edge of her bottom lip, fixing an imaginary smudge before sliding the glove back on.

"You gentlemen are going to let me by, yes?" When she wanted it, like right then, her voice was sweet and honey-smooth. Other than the hole between her legs, it was the most feminine thing about her.

The men moved, slowly. She dropped her right hand casually to her side and palmed a thin blade as she walked between them. Pushing the store's door open, she heard chimes, their silver-metal melody failing to mask the quiet accusations that followed her into the store.

"Whore."

Jeri let the door shut, leaving the foolhardy soul out on the street to strut and live another day. Removing the sunglasses, she fluttered her mascara-coated lashes at the store clerk, a big bear of a man, hairy and oversized with a nose like a circus clown.

"Looks just like home."

The man grunted, his expression unreadable behind the tangled brush of facial hair.

The stink coming off him was days old. Drawing a shallow breath, she studied the row of whisky bottles behind him and then the freezers against the opposite wall. She made her turn slowly, giving him time to notice details about her. A little town like this, the clerk would be on the phone before her ass touched the bike's seat.

She turned back to the counter, smiling. "And, just like home, I'm looking for beer and a fight."

The man nodded at the freezers. "Only got the beer here."

"Really, just the beer?" Jeri walked to the freezer and pulled out a one-liter bottle of malt liquor. She could hear the whine of the freezer and smell the illegal halomethanes used as coolants. She returned to the counter, shaking her head at the clerk.

The place was a goddamn boonie time capsule supported by only the oldest of mod cons, all of which would be off-code in a Union store. At least they took Union credits. She ran a palm over the cred reader then waited while the clerk scanned the beer. When the man started to bag it, Jeri took it from him and passed it in front of the scanner a dozen more times. It was a pathetic bribe by civilized standards but undoubtedly the only one he would see all year.

If nothing else got him talking and calling around, this would.

"Where might I find the other?"

The man leaned over the counter. His gaze traveled from the silver tips of Jeri's black leather boots, up her tight fitting leather pants and matching jacket. His mouth puckered for a second as he passed over the two small bumps on her chest, but he didn't stop until he reached Jeri's eyes with their kohl lining and mascara two layers thick. She offered the clerk a look at her profile. "Glamorous, no?"

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Redwood, south of town, 'bout a click past the city sign."

Jeri nodded. Now she had a public destination. A little more prompting of the locals and maybe Wendel would make it to the bar before she did. She searched her memory for the Berserker's last known alias. "Any chance I'll find Dolph Rettig there?"

"Can't say. What's he look like?"

The clerk's answer came too quick, giving Jeri the impression he would have said the same thing had she inquired after his own father.

"Can't say -- but I'll know him when I see him." Jeri shrugged, her outstretched arms and wide-open palms exaggerating her answer. It was the truth. O.D.I.N.'s Berserkers were almost as good as the agency's assassins when it came to disguises, and

Wendel had been on the run almost four months -- time enough for surgery or some black market injectors to obscure his chiseled good looks into something more common.

Leaving the beer on the counter, she walked out to the bike. Ignoring the jeers, she gave the machine a quick once over for damage before climbing on. Name-calling she could let slide without death or even violence, but the motorcycle was damn near the last of its kind.

* * *

On her way out of town, Jeri stopped at a recharging station and passed around a few more Union credits, killing time and spreading the word that she was looking for Dolph Rettig.

Leaning against the Honda, she scanned the street. There had been kids and women out before she'd gone into the supply store. Now there were only men. The realization made her fingers itch. Flexing her right calf, she felt the reassuring bulk of the Bersa concealed in her boot.

Jeri activated the mike, knowing tactical had a satellite lock on her. "Perimeter scan, weapons."

Paulson answered, his words vibrating with nervous energy. "Station attendant, back belt; roof top, north east corner, rifle, no scope; three men on the corner, back belt on each and the guy in the denim jacket has one in his left boot." There was a pause and then the query, "Support?"

"Negative." Leaving the station and heading south, she kept the mike on and watched the bike's mirrors closely. She could handle whatever trouble the locals might throw at her, but she didn't want to work up a sweat before seeing Wendel.

At the thought of the Berserker and how close he might be, her chest tightened. She had known Wendel longer than either of them had been with the agency. She'd also been the last to see him before his desertion -- when news had broken that his brother Tank, another Berserker, was dead.

She'd gone to Wendel's room that night only to have him slam the door in her face, his words like a sledgehammer to her gut.

"Tell all-father I don't need one of his whores tonight."

Only the Director hadn't sent her. She'd gone on her own to comfort a childhood friend while mourning another. The next day, Wendel was gone and the hunt for him was on.

It wasn't until he had crossed into California that she'd been brought in. Knowing Wendel, he wouldn't run now that the Director had sent a Valk after him. He might kill the woman sent to claim him. In fact, he almost certainly would kill the woman sent to claim him unless she was skilled and lucky enough to subdue him first.

Nothing personal -- it was just that he hated Valks. He hated what one had done to his brother and he hated that the only women capable or even permitted to share his life and bed owed their unwavering allegiance to the Director. It was a simple fact of agency life, one that bothered some Berserkers, and one Jeri had been completely ignorant of when she had entered the Valk program without Wendel's knowledge.

So he'd fight her. He might kill her, and he'd definitely pick the sleaziest hole in the ground Yreka had to offer for her to come crawling through first.

Humiliation, after all, was the perfect chaser for pain.

The Redwood Bar & Grill, exactly 1.3 kilometers south of the city sign, was just that kind of place. There were a few bikes and cars parked in the front, their tires balding and fiberglass cracking. One battered old truck was up on concrete blocks. Pygmy goats stood tied to the front rail, along with a sign advertising Sunday's barbecue. Seeing the sign, she laughed.

Good thing the goats couldn't read.

Driving around back, Jeri scanned the uneven row of travel trailers for signs of imminent trouble. All she saw was "Welcome to Hillbilly Heaven" flashing at her in bright green metaphor. She pulled the bike around front again and parked at the end of the long porch. She stepped off the bike...

And into a pile of pygmy goat shit.

"All-father help him."

"Repeat. Agent Bastillo, Repeat last transmission. Are you in danger?"

Paulson again. Jeri rolled her eyes and pretended to be checking over her bike while she answered. "Negative that. Start moving in. Hold perimeter at half a click."

"Are you sure we have target contact? I repeat, do we --"

"Radio silence until my command." Her words vibrated low in her throat, her voice threatening to erupt into a growl at Paulson's audacity.

He was probably worried over the last time he'd teamed up with a Valk. Considering how well Paulson hadn't handled that situation, she'd be damned if she was going to have him eavesdropping on her conversation with Wendel. Leaning lightly against the bike, Jeri disabled the mike and tried to compose herself.

It wasn't easy. She doubted that Paulson knew about that other wet chip embedded in all Valks. She'd only just learned about it herself. The chip was inactive until the Valk was paired with a Berserker, then it was coded with a Berserker's unique bio-signal. She'd gotten the download last week sitting in all-father's office. Now she had a functioning receiver implanted in her chest and set to Wendel's broadcast, the wires from her chip running parallel to the nerves that fed impulses to her lungs and heart and activating if he was near.

And he was very near. She knew that with a frenetic certainty as the chip blared Wendel's proximity at her. One day, all-father had promised, she would be able to quiet the chip's signal by force of will.

Today wasn't that day. Today, the chip was threatening to send her body into meltdown as its signal screamed its message at her lungs and heart.

Breathe faster.

Beat harder.

Your Berserker is near.

"My Berserker..." Jeri gripped the bike's seat harder, nails indenting the leather covering as reality settled in with an eerily comforting mantra.

"My Berserker."

Straightening, she adjusted her jacket sleeve, exposing a slim wristwatch that doubled as a hypo press. Beyond the Director's cryptic answer of "an instant calming

agent," Jeri had no idea what drugs it held. But she had to follow the protocol given her at the briefing. Pressing down on the watch face, she felt the quick sting of a dozen or more micro-needles.

Seconds passed, nothing changed. The chip in her chest still screamed that Wendel was near. Her heart continued with its rapid staccato beat, leaving her fighting not to gulp in air.

Just another O.D.I.N. letdown.

"Bastards. Every last one of them." Jeri stepped onto the porch fronting the bar. She had parked the bike facing out in case a quick departure was needed, and, as she walked to the front door, she counted each step of the way. The heels of her boots hit the aged planks with a hollow thud, warning her that her foot would go straight through if she stepped too hard.

Step lightly, then, she thought, burying her worries and the chip's call beneath four years of intense training. She was Valk now and damn good at it, too. Trained and bio-engineered to fight and fuck with the best.

The porch was empty and the smile that ghosted Jeri's face was for her alone as her walk slid into some cabaret hybrid of a gunslinger and a ten credit whore.

It took half a second before reality slapped her hard in the face and the smile soured. A gunwhore was the last thing Wendel wanted. His fantasies were probably laced with buxom blondes, white picket fences and home-baked cookies.

Too bad for him the sex and fight drives were precariously balanced in the Berserker DNA. Any sweet, untrained lovelies that danced in his dreams would be shredded in reality the second he tripped into overdrive. The only warning would be when those Berserker blue eyes turned deadly black.

Reaching the bar's front door, she reared her arm back, her hand ready to punch a hole through the wood.

"Calming agent my ass," she hissed and placed her open palm against the door. All she could think about right now was finding Wendel and kicking his ass. He deserved it for the way he had rejected her and for running -- and not just four months

ago. He'd been running from her the last six years. And, like an idiot, she kept chasing him.

Now that she almost had him and faced one hell of a fight to subdue him, the question occurred to her for the first time.

Would she take Wendel Spears any way she could get him?

Chapter Two

Leaving the question unanswered, Jeri pushed the door open and stepped inside. The interior was dark, with just a few lights along the bar, one above the juke box and one over the pool table and dart boards. Her Valk enhancements made the vision shift from the brightly lit parking lot almost instantaneously, but there were a lot of dark seating areas where she could only detect body heat registers until she was almost on them.

Approaching the bar, she threw some loose credits down and ordered a beer from tap. She'd half expected the receiver in her chest to coach her left or right, but the signal hadn't changed since she'd left the bike.

"Seen Dolph tonight?"

The bartender slid the drink forward. "Don't know the name."

The twitch in the man's left arm indicated otherwise. Jeri didn't look in that direction immediately. Instead, she turned to her own left to study the men playing pool and darts. "Nice table, where's the jukebox?"

No answer, just another twitch along the man's left arm.

"You could have made it a little more challenging." Jeri picked her beer up, downed it and gingerly replaced the empty glass on the bar. She reached into her pants pocket. "Does it take credits?"

"Nothing but. And you better have a lot of them, if you plan on causing any shit in here."

Smiling over her shoulder at him, she started toward the jukebox. "Don't worry, darling, I'm well funded."

Jeri expected Wendel to be alone, but so were the other men at the tables she passed. Most were easy to discard. No matter what Wendel had done to disguise

himself, he wouldn't be any of the old, overweight, balding or reedy men she was passing. That left her with a very big shadow tucked into the far corner, three tables from the jukebox.

Reaching the machine she fed it a few credits, all the while hoping that Wendel hadn't done anything to his face. She ran her fingertips over the glass, searching for something to play and remembering how he'd last looked.

Her nipples brushed against her bra, her shoulder jerking as she thought of the way his mouth curved like a thin blade of steel, smooth but not soft. At least there'd been nothing soft about his lips during the only kiss they had shared.

Six years had passed since then. The kiss had been short, hard and a little desperate. It had followed his promise to make the pain in her life go away.

A Long Time Coming -- Jeff Swinwood -- B4. Jeri gave a sad shake of her head and pressed the selection.

It had been a few weeks past her eighteenth birthday. She'd shown up bruised and bleeding at his apartment with nowhere else to go and the cold Chicago winter guaranteeing her death if she slept outside. He'd been furious, mad at her and the father who'd made the marks on her skin.

But Wendel had been true to his word, at least for a while. Mario Bastillo vanished from the face of the Earth that night. So did Wendel and his brother Tank.

A new pain had set in, one that went deeper and promised to last forever if she didn't find Wendel. It had taken the better part of a year to track him to an agency that wasn't supposed to exist. In tracking the brothers to O.D.I.N., she'd managed to impress all-father and secure a spot in the Valk training program.

Hard Times Ahead -- Amy White -- A12.

"Then and now," she whispered with a short laugh and pressed A12 before turning to the corner with its dark shadow.

Wendel lit a cigarette as she approached. He took his time with the flame, letting it light his face so she could study him.

There were no signs of surgery and he wasn't even trying to disguise the tell-tale blue of his eyes. He'd done little more than grow his hair out from the soldierly buzz cut he wore at the agency, leaving the color his natural dark chestnut. Other than that, he had a few days' growth on his chin and cheeks, giving him a short, rough-looking beard. Same high cheekbones, same mouth -- thin and uncompromising. Her muscles twitched a little as she tried not to imagine what it would feel like, the short stiff bristles, the hard kisses against her thighs and mound.

She pulled out the chair opposite him and sat down. "That's a lame-assed disguise, Spears."

"Who said I was hiding?" He put the cigarette pack in his jacket pocket without offering her one. He'd been like that since they were kids, denying her the shared pleasure of all his bad habits.

She reached midway across the table, grabbed his beer bottle and took a sip. Memories welled up -- out on the bleachers, pressed tight against him at a high school game, cold November winds and a thin jacket providing her an excuse to get close. She took another sip, swallowed the memory with it and set the bottle back down. "So you're not looking to leave the agency the hard way?"

"Said I wasn't hiding, that's all."

Ignoring his challenge, she shrugged. "We need to talk, somewhere private."

A single finger raised, Wendel signaled the bartender for another beer. "No, Jericho, we don't need to talk. Not in private -- not at all."

"Could you at least pretend to listen?" Her words came out like they'd been dragged over asphalt. It was hard coming to him like this, the way he'd treated her that last night at the agency compound. But she couldn't leave without delivering the message. From the briefing she'd been given, lives were at stake -- including his. She'd tell him here, in this crap hole of a bar, if the information wasn't so damn likely to send him tripping into overdrive.

The bartender started from behind the bar with Wendel's beer. She glared back over her shoulder until he retreated. Turning back to Wendel, she leaned forward, her gaze still narrowed. "You want this conversation."

"I don't want anything from you, Jeri."

She blinked, allowing a second's pain to flash across her face before she recovered her hard stare. "It's from the Director."

"Then I want it even less." He stood, eyeing her warily while he skirted the table and went to the bar. He returned a few seconds later with his beer.

"Hard to want something less than nothing." She was rambling a bit, trying to find the one thing that would draw him in without sending him into overdrive in such a public location.

"Damn near impossible, but I've found a way to do it." He finished with a tight grin, one that warned her not to press or things would get uglier in a heartbeat. "You want me out in the open where you can call in a tactical team or you want me someplace small and enclosed so you can gas me. Sweetheart, I've been with the agency long enough to hear about all those little Valk tricks."

Jeri hated the way "sweetheart" sounded coming from his mouth -- or "Valk," for that matter. He spoke them as clear substitutes for something more unsavory, twisted them into words that were dirty and vile.

She would feed them back to him before the night was up.

Jeri lowered her eyelids to half-mast and smiled at him. "Oh, I've got more tricks than that. You're just not man enough to test them out."

When he failed to deliver a quick comeback, she knew she'd hit a nerve. Dropping her gaze to the side, she leaned across the table and whispered, "Perhaps when this is over, all-father will be forgiving and give me a Berserker who really knows how to use me. You think?"

This time his reaction was lightening quick, his hand coming up from his lap and closing around her wrist so fast that she didn't have a chance to pull back. "You really don't want to play with me, baby girl. I know exactly how to use you."

Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

Jeri felt her insides do a back flip. It wasn't the chip causing the reaction. Already she was learning to override its signals as all-father had promised.

This was a much more familiar response, feral and hungry. She remembered the kiss all over again and the first time he'd kicked down the door to her father's apartment. He had wrapped his fingers around Mario's neck and told the old man that he was dead if he ever touched her again.

There was no way in hell she was going to let this end with her just walking away from the Redwood Bar & Grille. She raised her gaze to his, saw that the sky blue of his irises already were pulsing with a darkening gray. A tear slid down her cheek. She could smell her excitement working its way past the lace underwear and tight leather pants. With his heightened senses, he'd smell them both, salt and sex.

Wrapping her free hand around the edge of the table, she braced herself. "Show me."

* * *

Wendel tightened his grip on Jeri's wrist as he fought the urge to drag her across the table and show her right there every pleasure he'd dreamed of inflicting on her the last six plus years. But she was dangerous and a Valk, making her one of all-father's women now. Not his woman -- there was no chance of that anymore. All-father could have sent any other Valk to him or paired Jeri with any Berserker. A simple command and she would have been offering to spread her legs for some other guy.

"Show me, or let go of my arm." She repeated the dare, her body temperature spiking so high that his enhanced senses felt it like a warm shove.

Wendel slowed his breathing but kept his hold on Jeri tight. That trace of a tear on her cheek was killing him, softening a hard promise he'd made to himself the day he found out all-father was training her to become a Valk.

The bastard was cunning in finding ways to control the Berserker agents, particularly those who hadn't volunteered for the program. There were only two ways all-father could get to him, to make him submit. His brother and his...

Wendel cut the thought short and jerked Jeri halfway across the table.

If she was the only woman he wanted, then she was *his* woman, damn it.

If only that were enough to make him her man. But it wasn't -- not with all the programming and re-engineering they'd put into her. Not with what she'd had to do to graduate.

"Well?" She growled the question at him, the tight coil of her body warning him that she was ready to launch herself the rest of the way across the table. But for what purpose? To fight him or to fuck him?

She was breathing too fast if she wanted to fight him, and, even in the low light of the corner, he could see her pupils pulsing. Nor could he miss the smell rising off her -- intimate and distinctly Jeri. She'd smelled like that at the games, out on the bleachers, pressed hard against him and shivering. His cock hard, straining against his jeans, he'd known what it meant then as surely as he knew now.

"Yeah, I'll show you." Capitulating, he rose, dragging her sideways out of her chair and onto her feet. The other patrons, quiet until now as they watched the little drama play out, drew their seats back as he pulled her toward the door. No one moved to stop them. But she wasn't protesting and he was sure the look on his face made it clear -- he'd kill any man who tried to stop him.

He slowed as they neared the door, collecting himself enough to crack it open first and check the parking lot in case she'd brought anyone else to the party.

What the hell was he thinking? Of course she had backup. "What kind of team did they send you with?"

"Nine, holding at half a click."

"Because you told them to?" He looked back in time to see her nod. He snorted. "You really think it's your orders their following?"

Anger flashed across her face and her arm tensed beneath his hand. Knowing it would only piss her off more, he wanted to laugh, but couldn't find any humor in the suicide mission all-father had sent her on. "You should have said no, Jeri."

"Fuck you, Wendel."

"All part of the job, right?" He had pulled her around back to one of the twelve-foot trailers the bar owner rented by the month, week, night or hour -- depending on one's needs. Stopping, he held her at arm's length and fished for his key. Once he had the door open, he pushed her up the metal stairs and inside. No longer holding her arm, he clamped his hand to the back of her head, pinning her forehead-first to the opposite wall.

Always ready to run, he had a pack near the door and he pulled a chem light from it. He snapped the tube and a soft blue glow lit the small space.

"Strip."

She pushed back, resisting the hand that trapped her against the wall. He relaxed a fraction of an instant -- enough to give some distance between her and the wood paneling -- then gave her head a hard knock against the wall.

She responded with a sharp elbow that glanced off his ribs.

Amusing, almost.

He'd seen the small bulge of a gun in her boot and the telltale crease of a blade pocket in the cuff of her right sleeve. And for every weapon he could see, she probably had ten more he knew nothing about.

All he had were his bare hands.

He leaned closer, caught a whiff of her skin and hair as he whispered into her ear. "You're outmatched, baby girl. So stop fighting and start peeling."

With a low growl that hit him directly in his crotch, she ripped her jacket open and let it slide down her arms. Beneath it was nothing more than a black lace bra. His first instinct was to reach out and unhook it, freeing the small breasts for his hands and mouth. Instead, he pressed a fingertip against her spine, mesmerized by the way her shoulders instantly flared back while the tight little ass thrust toward him.

"Unhook it." The words came out strangled, the sight of her like a vise around his vocal chords.

Her hands shook as she fumbled with the bra's hooks and he wondered if the shake was real or a ruse to get him to touch the fabric. Every last thing on her was

standard agency issue for a Valk -- which meant each item was deadly in its own unique way.

The jacket, boots, pants, knives, gun -- weapons within weapons until she was a walking minefield. He had no way of knowing if those trembling fingers were a set-up. Not that there was much left of his mind to care. All he wanted to do was pull those leather pants down and sink into her, hear her moan his name as his hands explored her hard little body.

"Faster, Jeri. You can't expect your boys to hold the perimeter all night."

"They'll hold." She toed her right boot off, the one with the gun, then reached down and carefully removed the left one. There was just enough phosphorescent glow from the chem light for him to see the spring on the left heel. She could have gassed him already, sending both of them into la-la-land until the tactical team woke them up.

"Right. They'll hold because you're the boss and that's what you want."

She nodded.

God, how he wished it were true. Not that they'd hold -- he had no expectation of that -- but that she wanted them to, that she really was stripping away every layer of deceit all-father had dressed her in.

The pants and boot socks were off a second later, leaving only her underwear. She moved to push them down but he stayed her with a different command, his gaze never leaving the dark outline of lace against the light caramel flesh tinted blue by the light.

"Wires."

Jeri reached up to the simple metal stud in her ear and started to slowly pull on it. A disjointed shiver ran over her body as the embedded length of carbon wire left the flesh of her ear lobe. There was a little more than a foot of wire, strong and micro thin. He'd once seen Lacy, the Valk assigned to his brother, decapitate a man with the same kind of string. For all he knew, she'd taken Tank's head the same way.

"What else?" The question was wet with the memory of other men's blood and Wendel shook his head to dislodge the vision.

She threw a wristwatch to the floor, and then she placed both hands on the sides of her underwear before answering, "Just these."

Just a little slip of fabric, easy to push to the side, to slip his fingers beneath and explore the moist entrance to her cunt. He grabbed the chem light with his free hand and moved it closer to her body. "Slowly," he ordered.

"They're just panties," she offered. "Nothing hidden --"

The fuck there was nothing hidden beneath that scrap of lace! He'd spent years fantasizing about the flesh it concealed.

He repeated his command. "Shut up and do it slow."

Wendel kept the light close to her, his other hand sliding from the hard grip he'd kept on her head down to rest lightly against the back of her neck. He could feel her pulse, slow and heavy now, against his fingertips. The beat matched the throb in his cock as she pushed the panties over the curve of her ass.

Jeri hesitated and Wendel bent his head, his lips brushing her shoulder. "Drop them."

She obeyed and he let the light stick fall with them. It was enough to distract her, to let him get his hands around her waist and toss her the few feet to the fold-down bed. She landed with a soft *thwump*, cursing him and his long-dead mother as she tried to scramble to her feet.

She wasn't fast enough. He jumped onto the bed, his knee hitting her hard enough in the stomach to knock the air from her. Before she could recover, he had her left wrist in one of the handcuffs he'd bolted to the wall a few months back.

He smiled in the near dark, silencing her insults as he pushed a piece of cloth into her mouth. She did exactly as he hoped and brought her free hand up to remove the cloth. He captured the hand and fastened it within another set of handcuffs.

"What did you think?" he asked, sliding down her naked body to secure both legs. "I wouldn't be prepared for you?"

* * *

Panic, anger, lust. Jeri shouldn't have been feeling any of them -- not if she'd stuck with her training. A Valk's body was meant to be her ultimate weapon and nothing more.

Instead, she was drowning in all three emotions. Anger was the easiest to control, and she pushed it away, focusing on her panic. She had to convince him to at least free her legs and take the rag out of her mouth. But how was she going to convince him if --

Wendel cracked another chem light open. Bright white light flooded the small space. With the shadows gone, she could see him perfectly and her fear and lust flared. It was his eyes that scared the hell out of her. Liquid black along the whole of their visible surface, they signaled that he had gone into overdrive. By all accounts, she should be dead already.

His smile was frozen in place. Wide as any demon's grin would be, it showed her the swollen gums and extended teeth that were produced by the overdrive and were capable of shredding her. All of him seemed swollen, bigger than when they'd entered the trailer.

"Is this what you wanted?"

His roughly spoken words didn't sound human. But the question was, at least, an opening. Gently, she tilted her chin up -- not a "yes" or a "no" but a silent prod for him to take the fabric gag out.

Shaking his head at Jeri, Wendel struggled out of the light cargo jacket he had on. His t-shirt came off in torn halves. Then he was down between her legs, running his nose along her thighs before he placed his lips against her mound. She shuddered, moaning into the cloth and thrusting her hips forward. He nuzzled her, his lips and nose moving over the light pelt of pubic hair, along her thighs and the skin of her lower stomach.

She twisted against the cuffs, wanting more, forgetting, for the moment, those black eyes. She cried a soft plea, lost behind the gag. But he moved with the cry, sliding

up her body, flesh on flesh as his broad chest pressed against her breasts. She pushed her chin against the crown of his head, urging him to look up.

"Forget it." He rose up, rested his weight on his left arm and dipped his head, his mouth closing around her nipple.

She heard him unzip, followed by the rustle of denim as he pushed his jeans lower. Struggling beneath him, she tried to press at his hips with her knees but the ankle restraints kept her spread too wide. She pushed her ass hard against the mattress, twisted at the waist as she tried to force him to look at her.

His teeth grazed against her breast. Then he lifted his head, his black gaze filled only with her reflection and the white chem light's glow. Jeri jerked against the handcuffs, jutted her chin forward.

Wendel surged up the bed until his cheek touched hers. She could still feel him between her legs, his hand around the head of his cock as he prepared to thrust into her. He waited like that, his breath hot against her ear and throat.

Jeri rubbed her cheek against his, let him feel and smell her frustrated tears. It was unfathomable how many years she had imagined their union or how perfect she had anticipated it being. No matter how much the fantasy had changed over the years -- how old they were, where they were, the clothes, the furniture -- the perfection of their bodies meeting, the way he gazed deep into her eyes and told her he loved her, those things had remained the same.

Not once in all her daydreams had she been cuffed to the bed afraid to look in his eyes and see that no one was home.

Wendel's hand left his cock, traveled slowly up her belly, across her breasts and rested against her throat. Two fingers played at her lower lip and tugged the fabric free.

Her throat convulsed with dryness and then she pressed her lips against him. "Please, just the ankle restraints... for my safety."

"You're safe."

The harsh laugh that accompanied his words gave her no comfort. "Please, Wendel. I can --"

He placed his hand lightly on her mouth. "Is your mike off?"

She nodded.

He grunted, satisfied, and ran his hand back down her body. He parted her labia, his middle finger stroking the line of her clit.

"Because, if the mike's still on, they're going to hear you moaning, hear you needing." He was stroking her hard, twisting the sensitive tip of her clit, roughly running the pad of his thumb over the swollen tissue that gated her cunt. His skin, re-engineered for grip, was a sensual torment of sandpaper and velvet that had her trembling with the first stroke.

"They hear that and they'll know."

"Know what?" She was breathing hard, close to coming from the forceful play of his hand against and inside her.

"That a part of you is still human."

"All of me is human." She struggled to raise herself up, craning her neck to see him touching her, to see his cock ready to slide into her. It could still be perfect.

He stopped and pushed her back down against the mattress.

"Not the Valk part, Jericho. Not that."

Tears pooled instantly. She'd been stupid to think he'd moved even an inch past his prejudices while he still had her bound to the bed.

"I'm going to regret not hearing you call my name, though." He had the cloth in his hand again, the fabric worked into a tight ball.

"Wendel, no. We have to talk." Why did he have to be so fucking stubborn? "Before you try to just walk out again, we have to talk."

He let the cloth play over her lips, taunted her with it. He pushed it a short distance past her lips, his cock moving in unison to tease her pussy. "I don't need your lies, Jericho, just your body."

"It's a message..."

"Of course." He looked at her and she could see a blacker black pulsing at the center of his gaze.

Seeing him this deep in overdrive, she wondered where in the hell the control was coming from. She should be dead or thoroughly fucked by now -- if not both.

"What is it, this message?" The dark brows were raised, his whole expression one of alien sarcasm and scorn.

She didn't know this Wendel, but the answer to her earlier question came slamming home and she knew --

She would take Wendel however she could get him.

Jeri shook her head. She couldn't deliver the message, not yet. It was selfish as all hell but she wanted him in her, was holding out for the moment when he did hold her gaze and promises of love spilled from him. Once the message was delivered, she might lose him all over again.

"Just undo the cuffs, please." Her years of training had evaporated, she was crying. The tears had no effect -- he had no way to know they were real. "Please, Wendel, it's not supposed to be like this."

The brows pinched together for an instant and then his faced smoothed. "Jeri, baby, didn't all-father teach you back at the academy -- this is exactly how it's supposed to be."

"Not with you..."

"Especially with me." He shifted his hips, his cock settling into place, ready for that first hard thrust into her. He ran his lips across hers as he held the ball of fabric against her cheek. "You have about three seconds to switch that mike on and tell them to come save your sweet little ass," he whispered, his middle finger starting to pry at her bottom lip.

A tiny shake of her head was all she could manage. Closing her eyes, she relaxed her jaw and let him push the gag in. He dropped his hand to her hip, held her lower body steady.

He groaned as he entered her. It was a slow sinking into her, not the fierce invasion she had expected. Slow and almost sweet. When she relaxed the rest of her

body, he released her hip and ran his hand over her breast, teasing the nipple and squeezing at the small handful of flesh.

He kissed at her neck, his tongue causing shivers over her entire body as he slowly licked her throat and collarbone. The drive of his cock into her became more erratic, each thrust plunging deeper before he pulled back with a maddening swivel of his hips. Jeri arched against him, her body rising off the mattress as she tried to match his thrusts despite the cuffs at both ends.

The kisses at her throat turned to small bites, triggering distant alarms in her mind. The urgent warnings sank immediately beneath the overriding need to rub and grind against him. She lifted up to meet him one last time as the first sharp tingle of release began to spread across her body.

Wendel wrapped his arms around her, clasped her ass and upper shoulder and pulled her tight so that they melded into one mass. His mouth settled against her throat as she began to buck with the full force of her climax.

She heard Paulson snicker in her earpiece, "Any second now, boys..."

Wendel's teeth sliced into the soft flesh of her neck. She felt the surge of adrenaline and blood flowing from her and into his mouth.

She had a moment to curse the tacticals and their fucking infrareds and then Wendel reared back, roaring in anger. He pointed an accusatory finger at her.

A heartbeat later she was buried beneath his inert body.

"And he's out!" Paulson again, his voice gleefully insubordinate. "Close perimeter *now*."

No! The thought screamed through her mind. There was still time to save the mission, to build a small measure of trust with Wendel and deliver the message she'd been sent with. Twisting, she pushed enough of the cloth gag out to pin a corner of the fabric beneath one arm. She pulled back, the cloth unraveling from her mouth.

Activating the mike, Jeri screamed. "I'll fucking kill you if you don't hold perimeter."

"Sure you will, angel," Paulson snorted through her earpiece. "But first, why don't you take a little nap with your boyfriend."

"Not..." An image flashed in her mind of the watch on the floor with its hypopress. The Director's calming agent. He'd had her inject herself with some kind of reactive chemical then, one that would respond to the unique chemicals present in Wendel's saliva or her surge of adrenaline -- or both. The effect had been quicker on Wendel, but she could feel the combined agent moving through her blood now, spreading its numbing effect. It was climbing up her face, closing her eyes, shutting her ears.

Before she passed out, she heard the scrape and click of the demolition hooks as they latched onto the sides of the small travel trailer, heard the groan of steel bolts before the aluminum sides were ripped away.

They were breaching the scene. It was too late for her to tell Wendel that Tank was alive. He'd hear it from someone else now and be done with her completely.

"Fucking bastards," she mumbled, slipping into unconsciousness. "Every last one of you."

Chapter Three

Jeri woke in the infirmary of the Asgard Security Group -- the front company for O.D.I.N. central. The gray concrete walls surrounded her like a cold womb. A blue sheet covered her from ankles to shoulders. She moved and the sheet slid over bare skin. Rolling to one side, it felt as if her brain, unanchored, had slid forward to crash against the inside of her skull.

Spotting her clothes in a loose pile, she eased off the bed and stood on shaky legs. Her whole body hurt and her left butt cheek felt like someone had hit her with an aluminum bat. She turned, saw a large bruise spreading across the surface and swore under her breath.

Paulson's goons had probably dropped her. She'd take care of them later, but for now they were low down on her to-do list. First she wanted to find out where Wendel was and see if she could talk to him -- if he would listen to her.

Inventorying her equipment, Jeri shook her clothes out before putting anything on. She touched her ear lobes, felt the studs and their deadly length of wire back in place. She had her bra, gloves, boots, belt, pants, watch, jacket and socks. Knife was in its sleeve pocket. The gas spring on her heel was still loaded. No gun, but tactical would have returned hers to the armory until she cleared medical. No panties, either. She checked the floor, then shook the clothes out a second time to make sure the panties weren't stuck in another piece of clothing.

Apparently, she would have to go commando.

Dressed, she yanked her boots on, cursing under her breath at the fucking tactical team taking a trophy. She palmed the knife, put it back in its pocket and flicked it out again. It was sharp enough for her to take her own trophy, if she was in the mood.

"Tit for tat and all that," she murmured, sheathing the blade and putting her gloves on. She left the room to find one med tech in the waiting area, a graying woman in her late 50s if Jeri guessed right. Jeri glanced once at her and headed for the exit.

Hurrying around the desk, the woman checked the papers stuck to her clipboard. "You'll have to wait for Dr. Ames to return and clear you, Agent Bastillo."

Jeri pivoted, drew a deep breath and held it while she considered gassing the med tech. See how the old gal liked taking her own involuntary nap. The woman came too close and Jeri blew a puff of air in her face, instead. The med tech started to retreat and Jeri grabbed her clipboard. Her name was directly above Wendel's. Just as the drug had affected Wendel more quickly, his Berserker DNA had caused it to metabolize faster -- Ames had signed him out at 9:28 a.m.

She glanced at the clock, saw that it was closing in on noon. She'd been out over fifteen hours and he had more than two hours lead time on her.

"You'll have to --"

Jeri shoved the clipboard hard against the woman's chest. "Ames can sign me out when he's bandaging up the tactical team."

"We don't have anyone in from... oh." The woman stopped, reached across her desk and pressed the intercom button.

"Smart move." Jeri pushed the door to the hall, relieved the woman hadn't followed protocol and locked down the infirmary.

The stairs were to the right, with tactical buried another floor underground. She jumped the rail, hoping to stay ahead of security before they shut down the stairwell's exit doors.

Kicking open the door, she entered tactical's squad room. The overhead lights were off. A few desk lamps and active monitors provided pockets of illumination.

They could have switched the lights off and taken defensive positions behind their desks but she didn't see any heat signatures. And she couldn't smell any more than a lingering trace of that crap ass cologne Paulson liked to bathe in.

At least she couldn't smell it up front. She moved toward the back of the room, stopping when she heard the sound of weight shifting in a chair. Skirting a partitioned wall, she spotted one heat signature -- the lone team member on duty at a bank of monitors against the back wall.

No surprise that it was a guy in the squeaky chair. Other than Valks, the only other women in O.D.I.N. were either medical or administrative staff.

The guy had on a pair of headphones and she could tell from ten feet away that his breathing was irregular. It was the restless way he watched the monitor that made the chair creak and she glanced at the screen to see what held his interest so thoroughly.

An infrared capture danced with too many hot and cold zones across the screen. Too many hands, too many legs. A couple then, one body moving over the other, the second relatively immobile, arms and legs outflung. Four bands of metal showed pure white on the infrared, two top and two bottom.

Wendel's handcuffs.

Jeri flicked the knife out. With her other hand she grabbed the cord on the headphones and wrapped it around the man's neck before he could so much as blink in surprise. Cord cinched tight to hold him in place, she used the knife to push the headphones off one ear. She ran the blade along the curve of his jaw, listening to the change in his breathing from excited to terrified.

"Infrared pornos, huh?" Jeri trailed the blade over his throat, yanked on the cord when his hand moved toward the power button. "Who's the lucky girl?"

"It has to be logged in, Agent Bastillo." Fear cracked each word open. "That's all."

With the knife tip against his forearm, she guided his hand into his lap. "I came here to take Paulson's balls, but seeing as your squad commander is MIA right now, why don't you unzip your pants."

Waiting, she ran her lips over the ridge of his ear and tongued the fleshy lobe. A shudder passed over him. She pressed the flat of the knife harder against his throat but he kept his pants zipped.

"What's the matter, am I not hot anymore?"

"All surveillance videos have to be logged --"

Dude was a broken record. She moved the knife down to his lap.

"And where's your log, hmmm?" She ran the knife against his pants' zipper, letting the tip catch and click against each metal tooth.

"That's enough, Jericho. Let the man go."

With Tank gone, only two men at O.D.I.N. called Jeri by her given name -- and only one did it with such accented scorn -- all-father, O.D.I.N.'s Director. Tightening her grip on the cord, she slowly spun her captive's chair until they both faced all-father. Holding a slim PDA in his hand, he tapped the screen with his stylus and the lights came up. A second later she heard the slide of bolts as the room went into lock down.

Slim as the old ident cards had been, the small device was all-father's direct line to NORN -- the O.D.I.N. computer network and heart of the ASG building. She had never seen the old man without it.

"Still playing with your toy, I see." She let go of the cord, leaving the tactical guy to unravel it from his neck. The Director jerked his head in the direction of the door to the hall and the man double-timed it across the room. Another tap at his screen and the doors unlocked for the man, then all-father remotely accessed the computer next to Jeri and re-ran the video of her and Wendel fucking.

"What are you doing here?" His kept his head tilted as he looked at the screen, his posture one of clinical detachment.

His voice was just as distant. She'd only heard it rough once -- during her last training session before becoming a Valk.

Sliding the knife into the sleeve pocket, she tried to rid herself of the memory. She might have been successful if he hadn't looked away from the screen and met her gaze just then. The program's original Berserker, the Director had one blue eye, one black. Right now, the left was blue. Another blink or two and there might well be a color switch between the two.

She had witnessed it first hand during that last session. He'd been on top of her, in her, talking her through where her hands should be, how close to the chest she should draw her knees, calling her "Recruit" through it all until his climax.

Bile rose up and she blinked, turning her head so that she wouldn't have to see him. Was it any wonder Wendel hated her? Like every other Valk, she'd lain beneath the Director, rotated her hips when he told her to, locked her ankles behind his ass, squeezed him as he pounded into her. All so that she would know, when the day finally came, how to soothe and control Wendel if he clicked into overdrive.

"Answer me, Jericho. What are you doing here?"

Swallowing, she grimaced at the acrid taste that lingered on her tongue. "I was looking for Paulson."

"Why?" His right brow arched and he tapped the stylus against the PDA's casing.

"I thought Paulson's balls would look good hanging on my barrack's door -- it needs a new set of knockers."

He dropped his gaze to her tits. "I remember finding your knockers... adequate." The irises made their color shift, blue darkening to black, black fading to blue. "Now, if you're done with your temper tantrum, we have a briefing."

Jeri folded her arms in front of her chest. "No, I'm not done."

There was a slight flaring of his nostrils, but he gave no other indication that he'd heard her.

"Why did you lie to me about the hypopress?"

All-father slid the PDA and stylus into his jacket pocket. At almost six and a half feet tall, it took him less than a single step to close the space between them. "You mean it wasn't an instant calming agent?"

His accent deepened, bringing with it once more the memory of that day. She tried to move back, only to find a cubicle wall behind her. He was in her personal space now, as tall and broad as Wendel but smelling like the concrete that made up the walls of ASG.

And every bit as cold to the touch as those gray walls.

Starting to tremble, Jeri gave a hard shake of her head. "I had a right to know -- to know what was going to happen to Wend... to Agent Spears, to me. It knocked me out a whole day and a half."

"You have no rights, Agent Bastillo." He reached out and ran a hand along her cheek, his fingers like ice. "Or didn't you read your enlistment contract?"

"My contract gives me a job to do. I can't do it if --"

His hand closed around her throat to lightly hold her. "You can't do that job if you strip away every last defense you have, Jericho." He ran his other hand over her breast and far enough down her side to cup her ass. Then he lifted her by the throat and bottom until she was staring into his shifting gaze again.

"That's what you did, wasn't it?" His mouth brushed hers and then he breathed deeply through his nose as if scenting her fear. "Your knife, your gun, the sleeping agent loaded in your heel?"

His tongue touched her throat, sending a jolt of panic through her. Just as she had played at terrifying the tactical agent, he licked at her ear before seeking her mouth again.

"You weren't supposed to do that."

Letting go suddenly, the Director stepped back. Jeri landed hard on the floor, her arm instinctively coming up to shield herself.

He grabbed her wrist and jerked her to her feet.

"Don't mistake me for your father, Jericho. I've yet to harm you."

She arched a brow, lips parting to challenge his claim before she slammed her mouth shut again.

"What, Jericho?"

She glanced down at the floor he'd just tossed her onto then up at his face. His irises had flipped again. "You lied to me. You've lied to me from day one."

"That he wouldn't want to touch you after the process?"

He laughed when she nodded.

"Telling you would have changed nothing. You still would have joined without a second thought." His thumb stroked her wrist. "This way you get to keep a little of your pride intact."

Damned if he wasn't right. She looked away, wondering how many days or weeks she'd survive if she finally gave up the chase and went AWOL.

He put a hand beneath her chin and forced her to look at him. "Whatever you're planning, Jericho, drop it." He pulled the PDA back out and tapped on the screen a few times. "Now, compose yourself and meet me down in central briefing."

He walked to the door, sinking the final hook in as he went, "Unless you don't want to accompany Agent Spears on his next assignment."

* * *

Wondering how the fuck a teenage infatuation had taken her so far from herself, Jeri entered the central briefing room. All-father should be dead now. She had vowed to herself after Mario's death that no man would survive touching her without her consent. As a matter of principle, the entire tactical team should be eliminated for having moved her drugged and naked body and for the video and underwear theft.

She tried to slip into the meeting unnoticed, her gaze racing along the perimeter of the long table in search of Wendel. She only had to look where everyone else was looking -- three seats back from the front left.

All-father caught her sneaking in and ordered Paulson to give up his seat.

Great, now she had to sit in a chair reeking of Paulson's buck-a-gallon aftershave and everyone was looking at her.

Well, not everyone. All-father seemed to have dismissed her from his thoughts as soon as the order had left his mouth, and Wendel stared at the briefing screen behind the old man. She sat down, ignoring the stares and focusing her attention on the screen with the same intense concentration Wendel showed.

She didn't care what the others thought. Not a soul in this cold hell could be called "friend" anymore. She'd joined O.D.I.N. for one reason and one reason only.

And, in the end, it had all been for nothing. Wendel wouldn't even acknowledge that she existed.

"We've had sightings in Atlantic City, small Nevada towns, and he booked travel from Vegas under an alias to over a dozen cities, the flights all leaving within a few hours of one another."

All-father pointed to the cities -- Chicago, Miami, Toledo and Windsor, Ontario. "If one were to believe the plane manifests, he was on each flight."

Jeri glanced at Wendel. If anyone would have a better sense than her of where Tank was headed, Wendel would. But his expression -- the side she could see, at least -- gave nothing away. Refocusing on the screen, she looked for some common denominator between the cities and Tank.

"You have something, Agent Bastillo?" All-father asked.

There was a very quiet snicker followed by an "I'll say" from someone along the back wall. She ignored it, forced herself not to look over to Wendel for his reaction. She had to stop caring what he thought. "No, Director."

"You looked like you'd made a connection."

Another snicker and this time she looked back. Against the wall, one of Paulson's team paled meeting her gaze and she offered him a slow, closed smile just to let him know she was marking him in her memory. "I was just thinking that they were all airport hubs," she lied. "But they're not even that."

"What about you, Agent Spears? Do you know where your brother is heading?"

Wendel relaxed deep into his chair and shrugged. "Certainly you've had more time to figure it out than I have."

All-father's gaze narrowed. "I know you're not here willingly, Agent Spears." All-father shot a glance at Jeri, a brief smirk sparking along his face before he returned his attention to Wendel. "But you should understand that your brother is involved in something that, if successful, will result in your death and the death of every other Berserker under my command."

A collective gasp filled the room. All-father raised his hand and everyone immediately went silent. All-father pressed the remote to the briefing screen behind him and a picture of a brain came up.

A Berserker brain. Using a laser pointer, all-father outlined a small pea-sized area at the base of the brain. Another click on the remote and the area was covered with one of the agency's computer membranes.

"Your pituitary gland, Agent Spears. The membrane transmits the bio-codes for producing the Berserker hormones. If re-coded, it could produce any number of substances that would drop you dead in a heart beat."

"Re-coded?" Paulson asked from his place at the back of the room.

"There's a security sequence to do so -- left in place for improvements... repairs." All-father shrugged and let the briefing screen go black. "We believe that Tank's turned it into a death sequence."

"He'd kill himself in the process." Wendel had leaned back in his chair, his thick arms folded across his chest.

"Not if he already has survived removal of the membrane." All-father offered a dry smile. "We can't lightly risk removal from the other Berserkers. Even if we had time, those that don't die are just as likely to wind up with brain damage and crippling health problems."

"And even if the surgery was a success down to the last Berserker... O.D.I.N. itself would be crippled." Jeri said it softly, more to herself.

"Exactly, Agent Bastillo." All-father turned the screen back on and pulled the map up again. "Now, I'll ask you again, do you see any pattern? Either of you."

Wendel leaned forward in his seat, his gaze narrowing as he seemed to consider each marked spot on the map. "Nothing."

A decade ago, Jeri would have known in an instant if he was holding back -- now she had no idea. She looked at the map again. There were small clusters of cities and she realized they weren't airport hubs but gambling spokes for Atlantic City, Detroit, Memphis and all of Nevada. Tank was playing the tables, using the amazing math

abilities O.D.I.N. had recruited him for to game the casinos and fund his activities -- all while staying off the grid. She risked a glance at Wendel. She wouldn't characterize his expression as one of complete disinterest but he didn't look like he was actively processing the information.

All-father rapped the table with his laser pointer. "He knows we're closing in on him -- that we're near the end game of this plot of his."

Windsor. The city on the other side of Detroit's river rose up in her mind. As good as he was, Tank still believed in luck. Windsor was his lucky city. She remembered him coming back from the city one weekend before any of them had ever heard of O.D.I.N. He'd had enough money to take care of him and Wendel for a year or more.

Unlike most gamblers, he'd officially put the city in reserve for when he really needed it.

You just don't mess with that kind of luck, Jeri. Treat it right. Don't abuse it. And it'll be there waiting for you when you really need it.

She had nodded when he said it, thinking he was crazy for being superstitious about something that was all numbers.

"Well, this is getting us nowhere." All-father tossed his pointer on the table and tried to stare Wendel down. "We'll reconvene at 0600 tomorrow."

With the two men locking gazes, Jeri openly watched Wendel, looking for the old signs. She'd seen him lie for Tank or her or another one of their friends dozens of times, seen him face down the interrogations of teachers, parents and neighborhood cops. It didn't matter to him that this was all-father. The Director of O.D.I.N. was just another authority figure to outwit and defeat.

"0600, then." Wendel stood. His expression was smooth as silk and that was the only sign she needed. He knew; he knew and he sure as fuck wasn't waiting for tomorrow to start looking for the brother he had thought dead until yesterday.

He'd leave as soon as possible and without her. Even if he didn't totally hate her now, there was no way he'd travel in the company of a Valk wet wired for

communication with headquarters. She stood, watched his back as he left the briefing room. Above his head, carved into the concrete wall, was the O.D.I.N. motto.

Courage knows no defeat.

She followed, offered a brief glance up as she passed beneath those words.

Stepping into the hall, she saw that Wendel was headed left, leading him in the general direction of the mess hall, gym and, beyond that, the Berserker barracks. She turned right, toward the infirmary and general housing.

* * *

Jeri looked at the dresser in front of her. She had returned to the infirmary under the pretense of contritely waiting for Ames to clear her so she could collect her Bersa. He let her cool her heels in the exam room for almost an hour. She didn't mind. It gave her time to steal a few things she needed if she was going to follow Wendel -- surgical tweezers, a tubed micro scalpel, an angled mirror, and another thin, flexible tube with a small claw on its end.

Unloading the supplies back in her room, she pulled out some iodine and vodka. Picking the scalpel up, she examined its bendable tubing and turned the laser tip on. She directed the beam at a piece of paper, adjusted the depth setting and then pressed the cut button. Moving the light across the surface, she halved the paper without touching the desk beneath.

Laughing at her grim success, she looked in the mirror. "Don't try this at home, kids."

In her mouth and ear were the same kind of mike and earpiece as were planted in the Berserkers. Wendel and Tank had found someone to take theirs out when they'd gone on the run. Their procedure had probably involved sedatives, latex gloves, sterile rooms and people who knew what the fuck they were doing.

"Shit, forgot the gloves." She put the scalpel down and took another shot of vodka, trying to decide which to extract first -- the mike embedded in the roof of her mouth or the electronic membrane in her ear.

The mike. Definitely the mike. If she went in too shaky to start it was better to fuck up on the mike than on her eardrum.

Jeri re-sanitized the scalpel, her gaze drifting to the pint of vodka. Had it been two shots already or three? Fuck it. Two was enough for a bracer and three wouldn't fuck her up. Just get it over with. She opened her mouth, angled the mirror in, repositioned the dresser lamp and went in with the laser. The first incision exposed the pressure gauge that activated the mike.

Fuck. The first cut was too small. She drew an opposing line across it, her nose and mouth filling up with the smell and taste of her own burnt flesh. Seeing the small glint of metal in the roof of her mouth, she put the scalpel down and picked up the surgical tweezers. They gripped the mike head and she tugged. It was like a deep-rooted tooth coming out. She could feel each pull in her eyes, in her ears. The sensation was that of a garden hose being dragged through a nostril.

The head was just the beginning of the mike. Long strands trailed from it, the noise caused by their leaving her wet and sliding. She fought an intense urge to sneeze and then the strands fell onto her tongue like a dead spider. She gagged, half swallowed them, and then coughed the strands back up.

Jeri dropped the mike into a plastic baggie, grabbed the vodka and drank straight from the bottle. She waited to use the laser's cauterize setting, knowing the additional pain to her mouth might kill her nerve to tackle the earpiece.

Damn. Just give me someone to fight. She could handle that pain, knew how to strike and counter strike, knew what her opponent's goal was. But this? Mutilating herself alone in her room so that Wendel might let her go with him? And if he didn't, she couldn't stay with O.D.I.N. Her betrayal would be obvious and she would be useless to all-father after Wendel's rejection.

Trying to forget all the ways the night could suck worse, she played with the lights and mirrors. She leaned to the side of the dresser and spit a mouthful of blood into the trashcan before she took another look inside her ear.

Three points of attachment to the membrane. Three. Not a one of them was on her eardrum but each needed a separate cut. Suppressing another string of swear words, she sanitized the scalpel's tip and tube. She slowly guided it into her ear and made the first cut. Instant dizziness struck. Her image in the dresser mirror was wavy and broken up.

She blinked -- the waves thinned but didn't go away. She made a second cut, longer than the first because she could no longer see where the scalpel or the second attachment point were.

Vomit, mixed with blood from the mike wound, splattered against the dresser mirror. Another cut, unintended. She pulled the laser scalpel from her ear, picked up the surgical claw. Reaching for the iodine, she knocked it onto the floor. She lurched sideways, caught herself and threw up a second time.

Courage knows no defeat.

Defeat wasn't an option.

Her Berserker was near.

But only for now.

Another pull on the vodka bottle and then she doused the claw with the rest of the alcohol. In it went, slow along the ear canal to the dull throb of the first cut. She found the edge of the artificial membrane, gripped it and began to pull.

An ocean roared in her head; whole symphonies played; cannons and storm clouds thundered. And then silence and the claw in front of her, still grasping the bloodied earpiece. She managed to drop it into the bag before she slid to the floor.

* * *

Crickets. Hundreds of crickets. She could hear them in her room. She rolled to her side, cracked one eye open. The red time display on her clock showed 20:13. Well past nightfall.

No crickets. Just the sound of them.

Jeri pushed up onto her hands and knees and crawled into the shower still dressed. Quick and cold, just long enough to clean the vomit and blood away, and then she crawled out, naked, the discarded clothes left to clog the drain.

She swished a couple capfuls of mouthwash then searched through her first aid kit for a wound clip. She popped it against the roof of her mouth, the fresh pain momentarily eclipsing the hum of nonexistent insects. She balled up some medical gauze and plugged her still bleeding ear.

No way in hell was she going back in with the laser to cauterize the cuts she'd made.

Back in her bedroom, she put on panties, baggy gym shorts, socks and running shoes, followed by a dark tee. No bra, no jacket. There would be damn little for Wendel or anyone else to be suspicious of. She clipped the Bersa to her waistband, then stuffed the shoe with some paper credits and the bloody baggy with its two trackers into one sock. Leaving the room, she pulled a running cap down low to hide the gauze.

Either she would find Wendel and convince him to take her with him or she'd go on to Windsor alone.

Chapter Four

Wendel could smell Jeri before he could hear or see her. She was bleeding, and the blood carried with it a slow, determined scent.

And a shot or two of vodka, if he wasn't mistaken.

He waited, tucked away in the shadows under the stairs. There was little hope that she would stop at the landing above -- neither of them had any business being this far underground.

No luck. She appeared one bare leg at a time. He watched her unsteady progress down the rest of the stairs -- the flex of her dark, muscled calves, the delicate bend before her legs disappeared into shapeless running shorts.

She stopped at the bottom raiser and sat down, her head tucked between her knees as a shiver seemed to run over her body.

"You know I can feel you, right?" She kept her head down, her voice muffled.

He didn't answer, letting her get to her feet and approach him instead. His gaze dropped to her waist, where he looked for the tell-tale bulge of her Bersa. But first he noticed that she wasn't wearing a bra, the hard nipples creating two small tents in her blouse.

Dangerous.

He shifted his position further down the wall. She tracked his steps until he had backed into a corner.

"I know where you're going." She swayed, still unsteady from pain and liquor.

"You think that means I have to take you?" He closed his eyes, wishing she'd back off. This close, he could taste her emotion as if it were melted brown sugar poured over his tongue.

"You think they'll use me to follow you --"

"I know they will -- you're wired."

Jeri offered him a slightly stoned smile. Putting a hand on his shoulder, she lifted one leg up and pulled a baggy from her sock. It was bloody, red muck and flesh sticking to the electronics. Shaking his head, Wendel reached out, clamped down on her left hip and butt cheek and squeezed.

"That's not all of them, sweet cheeks."

Jeri punched his arm.

"You gonna tell me you didn't know?"

"Everything fucking hurt when I woke up, you cocksucker." She took another swing, lost her balance and started to go down.

He caught her, pulled her against his body and held her with one arm around his waist. She was facing away from him, her feet dangling and her ass snug against his cock.

Think it through.

He closed his eyes, tried to double and triple guess all-father's plan. The old man had to know he'd bolt again, and that he'd know where his brother would be. That's why he'd given Wendel all night to escape.

And it was why Ames had embedded another tracker in Jeri while she was knocked out.

Waking up from the drugs faster than Jeri had, he'd seen them do it. He'd also seen Paulson take a bedpan and slam it down on top of the injection site. He'd wanted to jump off the gurney and strangle the bastard on the spot. Instead, he'd continued feigning sleep.

But had they known he was awake? Had they done it to make him trust her? And had she known they would do it?

"Wendel..."

"Quiet." He gave her a little shake.

"I didn't know."

It didn't matter yet if she knew. She had to come with him, anyway. At least part of the way. If it was all-father's plan that she go with him, then the old man wouldn't let him off the compound without Jeri. And if she really hadn't known about the tracker, then she had just committed treason.

He wouldn't leave her to be executed.

He stepped out from under the stairs, set Jeri on her feet and pulled out his knife. "Against the wall, baby girl."

She obeyed, the only sound coming from her the shuffle of her feet against the concrete floor. Bracing her forearms against the wall, she put a knuckle in her mouth. Seeing her lips trembling, he looked away. He'd lose his nerve if he thought about how much this was going to hurt her.

He got down on his knees and reached around to the front of her shorts. He unclipped the Bersa and sat it next to him on the floor and then he pulled his own gun out followed by its silencer. He screwed the silencer on and placed the gun next to hers.

Tugging Jeri's gym shorts down, Wendel bit at his lip. She had thong panties on, and, even bruised, she had the most beautiful ass he could imagine seeing. Tight curved muscles, tensed tighter as she waited for what had to come next. He ran his hand over the bruise, searching for the swollen injection site and the small lump of a tracker chip. The chip itself would be half the size of a watch battery.

"Here?"

"Feels like it," issued from around the knuckle she was biting on.

Wendel flicked the knife open and lightly touched the blade tip against her skin. His other hand probed a line just above her butt and below the waistband of her panties. Finding the pressure point, he jammed his thumb into it, heard her grunt of surprise. He counted off five seconds, enough time for her leg to numb up, and then he pushed the blade into her skin. Another five seconds and the chip was out. He took the pressure off her sciatic nerve.

Dropping the knife, he grabbed his gun, stood and sheltered her while he threw his gun arm behind him. He squeezed off three quick shots and then pressed the end of

silencer against the open cut, stopping the ooze of blood down her leg as he cauterized the wound.

"Fuck!"

He laughed. Bending down, he scooped up his knife and her gun. He handed the Bersa off to her. "You're never gonna lose that mouth, are you?"

"Maybe if you stop giving me reasons to swear." She clipped the Bersa back to her waistband, her brows knit tight as she took her first step away from the wall. Her gaze locked on his hand as he slid the chip into his pocket.

"It's RFID, close perimeter." He kept his voice low, leaned close to her. "It needs to keep moving for now or all-father'll lock down on us."

He could see her processing the information, saw the downturn of her mouth when she put it together.

She plucked at her tee. "Guess I didn't need to dress down."

"Still, I appreciate it." He flicked the knife open and pried at a service panel beneath the stairwell. "What made you head in this direction?"

"I know how you think -- gotta go left to go right, down to go up."

Smiling, he popped the panel from the wall and pulled a penlight from his cargo pocket. He flashed the light inside, showing her steel beams, dust and small chunks of random debris. "You've got about three feet of clearance. Lift your head any higher than that and you can expect the next elevator to crush your skull."

Jeri crawled into the elevator pit. Following behind her, Wendel pulled the panel shut.

"Security changes shifts in five minutes. Elevator comes down for the new team, gives us about thirty seconds to grab the center support before it starts moving again." He paused until she gave him a short grunt of understanding. "We have to make the ledge at the third floor."

"Shit." They were seven floors underground already.

"Yeah, you gonna last ten floors and still make the jump?"

When she didn't answer, he turned the light in her direction. She shrugged.

"You've got the tracker chip now. As long as I don't scream on the trip back down, does it matter?"

He clicked the light off -- her hooded stare and the throwback of light against her dark irises unnerved him.

"Switch sides," he ordered. "You'll catch some light for the ledge and have a handhold when you land."

She crawled past him, the side of her leg brushing against his hand. He jerked away, his fingers jumping with the need to grab her by the ankle and pull her back to him.

Reaching the other side, he heard the slide of the elevator cables above them. His chest tightened; he tried to force his muscles to relax. He'd catch the support beam, hold for ten floors and make the ledge.

It was kid's stuff -- for him.

And that's what scared the fuck out of him.

* * *

Jeri waited in the dark, listening to the elevator's descent. She was breathing hard. The shaft's dust clogged her throat. Wendel reminded her to let the cage stop before she grabbed onto it. She grunted, then wiped her palms across her t-shirt. He patted the ground beneath them and she imitated the gesture. The dirt sucked the last of the moisture from her sweaty palms.

She still wasn't sure what his plan was. Three stories above ground, there was a vent fan. Huge, but always spinning and facing the front of the building, where there were plenty of lights and security cameras. Never mind the problem of scaling down the side of the building. His hands and the skin covering them were re-engineered for grip, but he wasn't a damn gecko.

The penlight clicked on. She looked up the shaft, saw the rapidly descending cage and the beam she'd need to catch and hold for ten stories. She rubbed her hand in the dirt one last time and then he switched the light off.

"Get ready."

The elevator came to a stop. The doors opened and heavy boots sounded across the floor.

"Now!" he ordered in a hard whisper.

Jeri grabbed on, her pulse sounding in her ears as she waited for the first slow jerk that would begin their ascent. Beginning to hyperventilate, she counted off the last seconds, fingers tightening as the cables tugged the cage up. She let it drag her, her calves scraping across the ground as her body lifted up. Her hip throbbed. She flexed the leg, testing the pain threshold. She'd have to land with her right. Another reason he'd had her trade spots with him.

They passed the door to Sub 7. At Sub 3, she shifted her hands, a dull ache already building in her shoulders. Passing the door to ground level, she started to swing, slowly building momentum for her jump. The only light came from the door as they passed it. She had no idea if Wendel was still hanging on. When the bottom of the cage cleared the top of the third floor elevator doors, she took one last swing and let go.

She hit the ledge, felt the cinder block start to crumble. Her hands wrapped around the diagonal bar that guarded the fan. She waited, holding tight, straining to hear confirmation that he'd made the opposite ledge. It came with the sound of more crumbling concrete. Wendel stayed silent until he was next to her.

"Slide over a little."

She moved to the edge of the fan's frame, her hand holding onto the bar in a death grip. He bent down, searching beneath the ledge. He came up with a dusty harness and a nylon rope. He tied the rope around the fan's frame and let its weight pull the knot down to the bottom corner.

Standing, Wendel put his lips against her ear. "When the exterior lights go out, we've got about ninety seconds to make it to ground level and across the lot."

"Lights go out?"

"No questions, just follow my lead and book ass when we hit the pavement."

He fitted the harness around his torso and sat on the peeling ledge. From there, he slid under the rotating blades. The blades had been longer once, until the sanguinary

odor of decapitated pigeons could be detected through the elevator doors. Now there was about a foot clearance, just enough for him to slide beneath and wait.

His hand touched her leg and she realized he was urging her to the opposite side of the frame.

Of course. Why else would he touch her?

About a minute later she heard the sharp snap of electricity, followed by the smell of burnt air pushing down the shaft. The lights illuminating the front of the building browned out and then extinguished completely. He tapped her leg and then he was gone.

Jeri knew the drill now -- he'd done something to knock out the main power. Electricity for core security would come on in the building first then spread out to the perimeter. She crouched down, the slowing fan blades lit only by moon glow. Hesitating, she heard the thunk of the blade as Wendel stopped the fan.

"Move it. Now!"

She started scooting sideways. Halfway in, he grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her out and up. He ordered her to wrap her arms around him.

"Legs, too!"

She threw her legs around his waist, felt his arm encircle her and then there was the sound of his feet sliding against the building's façade and the hiss of nylon rope threading through his gloved hand.

"Ground!"

Jeri braced herself, her legs bouncing, feet hitting the ground from the impact of his landing. She dropped her arms from around his neck, ignored her spinning senses and the screaming in her hip and started off across the lot. A football field in distance separated the front of the building from the tree line. A good day, a trained Valk could make it in seven seconds -- a Berserker in five.

Today wasn't a good day.

She felt Wendel's arm around her waist again. Her feet lifted off the ground, and then he was carrying her as he weaved through the trees.

Two-thirds of the area surrounding ASG was forested and off limits to the public. But they had gone out the front of the building, where less than half a mile of trees buffered ASG from suburbia.

Wendel stopped just short of someone's fenced back yard and set Jeri on her feet. There was a dog, mixed breed and whining, but the sound wasn't loud enough to wake the homeowners. Going up to the chain link fence, Wendel pulled out his knife and hewed his way through the links. The dog growled, Wendel growled back.

"Great," Jeri whispered from the tree line. "Perfect finish to the night -- a dog attack."

Wendel glanced over his shoulder at her. She could tell that he had smiled at her from the white flash of teeth.

"Not this old dog." He pulled the sides of the fence far enough apart to reach through and grab the dog's collar. He tugged the dog out, then reached into his cargo pocket and fished out the chip he'd dug from her butt cheek. Using his knife, he sliced a small hole into the leather collar and embedded the chip inside.

When he let go of the collar, the dog ran.

"How'd you know?" Jeri stepped closer to where he crouched by the fence.

He pointed at the ground. She could just make out depressions along the fence line where the dog had been digging. With his ultra-enhanced night vision, Wendel would have seen them easier and sooner.

Taking her by the elbow, he led her along the back perimeter of three more houses until they came to one without a fence. They cut through the yard and onto the street. The street was on a hill and they started walking up the sidewalk, passing a couple of cars until they came to one with a taped up window. Cupping his hands, Wendel peered into the front of the car.

"Stick." He pulled the tape back, popped the lock and opened the door. He climbed in, scrambling over the center hump.

Jeri jumped in behind him and quietly pulled the door closed while he punched the steering column. He popped the clutch and let the vehicle roll down hill while he finished hot wiring the engine.

The vehicle rumbled to life halfway down the hill. She leaned closer to him, caught a glimpse of the engine's charge level. "Fuel cells half charged. I'm surprised."

"Yeah, me too."

They passed beneath a corner street lamp and she caught Wendel's gaze on her.

He turned the heater on and directed the vents at her. "You look like shit, Jer. Get some sleep while you can."

* * *

Jeri woke with the car parked in an alley. Wendel was leaning over her, his hand at her beltline. He tapped the Bersa.

"This loaded?"

She nodded.

"Good. Telling you to keep the doors locked in this bucket of shit won't do much good."

"Where you going?"

"Get us some money." He opened the door, slid out. Pushing the lock down, he stuck his head back in. "Slide over to this side. Keep it running."

Rubbing at her eyes, she watched him leave the alley and head out onto the street. She checked the fuel cells, saw that they had lost most of their charge. Judging by the age of the vehicle, they'd driven about thirty miles. She looked back at the mouth of the alley and the crumbling buildings on the other side of the street. Not a lot of light.

Hagerstown. Maybe Old Baltimore, but she doubted it -- at least ten minutes had passed without gunfire. Five more minutes went by, the car's batteries growing weaker, and then Wendel reappeared. She unlocked the driver's side door and moved back to the passenger seat.

He climbed in. "Need to ditch the car, but not here."

Out on the street, they passed a Hagerstown city cop car. She saw a sign for the interstate and another for the train and bus station.

"That way." She pointed at the station sign.

They drove around the block, and then parked three streets down. Across from the station there was a run-down motel and Wendel booked a room for an hour. He took the Bersa with him, leaving her inside to clean her cuts and the barrel burn with cold water and a grungy washcloth. When he came back, he was dressed in different clothes down to his shoes and had some street couple in tow.

From the looks of them, it was a hooker and her pimp. The woman had on a cheap corset top and wrap around mini-skirt, with ripped hose and worn high heels. The guy was wearing the outfit Wendel had escaped ASG in.

Jeri raised her hand, palm out toward Wendel, and then she jabbed a finger in the woman's direction. "No fucking way."

Wendel advanced on her, backing her into the corner and leaning in close. His hands went to her throat. The index and middle finger of his left hand rested with meaning against the hollow of her throat, just below her jaw line. "Make no mistake, I'm taking you with me because I have damn little choice. Leaving you here, trussed up and vulnerable is another option."

She could feel her pulse in her throat, beating beneath his fingertips. He increased the pressure slightly, reminding her it wasn't a lover's touch he offered.

"I'm not putting her clothes on." She curled both hands into a fist, the thumbs out and just below his arm pits in a strike position.

"You were gone for days catching up with me in Cali. Plenty of time for them to go through your room." He upped the pressure on her neck, his body bracing for the impending jab of her thumbs into the bundle of subaxillary nerves. "You don't know how many more trackers are in your clothes."

"No, I don't." Jeri pulled her fists back two inches, seconds from launching an attack against him. Already lightheaded, she couldn't afford much more dancing like

this with him. "Just like I don't know how many guys she's fucked since the last time she changed underwear."

"C'mon Jer," He dropped his hand from her throat, his eyes slitting as he pulled back and gave her a once over glance. "She doesn't mind wearing a whore's panties, why should you?"

He turned, showing her his back. She shouldered past him, stopping next to the bed to strip her t-shirt off. Toeing off her shoes, she kept her gaze on the pimp, hoping the impromptu show and the man's reaction would piss Wendel off.

Instead, Wendel casually bent down and pulled out the paper credits she had stuffed into her shoe. He tossed them on the bed and the pimp moved forward to collect them.

She shot a glance over her shoulder, wondering if Wendel had lost his mind. "That's over two thousand credits."

"That were in your room?"

She nodded, reluctantly.

"The Bersa?" She loved that gun -- the way it nestled against her spine or the hollow where her hip met her stomach, its lines invisible to all but the best-trained eyes.

"Traded. Get over it."

"Get over it?" Her lips pinched together. "It's done more for me than you have."

His gaze narrowed, the blue irises immediately bleeding to gray ice, the stare as cold as it had been when he threatened Mario's life that last time. "Really?"

She looked away, her gaze lighting on the woman, and snapped, "Get your fucking clothes off, already."

Right. She was the bitch, the whore. Wendel was the white knight.

She dropped the shorts and underwear and kicked them at the woman's feet.

Except he wasn't a white knight -- not any more. He was a chicken shit mother fucker.

With the hooker's clothes in hand, she turned to face Wendel. The hose and panties she held pinched between her thumb and index finger and she tossed those in the general direction of the room's rusted out trash can.

She slid the heels on and wrapped the mini around her hips. Her breasts swimming in the fabric, she struggled with the corset.

Wendel reached out, spun her around and fastened the top. He lowered his head until his lips were against her ear and then he ground a little more salt in the evening's wounds. "Sorry, wasn't a one out there with small enough tits."

Chapter Five

Between the four of them, they caught the last two buses out of Hagerstown before morning. Wendel bought tickets to Atlantic City for the street couple. He and Jeri had tickets to Toledo but were getting off at Cleveland, where he hoped to catch one of the night boats bootlegging goods into Ontario -- Canada's last holdout against Pan-American Unionization.

He watched her in line, waiting to board the bus, her ticket crushed in a ball in her hand. She stood straight, carrying the streetwalker's clothes with as much dignity as she could. Which, he had to admit, was a hell of a lot.

He'd feel pride -- if she wasn't one of all-father's war maidens.

She handed the ticket to the driver, her elbows loose at her sides as if she was ready to crush the man's windpipe with one quick blow if he so much as smiled appreciatively at her. But the driver was no idiot. He punched the ticket and waited until Jeri was walking down the aisle before he turned his gaze to her.

"Mine," Wendel said, his voice low as he casually handed the ticket over.

The driver's gaze bounced nervously up, glancing off Wendel's broad chest and never making it to the Berserker's black stare.

"No offense, man."

"Just letting you know... man." Arms flexing, Wendel pocketed the ticket and started down the aisle.

Jeri had picked a seat strategically located near the bus's second exit. She was tucked against the side, arms and legs crossed and her head turned to look out the window.

He sat down, unacknowledged. Leaning across her, he pulled the shade down. "You'll have to miss the scenery. Don't need the traffic cameras picking us up."

Staring at the grime-coated shade, she whispered, "Go fuck yourself."

"For now, I'm going to have to pretend like I want to fuck you. We're traveling as a couple, remember?"

She glanced in his direction at last, the dark chocolate gaze slicing at his skin. "Yeah, well, couple's fight. That's about all the realism I can manage right now."

Placing an arm around her shoulder, he dragged her resisting body closer. "They make up, too."

Jeri reached up under the jacket and dug her fingers beneath Wendel's rib cage. "Like this, baby?"

"No. Like this." He stretched his other arm across her legs, his fingers sliding against her outer thigh and up under the hem of the mini-skirt until his palm was against her bare bottom.

The thought that she was going commando, the hooker's panties abandoned on the floor of the hotel room, was driving him crazy. He could smell her sex, and the scent made him want to slide down into the narrow space between the rows of seats and spread her legs.

Jeri released her death grip on his bottom rib and pushed against his chest. "Stop it."

"I thought this was what you wanted." He shifted his hand until he felt the bottom fold of her labia against his fingertips. Her skin felt hot enough to burn. "You could have stayed at home... with father."

She blinked, trying to control or hide her anger. He wasn't sure which, just felt the tug of longing her emotions produced in him.

He buried his head against her neck, praying she couldn't sense his need, and repeated, "You could have stayed."

She lifted her shoulder, tried pushing his head away with it. "I'm worthless to him now -- I doubt he's still operating under the mistaken impression that I mean something to you."

"Mistaken?" He left the word hanging. It was because of her he was in O.D.I.N. and that Tank had been dragged in, too. He may have killed Mario alone, but he hadn't disposed of the body on his own. And neither he nor Tank had known that O.D.I.N. was watching them -- looking to recruit Tank, a math prodigy stuck in Chicago's inner city, any way they could.

"Yeah. I guess that's why you had to blackmail me into taking you." He let go of her, watching her with a side glance as she retreated to the far side of her seat.

Again, she wrapped her arms around her chest and pulled her legs closer to her body. The mini did nothing to cover her lower thighs, leaving the tapered muscles and smooth, caramel-colored skin exposed. He remembered how strong they were, her legs. Capable of holding a man pinned to her, inside her. He pulled his gaze away to find that a man one row up and over had turned back.

He thought for a second about snapping the dude's neck. If he couldn't have his hands where he wanted them -- caressing Jeri's body until she came calling his name -- he could at least have them around this guy's throat.

Only they'd never make it to Cleveland if he killed every male stupid enough to ogle her. Hell, they wouldn't even make it across the state line.

Sighing, he took the pimp's jacket off and draped it across her legs. Her eyes flicked in his direction, offering a moment's worth of wonder. Folding his arms across his chest, he closed his eyes and settled back against the seat. "Don't want your teeth chattering while I'm trying to sleep."

Not that he would be able to sleep with her halfway to naked beside him.

When the bus driver shut the overhead lights off, Wendel eased into a position where he could watch Jeri. He counted each breath as she fell at last into a restless sleep, her body twisting until her back was to the window and her face tilted up toward him.

So easy just to bend his head the slightest bit and kiss the small, fierce mouth.

He shifted again, closer to her, and slid his hand beneath the jacket covering her legs. His fingertips resting lightly against her thighs, he waited. When Jeri didn't move,

he raised his free hand up to her throat. His thumb found the hollow beneath her jaw line and he slowly increased the pressure.

Asleep, she had been hugging herself to generate a little warmth. Now her body slackened, the pressed legs relaxing enough that he could slide his hand between her thighs.

Wendel eased the pressure against the artery in her throat. Dipping his head lower, he brushed his lips against hers. They parted and he caught the scent of berries.

Knowing the sweet smell was part of a Valk's bio-engineering, he felt a surge of anger. But then she moaned ever so softly, her chest hitching as she drew in a ragged breath in her sleep.

His tongue tracing the outline of her mouth, Wendel increased the pressure against Jeri's throat and took her body another level deeper.

Pressure points, breathing torture -- all part of his training, but they could have an erotic side, could keep her in a semi-trance state all night long if he wanted to.

Hell, yes, he wanted to.

He slid his hand further up her thigh until he could feel that she was wet. His tongue slid between the parted lips, gently exploring the taste and texture of her mouth as he eased a finger inside her cunt.

Hot and so wet she was almost dripping.

Another finger in and he started to slowly fuck her pussy, his thumb rubbing against her swollen clit as he lengthened the strokes inside her.

He felt the slow move of her tongue against his and his pulse rate doubled, threatening to send him into overdrive. She moaned again and he swallowed the sound.

She was getting wetter, her scent rising past the barrier of the jacket to almost drive him mad. It was still her scent -- at least all-father hadn't fucked with that.

Bending his head to her neck, he growled and felt flesh bumps rise along the sensitive skin of her throat.

He wanted a bite. A small one. Wanted to be fucking her in earnest, not this prom night finger dance as she lay helpless, moaning, enough of her senses present to strain against his probing.

Helpless.

He suppressed a moment's shame, reminding himself that she'd signed away all right to consent when she had let all-father put those damn chips in her.

Her body trembled and he lost the thought. Bringing his lips to her, he whispered against them, "Kiss me, baby girl."

Another tremor rocked her small frame. Her lips parted and a faint moan rose up to be cut short by the thrust of Wendel's tongue. Breaking away, he kissed the line of her jaw, tongued the small lobe of her ear.

"Sleep."

She squirmed, resisting him. The motion freed her breast from the hooker's sleazy top. He'd given her shit earlier about the size of her breasts, but they were perfect. Easy to tease, Heaven to suck on, and just big enough to squeeze.

His lips lazy against her ear, Wendel thumbed the exposed nipple, rolled it between thumb and index finger as he slid a third finger into her pussy. Her body's response coated his fingers, easing his way as he pushed deeper.

He sucked her earlobe gently into his mouth, imagining all the parts of her he could tease with lips and tongue -- fingers, toes, nipples, clit.

"Come for me." He hardened his thrusts inside her as his hand found her breast again. He pressed his palm flat against the swollen flesh, fighting the urge to dig his finger tips in, to mark her flesh as his.

Her pussy worked his fingers, clutching at them, squeezing as her ass and hips dug deeper into the seat.

She was panting, her agitated moans coming faster than he could silence them. People had started to stir at the noise. He didn't care. He wanted to feel her coming, hear her gasp and cry out at his touch. All those years he'd been waiting for it only to have it stolen from him in Yreka by all-father and his fucking tacticals.

“Come for me, Jeri,” he whispered one last time.
And she did.

Chapter Six

Formerly home to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland now survived on the refuse of other cities -- its docks lined with incoming garbage barges, trucks running at all hours to carry the loads to the two dozen or more waste reclamation plants that outlined the city perimeter.

That reliable Cleveland smell woke Jeri. She opened her eyes to find that Wendel had moved to the seat on the opposite side of the aisle. He had inched the shade back and was staring out the window.

She stretched, assessing her stiff muscles and the damage from last night's adventures. She had a slight ringing in her ear. Her mouth tasted like she'd spent the night sucking on a copper penny and her ass cheek still hurt like hell.

Jeri froze, her attention settling between her sticky thighs. She threw a quick look at Wendel but he was still staring out the window.

His body was rigid, as if he were looking for something specific or trying like hell to avoid her. She drew her legs close to her body and pulled the jacket down over them. Her mind flashed on something -- a sensation, a dream.

Wendel. She had dreamed about him, but what had she dreamed?

Another image flashed and her pussy twitched.

Fuck, oh fuck. She'd had a wet dream. A Hoover Dam kind of wet dream as she remembered it. So fucking real. He'd been whispering to her, his cock inside her, his hand hard against her breast. He'd growled, she'd moaned, her pussy working his thick shaft. Even now, the memory of the dream was making her wet all over again.

She glanced back across the aisle. He had to know. Even if he had fallen asleep, his senses were too damn sharp not to notice the difference, to wake up and hear her

elevated pulse and erratic breathing, see the change in her heat register and smell how ripe her cunt had become dreaming about him. Maybe she had gone so far as to...

She shook her head at the thought, but, damn it, she felt as if she'd been touched. She eased a hand beneath the jacket, almost gasping as her finger brushed against her clit.

Sore to the touch. Fuck. She'd done it. She'd touched herself. It didn't matter that she'd been asleep. He knew -- and the knowledge had caused him to flee to the other side of the bus.

Up front, the driver laid on the horn, the sound jolting her upright. She felt Wendel's gaze land on her and she slowly turned to look at him.

"Cleveland."

"Yeah, I know." She tossed the jacket at him.

Five minutes later they stepped off the bus and disappeared into the terminal's crowd. Wendel carefully steered Jeri through the press of bodies as they tried to avoid any plainclothes security. Outside, they meandered with purpose through town, first catching another bus, then a cab, until, on foot, they made their way to a run down bar on the first floor of a derelict building.

Jeri looked at the sign on the door and then up at the rest of the building. The floors looked like they had been collapsing in on one another year by year. The top eight floors had only their steel skeleton in place.

Looking back at the bar sign, she laughed and followed Wendel inside of *Any Minute Now*.

She scanned the room, sizing the patrons up as she automatically looked for who was packing a gun or knife.

"Relax." Nodding at a booth near the back door, he stepped up to the bartender. He followed her a few minutes later with a pitcher of beer and, for a change, two glasses. "Switch sides."

She did, vacating the seat that faced most of the bar and the front door. She sat sideways in the booth, able to see the front and back entrances and the hall to the toilets.

"You're not listening." He pushed the beer closer to her. "I said 'relax,' didn't I?"

"Maybe if you hadn't sold my Bersa," she answered over the rim of her glass.

"Behave and I'll buy you another fly swatter."

She glared at him, mentally marking a dot between his dark brows. Fly swatter or not, a double tap right there would leave even a Berserker dead.

Matching her sips to Wendel's, Jeri put the glass down and drummed her fingers on the scarred table top. She felt naked in the hooker's clothes, which only pissed her off. She stared at Wendel, at the way he was looking everywhere but at her. "So, if any one asks, am I working?"

"Up to you, baby girl. Certainly would make the cover look authentic."

Jeri wasn't sure if it was sarcasm or indifference in his voice, or whether they were the same thing. She turned her head toward the front entrance and concentrated on the door's peeling paint.

She heard him pick up the pitcher and refill his glass.

"Oh, I'm sorry... your question wasn't rhetorical?"

Looking back at him, Jeri flashed a thin smile. Then she slid from the booth and headed for a guy sitting halfway down the bar. She had noticed a light spark in his eyes when she had first entered the bar. Offering a tentative nod, she sat on the stool next to him and ordered a whiskey sour. When the drink came, the man offered to pay for it.

With a slight grin and another nod, she let him. "What's your name?"

"Frank."

She raised the glass to her mouth, massaging the corner of her bottom lip against its edge. "I knew a lumberjack named Frank."

"A lumberjack? I haven't seen a tree in..." Frank paused, looked at Jeri's face and laughed. "I guess you're fucking with me."

She took a drink, her tongue trailing across her lips to catch the lingering taste of bourbon and lemon. "I'm just trying to distract you."

"Distract me from what?" He looked down at her bare thighs and the tease of breast in the too big top.

"Asking my name." Grabbing his hand, she guided it onto her knee.

"No problem." He squeezed, his voice roughening as he asked, "What should I call you?"

Another drink and Jeri drained the glass. "Yours -- that is, if you can pay."

He nodded but his gaze flitted nervously over her shoulder.

"Don't look behind me."

"Your guy looks like he wants to kill me..."

"He's not my guy." Jeri shook her head. "Believe me, he couldn't care less." She moved Frank's hand up her leg until he could feel that she wasn't wearing any panties. "Would he let me out of the apartment like this if he gave a shit?"

Frank offered a slow, disbelieving shake of his head. "Guess not."

She smiled and signaled the bartender for a refill. "C'mon, you know he wouldn't. You wouldn't!"

Leaving Frank to pay for the drinks, she picked a booth close to the front door. The box light above it was burnt out, offering some privacy from the rest of the bar's patrons. And once she pulled Frank deeper into the booth's shadows, only a Berserker would be able to see exactly what was going on.

Frank put the drinks on the table and slid in next to Jeri. "You got a place?"

"You're in it." She reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and laid it flat on the table. "Now, what can you afford?"

He tilted the wallet toward the ambient light spilling over from the bar and finally pulled out a fifty.

She tucked it into her top before placing her hand on his lap and sighing. "Paper credits just aren't what they used to be, Frank."

Jeri placed her free hand against the back of his neck and rubbed at the tense knots. At the same time, she unzipped his pants. The man was rock hard and respectably sized. She put her lips close to his ear, her head turned just far enough that Wendel would be able to read her lips.

"Very nice."

"Can I... uh..."

"What Frank?"

"You know -- touch you."

She laughed and kissed the side of his neck, her lips lingering long enough to suck playfully at his flesh. "But that makes it hard for me to touch you."

"Just a little." There was a soft pleading to his tone, not unpleasant. "You know, before you do whatever you're going to do."

"Oh, Frank." Slowly she trailed her fingers along his shaft. "I'm going to suck you off."

"Here?"

"Yeah, here." She squeezed his cock for emphasis. "You telling me you've never seen it happen here?"

Frank coughed, his demeanor as nervous as when he had spotted Wendel watching them. "Once or twice. There's a couple women who come in when the street's too cold to work..."

"And you never, not once?" She nuzzled his cheek, felt him softly shake his head. "Why this time, Frank?"

He turned and looked at her. There was barely enough light for him to see her, but something in his gaze reminded her of those days out on the bleachers with Wendel, pretending to watch the home team lose while she waited for the rare, intense glances he would carefully throw her way.

"That's okay -- you don't have to answer." She kissed Frank again, this time on the mouth. Slowing as she drew back, she teased his lower lip, letting the extended kiss pull him at last into the booth's deep shadows.

When her back met the wall, she stopped and guided his hand between her legs. "Touch me now, Frank."

He moved closer and lightly rested his weight against her. It was as if he thought she was something fragile, his touch so tender she wanted to cry.

She could hear him breathing, the sound raw. And then he spoke.

"I have my own place... and regular work."

He was petting her, his fingertips slow and trembling against her pussy.

"What are you saying?" She looked down the row of booths and saw that Wendel was gone. Wherever he was, it wasn't far. She could still feel him -- that damn chip in her chest overriding any sensation Frank could ever hope of producing.

"Just that, maybe you're tired of..."

She closed her eyes and stroked his hair, her hand as nervous as his seemed to be. "Could you really fall in love with a whore, Frank?"

"With you -- I could fall in love with you."

"Falling in love is the easy part. It's trying to live with her that's the real bitch."

Jeri opened her eyes to find Wendel standing at the end of the table, his gaze black. She swallowed hard but dropped a calming hand onto Frank's shoulder.

"He won't hurt you."

Frank wrapped his hand around her thigh, as if he could stop her from going. "I don't care if he does."

He meant it. The crazy fool was willing to take a beating if it meant she would stay.

"I do." She brought a hand between them and pushed gently at his chest. "Let me up, Frank."

He moved until he was sitting in the middle of the booth's seat. He kept his gaze center table, unwilling to look at her or Wendel. She had to crawl over him, and his hands moved to stop her. "Can't you at least tell me your name?"

She hesitated, then touched his cheek. "It's Val."

"Val." He nodded, the simple motion seeming to imprint it in his memory. "If you need me --"

She stopped him with a fingertip against his lips. "I know where to look."

"I'll come running --"

"Not if your legs are broken." Wendel yanked Jeri the rest of the way out of the booth. He shoved his hand down her top and pulled the fifty credits out. Pushing her

toward the door with one hand, he tossed the money on the table. "Frank, buddy, she would have done it for five."

Outside, Jeri turned on him, palm flat as she took aim at his face. He caught her by the wrist and twisted until she was facing away from him. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he dragged her into the alley.

He let go of her arm, spinning her quickly to pin her against the brick wall. Pressing his chest against her, he held her there, her feet dangling a foot or more off the ground.

She could see from the street lights that his eyes were blue again. "How do you do it? How do you flip into OD without... without maiming people?"

"You wanted me to maim him, was that it, Jeri?"

"No." She shook her head, struggling against him. "No."

"You must have." He grabbed her arms and forced them to the wall, too. "You knew it would send me into overdrive."

"Only if you cared." She tried to kick at him. "But we both know you don't."

As quickly as he had pinned her, Wendel let Jeri slide to the ground. Pressing a pass card into her hand, he pointed up the alley to the next street and a lit motel sign. "Room 603. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Take a nap, take a bath. Go find Frankie and finish giving him his blow job. I don't give a fuck what you do."

"Right," she murmured, staring at his back as he walked away. "No one does."

Chapter Seven

Wendel was absent over three hours. He came back with two shopping bags and food. He tossed one of the bags and the food onto the bed and collapsed beside them.

"Eat."

Ignoring him, she opened the bag to find a set of clothes and boots jammed inside. She pulled them out and found a Bersa rolled up inside the pants. Leaving the food on the bed, she took the rest of the items into the bathroom and locked the door.

She had showered while he was gone and she peeled the hooker's clothes from her body. She stuffed them in the bathroom trashcan and then ran a warm washcloth over her torso. Clean and dressed in a set of leathers, she sat on the toilet, the gun in her hand.

This Bersa was a little bigger than the one she had given up. She pulled the magazine out. Thirteen bullets.

She locked the magazine in place and chambered a round.

Wendel knocked at the bathroom door. "You gonna eat?"

Looking in the mirror, she switched the gun's safety on. "Yeah, just a minute."

He tested the door handle, found it locked. "It's getting cold."

"Don't worry about it. I'm so hungry I could eat month-old dead horse."

"I think it's cat, actually."

Jeri laughed, then realized he probably wasn't joking. She slid the gun into her belt line, closing her eyes at the familiar way it nestled against the hollow of her back. With the leather jacket pulled over the gun, she unlocked the door.

He had moved the food to the side table and was sprawled across the mattress. One massive forearm covered his eyes.

Finding a small space on the bed to sit on, she unwrapped a burger. "You eat?"

"Yeah."

He looked beat. Stretching forward, she turned off the table lamp and took her first bite in the dark. The meat was too seasoned to be beef, not sweet enough to be horse. She forced the first bite down and took another.

"Where'd you get the clothes?"

"All night fuck palace -- side store." He took his arm away from his face. "You know, whips, chains, dildos and leathers. Lots and lots of leathers. It came with a free mask, but finding you pants with ass cheeks was extra."

She smiled in the dark and took another bite of her cat burger. "Thanks for that. I've been having trouble keeping my ass covered since tactical stole my panties."

She felt him jerk as if she'd woken him. "You know they did that?" she asked.

"Hmm?" The barest mumble, he was sliding into sleep fast.

"Paulson and his buddies -- bastards stole my panties."

Another mumble, so low she had to dip her head to hear him.

"Wasn't them."

* * *

Wasn't them. The words played over in her mind as she waited alone in the hotel room through the next day. She spent the time polishing possibilities. Had Wendel seen the theft? Had it been Dr. Ames? His nurse?

The only other option was...

"No." She surfed to another channel. He'd been all but asleep last night. She hadn't heard him correctly. He hadn't said that it wasn't tactical. She just must have misheard him.

Otherwise there was only one suspect left. She could ask him. But what if he lied -- or told the truth? Either response would leave her with nothing but more questions.

She jerked her head up and looked at the door. She could tell he was back and standing just outside it. The chip inside her chest had kick-started before the elevator doors had opened.

Jeri grabbed the Bersa off the table anyway, in case he wasn't alone. But it was just him, some more food and a few basic hygiene supplies. He handed her half a sub and sat down beside her.

"Stay still." He grabbed her ear and flashed a thin light inside. "Swallow."

She did, then took a swallow of the lemon-aid he had brought back. She opened her mouth, talking around the flash light as he angled it against her lips. "This isn't necessary."

He didn't answer, just motioned for her to stand.

"Drop your pants, Jericho. We're riding a garbage barge across the lake. Empty, yes. Clean, no fucking way."

She stood, lowering her pants just far enough down the side that he could see the spot where he had dug the chip out and cauterized it with the gun barrel.

He had a syringe in his hand. "Lower."

"I don't need a shot, Wendel."

"Really? Because your ear looks fucked up and you were running a fever this morning." Not waiting for her to comply, he pulled her pants down the rest of the way until her entire bottom was exposed. "Other cheek."

She turned, hoping he couldn't see the effect he was having on her as he probed his intended injection site. And how the fuck had he known she was running a fever?

"C'mon, Jer. Be a brave little Valk and I'll try to find you a lollipop afterwards."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, catching and holding his gaze. "Maybe you could just kiss it, Agent Spears."

He stuck the needle in.

"Ow! Fucker."

Jeri watched him push the plunger down and then pull the needle out. She started to pull her pants back up as he tossed the syringe into the trash can beside the nightstand.

"Not so fast."

"I don't need a band-aid."

"Nope, you don't." He grabbed her by the hips, pulled her closer and planted a big kiss on her right butt cheek. "Now, finish eating. We clear out in half an hour."

Jeri sat, eating the rest of her sub while Wendel went into the bathroom and turned the shower on. She took a sip and glared at the bathroom door.

It was fucking weird -- this thing that almost passed for true civility. It had to be his Valk containment strategy. He couldn't dump her, and he seemingly wasn't ready to just shoot her in the head. That meant he had to resort to his last available option -- politeness.

Shaking her head, Jeri tossed the cup and take-out bag in the trash.

Fine. Whether he liked it or not, they had to work together until he was out of danger. Not that Wendel was worried about himself. Even if Tank did have some fucked up piece of code that would drop Wendel dead along with every other Berserker they'd ever known, Tank was the last person left in the world that meant anything to Wendel.

"You ready?" He came out of the bathroom drying his torso.

"Yeah." Jeri turned toward the window, hiking the back of her shirt up enough to show him the Bersa tucked against the small of her back. Hearing him drop onto the bed, she stayed facing the window.

His reflection played against the darkened pane as he leaned forward to pull his boots on. Standing, he tucked his new gun into the band of his pants and walked back into the bathroom.

Glancing over her shoulder, she watched him slide his shirt on. Beautiful fucking bastard.

She cleared the knot from her throat. "We know this guy?"

"Tank and me, we've used him a couple of times." He looked up, she looked away. "And, before you ask, he hasn't seen Tank."

She curled her arms around her head, suddenly unsure if they would find Tank in Windsor.

"You okay?" Two steps and Wendel was at her side. "The antibiotic isn't --"

“Not that.” She slid her hands down until she was holding her shoulders. Chewing her bottom lip, she looked up at him. “What if he’s not here?”

Wendel looked past her, out toward the harbor where a garbage barge was waiting for them. “End game, he’ll be here.”

“This isn’t chess... it isn’t a game.”

He moved back to the bed, picked up his jacket and shrugged it on before moving to the door. “Of course it is, Jeri. Everything’s a game with all-father.”

Chapter Eight

Jeri zipped up her jacket once they were clear of the hotel. She turned her head, just enough to watch him from the corner of her eye. "Gruesome alias."

He didn't answer immediately, instead taking in the angle of her face, the sharp quizzical brows, the forward push of her lips as she waited impatiently for him to reply.

Fuck, if he loved his brother a quarter ounce less...

What? Would he find a body mech and reverse what O.D.I.N. had done to him before running away with Jeri? Stupid idea. She wouldn't run away with him.

Except that she had.

Walking, he rubbed at his jaw. He'd get a headache if he tried to make sense of things -- of her. Any sane woman operating under her own free will would be gone already, especially after the last few days. The hooker in Hagerstown, that scene in the bar where he'd practically challenged her to go fuck someone else. It was too much to think about, too much for her to ignore.

"It's a name we agreed to keep in reserve," Wendel answered at last. They were nearing the piers and he pointed in the direction they needed to go. "Timothy and Walter Gallows." He hitched a thumb back in the direction of the hotel. "If he'd stayed there, it would have rung a bell with the clerk. Same thing with the next hotel."

She nodded, satisfied.

His stomach knotted. If Jeri wasn't crazy, then she was a puppet -- all-father's puppet -- and he'd just told her what name to look for Tank under.

Jeri looked up, giving him a quick eye roll. "Well, 'Walter.' What number?"

"Pier Fourteen."

She pulled ahead of him, turned and walked backward. "I can smell it from here."

She wasn't joking. The stench at the hotel had started off bad enough, but here the whole damn place reeked. "Remember to breathe through your nose."

Jeri smiled a closed smile. Pivoting a hundred and eighty degrees, she fell back in place alongside him and said nothing as they turned onto Pier Fourteen.

Most of the lights on the pier had been busted. Only the steering cabin of the barge's tug boat and a few lanterns on the barge provided any illumination. Reegan, the tug's captain, met them at the front of the pier with a rake in each hand. Over the sound of the water slapping against the boat, Wendel could just hear the scrap of metal over metal.

Stepping onto the barge, he looked down into the carve-out. Men were already at work raking and shoveling the garbage that the heavy dock machinery hadn't cleared. Everyone down in that hole was in on it. Before the job was done, eight men and women would go down to the barge's floor. Only six would come back up.

He and Jeri went through the motions in case anyone was watching. They moved among the other workers, weaving from one end of the barge to the other until Reegan opened a door cut into the side of the pit and ushered them inside with their rakes.

"This --" Starting to gag, Jeri clamped a hand over her mouth.

They were standing in the dark in what felt and smelled like two inches of garbage sludge. He'd seen the room in daylight, just a flash as Reegan had opened the door and explained the procedure to him that afternoon.

Putting one hand on the wall and the other around her arm, Wendel guided Jeri over to a fifty gallon barrel strapped to the wall. He lifted himself onto the barrel and then pulled her onto his lap. She twisted until she could bury her face against his neck.

"I'm not even going to ask you about a bathroom."

"Good," he laughed. "Because we're sitting on it."

"Foul." She wrapped her arms around his waist. "So help me, if you drop me in that sludge..."

"Don't worry." He cinched her closer to him. In the dark, he smiled, pressed his lips against her hair and listened to the fading sounds of the barge's clean-up crew.

"What the director said, about Tank?"

She still had her face close to his neck and he could feel the warm breath against his skin. He grunted. Easy enough for her to talk in this stink when she had his body shielding her.

"You think any of it's true?"

"The code, yeah." He felt Jeri's arms tighten around his waist and he hugged her harder. "Don't worry, I said I wouldn't drop you."

In the tight space between his neck and shoulder, she shook her head. "I'm just thinking how the Director has had this sword hanging over everybody's heads. The only thing different is now we know about it."

"And only because all-father wants us to know." Closing his eyes, he felt the tension in his jaw creep up into his temples.

That was the really fucked part, wasn't it? Theft or no theft -- whatever all-father had planned, he never would have brought the code's existence out into the open unless he was ready to use it.

"I'm sorry, Jer." He felt her body go rigid. He couldn't blame her silent, tense response. "I'm sorry for pulling you into my mess."

It was his mess. He'd created it with Mario's murder. Everything flowed from there, from that one point in time. But they'd never called him on it once, Tank or Jeri. Not once.

His mess? Jeri was sure her heart was going to crack open. She lifted her head, looked up at him and shifted her vision until she could read his heat register. He was pulsing a bright crimson. She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck.

"That's bullshit." She knotted her fingers in the short wavy hair and squeezed. "Bull. Shit."

Relaxing her grip, she leaned closer and pressed her cheek against his. He hadn't shaved since all-father's briefing and his skin was rough with stubble.

Just like the night in Yreka. She sighed.

"You were protecting me." She moved her head, felt the bristles again her neck. Her body tightened, need pulling at the muscles. "How is it your mess if you were protecting me when no one else would?"

"You were eighteen. I could have asked you to stay."

He'd done that before, only she had been sixteen. And he'd spent a week in jail for it, too, before the prosecutor realized just why Wendel and Tank had been harboring a runaway. By then, she'd already been to the emergency room for a broken collar bone.

The prosecutor had warned Wendel to let the system take care of it. Some system! The child welfare worker had made one house visit, found an employed father, a clean apartment and a stocked refrigerator. That had been good enough for the woman.

Never mind the bruises.

"Like you said, I was eighteen. I could have found my own way." She shrugged, trying to ignore the spike in his heat register.

"In Shit City? Don't kid yourself."

"I survived afterwards." Of course, she'd sold off every last possession of Mario's -- down to the last pill in his well-stocked medicine cabinet.

"I wasn't some nineteen year old kid, like the last time I took you in. I could have made someone listen. I could have made you stay." He let go of her and wrapped his hands around the edge of the barrel. "Instead, I pretended you were some pain in the ass tag along because I was afraid."

Jeri tried to laugh off the suggestion. "Wendel Spears afraid? Never."

He didn't laugh with her, just kept his hard grip on the barrel's rim. "I've always been afraid of you, Jericho."

Fuck. He did not just say that.

She started to press closer but he grabbed her forearms and stopped her. Wendel slid to the right, lifting Jeri as he did so until she was sitting alone on the barrel. She saw his heat register move along the wall until he was standing by the door.

His voice barely reached her over the sound of the barge creaking and sloshing its way across the river. "That was then, Jeri."

"And now?"

"Now you're something I don't know I can trust."

Something. Some... thing.

His words ran through her mind in heavy rotation, made her clumsy sneaking off the boat when it docked, made her fall behind as they walked to the hotel. She wanted to yank him back by his collar and land a fist in his face for putting them right back at square one.

She watched him sign the register for the rundown motel he planned on dumping her in while he went in search of Tank. He paid a week in advance.

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Gallows.

Watching the clerk flip the register shut, she snorted. Wendel gave her a thin smile, the kind that warned her to keep her shit together, to be a good little "thing" and not make a scene.

She waited until they had made the three-story climb to their room and were behind closed doors.

"That 'Gallows' shit only works if anyone reads it."

"Bread crumbs add up." He sat down in the room's only chair.

She plopped on the bed and toed her boots off. "Bread crumbs... Say, which one of you gets to wear Gretel's dress?" She cocked her head, tried to imagine him in a dress but could only come up with something tight fitting and black that did nothing to diminish his masculinity.

Ignoring her, Wendel began counting through the paper credits they had left. When he was done, he tossed it all on the table. "That should get you food for the week, with enough left over in case you need to go to ground before I return."

"What are you going to use?" She didn't ask where she was supposed to go to ground. At this point, she doubted he cared.

"Don't worry. I've got plenty of ways to get more."

She smiled softly at him. "So do I."

He stood up, crossed to the bed and loomed over her. "You're going to stay in the room except when you go out for food. Do you understand?"

Jeri folded her arms across her chest and glared up at him. "I can help you find him."

"You're right." He turned away, crossed to the window and checked its locks. "But you're staying put anyway."

She watched his profile as he surveyed the building across the alley and the ground below. "Is that why you signed it 'Mr. and Mrs.'? So he'd know..."

"Know what?" He was scowling -- whether at her or the room's security, she wasn't sure.

"Know that you're traveling with one of all-father's whores."

She lifted her chin as she spoke, the motion lost on him as he closed his eyes. His chest lifted in a slightly deeper breath than the last one he'd drawn and then he seemed to shrug it off.

"That I'm with a Valk, yes."

"Same thing."

He glanced back at her, not long enough for her to read his expression or the dark glitter in his gaze. "Just stay in the room and wait for me, Jericho."

With that, he was gone.

And she was left alone to entertain herself.

The days melted one into the other. Day one was spent watching stupid vids, listening to the neighbors fuck or fight, sometimes both, and grabbing crappy food from the hot dog vendor on the street. On day two, there were sit-ups, push-ups, and, after fashioning a bar from the shower rod, pull-ups before she collapsed onto the bed and watched stupid vids, listened to the neighbors fuck or fight, usually both, and grabbed another hot dog (cat?) from the street vendor before flipping the hotel clerk off on her way back to the room.

Day three...

Fuck! She tossed the remote control at the vid screen.

Did Wendel really expect her to wait when she had no clue if he was coming back at all? Maybe this was a ruse. He and Tank had certainly learned the art of mind fucking someone raw after joining O.D.I.N. They played the game better than any other Berserker -- except for all-father.

Jeri sat up, pulled her boots on and tucked the Bersa in place. She counted her credits. There would be plenty left if she was satisfied with chips and meat of questionable origins for the rest of the week. But they still needed money when Wendel was back -- if he came back.

Standing, she stretched. Her thoughts drifted to the bar at the end of the street and the brightly lit "Pool" sign hanging from its second story. She could get lunch and hustle a few games, coming back with more money than she'd started the week with.

If there was one thing a Valk was good at, it was stick control.

It sure as hell was better than waiting around the room, hearing a footstep on the stairs and waiting to see if the chip in her chest was going to activate.

"Right!" She checked the Bersa's placement one last time and headed down to the street.

The weather was crap. Rain drizzled like warm piss and made the neon lights of the bar barely visible from the hotel. She zipped her jacket up and shoved her hands in her pockets. Keeping close to the buildings, she avoided the splash of the few cars that were slowly driving by.

Nearing the corner, she felt it -- that first tightening in her chest, the uptake in breathing. The chip was telling her that Wendel was near. She looked back down the street toward the hotel, scanning the foot traffic.

Nothing -- no one matched Wendel's build.

Was he in one of the cars that had just passed her?

Jeri started toward the hotel. The sensation in her chest instantly faded. She spun around, looked up the next street and saw a bike inching through the rain, its rider

dressed in black leathers. Broad back, trim waisted, his shape was the exact opposite of the anemic males that filled the boarded doorways waiting for the rain to stop.

She followed on foot, feeling the ebb and flow as she lost and then recovered distance on the bike.

Questions whirled through her mind: like why the fuck was he moving away from the hotel and where did he get the bike?

He slowed and pulled into underground parking. She suppressed the urge to shout his name -- whatever one he might be answering to today. Losing sight of him, Jeri ran to the garage's entrance. The barrier was down and she jumped it. Her ears picked up the sound of a bike rumbling down the ramp to the right.

At the ramp, she looked over the side and saw the bike pass through a small circle of light. The rest of the level below was unlit. She made the jump, landed in the light. There was another circle ahead and just beyond it the vague shadow of a bike. It was still running, the grey exhaust spilling into the light.

The chip against her heart transmitted its signal at a merciless frequency. In the days they'd spent together since escaping ASG, she'd managed to mute its effect. Now, three days without him around and it was as bad as Yreka.

Maybe worse.

Jericho stumbled, fell halfway into the pool of light and rolled just in time to avoid doing a face plant. A booted foot came down next to her head.

"Stop fucking around, Spears!" Jeri rolled onto her back and stared straight up into the face of all-father.

He smiled, the expression almost benign. His gloved hand held the familiar PDA and he tapped the screen once. The chip in her chest instantly silenced.

Her gaze widened. The old man had a fucking transmitter set to Wendel's frequency?

"I hope you'll forgive the ruse, Jericho." He pocketed the PDA. He removed his gloves and reached out his hand to help her up. "But I really needed to find you."

"I'll bet." She ignored the offer of assistance and warily stood up. With the chip no longer overriding her senses, she sensed someone else near them. Rather she could smell the person, and that was all she needed to identify him. "Paulson, you fuck."

"Now why do you do that --" All-father stepped closer, his hand coming down on her shoulder to pin her in place. "-- when you know he's just following my orders?"

When she didn't answer, he turned her until she was facing him. "He's no more to blame, Jericho, than you are."

She jerked away, quickly scanning the level for any more heat signatures. It looked like it was just the Director and Paulson, but she couldn't see through the whole goddamn building. And two was more than enough when one of them was all-father. Everyone may have called him the "old man" behind his back, but there was a certain ageless quality to him. And he could still take down any Berserker in the program -- except maybe Wendel. She'd seen him fight the old man to a draw once during a pissing match poorly disguised as a training exhibition for new recruits.

His hand moved to her jaw and forced her to look up at him. "You're not paying attention, Jericho."

At least they didn't seem to be here to kill her. Not yet. He wanted Wendel to lead him to Tank.

"I'm disappointed you haven't checked in."

Her pulse slowed, her left leg tensed...

Behind her, Paulson laughed. "You left your bag of tricks back at central."

All-father glared at him over Jeri's shoulder. When he dropped his eyes to look at Jeri's face, his gaze softened. "You're just following your training. It runs deeper than you know."

She shook her head.

He nodded. "Report, Agent Bastillo."

She shook her head again. She wasn't going to give him a damn thing.

All-father pulled out his PDA again, tapped it twice and brought her to her knees.

Your Berserker is near.

Only there was just one Berserker near and she sure as fuck didn't want him.
"No!"

Near, so near.

All-father bent over her, his face so close that her eyes crossed when she tried to meet his shifting gaze. "You have no free will in this, Jericho. Everything you've done, everything you're going to do, is just as I've planned it."

"Li --" She couldn't get enough air out to finish the accusation. Her chest squeezed tighter until her vision grayed. She touched one hand to the cold cement floor for support. She could hear him gloating somewhere above her.

"It didn't have to be like this, not if you'd been a better actress... a better agent. But you have to believe you're calling your own shots if he's going to believe."

A mindfuck, she told herself as she slid to the ground and the last of her vision vanished. Always a mindfuck.

Except when it isn't.

Chapter Nine

Jeri woke into blackness, her body having been pulled out of the light and left propped against the wall while she was passed out. The chip in her chest was quiet. Either the director had turned it off again or he was gone beyond broadcasting distance.

She rose, her legs weak from keeping up with the bike and the number all-father had done on her with his transmitter. She made her way slowly to the patch of illumination, pulled out her Bersa and checked its load. Everything looked okay.

Then again, the bruise on her ass back at ASG hadn't struck her as anything more than the tactical team being clumsy. She was tainted all over again. Her clothes, her weapon, the credits in her pocket. She couldn't go back to the hotel, couldn't even try to leave a message for Wendel until she knew that she was clean.

And she'd never be clean as long as she had that chip in her chest.

Jeri started up the ramp and back out onto the street. The easiest things to swap out were her money and clothes. She found a bank and then a resale shop. In the dressing room, she stripped and turned in the mirror. Her hands methodically covered her body from the roots of her hairs down to the bottom of her feet as she looked for lumps or sore spots where they might have injected her.

The gun was problematic. Not knowing its history, she couldn't hope to trade it at a legitimate dealer. She needed to find an illegitimate dealer in this city of strangers.

Beyond that, she needed a body mech -- one who was good enough that there was some slim chance he wouldn't kill her taking the chip out.

But, for now, she'd settle for a warm meal. She looked up and tried to get her bearings. She'd been wandering since she left the garage, her footsteps and each of her destinations taking her further from the hotel room.

Seeing that she was near the docks, Jeri's spirits lifted. The city wasn't entirely full of strangers. There was Reegan, at least if he hadn't taken off for the next port. She knew from the short conversation that had passed between Wendel and the barge captain that the man had connections in town.

For the first time since leaving the hotel room, Jeri smiled.

* * *

After three hours of wheedling and arguing with Reegan, she had a new gun and a lock on a body mech. She spent another hour working her way across town, avoiding the police and bank cameras that, even on this side of the border, all-father could tap into and locate her.

Finding the body mech, she had half a mind to go back to the docks and kick Reegan's ass for sending her to a rat hole. Filth covered the floors and walls. The body mech himself, 'Doctor' Sykes, looked like he'd taken his last bath in dirty water -- a month ago.

Not that she could see evidence of a bathroom. They were in the entry room. A table with take out on top served as his desk. There was a cot against the opposite wall and, next to that, a piece of plywood covered a five gallon bucket.

"About the money..." Sykes poured a shot of rot gut whisky into a dirty glass.

Watching the brown liquid climb to the top of the glass, her optimism drained from her in equal measures. When he drained the glass and went for the bottle again, Jeri reached across the table and threw the alcohol against the wall. "Don't fuck with me. The hardware you're pulling out more than covers the cost."

"Perhaps." He got up from the table, his legs as shaky as his hands, and walked to the cloth covered doorway into the next room. He pulled the cloth back, showing a room only slightly less grimy than the one they were in. There were no windows, no other way out. "Let's see just what you're carrying."

Jeri followed him into the next room. There was a tray of laser scalpels and camera probes. A drip bag hung from an IV rack. The operating table was what she presumed was the room's former door set atop two fifty gallon drums.

Knocking the dust off the overhead light, Sykes told her to strip.

She had to peel in front of him. She folded her clothes in a pile and placed them on top of her shoes in the cleanest spot of floor she could find. She took her gun to the table with her. It didn't matter that, if she agreed to go through with the surgery, she'd be completely vulnerable. Until then, he was subject to a bullet in the head.

"Lie down."

Following his instructions, she winced as something poked her. She twisted, looked at her backside. Great, now she had a splinter in her ass from the door. "Are you going to cover this thing before the surgery?"

He nodded in the direction of an open box of sheet plastic.

The thought didn't comfort her. The sheeting, once she was on it, was just as convenient for wrapping her dead body up.

Sykes ran the scanner over her body, only stopping for any time over her chest. "Exceptional."

She doubted he was talking about her tits. "So, you'll do it for the hardware?"

Nodding, he motioned her off the table and proceeded to cover it in plastic sheeting. "You know this could kill you."

Jeri looked at him with a hollowed gaze. "Yeah, but it might not."

Right now, it was the best she could hope for -- a return to life, to Wendel.

* * *

Wendel stared down at Jeri's body wrapped in plastic.

"Too keep her warm," Sykes assured him. The body mech limped over to a wheezing freezer, dumped a half empty tray of ice cubes into a rag and placed it against his swollen eye.

"How long until she wakes up?"

Sykes shrugged and limped back to his desk. He downed another shot of whiskey, the glass rim bloody when he set it down.

Turning his back on the old man, Wendel looked around at what passed for the operating room. Jeri's clothes were neatly stacked in one corner -- shoes on bottom, gun

on top. Not a single item was one he'd left her with. He looked over his shoulder at Sykes. The body mech had a preservation cylinder out. The fragile electronics membrane he'd pulled from Jeri's chest rested inside.

New clothes, new gun, a body mech to erase her last link to him. "Did she say why?"

Sykes fixed a resentful glare on him. "Was I supposed to ask?"

Wendel rifled through the clothes, checked the pockets. She was out of credits. He returned to the table for about the tenth time and stared down at her. There was no motion other than the shallow rise and fall of her chest and a faint pulse at her throat. Her eyes were motionless beneath the lids. He touched her cheek, his fingers retreating at the cold flesh.

"If she dies..."

"Yeah, yeah. We've been over that already -- you'll kill me." Sykes put the cylinder in a backpack and slid the bag under the cot. "Sounds to me like she wouldn't be here if you gave a fuck in the first place."

What the fuck did the old man know -- nothing. Ignoring Sykes, Wendel crossed into the entry room. He removed his jacket, folded it into a square and laid down, his body stretched across the only way in or out of Sykes' shit hole.

He was about to hit forty-eight hours with no sleep. Even longer without food. He'd spent the last eight of those hours looking for Jeri. First waiting at the hotel for her to come back, only to find out from the clerk that she had last headed out the afternoon before. From there, he'd walked a four-block perimeter around the hotel, stupid enough to hope that she would feel him and come out from wherever she was hiding, instead of being halfway across town making sure she'd never feel him again.

Then he'd gone on to a very nervous Reagan and now to this garbage dump, to have his heart fall on the floor at the sight of her plastic-wrapped body. He'd clicked into overdrive before the old man had the chance to tell him she was still alive.

Sykes moved toward the cot, bottle in hand.

"Nuh-uh." Wendel pointed to where Jeri still laid motionless on the table. "You sleep when she wakes up."

* * *

Jeri sat quietly in a corner booth, her hands wrapped numbly around a cup of coffee while she watched Wendel down his second cheeseburger.

"You need to eat."

"Something to go," she mumbled, the thought of food making her nauseous. She was still feeling the effects of Sykes' drugs and her chest felt like she'd taken a bullet with an armored vest on. She had to give Sykes credit -- less than 24 hours post-op and she could barely see where he had cut into her. She could still feel it, however.

Wendel ordered a chicken sandwich and side of macaroni for her boxed to go and then motioned the waitress away. "So what the fuck was this all about, Jer?"

She had to tell him. He had to know that all-father was here, that the old man was still using her as his pawn. Except telling him would only prove he couldn't trust her.

All-father's words rang in her ears -- *if you'd been a better actress... a better agent.*

Jeri pushed the coffee away and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I got bored, didn't think you were coming back. A little life-threatening surgery sounded fun."

His gaze flipped from blue to black and back again. He gripped the edge of the table and waited in silence as the waitress came back with the take-out box and their bill.

"I found Tank. I had to convince him..."

"That he could trust a Valk --"

"That he could trust you." He picked up the bill and take-out. "We're going to have to walk."

She shook her head. There was only one way she could be sure she still wasn't all-father's unknowing pawn. "Leave me."

"You don't understand, Jeri." He gave a hard little smile as if the irony wasn't lost on him. "Now that I've convinced him you're safe, he'll split if he doesn't see you."

From the all-night diner, they walked a dozen or more blocks, the passing buildings transitioning from rundown to abandoned to burned out. Leaving the sidewalk with its few remaining streetlights, they continued walking through a maze of dark alleys.

"You okay?"

"I'll live." Jeri didn't pay attention to the buildings they passed other than to note their ruin. She didn't want to have any information to report if all-father found her again.

Not if -- when. The thought twisted through her chest, taking the same path as Sykes' laser cutter had taken. Pain washed over her, causing her to break out in a sweat despite the cold night air. She stopped and rested against a wall. Wendel turned back and wrapped his arms around Jeri to keep her from sliding to the ground.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Told you. Is it so hard to believe?" The words cost her too much air and she started coughing. When her knees buckled, Wendel scooped her up and started walking again.

"I don't need carried." Jeri pushed at him, her muscles trembling with the effort.

He walked on, his features grim in the sliver of moon light that penetrated the alley. The alley came to a dead end and he put her back down on her feet. In front of them, a six-story building rose up. The first two floors had their windows barred and boarded. Plywood covered the windows of the other four stories. The back door had three deadbolts on it.

Wendel pulled a set of keys from his jacket.

"How the fuck did you manage that?"

She saw the shadow of a frown but he didn't answer. Once they were inside, he sat her down on a crate. Trashed lined the walls and he rummaged behind the bags

until he came up with a flashlight. He shined the thin beam on a lift cage. "Elevator still works."

He offered her his arm and she hoisted herself onto her feet.

"Jer... Tank can't know about Sykes."

She nodded, pretending her brain wasn't so pain-fucked that she could no longer make sense of his words.

From what little she could see of the building, it looked like it had been stopped mid-construction. The outside façade was complete and the floors and wiring were in place, but little things like walls and enclosed elevators had become a neglected courtesy. A lot of cities were like that on both sides of the border. Construction had come to a halt in the twenties under the twin pressures of war and a continued economic collapse. By the time the wars were over and the stock markets reborn, the buildings themselves were locked up in probate and bankruptcy courts and left to rot.

She stepped into the center of the cage. The only controls for the lift seemed to be inside, with a narrow control box hanging from a cable. It was so primitive in its construction that Wendel had to continue pressing the button to keep the cage moving - - unless Tank or an earlier occupant had rigged it to work that way.

Jeri counted the floors as they went, partly to know how many levels up Tank was nesting but mostly because it was habit -- how many floors up, how many exits on the floor, how many feet from each exit to a target's door. It all comprised the bits of information a Valk or Berserker would subconsciously make note of as a trained killer.

"You holding up?" he whispered as they reached the sixth and final floor. The interior was dark except for a few computer monitors on the far end and a dim light in front of the elevator.

"Yeah." She had taken a protective position slightly behind Wendel. Tank's last encounter with a Valk had reportedly resulted in the woman's death and his own. Even if that report had only been half accurate, it had still ended with a dead Valk.

Crossing the lift's threshold, she paused and drew in a deep breath. Holding it, she listened. She didn't expect to hear anything. Tank would have already taken a covered position at the first sound of the lift rising to meet him.

"Relax, Jericho."

It was Tank's voice. It sounded like he was about twelve feet off to her forward right, where the closest of the building's structural columns was in place.

"You tell Lacy to relax?" She managed to keep her voice clear, strong even despite the pain in her chest and lungs.

"I didn't kill Lacy."

A chill ran down her spine. Tank had changed positions without her hearing him move. She moved slowly around Wendel until he was once again between her and Tank's position.

"It's a speaker system, Jer --"

"Thanks, Bro."

Wendel tensed and she laughed an involuntary snort. It was starting to feel like old times -- the way she tried not to remember them.

Stuck between a bitch and a hard-ass. That's what their friends in the old neighborhood would say, giving Wendel a friendly shoulder slug while he watched the verbal sparring between Tank and the tag-a-long.

Tears sprung to Jeri's eyes. *Tank and the tag-a-long.*

Her hand crept to the small of her back and the gun she had traded the Bersa for. "You tell Lacy that?" She yelled it this time.

"I left that bitch alive. She was bound and waiting for her back-up last time I saw her."

Bitch. She growled and thumbed the safety off. "That's not how they tell it at central, Tank."

Wendel had heard the small click from the safety and he spun on her. His hands went around her waist, quickly finding and locking on to her wrists. "Stand down, Jer."

Tank spoke, softly from behind her, and she knew she was no longer hearing him over speakers. "When did you start believing what all-father says?" He paused, his tone mocking. "Or was your attitude toward the Director always an act, part of Valk Training 101?"

A better actress, a better agent...

Jeri looked at Wendel, tried to gauge the impact of Tank's accusation on his younger brother. She relaxed her grip on the gun but Wendel kept his hold on her tight. Tank stood at her back, now. Lifting Jeri's jacket while Wendel held her still, he pried her gun from her.

Wendel dipped his head until his mouth was against her ear. "He won't hurt you."

She didn't believe him. Not yet. She and Tank had been good friends once upon a time. That friendship had taken a hit after Mario had the brothers thrown in jail and had all but evaporated when she became a Valk.

Tank moved to where she could see him. "If you want to blame someone for Lacy's death, Jeri, look to her support team."

"Paulson." Wendel let go of her as she said the tactical leader's name. Fuck. Paulson had known the effects of the hypo-press. He'd disobeyed her command to hold and subsequently injected her with another tracer chip before battering her with a bed pan. The bastard hadn't been demoted or otherwise publicly reprimanded after Lacy's death. And now he was here in Windsor with all-father and neither brother knew.

Tank was walking toward the computer screens, his back to them. She felt the press of something cold and hard in her hand. She wrapped her fingers around it to find that she was holding Wendel's gun.

She turned, to thank him, at least, with her eyes, but he was already following his brother. She headed after him, her vision adjusting to the darkness to find her way around piles of rebar the construction crew had left behind.

By the time she reached them, Tank was sitting in front of a computer. He had turned a banker's lamp on, the light sufficient to show her that he held a stylus and...

"That looks just like the Director's PDA."

"Correction -- it is the old man's PDA." Tank smiled, looking for a second like the boy she'd once been close friends with. "Sounds like he replaced his."

"With everything but the Death Sequence." There, she'd said it, pushed it out into the open. "So why'd you steal it? Was it to bribe your way out of O.D.I.N. or do you have some mad genius plan to take over the world?"

Another familiar smile. It might have relaxed her but then he tapped the PDA's screen with the stylus and the similarity of the motion to all-father's made her blood freeze in her veins.

A new screen popped up on the computer monitor. Tank slid his chair back so she could step in close enough to watch the simulation.

"You wouldn't fucking believe it, Jeri." Wendel leaned over, one hand against her hip as the other pointed out planned Berserker strike locations. There was the Union Parliament and Prime Minister's offices in New York. Another simulation popped up showing a smaller scale first strike scenario that would put O.D.I.N.'s Director in charge of Ontario's government and military. "He was going to use us for a military coup. Stand as one or all our brothers die."

Turning away from the computer, she started to pace. Her chest still throbbed but she couldn't stay still, not with the knowledge that all-father could drop Wendel dead with the press of a button if he got his hands on the code again. She glanced at Tank over her shoulder. "So what have you been doing the last six months?"

Leaving Jeri's question unanswered, Tank slid the PDA back into his pocket. She looked at Wendel, who was rubbing his jaw. All right, they were holding something back, something that both of them knew. But it wasn't in Tank's nature to ignore every question. He couldn't keep his mouth shut like Wendel could.

She returned to the computers. She gestured at the pocket holding the PDA. "Is that the only version of the code?"

"No, but all-father can't access the other."

She fired off another question, her gaze darting between both men. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"So destroy them both. What's the fucking deal?"

She wasn't sure, but something like heartbreak seemed to pass over Tank's face.

Wendel moved until he was between Tank and Jeri. "You have no proof that she's real. It's just some protective AI program all-father put in place around the code."

"She?" Neither brother acted like he had heard Jeri's question.

Tank turned his back on them.

"You're leaving us, fuck, the whole country, at risk --" Wendel's voice was rough and Jeri felt like she'd interrupted an argument that had been stuck in repeat for the last few days.

Spinning around, Tank pulled out the gun he'd taken off Jeri. He took the safety off, chambered a round and offered it to Wendel. "Right, just one life to save so many."

Wendel pushed the gun aside. "Fuck you."

"If you can't pull the fucking trigger, don't ask me to, little brother."

Thirty seconds or so passed with the two men staring at each other, their bodies poised to shift into overdrive, and then Tank shoved the gun back in his waist band.

Jeri stumbled away, sensing she'd just missed getting a bullet between the eyes. Avoiding the light, she found a column to lean against and waited in the dark. She glanced back and could see from their heat signatures they were arguing again. Tank took the gun back out and laid it on the table before turning his back completely on Wendel to work on the computer.

Finding her in the dark, Wendel sat on the floor, his back against the column.

She nudged him with her foot. "What the hell's going on?"

"The other copy is embedded in an operating system, with locks on it. It's how he found out about the death sequence to begin with. Destroy the code, destroy the operating system."

Jeri pushed off from the column and started pacing again. "What operating system?"

"NORN."

O.D.I.N.'s computer network. "He thinks NORN is sentient, is that what you're saying?"

"Not exactly." He shifted position and she could see from his heat register that he had his head buried in his hands. "Think about what all-father's done to our bodies, Valk and Berserker, and then magnify it about a hundred times."

A central processing unit that was human? "That can't be."

Lifting his head, he raised his hands in mock celebration. "Something we can agree on at last."

"So what's the problem?"

"Convincing Tank that there isn't a human being at the other end who won't become a vegetable if the code is destroyed."

She stared at Tank. His fingers were flying over the keyboard. She'd seen him on programming benders, spending days at the computer with little sleep or food. She looked at the overflowing fifty-gallon drum next to the computer table. There were Twinkie and Zinger wrappers on the floor along with empty energy drink bottles.

Her head was clearing, the pain in her chest had subsided to a low throb. "What do we do now?"

"Wait, help him stay as far away from all-father as possible, keep money coming in so he has time to figure this shit out."

"We have to get him out of Windsor -- fast."

Wendel stretched his legs out in front of him. "We've got a little time, Jer. You could use the rest."

She didn't have the chance to tell Wendel he was wrong. Her pacing brought her in line with one of the building's two stairwells. The doors had been closed when they entered. In the dark, they still looked shut, but she could smell something wafting through the nearest one -- a smell that had no business being there.

"Cover!" Screaming the warning, Jeri whipped out her gun and dove for the nearest column. A second later, light pierced the room, accompanied by the loud blast of a flash bang. She rolled, fired three shots in the stairwell's direction while her vision

cleared. A heat signature flashed eight feet in front of her, the size too small to belong to Wendel or Tank. She shot and heard Paulson yell as the ricochet of concrete hit him.

She retreated behind another column, yelling for someone to cover the other stairwell. She looked for Wendel or Tank's heat signatures and saw nothing but a faint glow around one of the columns by the computer table. Then she heard the long slide of metal across the floor as Tank passed her Bersa back to Wendel.

Bullets started hitting the computer cases.

"No!" Tank ran forward and a bullet hit him in the shoulder. The force spun him around so that he fell against the monitors and sent them crashing to the floor.

"Aren't you going to help your brother, Wendel?" All-father mocked from his hiding spot.

Tank kicked the fifty gallon drum over, taking what little shelter it offered. With the way the bullets had cut through the computers' metal casing, Jeri knew it wasn't much. She started working her way toward the far side of the building, hoping she could get behind all-father and Paulson. She saw Wendel spring from one column to the next, his position taking him further from Tank and all-father.

Behind her, someone fired a shot and she turned to see Paulson falling into the circle of light that illuminated the elevator. She fired, her gun jamming.

"Fuck!"

Paulson tried to regain his feet. His gun arm hung loosely at his side and was dripping a steady stream of blood. She rushed him, knocking his feet out from under him. He fell, the lower part of his body inside the lift's cage. He reached for his gun. She kicked it away and then landed a foot against his face. The lift's controls were in reach. Kicking at him, she grabbed the control box.

He dodged the kick and tried to scramble past her. She brought her jammed gun down on his skull just as she pressed the elevator's down button. The cage started to descend and Paulson went wild trying to climb forward. She blocked him with another kick. When he tried to scramble all the way back into the elevator, she reached down and caught his bloody arm, her other hand still operating the control box. The cage was

descending and she fell to her ass, jamming her foot against his shoulder so he couldn't move.

She heard gunfire behind her and then the shattering of glass from the building's blacked out windows.

Her position was exposed, leaving her vulnerable.

Too bad for Paulson she didn't give a fuck. "You killed Lacy, you motherfucker."

He bit at her leg, his body jerking frantically to loosen her grip. The top of the lift's frame touched his back and then he really started to freak, screaming at her to stop the elevator. Half a second later, the cage had him pinned to the floor. She let go of his arm but kept her thumb pressed hard against the control's down button. Bones cracked. Blood spurted from his throat and then he stopped moving altogether as his flesh snapped and the elevator took everything below his shoulder blade down to the next floor.

Turning back to the fight, Jeri saw that three of the windows had been shot out. Moonlight poured into the room, illuminating the battle. Tank had lost his cover and his face was a bloodied mess. Worse than that, he had lost the PDA to all-father, who was using Tank as a shield against Wendel.

Reaching into his jacket, the old man pulled out a handset and placed it on the ground next to him. He fired random shots in Wendel's direction as he worked the PDA's interface with his other hand. At the last tap of all-father's finger against the PDA's screen, Tank began to groan. The groan quickly turned to shrieking.

Wendel stumbled from behind a column, his gun falling to the ground.

All-father raised his weapon and fired. Jeri's heart did a back beat but all that followed was the hollow click of an empty chamber. Roaring, all-father dropped the gun and rushed forward, ripping one of the rebar spikes from its pile.

Jeri fired Paulson's gun but the magazine was out of ammo.

The old man swung at Wendel, missing as the Berserker dove and knocked the Director's legs out from under him. All-father came up swinging again and caught Wendel in the hip. Wendel wrapped his hands around the steel pole but the signal was

already making him weak. She could see the pain in his face and knew he was holding back the same screams Tank was making.

Jeri ran for the handset. The ground near Tank was a mess of broken computer parts and trash from the overturned barrel.

Tank stopped screaming and she looked over at him. The dark brown hair that had matched his brother's had bled to white in the time that had passed from all-father triggering the code.

"Fuck!" She started smashing Paulson's useless rifle against the ground in search of the transmitter.

Nothing! She had to get the PDA off the old man and stop the signal. She spun around in time to see all-father rush Wendel, the rebar out in front of him like a javelin. Frozen, she watched the steel pike pierce Wendel's chest. He fell to his knees. He wrapped his hands around the rebar, his body slumping toward the ground only to be propped up by the length of steel sticking out his back.

Launching herself from the ground, Jeri screamed. The sound pierced the air as she ran across the room. Three feet from all-father, she hit the rebar pile. Leveraging its height, she flew at the old man, feet forward to hit him square in the chest. The force of the kick propelled him backwards -- onto the rebar that impaled Wendel.

The blow also knocked the PDA from all-father's jacket. The slim device skidded across the floor and into the darkness. She dropped to the ground, searching for it and finding nothing but cold concrete. She swept her arms across the floor.

Nothing.

She looked back, saw Wendel motionless beneath all-father's weight.

He would die if she didn't do something about the rebar in his chest.

But he'd die sooner if she didn't find the damn PDA. Tank was probably dead already.

Jeri laid down flat on the ground, arms and legs out, and began to roll. Five feet from where she started she felt it against her bare arm. She scooped the PDA up, her fingers mashing against the screen to bring its control panel up.

“End program,” flashed at her. She double tapped the square and then looked anxiously toward Wendel and the old man.

Wendel was there, sprawled on the ground, his life blood spilling onto the floor.

All-father was nowhere in sight.

Chapter Ten

Beeping filled Wendel's dreams, the constant sound interrupted by gunfire, sirens, crash carts colliding, and the shrieks of his dying brother.

Tank!

Wendel forced his eyes open. Machines surrounded him -- heart monitors, blood pressure clips, pulse oximeter. Tubes were all over the fucking place, like a spider's web. He closed his eyes, instantly returning to the nightmare world of Tank's loft.

He could hear the wind blowing hard through the shot-out windows. It was stealing all the air from the room. He tried to catch it, to breathe it in. His chest felt like lead.

All-father was with him, close as a lover to suck whatever air was left. The old man pushed on his shoulders. The lead weight shifted and fresh pain ripped through him.

He tried to roll to his side, but strings held him back. He blinked, saw the pale blue scrubs of a young nurse and remembered he was in the hospital. She unwrapped the tangled tube from around his arm and methodically reinserted the needle into the back of his hand.

When he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

"Jeri?"

She shifted in her seat. Her feet, dropping to the floor, came into view, followed by her outstretched hand.

He blinked and a second or an afternoon or a day passed. He couldn't tell. There was a tray in front of him and an orderly alongside his bed. Food, his second shot at solids. The first attempt hadn't gone over so well.

Wendel lifted his hand, his fingers flicking just hard enough to knock the pill tray onto the floor. "No more."

The orderly bent down, pocketed two of the pills and put a third back in the cup. "Can't have you going septic on us -- unless you want another tube..."

Wendel shook his head and reached for the antibiotic. He didn't care what the orderly did with the pain killers, as long as he didn't have to take them.

"My brother?"

"Out of intensive care."

Wendel nodded, his gaze drifting to the empty chair in the corner. How many days since Jeri had last visited him?

The orderly read the direction of his gaze. "She went out this morning. Nurses were getting ready to hose her down and force a feeding tube down her throat if she stayed."

A grim smile surfaced at the thought of a flock of nurses trying to take down one of the agency's best assassins. Best assassin, he corrected. She'd pulled his ass out of the fire, killed Paulson, and the old man might yet be dead from his wounds.

He ate, slowly, and made the orderly help him to the bathroom when he came to retrieve the tray. The nurse came in an hour later, pissed that his tubes were out.

Dinner rolled around. Jeri still hadn't returned. She wasn't there the next morning when Tank visited. He was in a wheelchair, his skin and hair still bleached white. A bandage covered his left eye. He looked worse than Wendel felt.

They spoke, each of them fiddling with their bandages. Two weeks had passed since that night at the loft. Tank would be heading back to ASG in the morning, Wendel to the general care ward for a few more days of observation. The Berserker DNA that had threatened their lives while the death sequence was in all-father's hands was now healing their bodies at an accelerated rate.

Everything was going to be okay.

So why was the chair in the corner empty?

The day didn't bring an answer. Nor did the nurse prepping him for transfer the next morning.

"Agent Bastillo -- you're not keeping her out? She's..." He paused, trying to figure out how to explain the inexplicable. "She's family."

The nurse glanced at the chair. "That one? I don't think we could keep her out if she wanted to be here."

She patted his hand, her gaze on the mess of monitoring wires he'd already stripped off that morning. "Don't worry, she'll find you in general."

"Fuck this." He pushed the wires away, ripped the IV tube from the back of his hand and dropped a leg over the side of the bed. The second leg followed and he kicked the wheelchair she had brought with her away from the bed. "Bring me my clothes."

She didn't argue, just pressed a button on her pager.

He pushed onto his feet as two orderlies raced into the room. He looked at the nurse. "You can tell the doctor I'm leaving."

"Sit back down and tell him yourself."

He eyed the orderlies. One was pushing retirement age, the other was the kid who kept pocketing his pain pills. "We're not going to have a problem, are we, fellas?"

"No, because you're going to sit your ass back down on that bed, Wendel Spears."

A woman's voice.

His woman's voice.

Wendel looked past the orderlies to see Jeri standing in the hall. She was in jeans and a sweater, her face scrubbed clean. She looked like a college senior. Smiling, he waved the nurse and orderlies out of the room. The smile faded as soon as he saw Jeri leave two bags out in the hall.

"If those are clothes for me, shouldn't they be in here?"

"If they were clothes for you." She rolled the wheelchair out of the way and shut the door.

"Heading back to central early?" He couldn't bring himself to ask his real question. He half knew the answer, anyway. It was why she'd been gone for two days.

Jeri looked at the floor and then turned away. "No."

"You're not leaving." It was a piss-poor command. He could barely unknot his throat long enough to say the words, let alone deliver them with any force.

Jeri stood between the door and the chair she had occupied the better part of the last two weeks. She stretched her hand out and rested it on the door handle. "Why not? The code is neutralized, you're out of danger. Tank may be hell-bent on returning to the agency but I'm not."

Reaching behind him, Wendel untied the strings to the hospital gown the nurse had forced on him that morning.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not discussing this with my ass hanging out, Jer. I've done that enough these last six years."

She blinked, but her hand didn't leave the door. And she wouldn't look at him.

"Fine." He pulled the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around his waist, leaving his torso and arms bare. He walked slowly toward her. For every inch he moved forward, she moved another inch closer to the door.

"You're not going until we've talked this through."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to talk about."

A foot from Jeri, Wendel put his palm flat against the door. "All-father's still out there. You going to walk away from that?"

Jeri looked up, tears in her eyes. "It was my fault -- don't you see. The body mech... I wasn't careful. He was in all-father's pocket already."

"It's not your fault Reegan and Sykes sold us out."

She was chewing at her lip. He closed the space between them and lifted her chin until she had to look at him.

"But I knew all-father was in town."

"I don't care." The sheet was slipping from his waist. He let it fall.

Jeri looked up at the ceiling. She had given up her death grip on the door handle, her hands moving as if she wanted to find some spot on him she could push at without hurting him.

"I need space."

He pushed his hips forward. She put her hands on them and offered a weak shove.

"Really, I can't breathe."

He kissed her, slow over her lips, catching one corner for a soft bite before moving to the other. "Better?"

She shook her head. "Worse."

"Even if you go, you're not getting rid of me." He put his hands on her shoulder, gently pinning her against the wall. "And no plane or bus is going to let you on with a naked Berserker following after you."

She stopped pushing at his hips, her touch lightening against his skin.

Did she still want him? Or now that most of all-father's hardware was gone from her body, did she realize she'd never wanted him?

"Jeri..."

She stopped touching him and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "Please, just let me go."

It wasn't supposed to be like this -- not now that he had finally relented, ditching the anger and shame over letting her down, letting himself trust her again.

It's not supposed to be like this. That's what she had said -- back in Yreka, cuffed to his bed. And he'd treated her like shit, his need and anger so overwhelming.

Wendel dropped his hands to her waist, covering hers. He bent his neck until his forehead rested against the top of her head. "Baby, please... let me show you how it's supposed to be."

She had turned to stone in his arms. He could feel the weight of it spreading out, infecting his hands, crawling up his arms. If she walked out today, he'd never get her back.

He sank to his knees, his head resting against her hands. She raised them, curled her fingers around her shoulders. Her body started to shake and he pressed his face against her stomach, his breath filtering through the sweater to heat her skin. He wrapped his hands around her hips, need making him squeeze harder than he should.

He felt a flash of anger at his chronic stupidity. He pushed it down, his hands wrapping around the waistband of her jeans. Her flesh was warm, reactive to his touch as his fingers brushed against her. That she couldn't hide it gave him hope.

Unclenching his hands from her jeans, he ran them up under her sweater. She moved, her body arcing slightly toward him. He planted his palm against the small of her back, held her like that while his free hand pushed her sweater higher. He pressed his lips against her stomach and felt her thighs and ass tighten.

Running his free hand over the front of her thigh, Wendel massaged the tense flesh. She dropped her arms and pressed her clenched fists against the wall. He looked up to see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her face was turned to the side, her lower lip tucked under the top row of teeth as she wrestled with impulse.

Flee, fight or fuck -- which was it going to be?

Wendel caught the top button of her jeans. He unthreaded it and then planted a kiss against the skin beneath. Another button, another kiss. Jeri grabbed his head and tried to hold him still, but he wouldn't let her.

After the third button, the jeans were loose enough he could slide them down her hips. She locked her knees too late. The jeans were around her ankles and his hands were on her exposed thighs. He dipped his head lower, brushed his cheeks against the trembling flesh. He nosed her lace-covered cunt, provoking an involuntary jerk in her body.

He wanted her naked, on the bed and moaning for him to enter her. He shook her hands free from his hair and stood. He watched her face as he locked the door.

Apprehension and need reflected back at him.

Good. He could work with those.

Wrapping an arm around Jeri's waist, Wendel lifted her.

"You can't." She touched the bandage over his chest.

He sat her on the mattress. "I damn well fucking can if you'll let me."

She looked away at that, seemed to shrink from him. He caught her by the waist again, one arm holding her while the other worked to peel away her shoes and jeans. He threw the socks down next to them, leaving only her panties to cover the bottom half of her body.

Navy blue lace, they matched the black ones he'd pocketed back at the infirmary. He smiled and slid his hand beneath the thigh band.

She put her hands down, tried to block him. He used his grip on the fabric to pull her closer to him. "Is this why you saved me, Jeri -- so you could turn around and break my heart?"

She shook her head, tears bouncing off her cheek and landing on his hand. He let go abruptly and planted his palms against the mattress on either side of her. He dipped his head, looked at the floor while his brain fumbled with what he wanted to say.

He wanted her to say something, was terrified it would be "good-bye."

She wasn't going to budge. He knew that. She'd spent all those years trying to bridge the growing gap between them and he'd slapped her back each time. What had changed?

Wendel looked up from the floor, her wary stare drilling into him. She was one wrong word, one bad move, away from leaving.

"I love you." Matching her fierce gaze, he covered Jeri's hands with his. "I always have. From that little first grader taking on bullies twice her age to now. You can leave -- but you can't change that."

She crumbled at his words. He watched her do it, fear seizing him that he'd fucked it up again. She started to shake and he wrapped his arms around her. When she wouldn't stop, he pushed her onto the mattress, his body over hers until the trembling subsided.

"Jeri?"

"Shut it, Spears."

Relief bubbled up in his chest. He knew that tone, knew the little hard ass it belonged to. He shifted until he was on his side and could look in her eyes. His hand found her hip again and the waistband of her panties. He rolled onto his back, bringing her with him and finding the other edge of the panties. He pushed and she lifted her hips, sliding and shifting gracefully until she was out of them.

His hands closed on her bare bottom and he coaxed her closer until he could feel the silky tickle of her pubic hair against his cock. He grabbed the hem of her sweater and she backed out of it, leaving just her bra on.

Wendel trapped her hands in his, holding her still as his gaze raked her body. Six plus years of cold showers had to be atoned for and he wanted a taste of it all -- pussy, breasts, that luscious, luscious ass.

With a flick of her wrists, her hands were free and she reached behind her to the bra's hooks.

"Slowly," he pleaded. He watched the last of her clothing disappear in slow measures. He heard the pop of each hook, saw the slide of the strap down one shoulder and then the other. The top of her breasts appeared, and then the hint of two dark areolas.

Jeri halted, teasing him. His gaze begged her to go on. She let the fabric covering her breasts slip another centimeter lower. He groaned, his cock twitching against her pussy. He reached for the bra and she batted his hand away.

"You did say slowly."

Biting his lower lip, Wendel nodded. She felt his hand inching up her thigh to her bare pussy. She tried to scoot back but his other hand clamped around her hip and pressed her tighter to him. She squirmed, unready to relinquish the last scrap of cover she had against him.

His fingers grazed her mound, his thumb gently burrowing its way between her labia.

"I know how to tease, too, Jericho."

Her cunt contracted at his touch and she felt his cock and balls tighten in response.

"Another inch," he begged.

Thinking about the nine hard inches beneath her, she let the bra slip a little lower. Her dark nipples popped out, hard and sore with need. Wendel raised his torso up, his hands still busy holding her in place while he stroked her clit. He chinned the bra a little lower and then his mouth fastened around one nipple.

Jeri raised her ass a fraction of an inch, felt the bob of his hard dick beneath her and then his fingers slid down the ridge of her cunt to find her pussy.

She was wet, ready, her muscles already dancing in anticipation of having his fingers and cock inside her. She raised up a little higher and was rewarded with the slide of his fingers in her. His thumb worked the bulb of her clit while he flexed and thrust his fingers into her.

His lips pulled at her nipple until she could no longer concentrate on keeping the bra in place. It fell between them. She pushed it out of the way and curled her hands around his thick arms.

He slid down, abandoning her completely for one heart stopping second before she felt the rough brush of his chin against her thighs and the press of his mouth against her cunt.

One side rail was still up on the bed and she grabbed it in surprise as his tongue slid into her pussy. She felt a finger tease her ass and then he licked her clit. She couldn't last -- not long, not like this, with his tongue and fingers teasing and thrusting. He was using both hands to fuck her, one buried three fingers into her cunt while the other slowly worked a digit into her ass.

She kept a hard grip on the side rail, her other hand knotted in his hair. He sucked her clit, his tongue as hard and merciless as his fingers were gentle. She tightened around him, her hips beginning to rock as she rode his mouth and hands. Her thighs were trembling, flexing to match the in and out that rocked her cunt and ass. Her

stomach knotted as she tried to prolong the pleasure. His fingers shook inside her until she could hold back no longer. She came crying his name.

In an instant, he had her on her back, her left leg dangling over the side of the rail as he spread her legs. He had two fingers in her, widening her cunt as the head of his cock teased its edges.

He was going to make her come again, with no more than the tease of two fingers and the swollen tip of his erection butting against the fleshy opening to her pussy. She threw her arms over her face.

Wendel pulled them away. "Don't hide from me -- from this."

She nodded, her hands clutching at the bottom sheet as he pulled his fingers out and finally slid into her in one long thrust. He locked his arm around the leg she'd left dangling, his hand on her shoulder so that he was buried as deep into her as he could go.

Jeri twitched, another climax threatening to erupt and leave her senseless. He kept her trapped against him, his hips grinding in slow circles. He was watching her, his gaze never leaving her face.

Wendel switched arms so that he had her pinned still with a hand against her chest while the other...

Oh, fuck, the other -- her brain melted as his thumb pushed into her ass. Clamping her pussy around his cock, she bit down on her bottom lip, whimpering with pleasure as he slowly finger fucked that other hole.

"Look at me, Jeri."

She shook her head and pressed her eyes shut tight.

"Baby..."

"I can't... don't make me."

He squeezed her breast. "You can. Open your eyes."

Still biting her lip, she forced her eyes open. She looked down to where their bodies met, the wet thrust of his thick shaft inside her. Her gaze followed the strong arm that held her down, the broad chest with its white bandage, up the corded muscles

of his neck to the hard, mobile lips repeating her name. And then it was the Berserker blue of his irises as he told her again that he loved her.

Jeri let go of the sheet, her fingers digging into Wendel's flesh at the promise she saw pulsing in his gaze. Her mouth relaxed, the first cry of her orgasm joining his. He dropped forward, his chest pressed against hers as he eased his hold on her and his strokes gentled. She embraced him, her arms thrown about his shoulder and head.

She looked at the locked door. The world was on the other side of it -- waiting for them. "It won't last."

"Shut it, Agent Bastillo." Wendel kissed his way up her neck until his lips were against hers. "They're not in here." His hand was between them, his palm against her breast and the heart beneath. "They can't touch us."

Jeri nodded. It was true for now and that was enough.

Ann Vremont

Ann Vremont is a mother, wife, licensed attorney, technical writer, high school dropout and former Russian linguist for Army SigInt. (Not necessarily in that order.) She's called Bingo for a living, waitressed at a strip club, scooped ice cream and conducted political surveys -- including for the wrong party. You can find her on the web at www.annvremont.com and visit the Men of O.D.I.N. at www.myberserker.com.