

House Phoenix Book One

A man is shown from the back, his arms raised behind his head. He has large, intricate black tattoos on his back that resemble angel wings. The background is a dark, grainy image of a city skyline at night, with various skyscrapers and lights visible. The overall tone is moody and dramatic.

Broken Angel

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Back Cover Copy

One rule: don't lose.

When Gabriel Morgan's sister disappears somewhere in New York's underground, he'll do anything to save her. But finding her is only the beginning, because Marcus Slade won't let her go for less than ten million dollars—earned through Gabriel's blood.

Slade, one of five ruthless leaders of an organization identified only by a symbol, runs hookers and street fighters, and never gives up what's his. Including Gabriel's sister. To win her freedom, Gabriel is forced to undergo a brutal training program with Slade's top fighters in order to become one of them. He is branded, broken, given a new image and a new name.

In the ring, Gabriel is known as Angel...and he does not lose.

Because the price for losing is his sister's life.

Contains violence, blood, and more violence.

Highlight

“You’ll fight for me, Mr. Morgan. I happen to have something you want.” Slade walked to the door, opened it and leaned out. “Get in here.”

“What is going on?” came from beyond the entrance in a woman’s voice tinged with fright. “Apollo, let go of me! Please. Tell me what’s happening...”

Gabriel’s chest became unbearably tight. He pushed himself to his feet, no longer caring what Slade said or did, and took a stumbling step toward the door, and another.

He stopped. An enormous black man filled the entryway, glared at him and stepped through, pulling a dark-haired woman in after him. Her head bent forward and cascading hair hid her face, but he didn’t have to see it. He’d known the instant she spoke.

She lifted her face. Her eyes met his. “Oh, my God.” One hand flew to her mouth.

He barely managed to remain standing. He swallowed hard, but the lump in his throat stayed. Lillith.

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by

S. W. Vaughn

House Phoenix: Book 1

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Dedication

For my boys.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who's been involved in this story, from the readers who've sent me notes asking for more to the family and friends who've spent hours casting the movie and talking about these guys like they were living, breathing people. No writer could ask for more than that—it's the highest honor, and I'm humbled every time. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

Not far from Gabriel Morgan's feet, a used condom festooned a patch of brittle weeds jutting from a crack in the concrete. Cigarette butts, crushed plastic cups, and the occasional spray of brown glass littered the sidewalk near the entrance to another nondescript bar in Brooklyn. A dented aluminum sign above the door proclaimed *Bottoms Up*. Neon letters buzzed and stuttered, and the 'tom' section flickered on and off at irregular speeds like a strobe with a coke habit.

He grimaced and set his gaze on the door again. The names changed, but the landscape stayed the same. A typical stench loaded the night air: smoke, cheap beer, vomit, sweat, the acrid odor of urine. The usual sounds battered the inside walls and escaped to assault his ears. Bass-boosted music mimicked the beat of a heart. Between thuds, raised voices became a torrent of incomprehensible words, while the intermittent scrape of a stool chair fought through the general din.

A hundred bars like this one lay behind him. If he had to, he would search a thousand. More. He'd search more.

A lead from a two-bit dealer at a fight last week had brought him to this bar. The dealer had assured him tonight's entertainment would point to the organization.

He'd heard the line before. It no longer inspired hope, only a grim determination.

The bar door burst open. He moved aside to avoid a collision with a couple who looked ready to drop down and screw on the sidewalk. A hooker and her john. The john had a hand thrust down the back of the hooker's scrap of a skirt. His fingers clenched and kneaded beneath the tight material, lifting the edge enough to show the curves of her ass. She dragged him by his belt buckle.

They paused, and the john kicked the door closed behind them. A few stumbling paces later, he bent to her neck. She squealed and jumped. He laughed against her skin, nuzzled harder, and her mood snapped in a flash.

"Hey! No marks, I told you." She pushed his head away.

The john laughed, a thick rasping sound. "Whatever, babe. I'll just mark you where nobody can see."

"Yeah, I bet you will. Big man." She grabbed his crotch, squeezed, and he gasped. "You gonna— Hey, what do you think this is, a peep show?"

She was staring right at him. He held his hands up, backed a few steps and gestured to the bar. "Sorry. Just going in here."

With a sneer, the john stepped in front. "They don't serve soda in there, kid. You heard the lady. Get lost."

"Do you own the place?"

"No, but I know who does. And he ain't gonna want you here."

"I'm legal age, and I'm going in. Excuse me."

He tried to sidestep the pair. The john laughed and shoved him. Considerable power behind the push almost sent him sprawling.

"I said you're not. Don't try to palm off a fake ID on me. Turn your ass around and go home."

His hands clenched into fists at his sides, but he held back. He'd already spent half a dozen nights in jail over the last six months thanks to his temper, and hadn't minded much because at least he'd been fed. Tonight he had to get in that damned bar. One way or another.

"What're you waitin' for? Beat it, kid. This bar is for big boys."

The hooker stifled a giggle and put a hand on the john's arm. "Cortez, c'mon. I'm getting bored. Let them handle him inside, honey, okay?"

An odd name, Cortez. It seemed he'd heard it somewhere, maybe even from one of the dealers he'd talked with. His mouth went dry with anticipation and he reached in his jacket for Lillith's photo.

Before he could extract it, a knife blade pressed against his throat, and he froze.

"Don't do anything stupid. You have no idea what you're walking into here."

He met Cortez's glittering gaze and tried not to breathe. "It's just a picture," he said as evenly as possible. "I'm looking for someone."

"I ain't seen whoever it is, and neither has anyone inside. Now take your hand out, slow, and you better not have anything in it unless you're looking to wear a red necklace."

The hooker sucked in a breath. "Stop it," she whispered. "Let's go. We're gonna be late."

"Hang on," Cortez said, not looking away from him. "I want to make sure this *puta* gets the point."

He removed his hand and spread his empty fingers. "Happy now?"

The knife pressed harder, then Cortez lowered the blade and it disappeared. "No. C'mon, Jess." With an arm around the prostitute's waist, he led her away.

He stared after them, then turned to the bar, pulled open the door and slipped inside before he could talk himself out of it. The lights had been dimmed to a mellow glow. Hoping not to be noticed, he shuffled away from the entrance, spotted the bathrooms past the dartboards on the far left wall and made his way over. The raucous crowd paid little attention to him.

Glad to find the bathroom empty, he glanced in a mirror and ran a hand over the roughness coating his cheeks. He'd been staying at a YMCA for the past few days, after he couldn't come up with fifty bucks for another week in the sinkhole of a room he'd been renting over on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. The grand he'd come to New York with hadn't lasted long. He'd discovered a few ways to make a fast buck since, none of them pleasant.

He braced a hand on the sink and pulled out the photo he'd been trying to show the asshole outside. The woman frozen in the worn snapshot shared his coloring. Raven-black hair, warm green eyes and honey-gold skin. Lillith Morgan—his sister, his world—gone without a trace. If he didn't find her soon he'd have to resort to those unpleasant alternatives, because he wasn't leaving this damned city without her.

Where are you, Lilly?

The picture back in his pocket, he ran the hot water in the nearest sink and scoured his face and hands. He combed wet fingers through tangled hair. Nothing he could do about his bloodshot eyes, or the hungry look in them. He'd spent too many long nights at places like this, begging strangers to help him. For his trouble he'd received derision, humiliation and jail time, but precious little in the way of information.

He grabbed a small stack of brown, grainy paper towels from the shelf above the sinks, dried his skin and scrubbed at his hair until it stopped dripping. There was a dark stain on his threadbare shirt—one of two he owned. He rubbed at the spot with the towels, and it faded a bit. A glance back in the mirror had him shaking his head. Despite the growth shadowing his lower face, he supposed he still looked young, even for his age. Twenty could get him in most places, but not all of them. He'd paid a small fortune for a slick license fudge that even the cops had never questioned. According to the DMV, he was twenty-two. He had to be if he wanted to find Lillith.

The wad went into the trash on his way back out, and then he searched the bar for indications of his next goal. The location varied from place to place. Some had guards, others just a locked door the barkeep would let spectators through, if they knew what to ask. Occasionally the setup proved a bit more sophisticated, with metal detectors and stone-faced men in dark suits.

A tall, heavyset man stood with folded arms in front of a door in the far right corner. Gabriel wound through the bar toward him and avoided meeting anyone's eyes directly. The bouncer fixed him with a threatening stare.

"I'm here for the action," he shouted over the clamor.

"Who said anything about action?"

He produced a battered wallet from his back pocket and extracted a crumpled twenty, the only cash he had. Trying not to think about how he'd acquired it, he pressed the bill into the bouncer's upturned hand. "Freddie said I'd find some here."

The bouncer grunted, reached back and opened the door. "Move along. Eli and Jeff'll see to ya."

"Thanks." Greedy son of a bitch. He entered a short hallway. The door closed him in, and two men ambled out from a recessed area at the other end of the hall. Keeping his hands clear of his body, he approached slowly. They regarded him with similar expressions of ridicule. The taller of the two nudged his companion and smirked.

"Your turn, buddy. Have a blast."

“Ah, Jesus,” the other man groaned. “Who let you in here, kid?” He glowered and held up a hand. “Stop there. Hands on the wall.”

He turned, bent slightly, and placed his palms against the cool surface.

“Don’t move.” The guard shifted behind him. Hands clapped against his body in hasty rhythm, gingerly at first, gathering more force as the search progressed downward. Once he’d finished, the guard shoved hard against the small of his back and dropped him to his knees.

“Got some ID?”

He struggled to his feet. “Why should you care about ID? I’m already in.”

“Just give it. I’m curious how old you are.”

“Come on! I’m old enough.”

“Shut up and give it.”

He fished out his wallet and flipped it open to his driver’s license. The guard snatched the wallet from him. His eyes widened briefly, and he motioned for his buddy.

“Jeff, c’ mere.”

The taller man approached with a grin. Eli tossed him the wallet, and Jeff’s smile faded. The stares they pinned on him raised his body hairs all over. “What? I’m legal.”

“Yeah. Okay, pal.” Jeff handed the wallet back, and both men moved aside. “Go on down and do your business.”

What the hell was their problem? Nothing in his wallet should have caused such a drastic attitude shift.

He walked past and entered the recessed area. Another door. This one opened on a set of stairs going down, and a medley of familiar, unwelcome sounds. After a while, all street fights looked the same.

Here we go again. He trudged down the basement stairs, already tuning out the flat smack of flesh meeting flesh. Thudding noises rose above the din of a crowd gathered to watch men beat each other senseless. What fun.

He fished out Lillith’s picture and searched the crowd for fresh faces. He’d seen too many of these people before, talked to hundreds of freaks and degenerates. So far he’d learned only that she’d been seen in the company of prominent members of an underground community of street fighting, prostitution and drugs. Members of this organization were identified by a symbol—a five-colored star.

In six months, he hadn’t glimpsed the goddamned star once. Maybe the organization didn’t exist, but he couldn’t entertain that possibility. No organization meant no Lillith, and he’d never find her.

A skeletal brunette leaned against the wall, smoking something. It might have been a cigarette or a joint, or worse. He stopped and brushed back a greasy lock of hair from his eyes. “Excuse me, miss,” he said. “I’m looking for someone. Have you seen this woman?”

The brunette turned glassy eyes on him, blinked and tried to focus on the picture he held out. She gave him a slurred response. "Why? You a cop?"

"No. She's my sister."

"Oh." The woman stared at the photo a few seconds longer. "Nope, haven't seen her. Sorry."

"All right. Thanks anyway." He walked away and searched the blur of faces for a new target. Most of them would say, "Are you a cop? No, never seen her before. Piss off."

Give up. The suggestion drifted, imploring and small. Not happening. He couldn't stop. Six long months of searching and he'd just now come close. Someone here had to know something.

He showed the picture to three more people. Got two "nos" and a "piss off." The odds were good the next person would tell him off, too.

Fists clenched in frustration, he entered the heart of the mob and headed toward the roped-off space in the center of the floor. The fighters, two shirtless men drenched in perspiration, panting, bleeding, circled each other like territorial toms after the same scrap of food.

This close to the action, the stench he'd come to associate with these flesh-fests surged strong, carried on ripples of stale air from the fighters' turbulent motion—a hot smell, like molten metal doused with brackish water, of pain and sweat, of victory wrought from punishment. Here the cheers and hisses became a deafening crescendo, a callous demand for more bloodshed. The fight wouldn't end until one of the combatants collapsed and couldn't get back up.

Battling despair, he silently repeated the mantra he said after every rejection. Just one more time.

He singled out a grinning drunk in a nine-to-five suit who swayed on his feet with a half-empty beer bottle clutched in one hand. Drunks usually stayed cheerful while they crushed his hopes. He approached, thrust the photo before the drunk's face and shouted over the crowd.

"Hey, have you seen her around?"

The drunk looked from the picture to him. His grin widened. "I mighta seen her."

His heart thudded against his chest. "You have? Where?"

"Christ, I dunno. It was like a week or two ago." The brow furrowed. "Lessee. Think it was over in Harlem, mebee right near Uptown." His smile twisted into a leer. "I seen a lot more 'a her than that, too. She's a tight little piece."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, she cost me a coupla hunnerd, that little lady," the drunk blathered on. "But she was worth every penny, know what I mean?" With a sloppy wink, he tried to nudge him, but stumbled.

Cold fingers of apprehension squeezed his stomach. Lillith, a prostitute? *No*. "Are you sure?" He held the picture closer to the drunk's rheumy gaze. "This woman here. You saw her?"

The drunk squinted. "Mmph. Mebee not. The eyes ain't quite right...hair's wrong too..."

"So it wasn't her?"

Laughter dribbled from the drunk's mouth. "Hey, wha's it matter, right? Ya seen one whore, ya seen 'em all."

His temper nearly snared his tongue. He drew a deep breath and shook the photo. "Look. Please. Was it her, or not?"

The drunk lifted the bottle to his lips. After a deep swig, he blinked a few times and stared at the picture. "Nope. Sorry, it musta been somebody else." The grin resurfaced. "She's hot, though. How much you want for her?"

He balled his free hand and launched it at the inebriated smile. His knuckles met the drunk's jaw with a dull smack. The drunk flew back to land flat on the floor. The crowd shifted away, and the drunk struggled to prop himself onto his elbows. Blood bubbled from his lips. Turning his head, he spat a mouthful of thick liquid along with a tooth.

He shoved the picture into his jacket. "That's my sister, you bastard. She's no whore."

The drunk sat up with a wheeze and looked from his recently departed tooth to him, as though he couldn't quite make the connection between the two. At last he lifted to his feet and swiped a clumsy arm across his blood-smeared mouth.

"Whassa matter witchoo?" The words tumbled from lips that couldn't seem to move properly. Pain registered in the drunk's eyes, and anger lurked beneath. "Why'd you go an' do that?"

"Fuck off." He turned and pushed through the packed crowd toward the outskirts of the room. Behind him, the drunk shouted something, and he glanced over his shoulder. A man had grabbed the drunk and held him back.

What the hell?

He broke free of the knot of people, only to walk into a denim-clad, devil-bearded Hispanic who didn't look happy to see him.

"You're causing a lot of trouble, kid." The Hispanic ran a hand through short brown hair and let out an exasperated breath. "Why'd you go and slug poor Kev there? He's only having a good time."

Frustration sharpened his fury and buried his restraint. "Get out of my way." He shoved the man with both hands.

The instant drop in the volume of the crowd turned irritation into cold fear. Even the fighters stopped and stared, as though he had just shot the Pope.

"You touched me." The Hispanic sounded genuinely amazed. "You pushed me. First you knock my cousin's teeth out, then you try to punk *me*?" His words rang in the silence. Veins popped into relief along his neck. He stepped forward.

Dull pain exploded in his gut. His breath gasped out, and he landed on his knees. He hadn't even seen the blow.

"Out," the Hispanic barked.

The floor beneath him vibrated. Murmurs hummed through the departing crowd like water whispering down a drain. He started to rise, but someone behind pushed him down. Something solid planted itself between his shoulder blades. It felt like a foot.

“Not you. You stay.” The voice belonged to the man he’d pushed.

“You want his wallet, Diego?” a man behind him said.

“Yeah. Then let him up.”

The pressure on his back increased. A hand wrestled his wallet from his pocket. His head throbbed with confusion. They weren’t mugging him. What was so goddamn fascinating about his wallet?

The foot retreated. He coughed and stood. Another Hispanic, a heavily muscled thug in a tight blue tee shirt, had joined the one called Diego.

Diego looked from the license to his face. He closed the wallet, held it between two fingers and tapped it on his open palm. A dark smile surfaced. “I’d kill you for free, but right now you’re worth more to me alive.”

Chapter 2

Christ. Hadn't the man seen his empty billfold? At the moment he wasn't even worth a pound of flesh. "Look, I'm sorry about your cousin. Can I have my wallet back?"

"Sure." Diego grinned and dropped it on the floor. It landed with a flat smack that reverberated through the empty basement.

He looked from the wallet to Diego. "How about handing it to me?"

"You want it, you get it."

"Come on, man." He glanced over his shoulder. At least only one thug waited to hit him from behind. "I said I was sorry."

Diego stopped smiling. "Pick it up, *ese*. You won't like how I give it to you."

Damn it. He shouldn't have slugged the drunk. Maybe his father had been right. One of these days, his temper would get him killed.

Maybe today.

Diego would probably beat him down if he didn't go along with the ploy. He bent and tried to stay out of range, reached for the wallet.

Diego kicked him in the head.

Pain flared in his jaw. He dropped to the floor and rolled onto his back, momentarily stunned. Blood seeped into his mouth. He spluttered, turned aside and curled inward, shielding his head with his arms.

"Damn. You still have all your teeth." Before he could think to move, Diego stomped on his arm and drove it against his face. He yowled and scuttled away. Blood gushed this time, splashing down his chin to streak the floor. With one hand clamped to his jaw, he scrambled to his feet and stood, gasping. His wallet lay where Diego had dropped it. A few drops of blood glistened on the scuffed surface.

Diego gestured at the floor. "Thought you wanted that. So pick it up already." The grin remained in place, made him a demented joker minus the jingling cap. Diego could have posed for Satan's custom card deck.

When he made no move to try again, Diego said, "Nails, give the kid his wallet."

Fuck this. He could live without it.

He whirled and sprinted for the stairs. The muscled thug gave chase. Followed by Diego's laughter, he grabbed the rail and propelled himself up, two and three steps at a time. He had almost reached the top when he collided with a wall.

The wall had hands. They grabbed his arms and held him back. It was the man who'd restrained the drunk earlier.

“Where’re you runnin’ off to?” The man turned him around and pushed him down the stairs, toward the thug standing at the bottom.

Another round of laughter rolled from Diego. “Kaiser, you just accidentally did something right. Get him down here.”

“Sure, boss.” Kaiser’s hand fell on his shoulder.

He jerked away, walked slowly down the stairs and stopped on the last step. Glaring, he pulled together all the strength he could muster and lobbed a fist at the thug’s face. Nails caught his wrist in mid-swing with one hand, and drove the other into his stomach.

He bent double with the blow. Nails tossed him headlong away from the stairs. He tumbled once and landed in a heap. Nails strode over, hauled him to his feet and pressed him face-first against the wall, pinning his arms behind him.

He thrashed in his grip. A knee pounded his spine.

“Hold still,” Nails grunted. “You owe Diego a couple of teeth.”

“Hey. *Calmate, ’mano*,” Diego said. His voice sounded closer. “Just give him his wallet. Changed my mind about the teeth. Permanent damage might lower the prize. You know that ritzy son of a whore’s always looking for a fuckin’ loophole.”

Fear drained the fight from him. This time he couldn’t dismiss the bizarre nature of Diego’s words. “What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. “What prize? Whose loophole?”

Nails stuffed his wallet back into his pocket, ground him into the wall, held him there, and released his grip fast. He sagged, but managed to stay on his feet, and turned to meet Diego’s painted smile.

“Didn’t you know? You’re a wanted man, Gabriel Morgan. If that license is a fake, now’s the time to ’fess up, lose a few teeth, and scram.”

“W-wanted? By who?”

“Marcus Slade.”

“Who?”

Diego shrugged. “If you don’t know, I guess you’ll find out when we get there.”

“Wait. Wait a minute.” He closed his eyes. This couldn’t be happening. Why would some thug offer a reward for him? It had to be a mistake. He would have pinched himself, been convinced he was dreaming, if the sharp ache in his jaw and his gut weren’t so real. “There’s eight million people in this city. Has to be more than one Gabriel Morgan.”

“Maybe. Got a point?”

“I don’t know anyone named Slade!” He forced himself to breathe evenly. “I’m nobody. Whoever this guy is, he’s not looking for me. I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re a pain in the ass. Around here, that’s enough.” Diego motioned a hand in the air. Nails and Kaiser moved in. “You aren’t gonna come quiet, are you? Don’t matter to me, one way or the other.”

“Hold on. I’m telling you, you got the wrong guy.” He stepped back and encountered the wall behind him. “I don’t even live in the city. I’m from Upstate. Buffalo. I’m just trying to find someone, that’s all.” He reached for Lillith’s photo.

Nails and Kaiser were faster. They produced guns.

“Damn it, it’s just a picture! Your buddies upstairs already searched me.” His pulse jumped and hammered in his throat. A tremor shot down his spine. These men would kill him without hesitation. They’d shoot him where he stood, and then go to wherever thugs went for a nice dinner, their consciences clean. With a sickening jolt, he realized Diego never said this Slade guy wanted him alive.

At last, Diego extended a hand. “All right. Let’s see it.”

Caution tempered his relief. He still had to convince them he wasn’t the right guy, not a criminal or a narc, or whatever they thought he was. Just some guy looking for his sister. He slid the photo out slowly and handed it over.

Diego took it. His eyes widened briefly. A short grunt escaped him. Shit, somehow he’d pissed the man off again. But then Diego gave a wintry laugh, and his stomach twisted. “Sorry, kid. You’re definitely the right one.” Diego lowered the photo and met his eyes with manic glee. “Nails. Put him out.”

Nails reversed his grip on the gun, and the butt end smashed his temple. White-hot agony filled his head and faded to black.

* * * *

The Marquis-Grant was four stories of understated elegance, situated just off Fifth Avenue in high uptown Manhattan. Close enough to Harlem to qualify the neighborhood as borderline gauche, the hotel and the small but immaculate grounds around it stood unscathed by graffiti and litter. Marcus Slade fancied himself a businessman, and would have no less.

Diego threw the Rolls into park. He killed the engine and twisted around to address Kaiser in the back seat. “Bring the kid around back. I’ll roust the prick.”

Kaiser grunted an acknowledgment, slid out of the car and reached back in to haul Gabriel’s limp, bound body toward him. He slung the kid over a broad shoulder and disappeared into the alley next to the hotel.

From the passenger side, Nails watched him fade into the darkness. “You sure he can handle it?”

“No sweat. That kid’s not gonna come around for a while.” He faced forward and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Out the window, a stretch limo with tinted windows rolled up, slowed to a near stop, and kept going. Slade’s clientele tended toward the loaded side. This one must have been looking for a discreet drop. Fuck the slick bastard. He wasn’t about to move the Rolls.

“Do me a favor and stay with the car,” he said to Nails. “It feels like a cop kind of night, and my glove box is full.”

“You’ll be okay alone?”

“Please. The day I can’t handle Slade is the day my sweet old *abuelita* takes up table dancing. You worry too much, *’mano*.”

Grinning, he jumped from the car, circled the back and plodded across the grass, digging his boots in with every step. Four stone stairs led to the glass front doors—locked, of course. Slade didn’t like surprises. The front lobby lay empty and dark. He depressed the buzzer on the intercom beside the door and held it down for a good twenty seconds, then looked up and waved at the security camera.

“Mendez, what do you want?” Slade’s voice oozed disdain through the speaker.

“*Hola*, Chief. How’s it hangin’?” He produced a switchblade and began cleaning under his nails.

“Put that thing away. And state your business or leave. I haven’t got all night.”

“What? This?” He twirled the knife a few times.

“Damn it, Mendez, what are you doing here?”

“I brought you a present.” He closed the blade, pocketed it. “Check your back camera. I’ll wait.”

Seconds passed. The intercom emitted a high-pitched whine, and an incensed Slade sputtered, “You’re bringing bodies to my door now? You have five seconds before I get the police here.”

“Take it easy, Chief. He’s still breathing.”

“Who’s still breathing?”

“Gabriel Morgan.”

The silence lasted longer this time. “You found him?”

“Yeah. Some shit, ain’t it? You’d better have cash on you, ’cause I won’t take a check.”

The electronic lock clicked and whirred. He pulled the door open and sauntered into the lobby.

“You brought the boy. How...interesting.”

The soft voice seemed to originate from the shadows. He whirled, looking for its owner. At last he made out the slender figure standing in the hallway beside the front desk, backlit by a glow from further down. The face remained in shadow, but he recognized the distinct shape of the Japanese clothing, the sweep of the hair pulled back in a tight braid. Jenner.

Slade’s freak of a lieutenant did not inspire him to relax.

“Where’s Slade?” He approached the wiry Bengali with disgust. The creepy mixed-up fucker never had settled on what he was, Indian or Japanese. Rumor had it Jenner wasn’t even human. He didn’t buy it, but he had to admit the old man unsettled him a bit. Only to himself, of course.

Jenner moved aside. Light struck his cold gray eyes and dappled his stone features with shadow. “He is waiting for you. I will escort you.” He motioned down the hall.

“You first.”

“Very well.” Jenner turned and drifted toward the light. A three-foot braid the color of smoke hung down the center of his back. On any other man, it would have looked ridiculous.

Goddamned thing. One of these days, he intended to cut it off.

“Perhaps you should not have left your lieutenant outside,” Jenner said. His back was turned, but his voice carried perfectly. “Much as your fear amuses me, it will not impress Marcus.”

“Please. The only thing scary about you is the way you dress.”

Jenner offered a shrug and continued onward. He stopped at the end and headed right. A shorter hall lay around the corner, terminating in a single frosted glass door. Jenner gripped the knob and turned to him with a wry smirk.

“I do hope you have not broken the boy. After all, that is my job.”

Fucking freak. “He’s fine. Barely scratched.”

Jenner opened the door and stood back. Imposing a casual stroll on legs that wanted to pick up the pace, he entered the room. The door closed with Jenner on the opposite side. Good riddance.

A spacious office lay before him with three-by-three rows of monitor screens mounted in a recess on the left wall, and elegant vertical blinds drawn against the night across an oversized window. A solid oak desk stood before the window. Behind the desk sat Marcus Slade, all-American male. From his blond hair and blue eyes to the slight dimple in his chiseled chin, Slade could have passed for a harmless executive playboy. The only clue to his deviant nature lay in his eyes. Two chips of unforgiving ice challenged anyone who met them to risk his wrath at their own peril.

He met the expression with a dismissive smirk. Jenner worried him—a little—but Slade was a walking, talking bluff.

Slade glowered at him. “He’s damaged.”

“Nah. He’s gift-wrapped.” He dropped into a nearby chair. “It’s all surface shit. He’ll come around in a bit.”

“He’d better.” Slade hit a button on the intercom phone beside him.

“Yes, Mr. Slade,” came the immediate response.

“Sol. Send Apollo to the back. Have him bring young Mr. Morgan downstairs. He’s not to hurt him. Understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Slade.”

Slade folded his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “Give me one good reason not to make you wait until the boy wakes up before you collect.”

“I ain’t gonna play this game with you, asshole.” He yanked a cellphone from his pocket, dialed, waited. “Kaiser, bring the kid back to the car. We’re leaving.”

“All right,” Slade snapped. “Good enough.”

“Never mind,” he said over Kaiser’s muttered agreement. “Stay there. Apollo’s coming to get him.” He replaced the phone and glared at Slade. “Don’t fuck with me. Gimme the goddamned money.”

Slade opened a bottom drawer, came up with a blue duffel bag and threw it across the desk. It hit him square in the chest. "One hundred thousand, cash. It's all there. Don't bother counting it."

"I won't. But I am going to make sure you're not giving me your dirty laundry." He pulled the zipper open and thrust a hand into banded stacks of hundred dollar bills. "Sweet. Feels like a hundred grand to me." He closed the bag, stood, and shouldered it. "Oh! Almost forgot. You owe me another fifty bucks, Chief."

"What are you talking about?"

"Delivery fee. Plus gas and tolls."

"You're kidding me."

He held out a hand. "Do I look like I'm kidding?"

"Mendez, you are a worm." Slade stood and extracted a thick wad of folded bills held together with a hinged gold clip from a pocket, teased a fifty from it and slapped it hard into his waiting palm. "Now get out."

"Sure. Pleasure doin' business with you."

"I can't say the same. Leave."

Laughing, he snapped off a two-fingered mock salute and let himself out.

* * * *

Gabriel fought the light that edged the blackness, struggling to stay unaware of his battered body for as long as possible.

Cold ravaged his flesh and gnawed at his bones. Fits of shivers forced awareness into him. At first he thought they'd left him outside, but it had been a warm night. Maybe they'd stuffed him in a freezer. The surface beneath him was solid and unforgiving, and slightly damp.

He tried to open his eyes. Only one of them responded. The other, where Nails had struck him, had swollen nearly shut, and a gummy substance sealed the lids together. He suspected it was blood. His head throbbed a sickening rhythm that his stomach copied, and his throat tightened with every pulse.

He lay still and breathed slowly. The nausea lessened but refused to disappear. Wherever he was, it was fairly dark. Everything looked gray. After a moment, he realized the floor really was gray. Damp concrete, too smooth for a parking lot, extended far enough to convince him he was inside somewhere.

A parking garage? He'd heard no sound since he woke, not even distant traffic or the whisper of wind. He shifted, suppressed the renewed urge to vomit and tried to push himself up.

His arms wouldn't move. He curled a hand, and his numb fingers brushed something rough. Rope. They'd tied his hands behind his back.

Fear pulled his senses into sharp relief. He rolled onto his side. An explosive groan escaped clenched teeth. At least his legs weren't tied. He managed to sit up, and slumped forward with a gasp. A wave of dizziness threatened to knock him out again. He closed his eyes and willed it to pass.

At last, he lifted his head. A wall of cement blocks rose in front of him and stretched to an unfinished ceiling. Moisture glistened on the worn mortar between the blocks, suggesting a basement. The dim light came from a single fluorescent tube, the only one lit of several that striped the space beyond the beams at regular intervals.

He took slow breaths and forced himself to stay calm. This place could be anywhere. Diego and his thugs might have put him in storage until they contacted this Slade person, or they might have brought him to the man already. He had no idea how long he'd been out, and no desire to find out why Slade wanted him.

To his left loomed a steel door. Probably locked, but he had to try it. Even if the door was open and he managed to escape this place, he would somehow have to free his hands. He panned his gaze along the room, looking for something that might saw through the rope. The sight of pairs of manacles and chains hanging from the back wall stopped him cold.

Not a basement. A dungeon.

Heightened fear galvanized him into action. He pushed back with his feet and slid across the floor until his bound hands met the wall behind him. Using the surface for leverage, he struggled to rise an inch at a time. Gained his feet and leaned back. His breath left in ragged pants, and his legs shook beneath him.

Think, damn it. The rough cement might erode the rope if he rubbed against it long enough. That might take hours, though. He tried rotating his wrists. The coarse fiber abraded his skin, but the ropes gave a fraction of an inch. Working his hands free would shred his flesh.

Unfortunately, he had no other options.

Drawing a fortifying breath, he clenched his jaw and wrenched his hands in opposite directions, back and forth, as quickly as he could manage. A burning sensation spread through his wrists. The rope ground away layers of skin and the burn became stinging pain as blood trickled from the abrasions. After a few minutes, his shoulders ached with the effort. He kept at it, gained enough to pull his hands through to the base of his thumbs. A bitter laugh escaped him when he realized his blood soaking the ropes made them more pliable.

Almost there. Another inch and he'd be free. Everything burned. Wet warmth drizzled into his palms. The pain drove him to his knees. He stayed there and kept working at the bonds. If the door was locked, at least he could try to surprise anyone who came through it. He'd have a sliver of a chance. Better than nothing.

A hollow click sounded in the stillness, followed by the groan of hinges as the door opened. His breath left him.

He stood and turned to face the door fully, concealing the evidence of his struggle from whoever planned to enter. A stranger walked in, closed the door and approached him. The man wore a tailored black suit with a white shirt open at the throat and no tie. Thick blond hair framed a granite face from which frigid blue eyes asserted dominance.

"I'm going to guess you're Marcus Slade." Trying to move slowly so the other man wouldn't notice, he started on the ropes again. The door had to be open. If he could get past this guy, he might be able to escape.

The man flashed a brittle and humorless smile. "Smart boy. And you're Gabriel Morgan. Now that we've been introduced, you can have a seat, and we'll talk."

Crazy motherfucker. "I'm not—"

Slade gripped his jacket and smashed him against the wall. His mangled wrists banged the cement and drew a cry from him. Slade dragged him down the rough surface, forced him to sit on the floor and hunkered in front of him without relaxing his grip.

"From now on, when I tell you to do something, you will do it." One hand left his jacket, gripped his chin and forced his head toward the door. "There's a camera up there. I've been watching you, and I saw what you did to your wrists. Stop it."

"You're insane." He jerked his head from Slade's hand. "I don't even know you! Why did you bring me here? What do you want? You can't do this. You can't just keep me here and... What do you want with me?" He lunged aside, hoping to break the grip on his jacket.

Slade held fast and backhanded him.

Agony exploded behind his eyes. Hot blood filled his mouth, coated his tongue with a bitter metal-salt taste. He shuddered and stilled.

"We're off to a bad start. Let's try again." Slade stood and stared down at him. "You are Gabriel Morgan. I am Marcus Slade. I'm a businessman, and I have a proposition for you. That's why I brought you here."

"A proposition," he repeated numbly. "Funny, but this doesn't feel like an offer."

"Oh, I have no intention of allowing you to refuse. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way."

His mouth opened, shut. This psycho was going to kill him. How could he get out of this? Struggling wouldn't work. In his current condition, he couldn't physically overpower Slade. The man was as strong as one of Diego's goons. He'd have to play along until he could think of something else.

"All right," he said. "What do you want?"

"It's simple, really. I run fighters and girls, and they make me a lot of money. You're going to fight for me."

"The hell I am," he snapped before he could stop himself. "You're talking about those basement beat-downs your pal Diego does? No. And why do you want me?"

Slade laughed. "First off, Diego Mendez is no friend of mine. I don't know how you ended up with him, and I don't want to know. Second, those ridiculous little pissing contests you've been hanging around are not fights. The organization doesn't even recognize them."

A lead weight settled in his stomach. This bastard belonged to the organization? At once he recalled Diego's reaction when he looked at Lillith's picture.

He was definitely the right one. And Slade had said fighters...and girls.

Oh God. No...

"You'll fight for me, Mr. Morgan. I happen to have something you want." Slade walked to the door, opened it and leaned out. "Get in here."

"What is going on?" came from beyond the entrance in a woman's voice tinged with fright. "Apollo, let go of me! Please. Tell me what's happening..."

His chest became unbearably tight. He pushed himself to his feet, no longer caring what Slade said or did, and took a stumbling step toward the door, and another.

He stopped. An enormous black man filled the entryway, glared at him and stepped through, pulling a dark-haired woman in after him. Her head bent forward and cascading hair hid her face, but he didn't have to see it. He'd known the instant she spoke.

She lifted her face. Her eyes met his. "Oh, my God." One hand flew to her mouth.

He barely managed to remain standing. He swallowed hard, but the lump in his throat stayed. Lillith.

Chapter 3

“Gabriel!” Lillith wrenched her arm away from the man she’d called Apollo and flew toward him with a sob. Tears streaming from her eyes, she reached out and traced his jawline with her fingertips, as though she had to verify his solidity. “No. Oh, Jesus, no.” She whirled on Slade and screamed, “You bastard! What did you do to him?”

“Lilly.” His eyes burned with the force of his emotions, but he wouldn’t let that maniac see him lose control. “I’m okay. Really.” The lie came easy. He’d had years of practice.

“Okay? You call this okay?” Her breath hitched and wavered. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

“Looking for you.”

The last of her composure crumbled. She buried her face in her hands and sank to the floor in front of him, shaking with the force of her sobs.

He directed a vicious look at Slade. “If you’ve hurt my sister, you sick, twisted son of a bitch, I’ll kill you. I swear to God I will.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, Mr. Morgan. As I said, the deal is simple. You agree to my terms, or she pays the price.”

Lillith shot from the floor and launched herself at Slade. “Leave him alone!” She pummeled his chest with her fists, striking blindly. Slade caught one of her wrists, and with his free hand produced a short knife. Lillith froze.

“Don’t!” He lunged forward, stumbled. His knees hit the floor. “Don’t hurt her,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’ll do whatever you want. Anything.”

“I know you will.” Slade released his hold and offered the knife to Lillith, handle first, inclined his head toward him. “Cut him loose.”

Lillith accepted the knife with a trembling hand. “Loose from what?” she asked.

“His hands are tied. Get that rope off him before he cripples himself.”

She blanched. Unable to meet the devastation in her eyes, he lowered his head. Just like old times. She’d taken care of him with worse injuries than these, after their father had finished with him. He still carried the shame, the guilt.

Lillith circled him and moaned at what must have been an ugly sight. He sensed her kneel behind him. “I can’t,” she whispered. “Gabriel, it’s so bad. I can’t...hurt you more.”

“You won’t. It’s okay. If you can just separate them, I’ll get the ropes off.”

Her breath caught and held. He steeled himself for her touch. She gripped his forearm, hesitated, and sawed through a rope. At least she knew enough to do it fast. His freed arm dropped instantly. Lillith lowered the one she held with a shuddering sigh.

“Thank you,” he murmured, aware she needed to hear it.

Slade closed in on them. "I'll have my knife back now, before either of you try something you'll regret."

Lillith stood and surrendered the weapon. Above his blood-streaked hands, the frayed ropes dangled loose around his wrists. He slid them off and tried to determine the least painful way to stand. As though she sensed his intentions, Lillith came to his side, crouched and put an arm around his waist. He gave her an apologetic smile. She nodded and helped him to his feet.

Slade motioned to the scowling giant. "Apollo, take Lillith upstairs."

"Wait!" He moved in front of her. "I said I'd do what you want. Let her go."

Slade's eyes narrowed. "Really, Mr. Morgan. Do you think I'm stupid? If she leaves, you have no incentive to work. She stays."

"What do you mean, work?" A shrill note entered Lillith's voice. "Slade, what are you going to do to him?"

Slade loosed a mocking laugh. "Not a thing, dear girl. Your brother is going to fight for me. And win, of course. Every time."

"No." Lillith put a protective hand on his arm. "You can't do that. Those fights...I've seen them. Seen the fighters. Jesus, Slade, they'll kill him out there!" Her fingers tightened. "Gabriel, don't let him do this. Just leave me here. I'll be fine."

"The decision has already been made, Lillith." Slade's icy tone brooked no argument. "He stays. You stay. He fights, or you die. Understand?"

She stiffened, about to intervene again, but he couldn't let her. Shifting, he put an arm around her shoulders, held her to him. Blood from his torn wrists smeared on her shirt. He hadn't wanted to sully her, but his relief demanded the embrace—if only to assure himself she was real. She collapsed against him with a wail.

"It's all right, Lilly," he whispered near her ear. "Don't try to fight him, okay? I can do this. I'll get us both out of here."

She looked up at him and sniffled. "I never meant for this to happen. I'm so sorry."

Before he could assure Lilly it wasn't her fault, the thug jerked her away and dragged her toward the door. She resisted, screaming tearful obscenities, until he called after her, "Everything is okay, Lilly. Don't cry. I'll see you again soon."

"Gabe." Lillith slumped. Head bowed, she allowed Apollo to lead her out.

The door closed. He met Slade's bemused expression with a grimace. "If you even touch her..."

"Yes, yes. You'll kill me. Forgive me if I don't exactly fear for my life, Mr. Morgan." Slade pulled a cellphone from an inside pocket and keyed in a series of numbers, too many digits for a call. A text message, maybe. "You've no need to worry at the moment. As long as you do what you're told, your sister will be safe."

Rage shook him to the core. "Fine. Tell me to do something, then."

“Patience, young one. We’ll get to that. You need training first, and that takes time.” Slade replaced the phone and crossed his arms. “For now, you have an appointment with Jenner. A welcome of sorts, so you can get to know your place here.”

“Jenner?”

“My lieutenant. He’ll be down shortly.” The sanguine smile that crossed Slade’s face seemed to have crawled from the sewers. “I highly recommend that you cooperate with him completely and without question—unless you want to discover depths of suffering you’ve never imagined possible.”

He looked away. Nothing could be worse than the anguish he felt now, for having failed Lillith already. He could imagine plenty of suffering. He’d endured it all his life to protect her from their father’s unending brutality.

No one could be crueler than Victor Morgan. Even if this Jenner was the devil himself.

* * * *

As he waited in silence, questions plagued him that he didn’t dare ask Slade. He couldn’t look at the bastard. Would he be forced to stay in this dungeon? He had no idea what was upstairs. How much would he have to fight to earn Lillith’s freedom—once, ten times, a hundred? The uncertainty tormented him. For all he knew, Slade might expect him to remain here until he was old and broken, or permanently crippled in a fight. A lifetime.

He would not allow this monster to confine his sister forever. He’d play along for now, but when the opportunity came, he would rescue Lillith and leave.

The door opened. He expected another hulking brute, a man who could break his arms like toothpicks or snap his neck with a single twist. Instead, a shadow slipped through and glided inside. The slim figure cleaved to the darkness that edged the borders of the room, and he could make out nothing save the suggestion of a shape. Odd clothing draped the silhouette—what appeared to be a knee-length dress with long, flared sleeves and loose pants beneath. If Slade hadn’t used a male pronoun in reference to Jenner, he would have thought him a woman.

Jenner approached Slade and stopped just outside the light.

Although he still couldn’t see more than a hint of the lieutenant, the man’s presence commanded his attention. Repulsion, dread, and a hint of fascination frightened him more than Slade’s threats, but also sharpened his curiosity. A bulky object dangled from Jenner’s hand at his side. In shadowed relief, it appeared to be an oversized purse with a handle instead of a shoulder strap.

Another intimation of femininity. Was the man a transvestite?

“Don’t hurt him too badly.” Slade watched him as he spoke, and the cesspool smile resurfaced. “I want him to start training as soon as possible.”

Jenner’s head turned toward Slade. His silhouette stood in sharp relief. Something slender and snakelike hung from the back of his head. His hair. A single thick braid fell to his waist and became lost in darkness.

“Of course.” Two words, whispers of silk and smoke, dripping with venom.

A frisson of terror stirred in his soul. The man was a snake. The devil himself. He shook his head and forced the idea away. Ridiculous. The top of Jenner’s head barely cleared Slade’s shoulder, and with his slim figure, a gust of wind could carry him away. He refused the fear, snuffed it beneath a slow burn of hatred.

Slade glanced in Jenner’s direction. The distaste stamped on his features seemed a visceral reaction. “I’m leaving.” He passed the lieutenant, coming nowhere close enough for even the suggestion of physical contact, stopped at the door and spoke without turning. “Don’t disappoint me, Mr. Morgan. Your sister’s life depends on my satisfaction.”

The door closed with the finality of a tomb.

“It looks like just the two of us, does it not, angel?”

A hard shudder shook him. The bizarre tag—angel—rolled from Jenner’s tongue with a lover’s intimacy. Jesus fucking Christ. Jenner intended to shackle him to the wall and rape him.

“Don’t touch me.” The demand emerged a moan. He backed away and raked the room in desperation with his gaze, seeking escape.

“Do not flatter yourself,” Jenner said in a brittle tone capable of crushing diamonds. “I have no such intentions.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

“I have not yet decided.”

Jenner moved into the light, and what had seemed like a dress in shadow proved to be an Asian costume—Chinese or Japanese, he wasn’t sure which. Simple clasps held together a long jacket of pale gray silk. Black piping trimmed the sleeves, the straight collar, and the garment edges. Flowing pants matched the jacket. Yet Jenner’s aquiline nose and swarthy complexion marked him as East Indian, not oriental.

His hair was gray, the color of brushed steel—an old man, but no other typical descriptors of age seemed to apply. Sinewy rather than gaunt. Not wizened or wrinkled, but grizzled and hard. And the eyes; pale, argent circles of smoked glass. Glittering gray, like the rest of him. How could an Indian have gray eyes? His lineage must have included Caucasian blood at some point.

The cold glint in those eyes bound him more effectively than any rope. He couldn’t move.

“Your determination is admirable. Few men would expend such effort to locate a mere sibling. Do you truly love your sister that much?”

More. “None of your business.” Anger broke the spell of Jenner’s gaze. In this snake’s mouth, a reference to Lillith sounded blasphemous.

“A shame.” Jenner placed the object he held on the floor. A black satchel. A doctor’s bag. “What did you intend to do when you found her, little guardian angel? Help her find a job, perhaps an apartment? It is far too late for that.”

“I...she needs me.”

“Did you ever consider that she might not want your help?”

Disgust twisted his stomach. “Lillith isn’t like you people. She wouldn’t have become a...prostitute on her own. She has a good heart.”

Jenner sneered. “While your sister’s clients do appreciate her many attributes, I am not certain her heart is high on their lists.”

“Fuck you!”

“I thought you were not interested in such activities, angel. You requested not to be touched.” Jenner’s hand slid inside his robe and reappeared gripping what looked like a collapsible radio antenna. He extended it with a flick of his wrist, and waved it at him in a dismissive gesture.

Pain flared across his face. He flinched back with a strangled oath.

“Your language is appalling.” Jenner collapsed the antenna. “Apologize.”

“Go to hell.”

Jenner arched an eyebrow and leveled an unwavering look at him. He bent and reached for his bag.

He flew at him, but the lieutenant’s slim body weighed more than it had appeared. Still, the lunge knocked Jenner to the floor. His torn wrists screamed a protest, but he ignored the pain and wrapped his hands around the sallow throat. “Don’t touch me, and don’t talk about Lillith. I’ll kill you.”

“Go ahead, angel.”

“Stop calling me that!” He squeezed harder. Jenner’s skin darkened, and his breath rattled beneath his hands.

Jenner managed a whispering wheeze. He almost seemed to be smiling. “Do it. You will be...a murderer. Even...worse...than me.”

“Nothing is worse than you.”

“You are forgetting...the camera.”

“Damn it!” He released him and scrambled back, shot a panicked glance at the spot above the door. “You’re crazy. All of you. Shit!” He sat hard on the floor, drained as quickly as the rage had taken him. “Please. Don’t hurt Lillith. I’m sorry.”

Jenner righted himself. Burgundy stains smudged his neck and the collar of his shirt—blood from his wrists. Jenner glanced down, and his mouth firmed in distaste. “It is difficult to remove bloodstains from silk. I quite liked this jacket.”

He stared at him.

Jenner rose and smoothed a few wrinkles in the fabric. Behind him, the door opened. Apollo strode through and headed straight for him.

“Stop,” Jenner said.

The giant froze.

“What do you think you are doing?”

Confusion furrowed Apollo’s brow. “Slade said the little bastard was acting up. He told me to teach him a lesson.”

“Do not touch him.” A cellphone appeared in Jenner’s hand. He dialed, his features completely blank, and held the device to his ear. “Marcus. I told you I did not want any interruptions.” He paused. “No. Stop interfering with my work.”

Another pause. Jenner’s clear gray gaze shifted and withered him. “Of course I let him. His limits must be tested.” Silence again. “Not yet. He will pay for this transgression himself. Save the girl for...special occasions.”

He bit down hard against a rising scream. His fists clenched and his nails dug his palms. The pressure forced new blood from his wrists.

“Fine. Do not interrupt us again. In fact, turn the blasted camera off.” Jenner thumbed a button and returned the phone to his robe. He glanced at Apollo. “Your services are not needed. You may go.”

Apollo hesitated. “But Slade said—”

“Get out.”

The look in Jenner’s eyes seemed to make the giant reconsider. Apollo left.

Jenner turned his scathing stare on him. “Stand.”

Terror tied knots in his gut, but he obeyed. He decided he’d rather have let Apollo beat him into the ground than face Jenner alone.

“You will learn to control yourself.” Jenner fingered the hem of his jacket. His skin crawled at the idea of the man touching him, even through his clothes. “Remove this.”

“No.”

“Every time you refuse me, you are one step closer to hurting your precious sister. Remove your jacket.”

“Please...”

“Do not beg me. I am not your father.”

“What?” His throat clenched. “How could you know...”

“Your sister has wasted no opportunity to seek sympathy for her tragic childhood. You are both disgustingly typical. Your father abused you, and would have abused your sister had you not insisted on playing the whipping boy to her. You are ashamed. You carry your guilt like a mantle, and it has brought you here to save her again. Shall I go on?”

Shock seemed to have stapled his tongue in place.

“Your jacket, angel. Remove it. I will not repeat this again.”

He couldn’t move. Fear for Lillith broke his paralysis, and he eased his arms out and let the jacket fall.

“Now your shirt.”

He swallowed a moan. The shirt joined his jacket on the floor. His back rippled with the ghosts of past beatings. It wouldn’t surprise him if Jenner pulled out a belt or a strap. Or something worse.

Jenner reached into the bag.

Please don't...

He came up with a small, white object. A roll of gauze.

“Hold out your wrist. Either one.”

He extended his left arm. Jenner wrapped the entire roll around the injured area and tied the ends together when he finished. “Your strength is impressive, but you apply it to the wrong tasks. This was foolish.” As Jenner turned and extracted a fresh roll, he didn’t wait for the order to offer his right wrist.

A small, cynical smile formed on Jenner’s face. “You do learn. Eventually.” He bound the right wrist, released his arm and stepped back. “Such a shame that you did not learn fast enough this time.”

Jenner’s silvered eyes riveted to his, and he wondered absurdly if the man was going to kiss him.

A torrent of agony seared his chest. All thought left him. A glance down revealed something long and slender skewering his nipple. His breath hissed through his teeth and his arm shot out to clutch Jenner, whose features remained impassive.

“Move to the wall,” Jenner commanded, and his feet obeyed automatically. Anything to stop the pain spreading through him like molten lead. His back came into contact with cold cement, and Jenner motioned upward with his head. “Put them on.”

Biting back a refusal, he raised his arms and felt along the wall until he found the restraints there. He buckled one leather circlet around his left wrist. There was no way he could close the other. Panic set in. “I...I can’t...”

“Shall I do it for you, then?”

The word “yes” would not form. He nodded. Jenner reached with one hand, leaving the other pressed against the spear of agony in his breast, and tightened the remaining cuff with a practiced motion. “And what do you say, little angel?”

“Thank you.” The words were a gasp.

“Very good.” Jenner leaned back and at last withdrew the long silver needle.

His legs trembled, but he willed them to hold him up. If he collapsed, he’d wrench his shoulder joints, and the pain would be unbearable.

“I recommend that you do not fall asleep.” Jenner retrieved his bag and strode to the exit. “Good night, angel.” He flipped a wall switch and plunged the room into darkness.

Chapter 4

The hours lasted longer than a Chinese dynasty. Kingdoms rose and fell while Gabriel stood chained to the wall. Exhaustion hung over him, a haze weighing his limbs. His body grew heavier with each passing moment. He wanted to scream, beat the wall, thrash against the restraints. To die.

He couldn't. Lillith needed him.

Her dependence had kept him alive. Victor Morgan's answer to even the slightest infraction had been physical punishment. Their father had been fanatical, almost ritualistic, in administering discipline. Victor kept a library of instruments in his study, and he'd spent more time in that dark and suffocating room, either waiting for a beating or enduring one, than he had in his own bedroom.

Often, Lillith had been with him. He'd always insisted on taking the blame for whatever their father imagined Lillith had done, and Victor had been happy to oblige by beating him all the more. But whenever Lillith had been originally accused of wrongdoing, she'd been required to watch.

She had seen him naked, battered and bleeding. She'd watched him hold his tongue, bite it, pound the desk he'd been ordered to bend over, all to deny their father the pleasure of voicing his pain. Had heard, on the occasions when his tricks didn't work, the screams wrenched from his lips with every blow.

He and Lillith escaped when he was seventeen, on the wake of a vicious thrashing that had nearly killed him. His error, as usual, had been fighting. He'd rarely started the fights he'd been involved in at school, but he always finished them. Victor hadn't cared who started what. To him, his son's behavior had been a disgrace to his name.

It was almost funny. In order to save Lillith now, he had to fight.

The memories of life with their father burdened him more than the effort to stay on his feet. His eyelids fluttered and his eyes rolled back. Sleep sunk claws into his mind, demanding entrance. He lifted an arm and deliberately smacked it against the wall behind him. Pain jerked him back to lucidity. Better a brief flare than the agony he would experience if he lost consciousness and his body's weight dragged against the cuffs. Once he went down, he wouldn't be able to stand again. At least the gauze Jenner had wrapped his wrists with provided some cushioning, though a few thin ribbons of blood had drizzled down his arms despite the protection.

How had this happened? He still couldn't understand why Lillith was with Slade. Had she run out of money, made a stupid mistake? Or had Slade just grabbed her off the street?

She'd come to New York to interview for the graduate program at Adelphi and never returned. He'd reported her missing, but the police had been little help. She was an adult, after all. There had been a search, but finding a single person in a city of eight million was like looking for one particular jellyfish in the Atlantic. The police relegated the case to extremely low priority, which he had translated to "who cares." So he'd set off on his own.

He'd found her. And once again, would have to rescue her from a sadistic keeper who preferred to hurt him in her stead. The prospect failed to relieve him.

He lost all sense of time. Remaining on his feet consumed every resource left to him. Head lowered, he stared at the floor. Would anyone come for him? Maybe they'd decided he wasn't worth the trouble and had left him here to rot.

At last the door opened and closed with a hollow bang. Not Jenner. Please, not Jenner.

Hating the weakness his fear implied, he forced himself to raise his head and face the approaching figure.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan."

The formal name and steel tone informed him it was Slade—thank God, not Jenner—before he made out the man's features. His captor walked the length of the room and stood in front of him. The smug look on Slade's face provoked an urge to throttle the bastard. He couldn't do anything but glare. Renewed rage drove some of the lassitude from him and fostered new strength.

"Well," Slade said after a pause. "I see your long night hasn't improved your temper."

He replied with silence.

"All right. There are other ways to get respect from you." Slade's hand slid inside his jacket and came out holding a cellphone.

A growl escaped him.

Slade laughed. "Don't worry, little one. For now, your sister is safe." With a wry gaze fixed on him, Slade dialed. The call was answered quickly.

"Send Apollo down here." Slade disconnected and replaced the device in his jacket. Arms crossed, he nodded up at the manacles. "I'm going to open those." He stepped forward, reached up, and unfastened the first of the restraints.

His arm dropped to his side. He braced himself, knowing damned well he'd end up on the floor once nothing held him upright.

Slade released the other cuff, and he collapsed at his feet with a groan. "I did warn you to cooperate with Jenner," Slade said. "Next time you'll listen, won't you?"

He tried to answer, but returning circulation sent streams of pins and needles through his arms and torso, stealing his focus.

Slade prodded his shoulder hard with a foot. The pins and needles became knives and daggers. "Won't you?"

"Yes," he gasped. "Damn it, yes!"

"Get up. You need to move. I don't have all day to supervise you."

Maybe you shouldn't have kidnapped me then, you dumb son of a bitch. He gritted his teeth and attempted to push his upper body from the floor. His wrists throbbed and buckled. Fresh blood created wet spots on the dark, stiffened gauze encircling them. His face barely missed smashing on the concrete. He stilled, drew a breath and rolled on his side. After several tries, he sat with his back against the wall. He inched up the surface, shuffled his feet back each time he gained height.

He straightened at last. Bastard. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic."

The door opened and drew their attention to the end of the room.

"Apollo." Slade gestured impatiently.

Apollo walked toward them and offered a bundle of black cloth with one meaty hand, passed it to his boss, and shot him a look of pure venom. The mouth twisted in a snarl that transformed the squashed face into an ugly mask. He returned the distaste full force.

Slade ignored the tension between them and deposited the bundle at his feet. "Put these on and leave your shoes here. You'll have another pair later."

He didn't move.

"What are you waiting for? I said get dressed. Now."

"Make me, you sick fuck."

Apollo lunged. Slade held out a hand and stopped him in mid-action. One step brought Slade so close he could feel the heat of his breath, but he refused to back down.

"Don't try me, boy. Or have you already forgotten whose life depends on your actions?"

Lillith. He drew a long breath, forced hands clenched in involuntary fists to relax and dropped his gaze to the ground. Apparent resignation seemed the only way to mollify the man.

"That's better." Slade stepped back and gave him room to follow orders.

He crouched to remove his battered sneakers. His muscles screamed in protest. He wrestled the sneakers off, pushed them away and picked up the first item in the pile at his feet: a plain black long-sleeved shirt. As quickly as his strained shoulders would allow, he pulled it on over his head.

The pants, also black, were thin sweat suit material with a drawstring waist. He peeled off his jeans using the wall to support his back, kicked free of the garment and stopped. Gasping for breath, he regained enough control to put on the sweats.

When he'd finished, Slade nodded to Apollo. The big man reached into a back pocket. A cascade of metallic rattling sounded, and Apollo produced a set of shining steel-blue handcuffs.

Slade took them and turned to him. "Arms forward, Mr. Morgan."

Hatred knifed his gut as he obeyed. He hissed when the metal bit his abraded wrists through the gauze, then waited for his captor to make the next move.

"Follow me." Slade headed for the door, and he trailed him with hesitant steps. His legs burned with the effort of movement.

Apollo fell in behind and pulled the door closed when they left the dungeon.

The heavy steel had slammed shut on everything he had been. For six months he'd carried everything he owned, never staying long in one place during the relentless search for his sister. Now, his wallet, his clothes...his life...lay in a crumpled heap behind that door.

He didn't look forward to discovering what waited on this side.

Chapter 5

Slade led them through a narrow hall and up a flight of stairs. At the top, a door opened on a darkened room that appeared to be a storage closet. Another door waited on the opposite wall. Slade threw it back, and light flooded through to sear Gabriel's gloom-accustomed eyes.

He stumbled after his captor into a hotel lobby furnished in extravagance. The small, round light fixtures recessed into the ceiling were almost invisible, and the cream-colored walls seemed to cast a glow of their own. Clusters of velvet couches, overstuffed chairs and low, burnished maple coffee tables lent the impression of an upscale coffee house or a sitting room in a mansion.

Opulence and wealth surrounded him: the deep carpet felt plush on his bare feet, the rich exotic scent of flowers and coconut oil permeated the air. He noted the windows and remembered possible escape routes.

Slade slowed his pace.

With the opportunity to breathe came an urgent, painful need to urinate. Before he could figure out the best way to phrase a polite request, Slade faced him and seemed to read his mind.

"There's a bathroom there." Slade pointed to a sliding wood panel set in the opposite wall. "Go use it, and be quick."

Asking to be released from the cuffs would be an exercise in futility, and probably earn him more pain. He nodded assent and moved toward the indicated door.

He shut himself in and heaved a shuddering sigh. At least Slade hadn't sent the hulking Apollo into the room with him. An unseen fan whispered from somewhere near the ceiling. To the right was a pedestal sink, and over that, an ornate oval mirror graced the wall. A plush chair stood against the far wall. There were no windows.

He shuffled to the toilet and fumbled with the drawstring at his waist. The loose pants puddled around his ankles, and he wiggled free of his briefs.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Maybe his bladder had seized during the night. Then a stream of scalding urine shot into the bowl. His knees buckled, and he leaned on the tank to keep from collapsing.

Panting, he shifted his cuffed hands to the side and pushed the lever down. The yellowed water swirled down the drain, and bile rose in his throat. He willed the nausea away and struggled to his feet to re-dress.

He faced the sink and labored to turn the cold water tap. The handcuffs jarred against the metal faucet and produced loud, echoing clinks in the tiled room. The tap spun slightly and emitted a small stream of water. He cupped his hands awkwardly beneath the flow and caught some fluid,

brought it to his lips and drank what he could before it slipped out, enough to ease the sandpaper dryness that coated his tongue and throat. After splashing water on his heated face, he raised his head to mirror level and inspected the damage.

A thoroughly beaten man looked back at him. A wicked multi-hued bruise surrounded one eye, a bright green slit, just visible through a web of dried blood. Above it, a deep gash scored the impact of Nails's gun. Below, the welt from Jenner's antenna drew a raised line from his temple to the bridge of his nose. Another bruise darkened the opposite cheekbone, compliments of Slade's vicious backhand. Dirt-streaked skin and stiff, tangled black hair heightened his wretched appearance.

He straightened, slid the door open and stepped out. Apollo stood directly to the right, an oversized guard dog. Slade's piercing eyes looked him over, studied him for what seemed like minutes. Maybe he'd done something wrong.

At last, Slade turned and strode through yet another door. He followed without prompting, and refused to look at the meat mass behind him.

The short hallway ended in a spacious hotel-style kitchen devoid of life and movement. They proceeded between an island counter and a bank of shining steel appliances, veered left and entered a large dining room where round oak tables flanked by captains' chairs rested on a carpet the color of red wine. Curtains of the same shade draped a row of tall, arched windows, and at the center of the domed ceiling hung an ornate crystal chandelier.

The pungent odor of cigarette smoke assaulted his nostrils. A lone man seated at a table by a window didn't bother looking up to see who had intruded on him. He stared outside, his sock-clad feet on the edge of the table. A lit cigarette dangled casually from the hand resting on his propped legs.

He brought the cigarette to his lips and inhaled. Slade cleared his throat. The man tipped his head back, blew an idle stream of smoke at the ceiling, turned and at last regarded them with clear brown, smiling eyes.

"Seth," Slade said. "Nice of you to join us." The edge in his voice dulled when he addressed the man, and he almost sounded friendly.

Seth's smile migrated to his mouth. He ground the cigarette out in an ashtray, swung his feet to the ground and approached.

Slade waved a hand. "This is the boy I told you about. He's had a rough night. Get him something to eat, then bring him upstairs and have a look at him. I'll come for him later." He produced the ring of keys, unlocked the handcuffs and removed them. "Do what Seth tells you, boy, or I'll find out about it. You won't like what happens next."

Slade left the vague threat hanging in the air, but he hadn't needed clarification.

After Slade walked out, he glanced at Seth and dropped his gaze. This guy seemed friendly, but he doubted he'd stay that way. He waited for the inevitable insults, mockery, or pain.

Seth offered him a warm smile, but not his hand. “Why don’t you go and sit down over there, and I’ll fix you a sandwich or something.”

He couldn’t return the smile, but moved past Seth and walked to the indicated place, lowered himself onto a cushioned seat and propped his arms on the table.

Seth entered the kitchen, returned promptly with a plate in one hand and a mug in the other and set them down in front of him.

Without bothering to examine the contents of the sandwich, he picked it up and bit into it. He barely tasted it, and ate only to stop his trembling muscles.

The other man stared, then shrugged and resumed his window watching until he’d finished eating. He lit another cigarette. “So,” he said through a cloud of blue smoke. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Gabriel.”

“Got it.” Seth started to grin. “Gabriel. My favorite angel.”

He sprang to his feet. “Don’t say that!”

Fast as it had taken him, the surge of adrenalin drained and he slumped back down. Slade would find out and grant him another visit from his sadistic sidekick—or worse, punish Lillith. Shit. He had to control his damned temper.

“Whoa. Okay, kid. Sorry.” The perpetual smile lingered on Seth’s face, and hope blossomed in his chest. Maybe Seth wouldn’t report the little outburst to Slade.

Seth gave him a curious look. “Do you want to tell me why not, though? I have to admit, you got my attention.”

“Jenner calls me that.”

Seth’s eyes widened. The cigarette drooped in his hand. “You’ve seen Jenner already?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus.” Seth whistled softly. “Do you need anything—drugs, maybe?” At his questioning glance, Seth said, “I’m a doctor. Well, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“It’s complicated.” Something in Seth’s expression closed, like a light turning off, and his attention drifted to the world outside the glass. He didn’t elaborate.

He didn’t push for details, and after a few thoughtful drags, Seth turned back. “Cigarette?”

“Sure.”

Seth picked up the pack from the table and shook one loose, which he extracted, then picked up the blue plastic lighter. He hadn’t smoked since high school, but he figured it was just like riding a bicycle. Once you learned how, you could never unlearn.

He spun the wheel, touched the end of the flame to the cigarette, inhaled...and discovered he was only part right. His body remembered the method, but his lungs had forgotten how to deal with the invasion. He began coughing with the first inhalation. His eyes watered. Smoke seemed to come not just from his mouth, but his nose and ears as well, burning like vaporous fire.

Amusement danced in Seth's eyes. When the coughing subsided, he said, "First time?"

"It's been a few years." He wheezed, flashed a sheepish smile. Seth laughed, startling him, but after a minute he joined him.

He managed to relax a little and finished the rest of the smoke without incident, then snubbed it out in the ashtray between them. Seth stood and waited for him to get up. He rose, and the man sighed. A frown emerged on his pleasant face.

"Kid, I have to tell you something." The frown deepened. "I don't approve of what Slade is doing with you, but I'm not going to make waves either. Just so we get things straight between us. I won't make things any harder for you while you're here, but I can't make them any easier. I don't expect you'll understand, but I can't. So don't ask. All right?"

"Right." The fragile shell of comfort that had built in the past few minutes shattered. He hadn't really expected anything in the way of help, but he had at least hoped this self-professed doctor would treat him like a human being—something no one else in this place seemed inclined to do.

Apparently, he'd been wrong.

Chapter 6

“You’d better walk in front of me. I’ll tell you where to go.” Seth kept his back to Gabriel while he gave orders, as though he couldn’t bear the sight of him. “Head back through the kitchen, same way you came in.”

The constant throbbing ache of his injuries made him slow, restrained his movements as he moved past him and retraced his path to the lobby. He knew he should pay attention to where they were going in case some miracle allowed him a chance to find Lillith and get out, but the effort seemed futile. They headed up a flight of stairs and through a hushed and darkened hallway of closed doors. Exhaustion stalked him, sapping his strength and his will. At the end of the hall, he stumbled through an open door the doctor indicated.

He stood on legs made of rubber and waited for Seth to come in and close the door. The room resembled a school nurse’s office. To the left of the door, a massive desk displayed an oversized paper calendar stuffed into black vinyl corner tabs. At a right angle to the desk lay a low bed made with military precision: pillow square and full, blanket pulled tight without a wrinkle. Beige metal cabinets lined the right-hand wall. A door near the end stood open on a darkened bathroom smaller than the one in the lobby below. Directly opposite the room entrance, a deep blue curtain hung in another doorway.

Seth brushed past him to open one of the cabinets and rummage through its contents. “Get undressed, kid.”

With trembling hands, he reached for the drawstring of his pants. If the treatment he’d received so far were any indication of the new life he’d been thrust into, he couldn’t expect anything good now.

Rage threatened to overtake him. *Lillith. Remember, they’ll hurt Lillith.*

He stepped out of the pants and managed to tug free of the shirt. Seth turned to face him, a syringe in one hand and a vial of amber liquid in the other. “Got to give you this first, just in case...you...” Seth trailed off after the first glimpse of his injuries.

“Jesus, kid, how are you still standing?” Concern flooded his eyes, and he took his elbow and steered him to the bed. “Here. Sit.”

He perched gingerly on the edge of the mattress. Seth put the syringe and vial on the desk and went to the cabinets, muttering under his breath. “...frigging goons...didn’t need to...bad idea...told him not to...”

Seth stalked back to the desk and deposited an armful of supplies. Selecting an alcohol wipe from the pile, he tore it open and swabbed a spot on his upper arm, then filled the syringe. “Antibiotic,” he explained, lightly grasping below the disinfected area. He plunged the needle in. The liquid burned, made him grimace.

“Sorry. The best way to do it is fast. You’ll need another few doses of that. Damn.” Seth crouched to eye level with him and sighed.

“I know Jenner didn’t do all this. He messes with minds, not bodies.” He waved to indicate the bruises blanketing his torso and stomach, and the damage to his face. “I suppose you have Apollo to thank for it.”

He shook his head. “That was Diego and Nails, mostly.” He touched the corner of his mouth. “This was Slade.”

A brief spasm of anger crossed the doctor’s face, but fled quickly. “And those?” he asked, pointing to the gauze around his wrists. No longer white, the bandages were crushed and stiff, rust-brown with dried blood.

His lips pressed together at the recollection. “I was tied. Rope. I didn’t know what was going on, so I wanted to be ready in case I could get out. I...”

“You what?” Seth gripped one of his forearms, pulled the wrist closer and touched one of the bandages. Pain sizzled through him and drew a wince. “You’re telling me you did this yourself? Did you try to break the ropes or something?”

He nodded and looked down. “I almost had my hands out. If Slade had waited just a few more minutes...” Maybe he wouldn’t have been able to take him down, but if he could have... Damn it. Lillith had been right outside the door. So close. This nightmare wouldn’t be happening if he’d only gained that last inch. He had failed.

“Marcus, you greedy son of a bitch,” Seth said through his teeth. He released him abruptly and stood. “We’re going to have to soak those bandages off. Who put them on?”

“Jenner,” he whispered. “He made me... He had a needle. Stuck me right through here.” He held a hand over his chest, but didn’t touch the tender spot. “Made me put the chains on. Told me not to sleep. Left me there all night.”

“I’m sorry,” Seth said at last. “He shouldn’t have... I’m sorry.”

Yeah, you’re sorry. Bitterness nearly choked him. *But you won’t do anything about it.*

“I have to check you before I can start fixing you up. It’s going to hurt. Do you want to take something first? I have codeine, Vicodin, Percocet...”

“No. No drugs.”

Seth favored him with an odd look, shrugged and stood. “I’ll be right back.” He entered the small bathroom. The light came on, and water rushed in a sink.

Run!

He was halfway to his feet and measuring the distance to the door when realization clobbered him and he collapsed back on the bed. He couldn’t find his way out, barely knew where he was. Besides, if he did manage to achieve freedom, what would happen to Lillith? He had to bide his time, to find out more about this place and the people in it. And he had to learn where they were keeping his sister.

Seth returned carrying a plastic basin half full of water, brisk and economical in movement, professional in demeanor. A doctor, despite his casual attire. He set the basin on the desk and knelt in front of his patient.

Cool, skilled fingers skimmed his ribs. He grunted and gripped the edge of the bed.

Seth probed and frowned. "Abrasions, a few small fractures—here, and here. Christ." The professional mask slipped for a moment. "Nothing I can do for broken ribs. They'll have to heal on their own. I'll wrap them, though. That should help control the pain."

Seth straightened and grabbed a wide roll of elastic bandage from the desk. "I'll need you to stand up and raise your arms."

Taxed shoulder muscles sent sharp, stabbing needles down his back as he complied. He stifled a groan.

"Sure you don't want any drugs?" Seth asked.

"I'm sure."

"Okay. Your funeral." Seth wrapped the bandage taut around his ribs. The compression shifted the dull ache in his torso to a pitched groan, and he clenched his teeth, felt perspiration bead at his temples and streak down his jaw line. At last, Seth secured the end of the bandage with two metal butterfly clips and stepped back.

He let his arms fall.

"All right. You can sit down, and we'll take care of those wrists." Seth fetched a folding stool from the cabinets, placed it in front of him and transferred the basin to the stool. "Here. Soak. Make sure both the bandages are immersed."

He lowered his hands and wrists into the warm water. The pain intensified, then the water soothed the sting. The doctor assembled peroxide, ointment, and fresh bandages. Maybe he could find out something more about this place if he talked to the guy. "So, how did you end up here?"

Seth froze. Without looking at him, he said, "You mean what's a nice doctor like me doing in a place like this?" The statement held unmistakable bitterness, but Seth seemed to recover quickly. "Sorry."

Seth glanced into the basin, where dissolving blood clouded the water. The frayed ends of the gauze drifted and wavered in gentle motion. "I was—I lost my license," Seth said. "I treated prostitutes, in the open. People didn't like it. I screwed up some meds, I guess, and...a couple of girls died. Take your hands out."

He lifted his arms clear. Seth whisked the basin away and placed a towel on the stool, snagged a small pair of scissors, cut a section of the sodden gauze and began to unwind it. Pain choked Seth's voice when he continued. "I knew a girl that used to work for Slade. She brought me here. I offered to keep taking care of the girls. I still had contacts for supplies, drugs. This is going to hurt." He reached for the peroxide, opened it, tilted the brown bottle and splashed clear liquid on his abraded skin. Foam hissed and bubbled at the wounds, and he clenched his jaw against the sting. "You'll have scars here. I don't have the right stuff to prevent it."

He gave a slow shrug. He had other scars. Two more wouldn't matter.

"Slade offered to pay me a lot to stay here, play doctor and keep my mouth shut." Seth used a clean towel to pat the excess moisture away and began to wind a new bandage around the wound. His eyes came up. "End of story."

Both remained silent while Seth repeated the process with the other wrist. He cleaned and dabbed ointment over the open skin on his face, stood, and cleared the supplies away. Finished, he sat in the wheeled chair behind the desk. "Well, turnabout's fair play, right? So even though I already know, what are you doing here?"

"I came for my sister. But how could you know that?" Frustration chipped at the deliberate barriers he'd set to keep his temper in check. "How does Jenner know so much about me? And why was Slade looking for me? Damn it, none of this makes sense!"

"Whoa. Breathe, kid." Seth inhaled sharply, as though he were demonstrating the process. "I can't tell you much. Jenner—he's a psychiatrist by day and a lunatic by night. No, he's a lunatic all the time. Unfortunately, he and I have more in common than I like to think about. As for Slade...let's just say he's well connected. You haven't exactly been discreet looking for your sister, right? It's a matter of leverage."

"But why? Why me? What does he want from me?"

"Whatever he can get."

He shuddered at the quiet fury pulsing through the doctor's words. Seth seemed about to elaborate, but sounds from the hallway stopped him. The office door opened to admit Slade. Apollo stood behind him, scowling, his arms folded across his chest like a child denied a treat.

Fresh apprehension shivered down his spine.

"Are we through here?" Slade addressed Seth, but he received the full weight of his stare, and returned the look with all the strength he had left.

"Yeah, but I'll need him back tomorrow. He needs more shots, and those bandages will have to be changed."

"Fine. Come along, Mr. Morgan. I'll show you to your...room."

He stood with exaggerated slowness. Slade raised a hand. The handcuffs dangled from his loose fist.

Slade expected him to hold his arms out for them. Son of a bitch.

"Don't put those on him," Seth said before he could manage to goad his weary limbs into movement.

Slade shot the doctor a warning look, but Seth held his ground. "I just cleaned his wrists. They'll never heal if you keep him cuffed, and he can't fight like that."

Slade displayed a slight smile. "Very well, doctor. But I'll remind you that I am in charge of our boy here, and you are to stay out of it. As promised."

Seth nodded. "You know I keep my promises, Marcus. Just lay off the cuffs for now. I'm sure the kid will behave himself."

Slade turned to him again, and a sly grin graced his features. “Oh, yes. Mr. Morgan won’t step out of line again. Will you?”

He didn’t answer.

Slade stepped forward. His fist blurred, too fast to see—but he felt it ram his stomach. He doubled over, and his breath left him in a rush.

“I asked you a question.” The smile fled.

“Y-yes...no,” he gasped. “I—won’t.”

“Good.”

Slade turned to leave, but Seth said, “Wait, Marcus. I need to talk to you. Can you have Apollo bring the kid up for now?”

Slade hesitated. “All right. I have a little time. Apollo, take Mr. Morgan upstairs.” As he faced him, he straightened with hatred searing his chest. “Go. I’ll deal with you later,” Slade said.

He took a step, stopped, and turned to look at the doctor. “Thank you, Seth,” he said softly.

Seth looked taken aback, and shook himself slightly. “Call me Doc. Everyone else does.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Yeah. Sure, kid.”

With a final glance at Slade, he moved past him and out the door, where Apollo waited for him with malicious glee.

Once the door to Doc’s office closed, Apollo reached out with a speed that belied his size and dug his fingers into his arm. He had to run to keep from falling as Apollo dragged him down the hall and toward the stairs they’d ascended earlier.

Another flight in the stairwell led up. Apollo climbed them quickly, maintaining his grip, not bothering to wait for him to catch up.

His shins banged every step. They reached the landing of the third floor, and the bigger man hauled him up and flung him against the wall.

“Keep up, boy.”

Apollo led him down yet another hallway, and he forced himself to concentrate on moving his legs. This hall, too, featured lines of closed doors, though it seemed somehow darker than the second floor. They reached the end of the hall and turned left into another endless corridor of doors. Just before the next corner, Apollo stopped and opened one of them. A wooden staircase stood inside, swathed in shadow and dusty with the cobwebs of long neglect.

Apollo jerked him forward and sent him crashing into the stairs. Blackness flooded his vision, chased by white starbursts. Consciousness wavered and returned. He shook his head and wobbled to his feet.

“Get up there.” Apollo stood framed in the doorway, his backlit bulk radiating menace.

Without a word, he turned and mounted the stairs. Heavy footsteps followed. He reached the top, complete blackness, and waited.

An arm pushed past him. The sound of a doorknob turning, hinges squealing, echoed in the stairwell. A fist drove into his spine and knocked him through the doorway onto a rough floor. Brutal, mocking laughter filled the darkness.

"I'll get my hands on you eventually, you little shit." More laughter, and the door slammed shut. A click announced a deadbolt sliding into place. Vibrations of massive feet tromping down stairs shook the floor.

He didn't get up. Couldn't get up. For the second time in as many days, conscious thought left him and he drifted in a black void.

* * * *

"Marcus, the kid's pulverized. Do you really think it necessary to bring Jenner in?"

Doc struggled to keep his voice down. Screaming at Slade would get him nowhere...or worse than nowhere. But the House leader had gone too far this time.

He'd seen some bad shit since he started working for Slade—fighters with shattered bones, or knife and gunshot wounds they didn't dare hit the public ER with. Men with faces so obliterated their own dealers wouldn't recognize them. One of them had lost a finger in a bar brawl, back at the beginning. That one had since decided there were safer career options than street fighting.

This kid, though. Christ, he'd seen corpses in better shape, and the kid was still walking around taking orders. Slade damn well knew he'd keep doing it, too.

Slade's expression didn't change. "Yes, Seth, I did find it necessary to consult Jenner. The situation is—different, to say the least. I don't usually have to force anyone to fight for me, but I believe this boy will be worth my trouble. So far he's proven to be everything I've suspected he is."

"What? Brave, tough, and stupid? If his sister wasn't here, he'd either escape or die trying before he let you and your goons near him."

"In that case, it's a good thing his sister is here, isn't it?"

"No, it's not! Damn it, Marcus. Not everyone exists to make you money."

"They have to make money for someone." Slade favored him with a chilling smile. "In business, the biggest payoffs come from calculated risks. I've calculated this one, and I intend to have it pay off enormously. The boy's a solid investment."

"He's a kid. A human being."

"Not for long." The smile stayed in place. "When I get through with him, young Mr. Morgan will be a fighting machine. My machine. And I keep what's mine."

Something inside him withered. "You're not going to let him go."

"Of course I will. Provided he meets my conditions. It'll be his own fault when he finds out he can't."

"This is low, Marcus. Even for you."

Slade's complacent expression evaporated. "I don't remember asking your opinion."

"You didn't. I'm giving it to you free." He narrowed his eyes. "After all, you always enjoy getting something for nothing."

“Why, Seth. You seem to have grown some balls while I wasn’t looking.” Slade stepped closer with wicked promise in his eyes. “Watch your step, doctor. I can assure you that federal inmates don’t make nearly as much as I’m paying you.”

Damn him. Slade had a knack for helping anyone who crossed him look forward to twenty-to-life, without a whiff of suspicion coming his way. He’d seen it happen more times than he cared to think about.

“Stay out of this. Do your job, and keep your mouth shut. I won’t tell you again.”

Slade turned and left the office. The door closed. He collapsed in his chair, head bowed, and blinked back regret.

He couldn’t save the kid any more than he could save himself.

Chapter 7

Light shimmered at the edges of Gabriel's closed eyes. Voices rose and fell, ghosts in a misty forest, garbled words strung together in the wrong order. Kid...get dangerous...criminals sick...fuck sister... He couldn't discern the spoken words from his thoughts.

Where was he? His eyes didn't seem to work. Only light-drenched shadow existed. Snatches of memory played out in his head, gray and crackling like homemade movies. Seth—Doc—who wouldn't get involved but he stopped Slade from cuffing him again. Apollo, dragging him through deserted hallways and into darkness, leaving him... somewhere. Here.

Someone spoke, a heated voice. The words refused to form in his ears. He had to move before there were consequences, but his mind remained mired in fog.

The voice intensified. "Get up."

Wait. He tried to say it aloud, but none of his muscles responded. His tongue sat idle and motionless in his mouth.

A shock of bitter cold engulfed him. The haze dissipated. He choked and spluttered. His eyes flew open and attempted to focus. He lay on the floor. Wood this time, not concrete. Moisture coated him, soaking skin and clothes. Fever sweat, he assumed before he noticed the puddle of clear liquid around him.

He raised his head. Slade stood over him. A still-dripping metal bucket dangled from one hand.

"Ah, so you are still alive. Good for you." Slade pointed to his right. "Drink what's in that cup there, and then I have shoes for you. You'll be training today. I want you in shape soon so you can start fighting."

He pressed his mouth tight and dragged himself into a seated position. How long had he been unconscious up here? Hours? Days?

The cup Slade had indicated sat on a small table two or three feet from him. Its contents were thick and foamy, the grayish-yellow color of used dishwater. Whatever it was, he couldn't refuse the stuff. The bastard would only hurt Lillith. He struggled to his feet and inspected the room.

It looked like an attic loft, windowless and musty. Bare rafters sloped up from the tops of two-foot walls at either side of the room to a point around eight feet high at its off-center acme. Like the basement, the furnishings were sparse. The table boasted one chair. Against the back wall, a worn cot sagged as though it had been rejected by the Army and taken it personally. A scuffed vinyl punching bag hung suspended from the midpoint of the angled ceiling. The bag had probably been black at some point, but had since faded to the muddy color of old tires.

So this place would be home for a while. At least until he managed to get Lillith away from this madhouse. He picked up the cup. A faintly metallic, earthy odor wafted up from it.

“Don’t worry, boy. It’s not poison, or even drugs. Just a protein shake.”

He turned to meet Slade’s eyes at last, debated whether it would be worth it to fling the contents of the cup into his smug face. Since he wasn’t yet strong enough to wage a war, he’d have to settle for drinking it.

He raised it to his lips and drained half in one swallow. The taste matched the smell: metal and dirt, thick and gritty. Forcing himself not to gag, he poured the rest down his throat. His stomach clenched and threatened revolt at the invasion.

Slade pointed again, this time to two black shapes near the closed door.

He picked them up. The shoes, made of suede, resembled moccasins. No solid soles, no rigidity at all. He put them on the floor and slid his bare feet into them. A perfect fit.

“Seth wants to see you first.” The look on Slade’s face said it was the last thing he wanted, but he would nevertheless allow it. “Are you going to come quietly, or do I have to restrain you?”

“I’ll come.”

“Fine. Follow me.”

Slade led him down the ghostly staircase, back through the long corridors of the third-floor rooms and down again. Outside Doc’s office, he turned with his hand on the knob.

“Seth won’t help you escape. I know you think you can trust him, but you can’t.” Slade took a menacing step toward him. Anger tightened his face. “No one here is on your side. No one. Understand?”

“Yes.” Despair turned the word into a choked whisper. He’d known that from the moment he and the doctor left the dining room. At least Doc would treat him decently, though.

“Go. I’ll be waiting.” Slade stood back, opened the door and closed it after he went through.

Bandages, scissors and ointment had been set out on the desk, but no one stood waiting to use them. “Doc?” he called hesitantly into the silence. “You wanted to see me?”

“Be right there.” Doc’s muffled voice drifted out from behind the blue curtain. A quick smile flashed on when he emerged. “Hey, kid. How’re you feeling?”

He laughed bitterly. “I’ve been better.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Doc nodded at the bed. “Sit down and get your shirt off. We don’t have a lot of time. I want to check you again, and change those bandages.” After he disappeared into the bathroom, he peeled off his shirt and sat.

Doc came out drying his hands. “I live back there.” He jerked his head toward the curtain. “Like to keep things simple. Now, let’s see those wrists.”

He held out one arm obligingly. While the doctor cut and unwrapped, he said, “Doc, can I ask you a question?”

Doc favored him with a wary look. “What?”

“When did I meet you...how long ago was it?”

“It was yesterday. Jesus, kid, where’ve you been?”

"In the attic, I think. Apollo brought me up there and I...passed out. I didn't know how long I was gone for."

"Passed out. Yeah, sure. I bet you had a little help getting there. Am I right?"

He saw no need to reply.

Doc had the bandages off now. The wounds looked the same, no better and no worse. Doc reached for the tube of ointment, smeared on a generous amount, and rewrapped with fresh gauze. Finished, he released the arm and began to work on the other wrist.

"I'm going to give you another dose of antibiotics and reposition the wraps on your ribs. A hot shower will do you a world of good. I've already talked to Marcus about it, and he agreed that you'll have one after your...training."

"Sounds great," he muttered. "Do you happen to know when I'll be starting this training?"

Doc didn't meet his eyes. "Immediately after I'm done with you."

No surprise there.

Doc poked, prodded and wrapped, and he mentally prepared himself for another day of brutality. He would survive. He had to. Lillith needed him.

The doctor finished quickly and ended the treatment with another shot. He returned his supplies to their proper places and produced an unmarked bottle of tablets. "Let me give you a dose of the strong stuff, kid. You're going to need it."

He stood and shook his head. "No. I won't take drugs." It was easy to get hooked on them. It had been for Lillith. After they moved away from their father, she'd started having frequent headaches. Bad ones. The doctor he'd taken her to see prescribed a powerful painkiller, and as far as he knew, she'd still been taking them when she disappeared.

He would not allow drugs to cloud his mind. Especially now, when he needed more than ever to think clearly.

Doc sighed. "Okay. How about a couple of Tylenol?"

"Yeah, all right."

"Extra strength?"

"Don't push it, Doc."

Doc laughed. He moved to the other side of his desk, extracted a white plastic bottle and uncapped it, shook three small white pills onto his palm. "Here. Six hundred milligrams of non-addictive acetaminophen. You can take another three in four hours. I'll give you the bottle." He pointed to the bathroom. "There are cups in there next to the sink. Go wash 'em down, and do whatever else you need to do."

He gave him a grateful nod, then entered the bathroom and closed the door. Five minutes later, after another bout of burning elimination, he emerged pale and shaking.

Doc seemed to notice the change in him. "Don't worry. The antibiotics I'm giving you will get you better. In the meantime, keep taking these as needed." He pressed the bottle into his palm and held it there for a moment.

The door to the office opened and Slade scowled in at them. "I hope you're finished, Seth. We're going now. Mr. Morgan has an appointment to keep."

Doc paled. "Christ, Marcus. I told you he isn't ready for that. He's in bad shape."

"And I told you that it's none of your concern. Didn't I?"

"Fine. Don't blame me when this blows up in your face, then."

"Seth. It would be in your best interests to shut the hell up. Right now."

Increasing dread filled him. He'd assumed this training was a foregone conclusion. Why would Doc try to talk Slade out of it now?

"Come on, boy. Don't make me restrain you."

With a wary glance at Doc, whose expression could have melted glass, he walked toward the door. "Tomorrow, Marcus," Doc said in a stern voice behind him. "I mean it. I need to see him every day, for at least a week. Probably longer."

Slade arched an eyebrow at him, but said nothing.

He joined his captor in the hallway. Slade closed the door, and shook his head as though ridding himself of the past few minutes. "We're going back to the basement. The training room is there."

He followed his lead. They reached the basement, passed the heavy door which opened on the dungeon, and walked to the end of the corridor. The hall terminated in another steel door with a large window set into the top third. Slade opened it and gestured inside.

He entered a room half the size of the building, walled with more gray cement. Several heavy bags hung from the ceiling, and a collection of weight machines lined the left wall. A large, roped sparring ring with a black mat floor dominated the far right corner. There were a few warm-up benches and an open door that appeared to lead to a locker room.

Slade pulled the door closed, reached for the ever-present phone, dialed, and said, "We're waiting." He snapped it shut and regarded him standing rigid and mute, hands clenched at his sides.

"I'll make this easy for you," Slade said at last.

He couldn't suppress a derisive snort. Easy? It would be easier for him to sever a limb or two with a butter knife than it was to submit to this man, to do his bidding and pretend everything was just fine, thank you.

Slade ignored his sarcasm. "Regarding my terms for your release, and your sister's. I've calculated the amount of money Lillith would bring in should she remain in my employ. I'll spare you the details of how I arrived at this figure—" He paused to measure the effect his words had. "—but the final tally is ten million dollars."

"You pulled that number out of your ass."

"I never guess when it comes to money, Mr. Morgan." Slade's blue eyes leveled coolly on him. "I am a businessman, and I deal in profits. Now, if you'd like me to review exactly how much your sister commands per client, or how many years I expect her to last until she's..."

"Stop!"

“Ten million dollars,” Slade repeated, emphasizing every word. “That is the price of Lillith’s freedom. You fight for me, you earn me ten million dollars, and then you and your sister are free to go. Unless, of course, you happen to have that much money on you?” He laughed at the black look he sent him. “No. I didn’t think so.”

The scrape of steel on cement announced the arrival of the trainers. Toward the front of the room, two Apollos entered: one smirking, the other frowning.

He blinked hard and shook his head. There were still two of them.

Slade indicated the frowning giant. “This is Sol. You already know Apollo.”

Apollo’s brother—they had to be twins, there was no other explanation for the carbon-copy likeness between them—loomed in front of the door, while Apollo headed across the room and toward the lockers. Sol’s features, though they mirrored his twin’s, seemed softer, his massive body slightly more relaxed. He’d heard that identical twins often possessed opposite personalities. Maybe...

No one is on your side. The echo of Slade’s words mocked his hope. He could do nothing now but stand his ground and endure whatever torments the twins threw at him. Save Lillith—and save himself.

“Remember, keep it light for today. The boy has an appointment,” Slade said when Apollo reentered the room.

What? If this wasn’t the ‘appointment’ he and Doc had argued about, what was?

Oh God. Jenner.

That’s what Slade had meant by that cryptic statement. Terror washed over him.

Apollo acknowledged his boss’s orders with a hideous grin. Slade strode to the door. Sol moved aside to let him pass, and Slade stopped. “I expect your complete cooperation, Mr. Morgan. If Sol and Apollo feel that you aren’t training to full capacity, your sister will pay for your languor.”

The bastard left before he could protest.

Sol approached, and he stayed put. Apollo moved around the room, the occasional creak of a bag or the dull thunk of metal on metal suggesting he was checking the equipment. He could attack them, try to escape—no matter what he did down here, he had a feeling Slade would receive a bad report—but he couldn’t take both of them on. Not yet, anyway.

“I understand my brother has a problem with you.” Sol’s flat and uninflected voice lacked the hatred that laced his twin’s speech.

He nodded. “Jenner took away his fun.”

“Fucker needs to learn his place,” Apollo rumbled.

Sol ignored the comment. “You will pay attention to Sol, and only Sol.” He glanced at Apollo. “My brother is merely a sparring partner. I am your trainer. Do what I tell you, and Mr. Slade will not hear anything negative. Cross me, and it will be otherwise.” Sol’s expression didn’t change. His voice neither rose nor fell. The deliberate speech pattern put him on edge, but it was probably in his best interest to follow directions from him.

"Today we measure your ability. We start with the arms." Sol pointed beyond him, and he followed the gesture. Behind him, Apollo steadied one of the punching bags. "You will hit the bag, one-two, one-two. Hard as you can. Go."

"I can't."

"Your arms are broken?"

He held up his hands. "My wrists."

"Broken?" Sol's tone stayed flat, emotionless.

"No. Rope burn. And...Jenner." The lieutenant's name alone seemed sufficient explanation for everything else. He hoped it would be this time.

Sol frowned and pointed to an open floor mat further inside the room. "One hundred sit-ups, then. I will adjust your program."

"But..." Hadn't Doc said his ribs were broken?

"One hundred sit-ups," Sol repeated, and pointed again. "Go."

Don't argue. He started across the room. The last thing he needed was a bad report. He stopped at the edge of the mat and glanced back. Sol walked along the row of machines against the opposite wall, occasionally stopping to inspect something. Apollo stood beside the heavy bag, arms folded, glaring. Angry seemed his natural state.

He positioned himself on the mat, laced his hands behind his head and tried not to put too much pressure on his wrists. The first lift sent knives through his torso. He gritted his teeth, did it again. Twice more. He gasped for breath and fell back, pulling his hands away just before his head hit the mat.

Stifling a groan, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, Sol loomed over him. "Why have you stopped?"

"Sorry." He drew his arms in, lifted his head. Under Sol's blank gaze, he wrenched up, stopped in mid-raise, and dropped. "Damn it!" He'd failed to move his hands fast enough. His wrists smacked the mat hard, and he grunted through the pain.

"You aren't breathing properly."

"I can't breathe at all!"

"Why?"

"My ribs! Yes, they're broken! Shit." He turned his head away from the towering trainer. He'd done it now. Slade would hear about this.

Sol placed a hand on his chest. "You have them wrapped."

"Yes."

"Take it off."

"What?"

"The wrap prevents deep breathing. Pain is controlled in this way. Take it off, and you will be able to breathe."

Yes. And he'd be in pain. He rolled on his side, sat up, pulled his shirt off and unfastened the clips. The bandage lost tension and slid down his torso. He inhaled, surprised to discover he did feel better.

Sol nodded. "Breathe out as you lift, in as you lower. Keep your torso straight. It will hurt. You won't damage your ribs further. Ninety-five more."

He stared at him. Sol had counted his half-assed flop toward the total. A small kindness, but more than he'd expected. "Sure. Ninety-five. Got it." He lay back down, and started again. The sharp pain migrated to a dull ache. He concentrated on counting, breathing, and barely noticed Sol slip away to return to the machines.

He would train hard. Harder than they made him. He would use their efforts against them and beat these bastards at their own game. His strength would surpass any opponent they could dig up, and he would take revenge on his terms.

Fifty. Sixty. Seventy. His pace slowed considerably. Straining, bathed in sweat, he struggled up again and barely reached a seated position. He lost it on the way back down. No way he'd make a hundred. His ribs hummed a loud protest. Fire smoldered in his stomach. He drew a breath, tried to lift himself. Failed.

Sol appeared at his feet. He didn't speak. Didn't smile, or frown.

"I can't," he whispered. "Please. Slade will..."

"You can." Sol knelt on the mat, gripped his ankles and held them down. "Twenty-nine more."

He grimaced. With Sol bracing him, he managed to reach one hundred before he collapsed. Momentary triumph blossomed on the tail end of spent energy.

"A good start. We will work the legs now."

More? He wasn't sure he could get up, much less complete another workout. He started to protest and stopped himself. Sol hadn't forced him to work against his wrists, and the trainer had been right about his ability to finish the sit-ups. If Sol thought he could do it, maybe he could. He pushed up on his elbows and made himself stand. Sol gestured to the row of equipment opposite them, and he went.

Sol followed and pointed. "Set the weight at two hundred. Lift one-two-three, stop one-two-three. Go."

He moved to the machine Sol indicated, an inclined bench with footrests designed to push down and let up. The weights were already set at 200, so he sat down, gripped the handholds at the sides and started pumping.

Leg lifts proved easier on his battered body. After three sets, Sol motioned for him to stop and moved the pin to 300 pounds. He finished five more sets, and once again Sol stopped him.

"We are running short on time. You will shower now, and then we will bring you to your appointment."

Wincing, he clambered from the machine and headed to the locker room.

“Do not believe your training will be like this always,” Sol called after him. “Soon you will spar with Apollo.”

Great. Another delightful romp to look forward to. He nodded to acknowledge Sol’s words, passed a bank of lockers, and rounded the corner. The communal shower he found there reminded him of high school. The rectangular space, its walls and floor covered in cracked beige tile, glowed eerily in the fluorescent light. Shower heads, four to a side, protruded from rusted circlets of steel, and each station boasted its own hot and cold taps. Small drains dotted the floor, which sloped gently downward to a larger drain in the center.

He undressed quickly, leaving the wrist bandages in place, and walked to the last station on the left. The tiled floor chilled his bare feet, yet his body salivated in anticipation of the hot water.

He twisted the hot tap as far as he could and stood aside. The water spat on the floor and swirled down the drain. Steam billowed from the showerhead in short order. He reached around the water, nudged the cold tap, and stepped into the spray.

Eyes closed, he reveled in the cascade of cleansing heat. He leaned his head back and let the water drench his face, then turned to put his hands on the wall and arched his back into the pelting stream. His overtaxed muscles relaxed by degrees in the relentless soothing force of the water.

A sudden sharp pain in his side banished the idea of relaxing. He opened his eyes. One of the twins—Apollo, he presumed—stood at the edge of the shower floor. The bastard must have thrown something at him. He glanced down. A bar of soap slid past him, down the slight slope toward the drain. The man had good aim.

Apollo sneered. “Hurry up. You don’t wanna keep Jenner waitin’.”

Despite the heat of the shower, he went cold. He’d already guessed Jenner was his next destination, but the confirmation heightened his dread. He retrieved the soap, lathered and rinsed hastily, the notion to stay put until the water ran cold dismissed.

Apollo was right. He didn’t want to keep Jenner waiting.

Chapter 8

Gabriel sprawled on the dungeon floor. The door slammed shut behind him. His muscles jerking with overexertion, he righted himself and glared at the door. Not that Apollo could see him, but he still felt the need to express his fury. This shove-and-run treatment wore out fast.

He tried to collect himself, but his rising anxiety bordered on terror. *Jenner is coming*. The simple knowledge of the lieutenant's existence chilled his blood. He hadn't felt this helpless against anyone since he lived with his father.

He had to get up and at least meet Jenner on his feet. Hell, it was probably all he could do. The moment Jenner stepped through that door, he would submit to his will. He'd march to whatever beat the bastard decided to pound out. The choice wasn't his to make.

He couldn't shake the feeling that even if Lillith weren't involved in this, he would end up obeying Jenner.

He shifted in preparation to stand. Something seemed different about the room. He gained his feet and looked behind him. "What the hell?" he muttered. A *thing* stood before the wall of chains. It looked like a cross between a dentist's chair and a motorcycle: a padded bench on wheels, with an oval hole in the headrest. Two pairs of chrome footrest-style bars extended from the lower section, just below the padding at either end. Buckle straps dangled above the bars. Obviously, the bench was not designed for comfort.

Above the contraption, a full-length mirror had been suspended flat and facedown. He edged closer. A smaller mirror had been mounted on the floor, on a vertical stand below the headrest. The floor mirror angled up and reflected the suspended one. Anyone lying on the bench could look through the hole and see themselves from above.

Cold too deep to blame on towel-damp hair sunk into him, and when he caught sight of the table beside the bench, penetrated his bones.

There were needles on it.

The array of instruments resembled nothing he'd ever seen. Half a dozen foot-long bamboo rods spread in a fan pattern on the low surface. Four short talons, miniature steel claws, tipped each rod. Behind the needles stood three black lacquered pots emblazoned with blood-red Oriental symbols. Two were lidded, and the third bristled with an assortment of slender wooden sticks.

He shuddered. Whatever the purpose of this equipment, it would bring something unpleasant. He took a tentative step toward the bench, and the door opened and closed behind him.

"Hello, angel."

The sound of that sinewy voice splintered him in anticipation of pain. He couldn't bring himself to face Jenner, though he heard his approach. The soft footsteps stopped right behind him.

“You were not thinking of touching my toys. Were you, little angel?” Dry breath whispered on his neck. “Because that is not allowed. You must not touch.”

Agony branded the back of his right thigh. He fell to his knees with a strangled oath. Though his body shook with effort, he managed to hold his position until Jenner withdrew the needle. A thin stream of blood crept down his leg and soaked into his pants.

“Remove your shirt.”

Why, damn it? He bit back the retort and complied without rising. Cool air caressed his skin, eliciting a shiver.

“Stand and face me.”

This time he struggled to force himself into obedience. Still, the unspoken threat of further pain had him on his feet in less than a minute. Jenner’s features remained the same as he remembered from their first meeting—calm, expressionless, terrifying.

Jenner reached into the folds of his robe and drew out a slim black marker. “On the table now, angel. Lie on your stomach, and make sure your face is in that hole. You are going to be there for quite some time, and you will need to breathe.”

He approached the bench. His attempt to control the rage and humiliation warring within left him weak. He settled into position, and in the mirror below him, his back was reflected clearly. Thin pale scars slashed across his skin, mementos of the last beating he suffered at his father’s hands.

Jenner grasped the waistband of his pants and slid them down to further expose his lower back. “There are two bars near your feet. Find them, and rest your ankles on top of them.”

He shuffled his legs until his feet found the metal protrusions. Jenner cinched the leather straps loosely around his ankles.

“Do not worry, angel. I trust you not to escape. I am only doing this because you will be most uncomfortable in a few moments, but you must not move.” He tightened the ankle restraints. “Now, grasp the handles below your head.”

Jenner moved to the front of the table, fastened the straps around the sodden bandages clinging to his raw wrists, and tightened them. Christ, he was so weak. Couldn’t do a damned thing to stop the bastard.

Finished, Jenner stepped back. Shuffling sounds came to him, and in the mirror Jenner’s hand floated over him holding the uncapped marker. The tip darted down to touch his skin. Cold ink inscribed slender letters across his back. The double reflection made the resultant words easily legible.

GABRIEL JOSEPH MORGAN

What was he doing? The lieutenant knew his name. So what? Slade knew it, too. Was Jenner trying some sort of reverse psychology, a pseudo-parental reprimand? It didn’t make sense.

Jenner paused, then bent to write again. He drew away. Under his name appeared
NOVEMBER 6

His birthday. How did the bastard know?

His wallet. Jenner must have gone through it and read the date on his license. Still, he didn't understand why the lieutenant was vandalizing him like this.

The pen moved across his shoulder blades and stroked sore muscles. He gritted his teeth and waited.

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT

His throat closed on fear at the sight of the new words.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" He bucked against the restraints. Jenner couldn't have figured that out from his wallet. He lifted his head from the bench, turned—and met the gleaming point of a knife.

"Now, now, angel. Behave yourself. Put your head back down."

Fresh tremors wracked his body. He lowered himself into position again. Silence swelled, broken only by his short, shallow breaths.

A finger traced one of the scars. "Fascinating angel," Jenner whispered. "This must have been exquisitely painful." The softly dangerous voice raised gooseflesh along his spine. "I suppose your father did this to you?"

He held his tongue.

"Of course he did. And this is when you left."

"How..."

Jenner smiled. "I know more about you than you do, little angel. I watch, I listen. I know." The marker resumed, writing at an angle to cross and re-cross the faded line of the scar he had just caressed.

SON OF A BASTARD

"Fuck you." He braced himself for pain.

"That is twice you have offered. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you will simply have to be patient. I am quite busy at the moment."

Jenner's calm infuriated him. His grip tightened on the bars. The marker scratched another comment beneath the last. Jenner moved back, and he read:

BROTHER OF A WHORE

He loosed an incoherent roar. He jerked his body from side to side, ignoring the anguish in his wrists, his only thought to obliterate the worm beside him. The restraints held, and after a long, fruitless struggle, he collapsed with a harsh grunt.

Jenner waited until his anger subsided. "That was a mistake, angel, and one you will answer for soon. But not now. Now, we will finish what we have started. Oh—and one more display like that, and your dear sister will pay the price."

The older man bent to his task again. The marker slid over his skin with slow, caressing strokes. Jenner didn't straighten between phrases this time. At last he pulled back to admire his handiwork.

Words formed a swirling pattern over his back.

LOSER AFRAID DIRECTIONLESS FAILURE ENJOYS PAIN WORTHLESS STUPID
BOY

He bit down hard to keep from screaming. The accusations shouted at him, echoes of memories. The words held truth. Every one of them. Jenner had somehow mined his soul and dragged what he found there to the surface. If he had intended to batter his mind into submission, he'd succeeded. How could he resist an enemy who knew his thoughts, his deeds...his darkest secrets?

Jenner circled behind him. A soft click sounded, the scrape of wood on wood. With his sight limited to the floor beneath him and the mirror above, he couldn't see what the lieutenant was doing. The rattling roll of metal on concrete announced Jenner wheeling the stool to his side. A rustling crinkle and snap followed. Gloves? Cool pressure on his back and a look in the mirror confirmed the deduction.

Jenner inhaled and released a small sigh of satisfaction. In a near whisper, he said, "This is going to hurt."

His other hand drifted into view. In it, he held one of the wooden sticks that had been in the jar on the table. A paintbrush. The bristles glistened with black ink. Its point applied the fluid to the letters of his name, guided by a steady hand. The last letter complete, the hand left, and returned with one of the clawed bamboo rods.

Jesus. It was a fucking tattoo needle.

Jenner drove the points home. One hand steadied the implement, the other manipulated the needles with almost careless precision. He traced the 'G' in rapid, rhythmic motion. The spikes danced across his skin and hammered the same spots over and over with disconcerting clicks. Drilling ink into him. Marking him forever. A faint and sickening pop echoed through his head every time a needle pierced him, and the pain stung his eyes with moisture he refused to let fall.

Jenner alternately guided the needles and wiped away the excess ink with a moist cloth. He did not pause until he'd finished GABRIEL JOSEPH MORGAN.

When Jenner stood to rinse the cloth and replenish the ink brush, he studied his back in the mirror. The rest of the words appeared dull and faded next to his name, scored in glossy black letters and surrounded with red, irritated skin that had begun to bruise. Already the pain ensured he wouldn't rest his back against anything in the near future. He could only imagine how it would feel if Jenner continued the tattooing process.

Hours later, he no longer had to imagine.

The constant click-pop of the needles filled the room, his head—the only sound other than his occasional strangled gasp. Needle jabbed bone, and the impact escalated from pinprick to hornet sting. His high school dropout status was next to become a physical permanence. His hands clamped the steel rods tight, and his teeth seemed to recede into his gums from the pressure of his efforts to remain silent.

Jenner didn't stop until every word had been etched into flesh. When at last he laid the needles to rest, dawn stained the dungeon's single window.

His back burned bright as his pride over the humiliation of being branded like a helpless calf. He lay motionless and spent, dimly aware that Jenner had released the straps binding him to the table.

"The good doctor wishes to see you," Jenner said, his voice filtering through his exhausted haze. The derision in his tone implied he cared no more for Doc than Doc did for him. "Apollo is on his way to bring you to him. I do not expect you to walk upstairs in your condition."

Sadistic bastard. He would anyway—for spite, and to maintain the shred of dignity he still possessed. He'd get up if it killed him.

He tensed and began the laborious process of extricating his body from the table, maneuvered himself into a seated position on the edge of the bench and paused to catch his breath.

Jenner, however, stood a few feet in front of him, his bland expression unchanged. The discarded shirt dangled from one outstretched hand.

Realization dawned, and with it came fury. The son of a bitch knew he would get up. Hell, he'd goaded him into it.

"Very good, angel." Jenner tossed him the shirt. He made a reflexive grab and snatched it in mid-flight. "And in case you are wondering, we will see to the penance for your temper on our next meeting."

A pool of dread settled in the pit of his stomach. He'd forgotten the promise of further punishment. He met Jenner's eyes—that fathomless gaze, so deceptively tender—and shuddered.

"You will need some ointment on that before you get dressed, unless you wish to experience the joy of a massive bacterial infection. Sit there on that stool and I will apply it."

He sat with a grimace, clenched his jaw tight and held his breath. Cool hands smoothed a thick, greasy substance over the mangled surface of his back. The lieutenant finished and circled him, regarded him with a hooded expression.

"I would put that on now." Jenner nodded at the shirt still crumpled in his hands. "Though I am certain Apollo would enjoy reading your little story."

Cringing at the scrape of rough fabric on his skin, he donned the shirt and stood. Just as his feet touched ground, the door opened and Apollo lumbered through.

Jenner ignored the intrusion. He surged forward, stopped with his face inches away and leaned toward his ear. "Until next time, angel," he whispered. He stepped back, caught his gaze and held it before he turned to leave. The long plait of his steely hair swayed in slow rhythm against his retreating back.

The scowling giant gave the lieutenant a wide berth. He was coming to collect him.

Fueled by pure adrenalin, he marched across the cement floor and began to make his way upstairs, to Doc and temporary safety.

* * * *

The gnawing ache in Gabriel's stomach overrode the fire in his muscles and forced him into consciousness. For one suspended moment, he knew nothing, then flashes of events tore through him and resurrected cruel reality.

Jenner. And needles.

Afterward, he'd collapsed halfway up the stairs. Apollo had dragged him up the remaining steps and through the second-floor hallway. Curious feminine faces flushed with sleep peered out at the spectacle. Apollo had heaved him into Doc's office, sent him crashing into the desk. While Doc spouted obscenities at the giant, he had slumped to the floor and let the blackness take him.

Now he lay face down, spread-eagled but not chained, on a large bed in darkened quarters. His vision focused, blurred, refocused with the pounding of his heart.

From what he could see, the place seemed sterile and devoid of personality—bare walls, flat nylon carpet, a lamp perched on a small two-drawer stand next to the bed. A single window obscured by wide vertical blinds graced the far wall. No pictures or knick-knacks, no books on the nightstand. Nothing to indicate anyone used this room.

A soft beep sounded to his right. He raised his head, rotated his stiff neck. A tall white pole stood beside him with two hooks at the top, each supporting a bag of clear fluid. Further down the pole, a small box with a keypad, switches, and an LED window displayed red numbers. It took a moment for him to recognize the contraption: a hospital-style IV.

Horried, his gaze followed the vinyl tube down from one of the bags. It ended in a needle plunged into the juncture of his right arm, held in place with gauze and surgical tape. He ignored the pain movement caused him and bolted upright, pawed at the tape with his free hand. It refused to come off. He grasped the line and pulled. The tube separated, but the needle remained in place. Fluid drained from the end of the damaged tube and darkened the blanket beneath him.

"Kid, you really shouldn't sit up just yet... What the hell?" The voice startled him from his panic-induced trance. The lamp beside the bed sprang to blinding life. "Jesus, you really are anti-drugs, aren't you?"

He focused on the shadow at his side. Doc shimmered into sight, shaking his head, his arms crossed in front of him. The doctor sighed and perched on the mattress between him and the IV. He reached for his arm.

"Relax, kid." Doc unwound the tape. "Welcome to my humble abode. It was just a glucose drip. Kept you hydrated." He pulled the needle free and looked at him, at once serious. "You've been out for twenty-six hours."

He gaped. "Christ," he tried to say, but his voice emerged a rusty croak. Doc reached past the IV stand to another, smaller table, where a plastic pitcher stood next to a stack of paper cups, poured water into one of them and offered it to him. He took it and drank greedily.

"Slow down. You'll give yourself abdominal cramps. That's just what you need on top of everything else."

He nodded and sipped at the water, feeling every drop glide down his parched throat to be absorbed by his shriveled stomach. After a minute, Doc rose and walked into the other room. He returned with a folding tray containing saltine crackers, a small cup of green gelatin and a plain white thermos.

"I'll leave you to your feast." Doc smirked at him. "Sorry, kid, doctor's orders. You have to wait at least a few hours before you can handle solid food. See if you can keep this down first."

"Great." He grimaced at the tray. Doc stood and approached the curtained doorway, and he called after him, "Hey, Doc?"

Doc turned and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Thanks. Again."

Doc merely nodded and left, without letting him see his face.

Chapter 9

Days blended into weeks, and Gabriel's existence settled into miserable routine. Each morning Slade came to his room with one of the awful protein shakes. He was escorted to Doc's office afterward and left there for half an hour.

Doc fussed over him. He changed bandages, slathered ointment, fed him vitamins and Tylenol and cigarettes—and provided the sole companionship he had in this place.

When Slade returned to collect him, he delivered him to the basement, where Sol and Apollo waited. Training consisted of a grueling two to three hour regimen: weightlifting, punching bag exercises—often without gloves—and sparring with Apollo in the makeshift ring. His strength and skill increased daily. He learned both the boxing methods Sol imparted and the dirty, underhanded tactics Apollo favored.

They would break for lunch. A slender, flame-haired girl, whom he eventually learned was called Rose, delivered a tray of food to the basement each afternoon. The brothers left him during this time, locked in the gym for an hour of solitude. On their return they put him through another round of training.

He would be allowed to shower, after which Apollo shepherded him back to Doc's office, where he stayed for nearly an hour. Most of these times Doc had a pot of coffee brewing. There was more bandage-changing and ointment application. They sat and talked over coffee and smokes, and carefully avoided those subjects that caused them both pain. Finally, Slade would come to bring him upstairs and lock him in for the night. His exhausted body devoured sleep like a junkie in a crack factory.

Each evening, he asked to see Lillith. Slade denied him every time.

The unpleasant reason behind his extended night visits with Doc quickly became apparent. Every third day, in lieu of the second training session, Apollo tossed him into the dungeon. The tattoo bench remained, but the mirrors had been removed. In fact, every mirror in his limited range of existence was gone—from the locker room, the bathroom off the hotel's lobby, even Doc's patient washroom.

Apparently, Jenner didn't want him to see the results of their sessions.

The lieutenant materialized exactly five minutes after he entered the dungeon, every time. From the first visit, Jenner made it clear he was to be in position when he arrived.

That first session after the initial marathon also dispensed retribution for his flaring temper. Jenner continued the tattooing, but instead of clearing the excess ink with water, used a cloth soaked in rubbing alcohol.

His back burned for days afterward. He made no further attempts to resist.

Worse than those agonizing sessions with the sadistic lieutenant were the beatings he suffered during his “sparring” rounds with Apollo. Most of the time, Sol’s presence seemed to temper his brother’s rage.

One day, around two months into his captivity, he entered the training room and found Apollo waiting for him alone.

“Sol’s fighting tonight.” A sickly-sweet grin split Apollo’s wide face. “So it’s just you an’ me, pretty boy.”

“Well, then. I guess we can rule out intelligent conversation.”

Apollo’s features twisted with the rage of a gathering storm. “Get in the ring, smartass.”

He took his time strolling across the floor to the far corner of the room, regretting his little outburst with every step. By the time he climbed onto the platform, his muscles quivered in anticipation of blows to come.

The bigger man leapt neatly up and rushed him. He found himself flat on the floor, his head ringing from a powerful right hook. He shook himself, started to get up—and knuckles rammed the bridge of his nose with a sickening crunch.

“Sud of a bidch!” He clamped a hand to his face, a futile attempt to stem the blood gushing from his nostrils. He gained his footing and wavered. “You broke my fuckid dose!”

Apollo raised his clenched fist, lifted two fingers and grinned. A glint of metal shone there, nestled in his palm: an iron weight, small enough to conceal and heavy enough to devastate.

He was trying to kill him. His stomach contorted. Positive the thug wasn’t allowed to do this, he met Apollo’s eyes. “Fuck you,” he said, and walked away.

He reached the edge of the platform before Apollo grabbed him by the hair and dragged him back.

“Where d’ya think you’re goin’, boy?” The weighted fist plowed between his shoulder blades. His knees buckled, but Apollo maintained the grip on his hair as he went down. The giant circled him, wrenching his scalp, and drew him back up on his feet.

“Today’s lesson is how to lose.” Three fierce jabs to his midsection left him gasping for breath. “Don’t worry—” *wham!* “—I’ll tell you when you’ve learned it.”

He blacked out long before the blows stopped coming.

* * * *

From Slade’s office, Sol watched his brother’s vicious performance on the monitoring system with rage that his placid features did not betray. After the boy went down, he switched off the system and headed to the fight. Some part of him insisted Apollo pay for his overt cruelty—but not yet. Patience was a virtue.

Jenner had taught him the lesson, and he had learned it well.

* * * *

Slade allowed Gabriel one whole day to recover from Apollo's beating. The bastard hadn't broken anything, but he still felt like he'd taken on a city bus and lost. On the way down to the morning session he remembered with pathetic gratitude that he didn't have to see Jenner that afternoon.

He entered the training room to find Sol waiting for him. With Jenner. His hope for respite guttered and died.

"Hello, angel."

He couldn't return a greeting. Instead, he glanced around the room and muttered, "Where's Apollo?"

"He is otherwise engaged."

"Great. Does that mean you're taking his place?" Bitterness laced his tone, and he surrendered to the inevitable pain.

Sol stepped forward, exhibiting real emotion for the first time—fury.

He drew back. What had he done?

Jenner placed a hand on Sol's arm. The trainer calmed instantly.

"Do not be irritated with the boy, Sol. Concern yourself only with his body. His mind will require some time."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Control, angel. You lack it completely." Jenner shook his head. "Your rage and your strength will take you only so far. Without control, you will fail."

He huffed. "I suppose you're going to teach it to me."

"You are not ready to learn."

"I—" He stopped himself from insisting he was ready. Another trick. Jenner trying to manipulate him into asking for pain.

"You what?"

"Nothing."

"As I said. You are not ready." Jenner glanced at Sol, nodded. "I will take my leave now."

"What, you aren't going to stay and watch me suffer?"

"No, angel. Not today." A small smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "After all, you are mine tomorrow. I am content to remain patient until then."

Bastard. Watching Jenner leave, his quiet mockery only served to fuel his resolve. He almost looked forward to training today.

Sol made an expectant sound, and he turned to face him.

"One hundred push-ups." Sol pointed to the mat.

"But..."

"Your arms are—"

"No. They're not broken." He exhaled sharply and headed for the mat. For the moment, he wasn't sure who he hated more.

* * * *

Gabriel's body became conditioned to constant pain and duress. Long nights with nothing to do, no one to talk to, gave way to deep reflection. He paced his room or lay on his stomach on the floor next to his cot, a practice begun after the first night he spent waking every time the rough canvas brushed the bruised skin of his back.

He'd long since given up keeping track of days, and so had no clue how long it had been when one afternoon the dungeon yielded a chilling sight.

The mirrors were back.

He approached the bench on trembling legs. He had no desire to discover how Jenner had desecrated him. He'd extracted a promise from Doc not to talk about what he saw. True to his word, the doctor never disclosed the secrets seared into his skin.

Now he was only postponing the inevitable. Jenner wanted him to see. Therefore, he would. He climbed onto the bench, fit his head in the brace—and swallowed an anguished cry.

Wings. The bastard had given him wings.

The sleek black design spread in graceful sweeping lines. It tapered gradually from the widest point across his shoulder blades to a gentle fringe at the base of his spine. Though more Eastern than angelic, the image could not be mistaken for anything but what it was.

The cruel taunts had been buried in the solid sea of ink, just as they were buried in his mind. Only one phrase remained, sprawled across the center of his back.

GABRIEL JOSEPH MORGAN

He didn't look up when the door opened. Alternating waves of anger and degradation consumed him, and he couldn't trust himself not to act on his feelings. Instead, he gripped the handles beneath him until his hands burned with the effort.

"Hello, angel." Jenner's haunting voice drifted through the room.

He wouldn't answer. His heart slammed his ribs, threatened to burst from his chest.

Jenner approached him and stopped inches from his side. "Look at me."

He swallowed hard and raised his head, met Jenner's simmering gaze.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Jenner skimmed a finger along the outlines of the black monstrosity. "You may have noticed that it is not quite finished."

He nodded, still unwilling to speak.

"This is a momentous occasion." Jenner practically purred. A grin surfaced on his sallow face. "Today, you will be reborn."

"What?"

"Gabriel Joseph Morgan entered this room, but he will never leave it. He dies here, now, on this bench." Jenner paused, presumably to let his words sink in. "When you leave, you will be Angel."

"Like hell I will," he blurted.

“Oh, but you will, Angel. You have no choice. Of course, if you want to make things difficult for yourself, and your lovely sister...”

His anger faded. His shoulders sagged, and he hung his head. “All right,” he whispered. “You win.”

Jenner smirked. “Of course I do.”

He lowered himself back down, and the lieutenant gathered his needles. The gloves snapped into place. The wheeled stool glided up beside him, and he forced himself to watch Jenner obliterate his name. Erase him, letter by letter.

Eventually, the last ‘N’ disappeared. An arching line formed that licked beneath the right wing to complete the pattern. He focused on the mirror beneath him and shuddered at the sight of the stranger staring back.

Angel.

* * * *

That night when he was returned to his room after his treatment with Doc, Slade entered and closed the door behind them. Exhausted, in physical and emotional agony, his mood did not endear him to deal with his captor.

Slade said nothing at first, looked around as if seeing the room for the first time, and settled for seating himself in the sole chair.

He squatted on the floor, balanced on the balls of his feet with his arms rested on his thighs, and fixed his gaze on Slade with all the disgust he could summon.

“I understand Jenner has finished your tattoo.”

He nodded. His eyes didn’t leave Slade’s.

“Don’t be so upset, boy. All my fighters are marked in some way, and all by Jenner.”

Not all of them had their secret sins plastered across their backs.

“Show me.”

He rose slowly and turned away. Pulling his shirt over his head to expose his back proved excruciating, but he managed. Behind him, Slade drew a sharp breath.

“Jenner’s really outdone himself this time,” Slade muttered. Footsteps crossed the floor. Slade stood in front of him, searching his face. He bore the scrutiny unblinking, until Slade reached out and eased the shirt from his arms.

“Why don’t you leave this off for now? It will only irritate you further.”

“Sure.” Like he cared.

The man held his hand out, a placatory gesture. “I stayed to tell you a few things. First, Sol and Apollo believe you’re ready to fight. I’ve entered you in a match that will take place one month from today, at my arena. Second, there are two rules in our fights, and they’re simple ones. Weapons are not allowed and you can’t kill your opponent. Other than that, anything goes.”

Slade paused. “And finally, your schedule is to change starting today, so you’re on the same timeline as the rest of us. You won’t sleep tonight.”

He glared at him. "How am I supposed to manage that?"

"I don't care how you do it. Twiddle your thumbs, shadowbox, bash your head against the wall if you want to, but stay awake. I'll come back at dawn to check on you, and then—only then—you can sleep. Any more questions?"

"Can I see Lillith?"

"No. But you can talk to her." He produced the omnipresent phone and dialed. "Get Lillith," he said seconds later. He paused again, spoke sharply. "Lillith, someone would like a word with you."

He took the proffered phone. "Lillith?" he half-whispered, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"Gabriel! Is that you?"

Her voice soothed his shattered psyche, and he clung to the sound like a man drowning.

"Yes." He closed his eyes and folded his free arm across his stomach. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. What are they doing to you, Gabriel?"

"Nothing. I'm okay."

"Oh, Gabe. I'm so sorry." Her voice hitched.

"Don't be sorry. You didn't do anything."

"Yes, I did. I shouldn't have run—"

"No." He cut her off, and turned away so Slade couldn't see his face. "No, Lilly, you didn't. Don't cry. I'm okay. Really."

She sniffled once. "Where are you?"

"In the attic." He uttered a harsh laugh, stopped himself.

"The attic? I didn't think there was one."

"What about you?"

"I have a room." Her voice grew quiet.

"Okay. If they do anything to hurt you..."

"No, Gabe. They haven't hurt me, not at all."

Slade motioned for him to cut the conversation. "Lilly, I have to go. I...I love you, sis."

Lillith drew a shuddering breath. Whatever she said next was lost to him when Slade jerked the phone from his hand and hung it up.

"Satisfied?"

He snorted and crossed his arms.

"I'm leaving. I have a business to run. You know what will happen if you defy me, so don't go to sleep. Angel."

His jaw clenched, and he forced himself to stay in place. Slade left the room. The deadbolt lock slid into place with ringing finality.

Alone, he pounded his frustrations out on the bag that hung from the ceiling, until his knuckles split and the blood ran down his hands. When he could no longer lift his arms, he fell to his knees and loosed an anguished scream.

Chapter 10

By the fourth night on his new schedule, Gabriel's body had adjusted to rising with the moon. His attic prison had no windows, so day and night made no difference to him.

With the end of his sessions with Jenner came an end to his formal training. He still spent five or six hours in the basement every night, conditioning himself to stay fit and focused. He had nothing better to do. One of the ever-present twin bodyguards would lurk, if not in the room with him, then just around the corner or outside the door.

On the fifth night, he entered the training room after an hour with Doc and found a stranger. A swarthy, muscular man, around his age, stood at the far end of the room engaged in a bout with a bag. Bare-chested, shoeless, he wore only tight-fitting black pants, hand wraps, and a gray sweat-soaked headband over which slick black hair spiked like burnt blades of grass. His face reflected intense concentration, and he pummeled the heavy vinyl with blows that reverberated through the room.

The guy was completely focused, a state he had yet to achieve himself. The workout ended abruptly. The fighter stopped and lowered his arms, panting, and faced him with a wide grin that showcased a missing front tooth.

"Hey. You must be the new guy," he called, advancing. He reached him and extended a wrapped hand. "I'm Lonzo. And you are?"

"Ga—" He stopped, disgusted, and took the man's hand. Through clenched teeth he said, "Angel."

Lonzo laughed. "So you are, and you look the part, my friend. Especially that grinning mug of yours. Very angelic."

"Yeah. Right." He cooled off a little, and blinked. Lonzo's eyes were clear amber, rather than the usual Hispanic brown.

Lonzo must have read the observance in his face. "You like the eyes? It's great in bouts. Facing a yellow-eyed Latino can be disconcerting. Whatcha think, *mijo*? You seem pretty alarmed." The grin resurfaced, and he couldn't resist returning it.

"Alarmed, yes. Intimidated, no."

Lonzo shrugged and laughed again. "Sure. So, you came to train?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't let me stand in your way." Lonzo stepped aside and swept an arm toward the bag he'd just vacated.

He flexed his hands, the fresh white gauze wrapping them. Doc would kill him if he tore his knuckles up again, but he felt he owed this Lonzo guy something for barging in on him.

He stepped into position and struck one of the fighting stances Sol had shown him. *This is Apollo, Jenner, Father. This is Marcus-Fucking-Slade.* The last visualization spurred him into action. His fists were a blur, battering the unforgiving material. Blossoms of bright crimson burst on the gauze, but he barely noticed. The room dissolved, and the bag *became* Slade. Cringing before him. Shuddering with every blow.

“Hey...hey! Angel!”

The hated handle jerked him back to reality, and to the discovery that he’d found a way to focus, to channel his rage into something productive. Though his hands throbbed and his shoulders and arms burned with exertion, he felt good. Better than he had since the day he’d been inducted into hell.

“I think you won, man.”

He turned. Lonzo stared at him with mingled humor and awe. A muted rushing sound like distant rapids whispered behind him. He’d torn the bag open. Sand poured from the vertical split in the black material and formed an anthill on the concrete floor.

Lonzo cocked his head to one side. “Come spar with me.”

Nodding, he followed the fighter to the ring. They clambered in on opposite sides, and stood facing each other. Lonzo said, “We don’t have a bell, so I’ll just say when. *Uno, dos, vamenos!*”

Lonzo flashed forward, lobbed a fist toward him. He ducked, tried for a leg sweep, but the backlash of Lonzo’s swing caught him on the side of the head. He missed the other man’s feet by an inch and rebounded to dance back out of reach.

Lonzo advanced on him. This time he was ready, and when his opponent swung, he caught his arm and jerked him forward. He bent a knee and lashed out with his other leg in one fluid motion.

Surprise infused Lonzo’s face. He fell and landed on the mat with a solid thump. He held a hand up to call a halt, grimaced, and stood.

“Ouch. Of course, if this was a real match it’d be far from over, you know. I just wanted to try your style on for size. C’mon, let’s grab a seat.”

Lonzo vaulted to the floor and headed for one of the benches, where a towel lay carelessly draped over wooden slats. He picked it up, slung it around his neck, and mopped the sweat from his face, waiting to be joined.

When they were both seated, Lonzo said, “So what’s your real name?”

“Angel.” *Damn you, Jenner.*

“Okay, if you insist. Where you from, Angel?”

“Around.” He’d already been warned not to spread the story of his captivity to the other residents of the House. It might upset them, he’d inferred with ironic bitterness. They couldn’t have anyone upset. Oh, no.

“A man of few words. I respect that.” Lonzo leaned back against the wall. His hands tugged lightly on the ends of the towel. “It’s okay. I can do enough talking for the both of us. I’m from Brooklyn, so I should be in Mendez’s House. But I can’t stand the bastard, so I came here.”

“Mendez? You mean Diego Mendez?”

Lonzo sent him a strange look. “Uh, yeah. That one. Head of Prometheus? Big-time drug lord and general thug...any of this ringin’ a bell?”

His fists clenched. Diego was part of the organization. Christ. He’d assumed the thugs who’d been with him, Nails and Kaiser, were fighters. Attempting nonchalance, he said, “So we fight people from this guy’s place, then?”

“What?” Disbelief bordering on shock colored Lonzo’s voice. “Don’t you know anything about this outfit? How the hell did you get in here, *mijo*?”

He shrugged and remained silent.

Lonzo shook his head. “All right, look. There are five Houses—one for each borough. We’re Ulysses. You did know that, right?”

“Sure.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. He thought he’d heard Doc mention it before.

“Okay. Then there’s Prometheus in Brooklyn—Mendez. Staten Island is Pandora, run by the Haradas. They’re old, rich and Japanese. Got a real mansion on a private island, deal in upscale escorts and traditional-style stuff. Their fighters are tough.” Lonzo paused and looked at him. “You follow?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Dionysus is in Queens, and the head...uh, man there is Dell, Dell Ramone. He makes a good-looking woman. And then there’s Wolff.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Wolff?”

“Captain Wolff. He’s a cop. All his boys are. They don’t run girls, obviously. House Orion doesn’t enter many matches either. They’re just around to make sure things stay quiet.”

“And they’re from the Bronx?”

Lonzo grinned. “You got it.”

This was big business. Huge business. A corporation of crime with branches in every borough, protected by the cops.

At last he said, “What about the star?”

“That was Wolff’s idea. Five houses, five colors. There are pins and signs and graffiti all over the city, and people either know what it means or they don’t. Since the symbol is innocent enough, no one that doesn’t know bothers to poke into it. Oh—and by the way, we’re the black point.”

From Lonzo, he learned that an outside interest handled the betting—odds determination, placing and payout. The “accountant” and the hosting House received percentages of each night’s take, and fighters could earn anywhere from a thousand dollars to half a million for each match, depending on whether or not they won.

It wasn’t hard to figure out the attraction to voluntary competition.

Slade paid his fighters a base commission of a grand per match, win or lose, plus a percentage of any winnings. He doubted he would receive the same recompense.

Chapter 11

The night of his first fight, Gabriel woke from a rare dreamless sleep to, “Hello, angel.”

Familiar words delivered in a voice he’d hoped never to hear again.

Heart racing, he bolted from the floor, and expected to encounter restraints, but found none. His vision adjusted to wakefulness. The slight figure stood a few feet away, dressed in his usual robe-and-smirk combination. What the hell had he done to bring Jenner here?

“Relax. I only wanted to wish you luck tonight,” Jenner said. He stepped forward, stopped and seemed to remember something. “Oh, yes. And to tell you not to worry about your lovely sister. I will take good care of her while you are gone.”

“You son of a bitch.” An icy weight formed in the pit of his stomach and sent tendrils of cold through him. “You lay one finger on her and I’ll...”

“You will what?” Jenner’s right hand flew up.

He flinched.

With a predatory grin, Jenner reached back and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear.

He held his ground as the other man advanced on him, though his stomach churned and rolled. Jenner stopped inches from him.

“I heard you scream the other night.” The voice dropped to a whisper. “I have decided I enjoy the sound, and some time soon I wish to hear it again.”

“You won’t.” Defiance tightened his voice.

Jenner smiled benevolently. “We shall see, angel.”

“Yes. We will.” Calm descended, and he returned the smile with a cold, calculating one of his own. The barest flicker of an emotion Jenner had never exhibited before tightened the man’s features: surprise.

Jenner recovered quickly and withdrew, with his habitual leer intact. Had that brief shock had even been there, or had he merely imagined it?

“Well. You have certainly progressed faster than I believed possible.” He had been surprised, just not in the way he’d expected.

The arrogant satisfaction stamped on Jenner’s face nearly proved his undoing. His arms jerked spasmodically in his longing to wrap his hands around the worm’s throat. “I never expected to have you reformed before your first fight. However, you are ready.”

More than you know. Jenner walked out, and he savored his contempt. Nursed it. Fed on it. He would turn their world upside down and leave it in shambles.

* * * *

An hour after his confrontation with Jenner, Gabriel arrived at Beatz. An innocuous name for a nightclub indistinguishable from any other on the streets of New York. Garbed in flashing, sputtering neon, the club huddled between a topless bar and a building that might once have been warehouse space, but now loomed abandoned and boarded shut. A line had formed before the doors of the club.

Stuck between Sol and Apollo, handcuffed, with a jacket thrown over his arms to hide his prisoner status, he embraced the five blocks between the Marquis-Grant and Beatz. He savored every frigid March breath of New York air as though it would be his last. Despite the horrific idea of attempting to pound another man into incapacity, a thread of hesitant anticipation pulsed through his taut nerves.

He'd been given new clothes for the fight. Gone were the loose-fitting garments that marked the first months of his captivity. Now he wore the uniform of Ulysses: black boots laced up to mid-calf over form-fitting black pants, black tank top, and a long-sleeved linen shirt, open at the front, also black.

He had received new rules as well, to be followed in addition to the two laws of the organization. Slade insisted on entertainment along with triumph, ordered him to draw out the match as long as possible. And as testament to his forced name, he would fight shirtless so everyone could see his tattoo.

They reached the entrance and pushed through a throng of people waiting for admittance without sparing a glance at the protestors they cut in front of. At the door, a bouncer nearly as large as the twins nodded them through. Apollo steered him by the elbow into a darkened din of music and noise, grinding bodies and sweat.

A discreet door beyond the bar led to a nest of rooms in the rear of the building, where insulated walls and heavy carpeting swallowed the cacophony of sound from the nightclub. Silence reigned in an elevator at the end of a hall.

The car descended smoothly. They walked through a deserted basement to a hallway hidden in shadow, and up a flight of stairs. At the top, double steel doors stood waiting—a concealed entrance to the deserted building they had passed outside.

These doors opened on a different brand of clamor. Beyond Sol's looming bulk, hundreds of people milled about in a vast room of cement and steel beams under the harsh glow of the running lights set into the ceiling. Occasional shouts rang out above the roar of conversation. The bulk of the chatter emanated from a stadium-style vending window across the room, where bets were being placed.

In the center of the arena, four chain-link walls that stopped just short of the ceiling boxed in a raised platform—a fighting cage. Tables, prime seating, encircled the ring.

Apollo led him through the crowd to one of the tables, to Slade, seated and deep in conversation with a striking light-skinned black woman in sequined purple. The woman looked up and flashed a dazzling smile, showing flawless teeth. Apollo shoved him into the chair opposite Slade.

"You must be Angel." The woman spoke husky and deep, as though she'd been chain-smoking for decades. The slight motion at her throat suggested this was Dell Ramone of Dionysus. She extended a hand across the table, affording him a look at the cascade of elegant silver bracelets encircling her wrist, and said, "Pleasure to meet you."

He glanced down at his cuffed hands, still concealed by the jacket. Slade cleared his throat. Dell shrugged, lowered her hand and turned the smile back on.

"The pleasure is mine, ma'am," he said with a slight nod. She gaped at him, and then burst into a throaty chuckle.

"Call me Dell, sugar. There is no 'ma'am' at this table." Still laughing, she turned to Slade. "You really think your Angel is gonna beat my Eddie? Why, he's nothing but skin and bones."

"Oh, I think he may surprise you." Slade directed his gaze at him. "It's amazing what one can accomplish, given the proper motivation."

His jaw clenched in mute fury. Dell loosed another round of hearty laughter. "How delightful!" She clapped her hands with a jingle of jewelry. "I do love surprises." She grinned, but then her gaze focused on something beyond their table. The buoyantly flirtatious woman disappeared, and a snarling panther took her place.

"Just who in the hell does he think he is?" Dell turned and called over her shoulder, "Ania!"

A compact, unsmiling woman with close-cropped blonde hair materialized soundlessly behind Dell, hands clasped behind her back. Without looking at the woman, Dell said, "Mendez is over there messing with Sammie. Go tell him to keep his slimy paws off my girl."

Ania nodded and melted into the crowd, and Dell's smile banished the panther. "Duty calls. So tell me, Marcus, when can I invite your Angel to my place for a conjugal visit?"

Slade offered an amused smirk. "Insatiable as ever. Sorry, Dell, but Angel is not for sale. Or rent, for that matter."

"Aw. But he's so cute! Oh, well—you can't blame me for trying. See you at the races, sugar." Dell rose with stately elegance and blew a kiss across the table to him before disappearing in the same manner as Ania.

An involuntary shudder traveled the length of his spine, and he realized just how close he'd been to becoming another man's sex toy.

"Relax, young one. Prostitution is not part of our deal, and I'm a man of my word," Slade said.

Relax. Yeah, right.

Tense minutes passed, devoid of conversation. The crowd roared around them. A dozen plans for escape rose and fell, yet he could feel Apollo behind him, daring him to make the wrong move. He stayed seated.

At last Slade glanced at his watch and rose from his chair. "Come on. Time to go."

Go where? He stood and tried to ignore his thudding heart. Slade walked toward the cage. When he faltered, Apollo gave him a rough shove forward and he barely avoided crashing into the table. He strode after his captor, his body tense with self-restraint.

They circled to the opposite side of the ring and stopped before a distorted extension of the cage. It was lower than the rest of the structure, equipped with a door of steel rods connected by more chain-link. Within this recessed enclosure, a handful of men stood, or sat on one of the wooden benches placed around its interior perimeter. A few shadow-boxed, concentration etched on their hard faces.

"This is the pen." Slade faced him again. "You'll wait here until your match. You're up last." The keys were already in his hand. He jerked the jacket away, tossed it to Apollo, and unlocked the cuffs. "Remember your instructions." Slade swung the door to the pen open. "Do not disappoint me, Angel. You know what will happen if you do."

He walked into the fighter's area. The door clattered shut behind him. Inside, three wooden steps led down to a dirt floor littered with cigarette butts and shards of broken bottles. He stopped at the bottom of the short flight and scanned the competition.

No one glanced his way, though several appeared engaged in friendly conversation. He tried to guess which of the fighters might be Eddie. A familiar face surfaced on a bench opposite him: Lonzo.

The fighter noticed him at the same time and waved him over with a boyish grin. He skirted around a shadow-boxer, making his way to the bench to take a seat.

"Hey." Lonzo produced a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

"Thanks." He extracted one and handed the rest back to Lonzo, who was ready with a light. He inhaled deeply, leaned back and closed his eyes, and let it out slow. The small luxury of smoking had to sustain him. He had no other source of available pleasures.

Lonzo lit up and took a deep pull. "Nervous?"

"Yeah. Which one's Eddie?"

"He's not here yet." Lonzo scanned the room and settled his gaze on the shadow-boxer he'd passed on the way in. "See that guy?" he asked, inclining his head toward the fighter.

"Yes."

"I'm fighting him. Tiger, from House Pandora. Man, I hate those *gavrons*."

He nodded, unsure how to respond. Finally he said, "Good luck."

"Thanks." Lonzo grinned through a cloud of smoke. "I hear the odds on you are way long. Makes for good cash, if you win."

"Great. I'm overwhelmed by our esteemed employer's confidence in me."

Lonzo chuckled. "Slade doesn't post the odds. He just bets 'em. He probably put up a big chunk of cash on you, too. Hell, I would, if fighters were allowed to bet."

"Thanks. I think."

"Hey, we gotta stick together. Besides, I—"

"Don't I know you?"

A lumbering form stood in front of them, staring at him. Lonzo squinted up at the speaker. "What you want, *ese*? We're talking. Take a hike."

He gripped the bench. Kaiser. "Er, no," he said, hoping the thug was as stupid as he'd seemed in Diego's bar. "I don't think so."

Kaiser blinked. "Yeah, I do. You're that kid." He turned toward the front of the enclosure and shouted, "Hey, Cortez! C'mere."

Shit. Cortez definitely wasn't stupid. He tensed and glanced around the pen. He wasn't supposed to leave it. He'd just have to hope the fighters weren't allowed to start the fun before the main event.

Lonzo's brow furrowed. "That kid? What's he talkin' about? I thought you said you didn't know anyone from Prometheus."

"I don't," he muttered darkly. "Think they know me, though."

"Hot damn! You ain't even fought yet, and you got a rep already." Lonzo laughed and looked at the figure pushing toward them. "Sure did pick a nasty one. Cortez is a brute."

"You don't say."

Cortez reached Kaiser and stopped. "What's up, *'mano*? You forget your match-up again? You aren't in 'til next to last. One of the Japs."

Kaiser shook his head and pointed. Cortez followed the gesture. "Son of a bitch." The fighter reached down, snagged his shirt and hauled him off the bench. "I told you to get lost. Guess you didn't hear me. Who the fuck let you in here?"

"Hey!" Lonzo shot to his feet. "Leave off, man. He's with us."

"What? You're shittin' me, right? Slade signed on this little puke?" Cortez released him and wiped his hand on his shirt with an exaggerated motion. "What'd he do, take out life insurance on him? He ain't gonna last two minutes."

"*He* is standing right here." He resisted smoothing his rumpled shirt. "Don't talk about me like I don't count."

Cortez laughed. "Here's a news flash for you, kid. You don't. Get fuckin' used to it." He walked away, and Kaiser followed with a confused expression.

He sat down hard. "Thanks, Lonzo. Sorry about that. I just..."

"You know what? I don't wanna know. Seriously." Lonzo grinned and rejoined him on the bench. "Don't even worry about those assholes. They aren't worth the effort."

"Yeah. I forgot 'em already." Until he had to fight one of them.

A sudden thunderclap of cheering cracked from the spectators, and he sought the source of the excitement. A sable-haired beauty stood poised in the center of the cage, arms over her head to greet every person in the arena. One upraised hand gripped the staff of a cordless microphone. Scant triangles of glistening black leather were all that covered the ripe swell of her breasts, the generous curves of her ass and her private nest of curls. Stiletto-heeled boots hugged her legs to mid-thigh.

She bent her arm to bring the mike to her lips, and her voice boomed through the open space. “Welcome to House Ulysses!” The applause intensified. She paused, waiting for a lull. “We have a special treat for you tonight...the debut match of our newest fighter!” Again the clamor swelled, ebbed. “The betting window will stay open through the seventh match, for those of you who would like to wager on our final fight.”

“And now—bring on the boys!” The announcer turned toward the pen with a seductive smile. “For our first bout of the evening, please welcome Tiger of House Pandora to the ring.”

Tiger slunk past the bench where he and Lonzo still sat. The fighter offered a quick, predatory grin, mounted a second set of stairs that he hadn’t noticed before, and ascended into the cage to the sound of rousing cheers.

Lonzo stood. The entrance to the pen opened and another fighter walked in, bathed in shadow. “Ah,” Lonzo half-shouted over the din, “there’s Eddie.”

He strained to make out the new arrival, but he’d already mingled with the rest of the men in the enclosure. The announcer’s voice rang out again. “Competing against Tiger tonight is our own...Lonzo!”

With a brief wave, Lonzo charged up the steps and into the cage.

He temporarily abandoned his quest to determine which man would be his opponent and turned his attention to the impending bout.

Chapter 12

“Ooh, I don’t think he’s gonna come back from that one.”

The tall fighter in black next to Gabriel had stated the obvious. Accompanied by a mixture of cheers, catcalls and sighs of dismay, Lonzo’s limp body slammed into the cage wall for the third time in ten minutes. Tiger held a clear advantage from the start. Though Lonzo had the drive and the power, his opponent possessed speed and skills that could only have come from years of rigorous training.

Lonzo never stood a chance, knew it, and he still fought.

He watched in mute horror. His fellow fighter struggled to rise and failed. With a long, shuddering breath, Lonzo sunk to the floor and stilled.

Twenty seconds passed, counted out by the announcer. A bell sounded. “Winner!” the announcer called. She dashed across the ring and held one of Tiger’s bloodied fists upraised in a victory salute. Grinning, though his smile now floated over heaving breaths, the fighter from Pandora soaked in the cheers of the crowd like a cat in the sun.

Sol entered the ring, silent as shadows while the masses lauded their hero of the moment. Unnoticed, he bent to lift Lonzo—and to Gabriel’s amazement, the beaten fighter managed to walk out of the ring with his arm around Sol’s massive shoulders. At last the cheers began to abate, and Tiger took leave of his temporary glory.

The fighters in the pen had taken no notice of each other during the match. Now, with a break in the action, they milled about again. Snatches of conversation, reflections and instant replays, a few comments on how they would have won came to him.

He pushed his concern for Lonzo to the back of his mind and tried to concentrate on his impending ordeal. He turned to reclaim his spot on the bench, and found himself facing one of the fighters, who’d been standing behind him.

“Lo, kid,” the fighter said. “I’m Eddie, and I’m guessing you must be Slade’s new guy.” A hand came forward.

He took it. “Yeah, that’s me.” The guy was big, but not monstrous like the twins, and black as pitch. His hair hung in tight, shining curls to just below his ears, and the deep purple tank top stretched over his chest revealed thick veined arms and contoured muscle. Christ, were any of his opponents going to be his size?

“Leave your manners back at the ranch?” Eddie’s smile stayed in place, but his arms folded across his chest. Where had he gone wrong? And then he remembered the name. The goddamned name.

“Sorry. I’m...Angel.”

“Well, I’m charmed.” Eddie nodded and stepped back to let him through, and he moved to the bench. Eddie added with a grin, “Looking forward to bein’ the first guy with the pleasure of beating you.”

Great. He managed a weak smile and sat down. The clock moved on, and time rushed him toward the inevitable.

The rest of the matches passed in a blur. Next up was Boomer of Prometheus, a burly-looking bald slab of a man, against Johnny O, one of Dell’s crew. These two seemed evenly matched, but eventually the slighter Johnny O went down. His defeat elicited a sympathetic groan from Eddie. Boomer gloated and strutted the ring, a misshapen peacock preening for an audience that tossed out more hissing than cheers.

It seemed House Prometheus was not the favorite.

Eventually, only four fighters remained in the pen. Two of them migrated into the spotlight. The announcer introduced Kamen of Pandora and Kaiser of Prometheus. He kept his gaze diverted from his soon-to-be opponent, opted instead to try following the movements of the men in the cage.

The background roar of the crowd faded. Flesh smacked flesh, bone impacted muscle, grunts and sighs ejected from the fighters. Slick with sweat and blood, Kamen and Kaiser rolled across the mat, locked in a violent embrace and landing blows as they went.

Blur of skin and cloth and hair. Striking like cobras on fast-forward, hissing and spitting. Heads snapped, time whirled. Dragged closer to the moment he feared.

Thud. Kamen down. Game over. Time’s up.

The sibilant announcer called the victor’s name. Eddie muttered something under his breath. Hiding trepidation behind a mask of rigid politeness, he looked at him and said, “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I said, those fuckers are on ’roids or something. Prometheus.” Eddie frowned and blew an agitated breath. “Winning streak, my ass.”

He merely nodded.

“I’d like to kick Mendez’s happy ass from here to Sunday.” The fighter broke off and fell silent. A minute passed, and he said, “Well, kid. You ready for me?”

“Sure.” Lillith’s life depended on his performance here and now. Don’t kill your opponent, Slade had told him. Don’t disfigure your opponent. Draw out the match. Shirt off. Goddamn it. He had to display the inked horror Jenner branded him with. He shrugged free of both shirts and dropped them in a crumpled heap on the nearest bench, ignoring his opponent’s antagonistic snort. He looked at the ring, the announcer, the spectators. And the last unspoken rule.

Don’t lose.

A cheer rippled through the crowd. The sound crested even before the announcer reached the center of the ring, and his heart sank. Tonight he served as the star attraction—fresh meat. The woman in the cage held up a hand for silence, but the din swelled before it settled into a dull roar.

She smiled, dazzling. Paused for effect. Raised the mike.

“And now, the main event!”

Cheers and jeers, applause and catcalls. A thin film of sweat coated his palms. He rubbed them on his pants.

“House Ulysses welcomes back to the ring...Eddie of Dionysus!”

Flash of white teeth. Feet charged up wooden stairs, pounded across the mat. Cheers and jeers—more cheers, less jeers.

They liked Eddie.

“And introducing the latest addition to our fine stable of fighters. Please welcome to the arena...Angel!”

His feet carried him forward and up. Step, step, step, into the searing flood of spotlights. Hands fisted at his sides, determination stiffening his stride. He forced himself to cross to the center with measured gait and proud posture.

Dimly aware of the awed hush that befell the crowd, he faced his opponent and waited. He would let Eddie make the first move.

Don’t lose don’t lose don’t lose.

The announcer retreated with an appreciative wink. A buzzer sounded.

Eddie moved.

He jerked back, aside. The blow meant for his jaw whizzed by in a blur of knuckles. From the corner of his eye, his opponent’s other arm began an upward trajectory. He ducked this time and felt his hair ruffle with the force of it.

Drop to the floor. Roll clear, stand. Don’t let him connect. Draw it out.

Roaring like an enraged bull, Eddie charged. He sidestepped, neat as a matador, and whirled to face him. His opponent lunged. He avoided one flying fist only to collide with another.

The blow glanced off his ribcage. The sharp sting faded fast. He hadn’t received the full impact. In front of him, Eddie grinned and jabbed again at his midsection.

Block. Shove away. Back off.

Avoidance was simple, but it couldn’t last forever. The crowd wanted action. They came for blood. Minutes passed with no contact and he felt pressure emanating from all sides, a nearly audible chant: punch-kick-strike-hurt.

He lashed out, aiming for his opponent’s gut. Eddie proved equally effective at defense, and his fist met a meaty forearm. He tried again with both hands—one-two, Sol’s technique—and this time connected.

It was like punching flesh-covered steel.

The effort left him unprotected and off-guard. Eddie landed a hit to his face. His lips mashed against his teeth, and the lower one split. Wet warmth engulfed his chin and pattered on his bare chest.

Just what the mob ordered.

Eddie paused to savor first-blood triumph. Mistake. He rabbit-punched his left kidney. His opponent doubled over with a gasp, and he delivered a blow to his jaw. Eddie lurched sideways—but instead of taking advantage of the man's vulnerability, he stepped back and waited.

Draw it out.

Eddie straightened and swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. It came away dripping blood so dark, he could believe the fighter ate handfuls of iron for breakfast. His opponent bared red-smeared teeth in a can't-hurt-me smile.

Eddie came at him again, bellowing, arms outstretched—and this time bore him to the mat. He tried to block. Flailing fists and feet seemed everywhere at once, connecting with dull smacking sounds and blossoming pain.

He went limp, tried to maneuver the man into relenting. It worked. Eddie hesitated just long enough for him to tense and spring, and reverse their positions. He knelt on Eddie's shoulders. The fighter bucked and convulsed beneath him.

The barest tremor of victorious pleasure thrilled through him.

No. This was not sport. This was survival. Self-directed rage coursed in his veins, and he channeled it into a furious backhand that snapped his opponent's head into the mat.

Disgusted with himself, he rolled off Eddie and sprang to his feet.

The fighters circled each other, trading blow for blow. Time slowed to a crawl. Eddie swung in slow motion, his breath formed great tearing sighs. Limbs moved as though mired in mud. Blood flowed like syrup.

His opponent crouched, looped one leg outward in a wide arc—a sweep kick. He couldn't avoid it in time. He crashed to the mat at the base of the cage wall.

Right in front of Slade's table.

Eddie leaned over him. With his fingers entangled in the chain mesh above, he drove his foot into his ribs and stomach. Over and over.

Thud-rattle. Thud-rattle. Crunch-rattle.

Gasping in agony, he tried to rise. Eddie struck every time he started to gain purchase. He turned to look at his captor through the cage, and what he saw erased his thoughts.

The bastard was reaching for his phone.

Blind fury carried him to his feet despite the hailstorm of kicks. Wedging himself between Eddie and the wall, using the mesh behind him for leverage, he raised his legs and shoved hard. His opponent stumbled backward and sprawled on his ass.

He rushed him. The other man gained a standing position, and he swung his balled hand toward him, drove it with every ounce of power he possessed, every drop of rage he could produce. And connected.

Eddie's limp body followed the trajectory of fist and crashed to the mat.

Five seconds, ten seconds. Not so much as a twitch.

Silence screamed from the masses, gathered momentum.

Fifteen seconds.

Twenty.

“We have a winner!”

A backlash of sound washed over him. The crowd broke in wild delirium. He stood over Eddie’s still body in disbelief. Blood...so much blood. He had beaten another man unconscious.

As he looked down, sorrow and self-loathing gnawed at his soul, and he came to a terrible realization.

He wanted to do it again.

Chapter 13

Slade smiled and approached the betting window. Payout time.

Apollo had returned to the House to deliver the boy to Seth. He'd done well—but Slade would never let him know it. The match had lasted a full twenty minutes, the second longest in the organization's history.

His own debut bout had been the longest.

He replayed the fight in his mind like a beloved movie. The boy—Angel—was a natural exhibitionist. Whether the ability stemmed from fear for his sister or an unconscious warrior spirit, it made for an incredible show. His conditioning had proven well worth the risk.

He neared the front of the line, and a familiar and unwelcome figure approached from the side. Refraining from a childish display of eye-rolling, he looked ahead as though he didn't see the obnoxious twit.

"Hey, Chief."

"Mendez." *What the hell do you want?*

"Your kid did pretty good out there tonight."

He gave him a sidelong glance. "Yes, he did."

Diego's brow creased. He was obviously thinking hard. "A lot better than I expected," he said, pronouncing each word with deliberation.

"I'm assuming you bet against him."

The statement elicited a strained laugh from his oily associate. "Course I did. That don't matter, though. My guys won all night."

"Did they. I hadn't noticed." *Get to the point, you insufferable cretin.* He had almost reached the window, and didn't want Mendez to find out how much he'd earned from the boy.

"So I was thinking..." Mendez leaned in. "I oughta get a cut of your action, you know," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "For findin' the kid for you."

He whirled on him. "You got your cut already, shit-for-brains. The deal is done. Get lost."

"All right, Chief. Chill. Didn't hurt to ask, now, did it?"

He glared in thunderous silence.

"Right. Catch ya later." Mendez turned and walked into the crowd. The worm had nerve, a lot of fucking nerve.

He reached the window and cast a self-assured smile at the man behind the glass.

"Ah, Mr. Slade," the man said. He was one of the two regular managers the organization used for events—Bentley or Benson, something like that. "Cashing out?"

He nodded, reached into his pocket and produced a sheaf of receipts, slid them through the slot at the bottom of the window. Bentley-or-Benson riffled through the stack, punched some numbers into the laptop on the counter beside him, whistled softly, and fed the receipts to a shredder.

“Five hundred gees. Nice little chunk of change. You want it all deposited?”

“Yes. Wait, no. Give me three thousand cash, deposit the rest.” He still had to pay Lonzo, despite the gung-ho fighter’s penchant for losing, and the two others who’d been in tonight.

Ben-something poked at the laptop, clicking away, his fingers a scurry of mice. Keeping his eyes on the screen, he used a key on a wrist coil to unlock a drawer beneath the counter. He extracted a slim banded stack of bills, and with his free hand retrieved a slip of white thermal paper from the miniature printer beside the computer. He slid both the cash and the receipt through, and Slade pocketed them both quickly.

“See you next time, Mr. Slade.”

He started to respond, but Bentley-or-Benson had already motioned for the next customer. The tide of people jostled him away into the whirling aftermath of the evening’s entertainment.

* * * *

The door of the hotel closing behind Gabriel slammed like the gate of a prison cell. The taste of freedom he’d received mocked him, a drop of water on a shriveled tongue. Sweating, bruised and torn, he dragged dutifully behind Apollo to be patched up. They neared the closed door of Doc’s office. Clattering sounds, muffled muttering and cursing penetrated into the hall. He smiled and shook his head. Poor Doc.

Apollo opened the door, and he entered. Lonzo lay unconscious on the low bed next to the desk. An IV line snaked from the back of the fighter’s hand. Cuts and bruises dotted his face, and his shallow breath strained through swollen lips. He looked worse than Gabriel felt.

Doc burst from the bathroom and strode toward Lonzo, his attention focused on the damp cloth in his hands. Apollo left, and he finally glanced in the direction of the door. His scowl deepened.

“Go. Bed. Sit.” He pointed toward the curtained doorway.

Grateful for the quiet Doc’s room would provide, he went. The instant he was out of sight, the doctor started grumbling again. “Damned barbarians...can’t just watch a frigging movie or play chess, no...have to try and kill each other...”

He perched on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. The lingering sense of pride at his win shamed him, made him feel dirty. He wasn’t supposed to enjoy any of this. His sole objective was to extract both Lillith and himself as soon as possible.

He would not become one of these people.

With these thoughts swirling, he allowed his body to relax and dreamed of escape. The sound of Doc clearing his throat drew him back to reality. He glanced toward the curtain. The doctor stood in the doorway, arms crossed, a mixture of amusement, rebuke and relief on his weary face.

“Hi Doc,” he said slowly. The pain of his injuries had started to surface beneath his draining adrenalin. By tomorrow night, he’d be almost immobile with soreness.

He could see Doc’s mind working, deciding whether to greet him or scold him. At last the man smiled and let his arms drop to his sides. “So, you’re still alive.”

“Last I checked.” He grimaced and tried to stand.

“No. Sit.” Concern colored Doc’s expression. He crossed the room and took a seat beside him. “All right, you’re taking something. What’s it gonna be—the good shit, or Tylenol?”

“What do you think?”

Doc heaved a sigh. “Fine. I’ll go get it. You strip.”

“Yes, Mother.” He smirked. Doc grunted his annoyance and ducked out of the room.

Alone, he battled frustration and pain in silence while the cursed wings burned on his back.

* * * *

“Congratulations, boy. You’re half a million dollars closer to freedom.”

He lay on the floor facing the wall, stiff from the fight and oozing latent rage, and didn’t bother responding to the voice from the doorway of his room. Slade, of course. Come to gloat over his victory.

If his lack of reaction disturbed his captor, Slade didn’t show it. “You have three weeks to prepare for your next match,” he told him. “And if you can prove between now and then that you won’t try anything foolish, I’ll allow you more leeway.”

Your generosity is overwhelming. He pressed his lips together to prevent his thoughts from escaping and silently willed the bastard to leave.

“I have something for you. Call it a reward, if you like, for your victory.” Slade’s voice sounded closer now, although he had not heard his movements. From further away, hesitant footfalls told him someone else had entered the room.

Jenner.

But the step was too light and irregular to be the sadistic lieutenant. He pushed himself to his knees and turned his head. His breath caught in his throat.

“Lillith.”

Spoken in an astonished whisper, the single word carried anguish and relief. She trembled in the doorway, her wide green eyes already filling. He stood and looked at Slade with gratitude, though he couldn’t bring himself to speak the words.

“You’re welcome,” Slade said. He walked to the doorway, motioned Lillith aside and turned to face the two of them. “Five minutes. Don’t try anything she will regret.” He withdrew and closed the door.

Lillith flew across the room and embraced him with a sob. Unprepared for her touch, he stiffened and winced.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” she wailed, immediately releasing him. Horrified, he reached out and drew her to him. He ignored the resultant pain.

"No, no...it's okay, Lilly. I'm okay. Shh, don't cry." He held her and stroked her hair until her cries dwindled to subdued sniffles. She finally looked up at him, and he offered a sad smile.

"It's good to see you," he said.

Lillith returned the smile with a watery one of her own. "I've missed you," she said in a small voice. "Oh, Gabriel, what have they done to you? Look at you. Look at your back..." More tears coursed down her stained cheeks, and he cursed himself for not putting a shirt on.

"It's nothing, Lilly. Just a tattoo, that's all. It doesn't even hurt." Anymore, he almost said, but stopped himself before the words were out. That would only make her feel worse.

"But it did!" she cried. "I know it did. And what about all those bruises, and the blood... oh, Gabe, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault!" She collapsed against him in a torrent of sobs, and his heart constricted.

"Hush, don't cry. It's not your fault." He rubbed her heaving shoulders. "Look at me," he said. She raised her face, and he cupped her chin gently. "This is not your fault." He pronounced each soft word deliberately. "It's Slade's fault. Please, stop blaming yourself. Promise me you will."

Lillith hesitated. Her lower lip quivered. At last she drew a shaky breath and said, "Okay. I promise."

He smiled. "That's better. Now, tell me how he's treating you."

"Slade?" She dropped her gaze for an instant. "He treats me all right, I guess."

"Are you...working?" He couldn't bring himself to elaborate.

She paled and looked away. "Actually, I haven't been since you got here. He... Slade...told me..." She trailed off, and he laid a comforting hand on her arm.

"What did he tell you?"

She turned back to him, her face full of discomfort. "He said that as long as you win your fights, I won't have to work."

Son of a bitch. He'd bring that bastard down. Somehow. He swallowed his anger for Lillith and presented a reassuring front. "Don't worry. I won't lose."

Lillith shuddered. They stood together in silence until she broke the stillness and said, "Gabriel, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Well, I was just wondering..."

"Go on."

She swallowed and looked away. "How much did you make?"

Confusion washed over him. "What do you mean?"

"On the fight."

His uncertainty grew at her explanation. Why did Lillith want to know about the money? Had Slade explained the price of freedom to her, too?

"Half a million," he said slowly. He searched her face for answers to his unspoken questions.

Her eyes took on a faraway cast. "That's a lot of money."

"It's blood money." He backed away from her. "Lillith, what the hell..."

She snapped back abruptly, as though from a trance, and her face fell at the sight of his thunderous expression. "I'm sorry. It's just...when I came here, I tried to get money. For us, you know? I thought maybe..." She shivered and blinked rapidly, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "I didn't want to go back. And Slade said I would make a lot of money. I thought it wouldn't be so bad, maybe. Just a few times. And then I could bring you here, with me."

"Oh God. Lilly..."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "He wouldn't let me go. He said I had to earn more, and it was taking so long. It was never going to be enough. And I didn't want to tell you, Gabriel, because I'm so ashamed. I thought, for once... I could save you. But I made everything worse!"

A torrent of sobs wracked her slender frame. He reached for her, and she buried her face in his chest. He gave her a gentle squeeze and whispered, "I'll get you out of here, Lilly. No matter what it takes."

The doorknob rattled, and the soft squeal of hinges announced Slade's return. Over Lillith's bent head, he met his captor's cool amusement with disgust.

"Time's up, kiddies," Slade announced. "Come along, Lillith. Say goodbye."

Lillith gave a faltering smile. "I don't deserve you," she whispered.

He shook his head. "Don't say that." He hugged her tight and released her. "I'll see you soon, and we'll get out of this place. I love you, Lilly."

"Love you too, Gabriel."

Squaring her shoulders, Lillith walked away. Slade stood aside to let her pass, and said, "Wait on the steps for me." She nodded, and with a final glance at him, left.

"If you even think about trying to sell my sister again, you will regret it," he snapped at Slade.

Slade laughed. "Will I, Mr. Morgan? And how will that come about? Do you plan to threaten me to death? Or maybe I should shore up for a serious round of name-calling."

He seethed in silent rage. The bastard was right. He could do nothing.

"I will remind you once again, Angel." The contempt he infused the hated moniker with made Gabriel's stomach contort. "You belong to me. And until you earn your keep, you will do as I tell you." Slade's eyes were crackling shards of ice. "Never threaten me again, unless you want Jenner to pay both you and your sister a visit."

Images flashed through his mind—Jenner, in his room, telling him he'd take good care of Lillith. Leering.

Never.

He lowered his eyes and let his head fall. He studied the floor and mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"Better. Remember, you have three weeks, and the odds on you won't be as long next time. You had better win."

Slade locked him in for the night. A wave of exhaustion rolled over him, and he stretched out again on the rigid floor. With Lillith's face fresh in his mind, he drifted into his first real sleep since she'd disappeared.

Chapter 14

Gabriel stole three nights to recover before he threw himself back into his grueling regimen. Knowing Lillith would be forced to turn tricks if he lost fueled his drive, and he trained with reckless abandon.

He expected the weeks until the upcoming match, which he learned would be hosted by Diego Mendez, to drag on forever. However, the night arrived with the speed of a bullet train—and with the promise of temporary freedom from Slade’s watchdogs. He had sworn not to attempt escape, and would keep the vow for Lillith’s sake.

They traveled to Brooklyn in a limousine. Sol drove, and another of Slade’s fighters, Lucian, rode shotgun. Apollo had stayed behind to “take care of the girls,” and Lonzo would not be fighting this time. Two other participants for Ulysses would arrive separately.

He sat facing the rear of the car, handcuff-free for the first time outside the walls of the hotel prison. Opposite him, Slade lounged beside an attractive blonde with a smile almost as big as the breasts she displayed in a low-cut snug top with no bra. Moxie flirted and bubbled the entire trip.

Rose, the flame-haired lunch-bringer he remembered from his early training days, sat next to him. She remained more reserved than her chatty companion and seemed nervous to be so near him.

He didn’t speak to anyone. His attention stayed riveted to the window, and he watched the city rush past.

They pulled into a sparsely occupied parking garage and circled up the ramps. Graffiti covered many of the scarred walls and chipped pillars, ranging from single-color scrawls to full murals. One pillar bore a crude five-colored star, along with a message in Spanish: *Somos las calles*. Though he couldn’t begin to translate, the words chilled him.

Eventually, the car emerged on the roof. The limo stopped and the engine cut off. Sol opened the door nearest Slade, and the occupants filed out.

The car rested close to the edge of the building. Only a double-barred railing separated them from a long drop to the pavement. He let his gaze wander and took in the surroundings while he filled his lungs with night air.

They were in a warehouse district, abandoned years ago from the looks of it. Enormous boxlike buildings in various stages of disrepair surrounded the garage on three sides. Only a few of the structures showed signs of activity, with an occasional light in a window or a distant whirr of something mechanical. Nests of cracks erupting from volcanic potholes appeared at almost regular intervals along the strip of road below.

He almost jumped over the damned rails.

The impulse for self-destruction faded reluctantly. He followed the group to an ancient elevator cage near the center of the garage. Its metal grate door stood half-open, frozen like the Tin Man in the rain. With a grunt, Sol pushed the frame aside. A metallic groan rose from the depths of the shaft and the flat rose to meet them. They boarded and started down.

The rusted cable failed to give way on descent, and they reached the ground unscathed. Slade led them out of the garage into narrow, deserted streets, unevenly lit with harsh orange glare from the handful of arc-sodium lights that still worked. The place seemed desolate and empty, as though their party represented the first human presence here in decades.

The group walked through a complicated maze of passageways, occasionally leaving the narrow streets to cut through the shells of buildings long deserted. Soon, other souls materialized around them—alone, in pairs or groups, all headed in the same general direction. They arrived at one of the buildings with lights, passed through a room that might have once been a prep area for deliveries, and entered pandemonium.

Hundreds swarmed the cavernous arena, filling the air with a cicada buzz of sound. Here, the ring was roped, not caged. He caught glimpses of the dull gray mat through the shifting crowd. The scarred surface bore concentric stains, layer upon layer of splotched sweat and blood ground in by feet and rolling bodies. Tonight he would add his own stains to the collection. Thoughts of the impending fight triggered an avalanche of nerves.

What if he forgot something? What if he didn't draw the fight out long enough to make Slade happy?

What if he lost?

Slade indicated a cordoned-off area along the far wall furnished with benches. "You'll wait there when the matches begin. You're up third and I expect you to stick around until the last fight is over. You'll never find your way back to the car without me, so don't try."

He nodded. He would avoid asking questions.

"You have your freedom for the moment, Mr. Morgan. Just remember—if you try to escape, I will find you. I did it once, and I can do it again." His gaze bored into his skull, and a sly grin crossed his lips. "And your sister will suffer the entire time it takes to relocate you. At my hands...or Jenner's."

His body trembled with rage, but he held his ground until Slade took his leave. His captor blended into the masses, and he whirled and plunged away from the madness, toward the open door and the outside.

He had no choice but to go back. For now, though, these precious minutes spent in the open air—free, with no one lurking around the corner waiting for him to make a mistake—were golden in their perfection.

From his pocket he pulled a worn, half-empty pack of cigarettes and a plastic lighter, gifts from Doc. He stuck one in his mouth and lit it, deriving artificial pleasure in leaning against a streetlamp pole, inhaling the bittersweet burn. Doing nothing, being no one. He tipped his head back and released a slow plume of swirling smoke into the night-slicing streams of light above.

The sounds of the night washed over him, the ever-present rumble of New York traffic in the distance, the intermittent blasts of taxi horns, the occasional insectile stutter of flickering lights. The heartbeat of the city that never sleeps pulsed through its streets, unseen blood through concrete veins.

Over it all, a troubled scream sounded somewhere close.

He took off in the general direction of the sound, turned a corner. It came again. Harsh laughter joined the cries. There, the alley; down it and out into a fenced parking lot, deserted save for four people who were engaged in a grave disagreement.

It was three against one, and he didn't like the odds. Especially since the "one" was a woman. Two of the others were also female. Pretty ornaments, obviously hookers, flanked a tough-looking man clad in denim and metal.

The lone woman wore a conglomeration of tatters—a worn tee shirt with cutoff sleeves, battered calf-length vinyl boots, a skirt so short it screamed desperation. Her thin frame flirted with emaciation, and the collection of bangles and earrings she sported seemed to weigh her down. He drew closer. Her collarbones showed through the threadbare material covering them. He quickened his pace.

"You don't own the street!" she half-shouted to the other three. "So unless you're cops, piss off. I'll work where I want." The weak bravado in her voice barely covered her terror. Her burning eyes flicked to him. While she was distracted, one of the other girls reached out and shoved her. She tumbled to the sidewalk and landed on her ass with a jingle of cheap jewelry.

"Hey!" He ran the last few feet between them. "What the hell is your problem?"

"She's on our turf." The shover looked him up and down, and licked her lips. "Wanna join us, handsome? We're short a man."

He glared at her, then turned and offered a hand to the woman on the ground. She flashed him a look of wary distrust and extended an arm hesitantly. She maneuvered herself to her feet, using him for leverage, and he was aghast to discover she weighed next to nothing.

"Don't help that dried-up little skank." The command came from the brute behind him. He whirled, keeping the waif-woman beyond their reach.

"Try and stop me." Before he could call them back, the words were out of his mouth.

Incredibly, the brute grinned. The two ladies with him stepped back, as though his smile were a starting pistol. A fist lined with silver rings flew toward his face. He ducked aside, and it failed to connect.

The next blow caught him in the sternum, knocking the breath from him. He recovered quickly and dodged a flashing foot, then let his fist fly.

His knuckles caught the other man high on the cheekbone. His opponent's head pivoted to the side. Surprise filled the brute's eyes. He stepped back and looked at him standing, poised to strike again, and gave him a contemptuous sneer.

"You ain't worth my time," he drawled. "Do what you want with that piece of street filth. I got a real fight to get to." He turned and rejoined the pair of prostitutes, who laughed derisively, and the three of them melted into the gloom.

Barely hearing him, he turned to address the woman, but she was already halfway across the lot and walking briskly in the opposite direction. He went after her with long strides and reached her just before she turned the corner.

She seemed to sense his approach, because she stopped in mid-step and mumbled, "Thanks," without turning around.

"You're welcome. Look, can I..." He stopped himself. He'd almost offered to help her. What could he do? He couldn't even help himself.

She stiffened, and finally turned to meet his eyes. "See something you like?" The line emerged practiced, stilted. Her body language played out coy and wanton, but her eyes told a different story. Somewhere out there, her pimp was waiting for his cut.

He shook his head miserably, and she sagged in defeat. The crumpled look on her face wrenched at him. He reached for her, brushed her bare arm—and she jerked away from his touch.

"Hey! Hands off the merchandise."

"Sorry." He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I only wanted to..."

"Wanted to what? Grab a cheap feel? No dice, mister. I don't do freebies, not even for knights in shining armor. It's pay to play, all the way."

He recoiled. The fragility he'd seen in her had disappeared. Maybe it had never been there in the first place. His gaze fell to her arm, where he'd touched her. Slight smudges marred the skin of her upper arm, and he thought he'd smeared dirt there. They were bruises, fading and finger-shaped. He shuddered and averted his eyes.

"Do you want something or not?" Her foot tapped a weary staccato on the pavement. When he didn't say anything further, she blew a short breath. "Listen. You seem like a nice guy. I don't know what you're doing out here, but it's kinda obvious you don't belong. You're lucky that guy didn't waste you, you know."

"Yeah. Lucky me."

She laughed a little. "I'm just sayin' to watch yourself. Around here, heroes end up napping on a slab, know what I mean?" Her expression softened, and she became vulnerable again. She closed the distance between them. "By the way, this one's free."

She kissed him. He tasted smoke and velvet, heat and sin. "Thanks, cowboy," she whispered against him. "See you around sometime." She whirled and strode away, her heels clicking furiously on the pavement.

He stood motionless, and a strange silence settled over him. The distant background sounds of people arriving for the fight had ceased. He had to get back inside. If Slade realized he wasn't there... Lillith was only a phone call away. He sprinted for the building, passed through the deserted front room, and forced his way through the crowds to Slade, who sat at a ringside table.

Slade frowned at him. "Cutting it a little close, aren't we, Angel?"

"Sorry," he muttered, and held his breath.

The dreaded phone didn't materialize. "Go," Slade told him curtly. "Remember your instructions."

He nodded in silent relief and headed for the benches Slade had shown him earlier. Many of the fighters had already congregated there. No Eddie, or Lonzo, but there were a few he recognized from the previous fight. Only one bench remained empty, the furthest from him. He headed there. Two regrettably familiar figures reclined in the back.

The brute from the parking lot—and Nails.

Chapter 15

The brute saw him first. “You!” He stood and pointed a finger at him. “What the hell are you doing here, runt?”

“Fighting.” A darkening bruise had surfaced where he’d hit the man. It was a start.

“Who are you with?”

“He’s with Slade.” Nails rose and flashed a wicked smile. “Angel, huh? Interesting choice. Gabriel.”

“He’s the new hotshot kid from U?” The brute grunted. “I’m going to enjoy tearing you apart.”

Nails laughed. “Shouldn’t be too hard. Kid can’t even hold onto his wallet. Too bad, Duke, looks like you’re stuck with another sleeper. Make him last for a while, wouldja? It’s boring as hell watching you drop a guy in sixty seconds.”

“Shit. I could take ’im in thirty. How ’bout a friendly wager, little man? How long you think you’re gonna last against me? I’ll give you a whole minute and a half, even.”

He said nothing, and though his gut churned with rage and an undercurrent of fear, he maintained a calm expression. He hoped the bastard’s words would prove harsher than his fists—but he doubted it.

“Leave off, Duke. He ain’t got money. You just make him sorry he ever set foot on our streets.” Nails lost all trace of amusement. “That’s an order.”

“You got it, lieutenant.” Duke grinned and dropped back on the bench. “See you in the ring, fish.”

He walked past them and settled on the empty bench. Duke would likely prove a tougher opponent than Eddie had been...and he’d barely beaten Eddie. This did not bode well.

The lights dimmed. Spotlights flooded the ring and illuminated a new face. A shapely blonde stood in the center, clad in scant midnight blue, presumably to represent the hosting House Prometheus.

She raised her arms. Light danced on the steel shaft of a microphone in her hand, and the crowd loosed a roar of approval. After the noise subsided, she gave much the same welcome as the announcer at the last event had, and introduced the first two fighters: Magnus of Dionysus and Lucian of Ulysses. The men walked down a cordoned aisle to the ring and entered. The bell rang, and they went at it.

He tried to let the chaos around him phase into the background, and managed a dull mental distance. Not enough to relax, but sufficient to slow his galloping heart to a quick trot.

Someone nudged him. He snapped back to reality and looked to his side. Another fighter had taken a seat next to him, a young Asian man with dyed bright blond hair pulled back in a tight knot. The fighter wore loose, blood red pants and a matching sleeveless shirt, placing him with Pandora. He grinned and extended a hand with black painted fingernails.

"Hello. You are Angel. I am Akuma—it means Devil." A clipped accent edged his voice, though he seemed fluent enough in English.

He took the hand, then glanced toward the ring. The first match had ended, and the second was already underway. He hadn't seen who won—and it didn't matter to him. Nothing mattered now except winning the fight against Duke.

"Hi," he said at last to Akuma. "Fascinating... Angel meets Devil."

"Yes. I have wondered when we might be paired together. Our battle will be epic. Its repercussions will echo through eternity." He smiled again. He'd meant the strange statement as a joke.

"Your housemate lost," Akuma told him. "But he fought bravely."

He smirked. Doc would have a fit.

A new fight unfurled in the ring—it looked like one fighter from Pandora and one from Prometheus. At the moment, the match had no clear leader.

"Prometheus fights without honor," Akuma said.

He couldn't hold back a sarcastic snort. The other man gave him a strange look, so he tried to explain. "Honor? There's no honor here. We aren't fighting for respect or principles, just for money. Dirty money."

Akuma slowly shook his head. "No. You are an honorable man. And so am I. It is true that we lack a strong moral reasoning for these battles, but we fight for glory, for respect. This..." He gestured, indicating the whole room. "...is an affirmation of life." His smile broadened. "The money is a nice bonus, though."

The words should have been wrong, empty. A hollow comfort. But somehow they rang true. At the notion these fights weren't all bad, familiar horror and self-loathing welled up and he forced the thought away. He would not become one of these animals.

One man went down in the ring—the fighter clad in red. Pandora's representative. The announcer swept an arm at the one who remained standing and declared him the winner. The crowd launched its mingled hoots and cheers.

They spaced the matches fifteen minutes apart. In a short time, he'd face the brute from the parking lot, a man who thought he had a reason to hate him. Hate, he had discovered, could serve as powerful motivation.

Maybe revenge would prove stronger.

Akuma took his leave and promised they would meet again. He nodded absently at the retreating fighter and tried to focus on the impending match.

The announcer's ebullient, magnified voice cut through his reverie. Time to go. He tugged his shirt off and waited for his cue.

"Competing in our third match of the evening, please welcome Duke of Prometheus!"

The brute swaggered down the aisle to the roar of the crowd. He stood, rigid with anticipation, and the announcer continued. "And appearing in his first away match, from House Ulysses...Angel!"

The corresponding increase in the crowd's volume intoxicated him. A forbidden thrill coursed through him and electrified his body. Akuma's words echoed: "You are an honorable man...this is an affirmation of life."

He followed his opponent's path between the roped barriers and ignored the words. Only Lillith's life mattered. No need to affirm his.

Entering the ring, the shapes and the sounds of the audience converged into a formless, shifting void of muted color and dull buzzing. Images flashed before him, mental snapshots with single subjects in sharp focus. Akuma assisting his fallen comrade at a corner table. Slade staring at him with fierce intensity.

Duke. Undulating tower of hatred, with the malevolent expression of a schoolboy about to tear the wings off a captured fly. Or a cornered Angel.

The bell and Duke exploded in the same instant. He found himself flat on his back. Knees ground into his shoulders. A volley of blows rained on his face. Hot blood erupted from his nose and filled his mouth. The fists moved down, pummeled his ribs, his stomach.

Disoriented, he bucked and twisted beneath his opponent's weight. The pressure on his right shoulder eased. He reached up, grabbed a handful of something, and pulled. Duke collapsed on his head. Ignoring the flare of pain, he squirmed away and rolled to the side, managed to gain his footing and Duke barreled at him.

He wasn't fast enough to dodge a fist to the gut, but he recovered quickly and struck back. His blow clipped his opponent square in the temple. Duke shook his head like a duck shedding water and grinned.

Duke's arm shot forward. He stepped aside, planted his feet apart for balance—and too late, caught on to the feint just before a booted foot collided with his balls.

Glaring white haze. Sound faded out, in—old movie reel, skips and smudges. Down, down...no. Can't go down. Get up. Look out...

Fresh agony rocketed through his crumpled nose and jerked him back to semi-lucidity. Fury propelled him from his knees and into Duke. His aimless jabs missed their target more often than not. The anger-induced energy wore off, and his groin screamed a reminder of its recent bludgeoning. He winced, stumbled back.

Duke laughed.

“Oh, my. Poor pretty boy.” A wide grin revealed broken eyeteeth, shattered at an angle that made Duke appear to sport fangs. “Told you this was our turf. We own the streets. Can’t you fucking read?”

Concentrate, damn it. Duke stood unguarded. He threw a punch and connected with his opponent’s jaw. Duke’s head turned with the blow.

His arm followed its arc. Before he stopped moving, an elbow slammed his shoulder and sent him to the mat.

He landed on his side, his back to his opponent, and rolled away the instant he touched the floor. Duke’s foot stomped the mat a hairline from his hand. He started to push himself up. Duke dropped to one knee beside him, grabbed a fistful of hair and twice bashed his face against the mat without letting go, wrenched his neck back and sneered.

“If I was you, I’d stay down, little fish. You aren’t ready to swim with the sharks.”

Duke thrust his head down and stood.

He twitched, put a palm on the mat. A boot slammed his side and flipped him onto his back. Duke loomed over him. “You deaf, too? Stay the fuck down, or you ain’t walkin’ out of this ring.”

Discontent exploded from the crowd in shouts and hisses. From Duke’s arrogant demands or boredom, he couldn’t tell. Whatever the reason, he couldn’t oblige the man. He had to get up.

The rope border stood a few feet away. He rolled once, grabbed the lowest one, and pulled himself upright. Blood drizzled like sweat down his temple from a gash above his eye. One knee jerked and threatened to fold beneath him. He shifted his weight, prepared to move.

Duke shook his head. “Stupid little fish.”

He launched into his opponent, intent on bringing him down. Duke caught him around the torso as they fell. The Prometheus fighter hit the mat with a brief grunt, bucked up, and twisting, threw him aside. Both men stood, but he lagged by precious seconds.

Duke strode toward him, drawing back a right fist. He crouched slightly and searched for an opening, ready to dodge the blow. The fist that flew at him seemed almost swollen. A dull glint of metal nestled between the third and fourth fingers.

The bastard had a weight.

The shock of the hit slammed through him down to his feet. Something in his jaw cracked, a sickening sound his ears amplified from the inside. He fell to the mat, scrambled aside, stood, only to have the weighted fist slam his ribs. Once, again. The pain sent scalding bile up his windpipe.

Duke prepped for a left swing, and he threw up a forearm—but Duke opened his hand at the last second. Fingers encircled his wrist, wrenched his arm aside. Duke launched his right and struck the base of his neck.

A gasping breath caught in his throat and would go no further. Duke dropped his wrist. One hand slid in his pocket, quick as a snake, and came out empty. He gripped his upper arms and pressed them to his sides, stepped forward, and drove a knee into his still-throbbing groin.

He couldn’t even scream.

His muscles locked rigid, holding him in place even when Duke let go and stepped back. A dazzle-swirl of sparks erupted at the corners of his vision. He shook his head. The dancing lights refused to clear. Sweat coated his skin and drenched his hair, plastering it to his skull. The pain in his battered face was incidental compared with the ripping ache that emanated from his injured groin and coiled like hot lead in his belly.

There were two Dukes. He blinked, swung, and missed both of them.

Two blurred hands extended and became one. Fingers squeezed his windpipe. He hammered at the rock-hard arm connected to his throat. His ineffectual blows weakened. Sight and sound bled from the world, leaving blackness in its wake.

Chapter 16

Clicks and pops chattered in the dark. Tiny threads of Gabriel's consciousness pulled together and formed a knot of panic. Jenner! His body jerked automatically, and a hoarse, anguished cry exploded from him. His eyes flew open, hot with pain.

Doc's room. Dimly lit, empty save for him. No Jenner.

He remained absolutely still. Everything hurt. Breathing. Blinking. Attempts at thought seared his brain. His heavy eyes closed, but his mind refused to shut down again. Another burst of rapid clicks sounded, like distant gunfire. With agonizing lethargy, he turned his head toward the sound, forced one eye open. The IV pole stood to his left, switched on but connected to nothing. The line hung straight down. No needles were taped in place on his arms. A wrinkled, empty bag curled on one hook. A mechanical whirr spun from the box, and spat more clicks as the machine attempted to draw fluid from the emptiness.

At last, the pain eased enough to allow more lucid thought. With it came renewed fear.

He'd lost.

The last thing he remembered was Duke's hand clamped on his throat. He had no idea how he'd arrived here, or what would happen now—other than the certainty that Slade would be furious. He would hurt Lillith. If he hadn't already.

The curtain across from him rustled and twitched. He tensed, expecting Slade, or maybe Jenner. Doc stumbled through instead. He froze, wavered on his feet, and sent a mildly astonished look in the direction of his bed.

“Lo, Gayreel. Howd you get here?” A vacant grin drifted across his lips. “Sup? You wanna drink?” He held up a hand with a clumsy flourish. His fingers clutched the neck of a near-empty bottle: black-label Jack Daniels. The dregs of the liquid inside sloshed around with his unsteady motion.

“Doc?” His voice emerged a whisper-croak. Clenching his jaw against impending agony, he propped himself up on his elbows. A moan slithered from his throat and collided with his teeth.

“Here. I'll pour ya shot.” Doc thrust the bottle toward the bed. The sudden movement unbalanced him. He folded and thumped to the floor. Seconds of silence passed before a high-pitched giggle arose from the unseen doctor. “Don'ya know this's a party?” Doc shouted from the floor. “Iss fight night! Buncha fuckin' murderin' drug dealers all killin' each other, an' I get ta fix 'em up! 'Cuz I'm the doctor!” Crazy laughter burst from him and degenerated rapidly into guttural, wrenching sobs.

His alarm increased, temporarily cresting his pain. He sat up with a wince and strained to see beyond his feet. He couldn't.

Doc had fallen silent again.

Anguish poured through his wracked body as he manipulated his legs over the side of the bed and clenched handfuls of sheet. Air hissed through his teeth, in and out. He tasted blood with every breath. "Doc," he gasped. "You alive?"

A hand gripped the footboard with a thud that shook the bed. Fresh pain jarred a whimper from him. Doc hauled himself to his feet and, one hand pressed to his eyes, extended the bottle toward the bed. It shook violently in his grip. "Take this a sec." The raw whisper had lost some of its slur. "Please. Now."

He made an awkward grab and caught the bottom of the bottle. Doc let go and took off for the bathroom at a stumbling run. The door slammed. Violent retching followed and lasted for almost a minute. A flush broke the ensuing silence. Eventually, Doc rustled around in the room, and the shower turned on.

An inch or so of liquid remained in the bottle. Maybe it would numb his screaming nerves, just a little. Enough to get him on his feet. If Slade hadn't done anything to Lillith yet, he had to try and stop it. He could promise to earn more than ten million. Or take whatever Slade intended for her. Even if it was rape. Anything.

Would Slade force him to watch? He couldn't bear it.

With effort, he brought the bottle to his lips. The first taste stung several cuts inside his mouth. He forced it down and drank the rest without stopping. The burn coated his throat and bloomed in his stomach. He waited a minute, two minutes, while the shower droned in the next room. Three minutes. The liquor had little effect. Even Doc's so-called good shit couldn't douse the fire in his muscles, or ease the agonizing weight in the bottom of his gut.

He dropped the bottle, gripped the edge of the bed and stood. His legs promptly collapsed beneath him. Dizziness blurred the room and made everything gray. The curtained doorway seemed so far, and Lillith even farther. He drew a shuddering breath and dragged himself across the floor, inch by painful inch. How would he get down the stairs?

It didn't matter. He'd figure it out when he reached them.

As his fingers brushed the hem of the curtain, the bathroom door opened and Doc vaulted out. He ran and dropped beside him, and put a hand on his shoulder.

He flinched. Tried for the curtain again.

"Stop, damn it!" Doc slid the material from his lax fingers. "You're going to kill yourself. What the hell are you doing?"

"Lillith," he murmured into the carpet. "I lost. He'll hurt her...stopping him."

"Jesus. Jesus Christ." Doc ran a hand through his damp hair. "Kid, you couldn't stop a snail right now. Come on. Bed."

"No. Lillith. Hurt me instead."

"No one is going to hurt you any more. Not today." Bright fury laced Doc's voice. He stooped and lifted his arm around his shoulders, and his gasp terminated in an anguished sob. "Come on," Doc urged. "We'll do this fast. Can you bear any weight?"

“Please take me downstairs...”

“Gabriel, listen to me. If you move around much more, you’re going to black out, and you’re not going to come around for a long time. Maybe never. Do you understand that? You’re no help to Lillith this way.”

A low moan escaped him. He managed a nod. Somehow, he and Doc reached the bed. He fell across the surface, and his legs hung down the side. No muscle would respond to further attempts at movement.

Doc shifted him carefully onto the mattress. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle Marcus.”

He barely heard him. The void loomed, and swallowed him whole.

* * * *

Doc sat at the desk in his office, a second bottle of Jack unopened in front of him. He hadn’t intended to drink them both tonight, but then, he hadn’t expected any of the fighters to arrive so early, or so thoroughly broken.

In Gabriel’s case, broken was putting it mildly.

How long had the kid been here? Someone must have brought him in—no way he brought himself—when he’d gone to the liquor store. Which meant he’d sat here feeling sorry for himself, getting completely shitfaced, and Gabriel had been in the next room the whole time, damn near dead.

Some doctor he was.

A knock sounded at the door. He stowed the bottle in a drawer and opened up to Lucien, who was at least still on his feet.

“Hey, Doc.” Lucien flashed a tired smile and limped into the room. A few bruises stood out darkly against his paler-than-usual complexion, made ghostlike by his dyed black hair. “Got any of the good stuff left, or did you give it all to Angel?”

“Sit down and shut up.” He pointed to the bed. Slade didn’t want the details about the so-called deal he’d struck with Gabriel to get around, but that didn’t make it easier to keep from snapping at Lucien. The fighter’s ignorance allowed him to joke about Gabriel’s condition.

He enjoyed no such luxury.

“Damn. You’re touchy tonight.” Lucien crossed the floor and sat. “Sorry, man. I don’t mean to make light. They fed him to a Prometheus bruiser, did he tell you? Duke wiped the floor with his ass. Is he all right?”

“He’s unconscious.”

“Oh. Probably the best thing for him to be right now, huh?”

“Yeah. Right.” He avoided direct eye contact with Lucien, unwilling to let the fighter see his rage. He opened a cabinet. “How bad are you?”

“Leg hurts a bitch. Got a killer headache, too.”

Boo fucking hoo. He slammed the cabinet closed. Giving the fighters prescription drugs for a goddamned sore leg only encouraged more of this stupidity. He stalked to the desk, pulled the drawer open and grabbed the Jack. "Here. Catch." He tossed it to Lucien with a wry grin. "Dr. Stephen's remedy for a killer headache. Knock yourself out."

"Sweet! This'll do." Lucien stood and brushed his shirt smooth. "Thanks, Doc. Didn't know you kept this kind of good stuff around."

"I don't. It's just your lucky day."

"Hell yeah. You want a shot?"

"No. Just take it." He moved around the desk. "Ice that leg down every few hours, and let me know if it gets worse."

"Sure." Lucien limped to the door. "Hey, Doc. Angel, he's gonna be all right, isn't he? I mean, Duke really worked him over. Dirty shit. Kicked him in the junk twice."

A shudder went through him. He hadn't known about that. "He'll make it," he said softly. The horrific vision of Gabriel dragging his shattered body across the floor renewed his shame, and his fury. The kid would come back from the grave for his sister, and Marcus Slade knew it.

"Good," Lucien replied. "That's good. Angel's hell in the ring, you know. He damn near took Duke out anyway. He just doesn't stop."

"No shit." He stared at the curtain. He'd heard nothing from inside, but he expected that. Gabriel would remain out for a long time.

Behind him, he heard Lucien open the door and pause. "Hey, boss. How's it going?"

"Lucien. Is Seth in?"

Slade. His hands clenched and his fingers dug into his palms. The callous son of a bitch never stopped in after a fight. He didn't give a shit how busted his fighters ended up. He'd come for Gabriel.

"Yeah, he's here. I was just on my way out."

"All right. Stop by and see Apollo before you go."

"You got it."

The door closed. He didn't turn around. Wasn't sure he could stop himself from decking the bastard. That would be a mistake. He knew Slade still packed the same punch that won him the organization's annual tournament two years in a row.

"Where is he, Seth?" Slade's tone dripped with frost.

He whirled to face him. "He's down at the Jack Spot having a beer. Where the fuck do you think he is? Passed out, damn it. And he's staying there."

"Wake him up. He has an appointment."

"No." His gut performed a long, slow roll. Slade planned to turn the kid over to Jenner. "Marcus, you can't—"

"I can, and I will. The boy lost. He's been warned of the consequences. And you are interfering. Again."

“Yes, I am. Are you paying me to take care of these clowns or not?” He fought to keep the fear from his voice. If Slade sensed it, he’d go through with this insanity out of spite.

“I’m not paying you to make management decisions for me. He will not go unpunished.”

“He’s been punished enough for tonight.” He folded his arms to stop the trembling in his hands. “He knows he screwed up, and that he’s in for it, and his sister is too. He can’t stand, so he tried to crawl to you so he could beg for mercy.”

“Did he?” Slade’s smile sent his stomach flipping again. “Well, it’s a start.”

“I’m telling you now, Marcus. If you bring him to Jenner in his condition, there’s a good chance he’ll die. Just leave him alone for a few days. Let me fix him. He’ll torture himself enough trying to figure out what you’re going to do, and when.”

“A good point. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“So you’ll leave him here?”

Slade frowned. “I didn’t say that. Let me see him, and then I’ll decide.”

“I told you, he’s out. He won’t be able to talk to you.”

“I said see him, not talk to him. I want to know how bad it is.”

“You’re not a doctor, Marcus. There are internal injuries you can’t see. And I still haven’t checked his...groin. Lucien said he got kicked.”

“I know.” Slade’s features twisted in disgust. “A stupid, amateur mistake. He’s going to learn not to let that happen again. Take me to him now, or I’ll have Jenner come up here for a visit.”

“You...” Wouldn’t, he nearly added. But he would. What Slade wanted, Slade received. Shoulders slumped, he drew the curtain aside. “Come on. He’s in here.”

Against his better judgment, he let Slade enter first and slipped in after him. Gabriel lay where he had positioned him, on his back to avoid further damage. Gashes and scrapes scored his bruised ribs, likely the marks of heavy rings. His face looked like someone had tried to use it to saw logs. The boot-shaped bruise on his side wasn’t visible, though he’d seen it when he turned him over.

Slade shook his head. “You’re a sorry sight,” he muttered.

“Satisfied?”

Slade favored him with a frozen stare. “Two days. Don’t waste your breath asking for an extension. I want him then, and no excuses. I’ll see myself out.”

He nodded. Slade stalked from the room, and he didn’t exhale until he heard the office door close.

* * * *

Gabriel woke with Lillith’s name on his lips.

Slivers of light to his left revealed he still lay in Doc’s room. The pain had eased, and a bone-deep ache replaced it. He flexed a hand. At least he could move something without losing consciousness.

Panic drove him to sit up too fast. The vertigo sent him reeling. He slumped to the side, lost his balance, and tumbled from the bed in a tangle of sheets. A sharp pain in his arm and a corresponding clatter from the opposite side indicated he'd been hooked to the IV again. How long had he been gone this time?

Too long, he decided. Too long already when Doc kept him from going to Slade.

The light snapped on before he could right himself. "I'm going," he called weakly, aware Doc had entered the room. "Don't try to stop me."

"No, you're not." Doc crouched at his feet and began to remove the sheets. "You still have one more day of grace, and you're going to rest, even if I have to drug you."

"Grace? What are you talking about? Have to get to Lillith. Who's Grace?"

"Oh boy. Come on, kid, up we go. And in bed, damn it." Doc helped him up and settled him on the edge of the bed. "You pulled your IV out. You have to stop doing that."

He groaned. Couldn't even lift his head. "Did he...hurt her?"

"No." Doc's tone was clipped, reluctant. "Like I said, he gave you a grace period. You slept through the first day. Welcome to day two. That's all you get."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me." Doc ripped open an antiseptic wipe and swabbed at the blood dribbling from the IV site. "I'm sorry, kid. Did my best. He was going to bring you to Jenner yesterday."

Jenner. Did Slade plan to have his lieutenant torture him...or Lillith? "I can't. Can't let them hurt her...can't watch. Bastards. I'll kill them..."

Doc eased his legs onto the bed. "You've got to calm down. Getting all worked up will only make you worse. I'm completely serious about the drugs, Gabriel. If you don't relax, I will put you out. Don't make me do that."

He released a heavy breath and fell back against the headboard. He closed his eyes. *I lost*. Visions of the fight with Duke returned, and again he glimpsed the telltale bulge of the weight concealed in the other fighter's fist. "Wasn't fair," he murmured. "Asshole cheated. I would've won."

"It's never fair. They all fight dirty." Doc taped a folded square of gauze over the weeping hole in his arm with swift surety. "There are no rules, remember?"

"No weapons."

Doc froze. "What?"

He grunted, straightened a bit and opened his eyes. Things were a little less blurry now. "The guy I fought, Duke." He spoke carefully, attempting to regain control of his tongue. "He used a weight. Handheld one, like Apollo has. No weapons allowed, right?"

"Jesus. Are you sure?"

"I saw it. And I sure as hell felt it."

“Have you—no, you couldn’t have. You haven’t been conscious. Damn it.” Doc paced a few steps, stopped and ran a hand through his hair. “That explains why you’re so messed up.”

He laughed, but a strenuous protest from his ribs cut him short. “Is that your professional diagnosis?”

“Something like that.” Doc smirked, and then fixed him with a solemn stare. “You have to tell him.”

“Slade? I don’t know. Do you think he’ll change his mind about whatever he’s going to do to me?”

“I really don’t want to answer that.”

“You just did.” He frowned and dropped his gaze. “What happens if I do tell him?”

“Maybe nothing. Or maybe Mendez gets called out. Which he does deserve, but no one ever catches him or his fighters being bastards.”

“Called out?”

“Yeah. The rest of them’ll get together and give him a stern lecture or some such crap. They’ll tell him if his fighters break another rule, they’ll be temporarily banned from the events. And supposedly, the third time they’ll be out for good.”

“Great. So if I tell Slade about this, all of House Prometheus will want to kill me.”

“Pretty much. See why no one ever catches them?”

“Yeah.” He grimaced. Making enemies was not high on his to-do list. Still, something that resembled pride insisted he bring the incident to light, if only to erase the smug smile from Duke’s face. Besides, he wasn’t going to stick around here permanently. Once he earned Lillith’s freedom, they would relocate somewhere far from New York. Like Australia, or the moon. “All right. I’ll tell him.”

“Good. Mendez needs his nose rubbed in his own mess for once.” Doc rummaged in the drawer beside the bed and produced a new IV needle. “Now this had better stay in. Two frigging days isn’t even close to what you need, but it’s what you have.” He reattached the line, reset the machine. “Rest, kid. I’ll bring you something to eat in a while.”

He nodded. His heavy eyelids closed, eager to follow Doc’s command. Sleep came silent and fast.

Chapter 17

Full night had fallen when Gabriel woke to silence. He felt like shit—which was a step above his last bout with consciousness. At least he could move. He took advantage of it and sat up.

Doc had disconnected the IV at some point and left a tray on the nightstand next to the bed. More bland fare: crackers, broth, applesauce. A pitcher of water stood beside the tray. Next to an empty cup, a shot glass held three small brown pills. There was a scrap of paper beneath the glass with something scrawled on it. Gabriel slid it out and read.

It's ibuprofen. Take all three.

Smiling, he poured some water, downed the pills and ate methodically. He refused to think for the moment. Thinking would lead to speculation about what he'd have to face when he left this room.

Finished, he stood carefully and scanned the dim room. He didn't see his shirt or shoes anywhere. Maybe Doc had brought them out to his office. He headed for the curtained doorway, moving slowly in deference to the dull, full-body throbbing that flared with every step.

Beyond the curtain, he discovered Doc asleep at the desk. Guilt needled him. He'd taken over the man's room more often than he cared to recall. He reached across and touched Doc's shoulder.

Doc bolted up with a sharp, indrawn breath and stared. "Christ. Who told you to get out of bed?"

"Looks like you need the bed more than me right now." He wavered and put a hand on the desk to steady himself.

"Right. You're in great shape." Sighing, Doc pushed his chair back and stood. "Would you sit down? You're making me dizzy."

A deliberate knock sounded at the office door. Three measured raps. "Damn it," Doc said through clenched teeth. "Sit, Gabriel. I can stall him for a few minutes."

"Him?"

"Jenner."

No! Too soon. He wasn't ready. He could barely stand. Sick with dread, he made his way to the cot and settled at the foot. His head dropped and he resigned himself to the inevitable. Even if by some slim chance Slade went easy on him in light of Duke's cheating, he'd receive no mercy from Jenner.

Doc opened the door. "What?" he snapped.

A pause, then Jenner's soft, chilling voice. "Come now, Dr. Stephens. You know why I am here."

"You're early, you slimy son of a bitch."

"I am precisely on time. It has been forty-eight hours since the boy lost. You may wish to consider whether stalling is the best alternative for you at the moment...angel."

He stood, almost without realizing his intention, crossed the room and put a hand on Doc's arm. "It's all right, Doc. I'm ready."

"No you're not." Doc stayed in the doorway, blocking his exit. "Jenner, he's in no shape to..." The doctor glanced at him, and looked back at the emotionless lieutenant. "Please. Don't you think he's been through enough already?"

"It is not my decision to make, doctor. If the boy wishes to plead his case, he will have to take it up with Marcus."

He detected disgust in Jenner's tone. Strangely, it seemed directed at Slade. "Believe me, I will," he said. "Don't worry, Doc. Whatever he's got planned, I can handle it."

"Interesting assertion. I doubt you will be able to maintain it for long, though." Jenner stepped back with a slight gesture. "I suggest you let the boy through."

Glowing, Doc moved aside. "You're bastards. Both of you."

Jenner smirked. "I have been called worse. Surely you can do better."

"Fine. Marcus is a bastard. And you're his bitch."

"Perhaps. But in this I am not alone. Am I, Dr. Stephens?"

He stepped past Doc, into the hall, looked back and managed a half-smile. "I'm going to tell him. Who knows, maybe he'll cut me some slack."

"Yeah. Maybe." Doc didn't meet his eyes. "Well, kid, I'm sure you'll be back in here soon enough. Just watch yourself, all right?"

"I will." Gabriel faced Jenner. "What are you going to do?"

"As I said, it is not my decision. I will take you to Marcus." Jenner turned and headed for the stairs.

He glanced over his shoulder at Doc, who nodded and withdrew, then followed the lieutenant. Just before they reached the end of the hall, he said, "Don't you want me to walk in front of you?"

"No." Jenner started down.

"So you trust me not to run away, or push you down the stairs?"

"Trust is irrelevant. You will do no such thing."

"How do you know?"

Jenner stopped. "You realize it is not you Marcus intends to punish?"

Lillith. "Yeah, I do. But she didn't do anything."

"Her guilt or innocence does not matter. Only what will hurt you more."

Further protest rose, but his current audience wouldn't listen. He'd save it for Slade.

On the first floor, Jenner led him through a darkened and silent reception area and down a lit corridor, toward the back of the building. At the end, he turned right and stopped before a frosted glass door. He knocked three times, the same measured beats he'd announced himself with at Doc's office, and stood back. "I will take my leave now."

He moved forward. The door opened to reveal Apollo's scowling face. The brute pulled him inside and slammed him back against a wall beside the entrance. Holding him with a hand pressed against his chest, Apollo closed the door.

Slade's voice sounded somewhere behind the massive thug. "If it isn't the loser. About time you dragged your sorry ass out of bed. Apollo, cuff him."

Apollo gripped his arm, spun him to face the wall, and forced his hand against his back. Cold metal encircled his wrist. The thug fastened the other cuff and hauled him backward. A moment later, he sprawled hard in a straight-backed chair that faced a desk with Slade on the opposite side.

"Have a seat, Mr. Morgan." Slade glanced past him, nodded. Apollo thumped from the room.

"Wait..." His head swam with pain. The jostling had upset his already weakened state, and his body attempted to shut down in response. He willed himself to stay conscious. "It wasn't my fault. Duke—"

"Don't bother," Slade snapped. "No excuses, boy. I told you what would happen if you lost. If you try to talk your way out of it, you'll only make things worse for both of you."

"He had a weapon."

Slade stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Duke had a weapon. A weight." He shifted, suppressed a groan and straightened in the chair as best he could. "I would have won."

"That underhanded son of a bitch." Slade punctuated the statement with a fist pounded on his desk. He stilled for a moment, and then yanked out his phone and pressed four keys in quick succession. After a beat, he said, "Wolff, we need to talk. Call my cell." He disconnected and thrust the phone back.

A whisper of hope filtered through his dread.

"This doesn't change a thing for you. You still lost," Slade said.

His heart plummeted. "Fine. Do whatever you want to me, but leave Lillith out of it. You can't punish her because that bastard cheated."

Slade laughed. "Are you actually trying to tell me what to do? You're dumber than I thought. And I wasn't giving you much credit in the first place." He stood, circled the desk, and stopped in front of him. "You lost. You pay. So does she."

"No." He sat up straighter. A familiar knot of dread and humiliation tied his stomach. He'd beg this bastard to take it out on him instead of Lillith, just as he'd begged his father. "Please. Whatever you're planning, I'll take it. Please...don't hurt Lillith."

"I don't think so, boy. Even if I were inclined to spare your sister, you don't satisfy the requirements to take her place."

"What? Why?"

"You don't have tits." Sneering, Slade returned to his side of the desk. He pulled out a sliding tray, and the distinctive clicking of a keyboard sounded. A flash of movement on the left side of the room caught his eye, and a panel of the wall slid back to reveal nine monitor screens nestled

three-by-three within. The blank screens flickered to life. Each displayed the same grainy, colorless scene: a hotel room setting, an empty bed. A shadowed figure occupied a padded chair to the left of the bed, a half-full wine glass in one extended hand.

Jenner. His breath caught. But the figure was bigger than the gaunt lieutenant. Much bigger. “What is this?” he whispered.

“A client, here for an elite service. You see, a few of my girls specialize in role-play for men who like their partners on the unwilling side. Since Lillith has decided she doesn’t like the profession after all, she won’t have to act much for the part.”

“No!” He shot to his feet. “Don’t. You can’t. You’re going to let him—”

“Rape your sister? Yes, I am. And you’re going to watch.”

“I won’t.” His heartbeat throbbed in his ears. “I won’t let you.”

“You’ll sit your ass down and shut up, or she’ll stay in that room all night when this one is through. There are plenty of men looking for this kind of action.”

Movement on the screens. A slim, stumbling figure at the edges—blindfolded, hands tied in front at the wrists with a length of cloth. Lillith. He dropped back into the chair.

A soft sob drifted from unseen speakers, and he blanched. He’d have to watch. And listen. “Apollo, where is this?” Lillith whispered. “What’s going on?” Something slammed, a door closing. The sound cracked from the speaker system.

A corresponding muffled thud, a real one, came from behind him. He turned his head and for the first time noticed the door set in the right-hand wall. He faced Slade, but couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“That’s right, boy.” Slade flashed a wicked smile. “She’s right behind you, and you can’t do a damned thing about it.”

“Hello?” Lillith’s voice shook. “Is anyone here?”

The figure in the chair rose and started toward her. Lillith backed a step, lurched, nearly fell. “Who’s there?”

His fingers dug his palms. *Don’t make it worse.* His body shook with the effort to keep from vaulting from the chair to do something. Anything. Break the door down. Tear Slade’s throat out with his teeth. He couldn’t let his temper take control. Lillith would suffer for it.

On the screens, the man stood a few feet from Lillith, tormenting her with silence and anticipation. He closed his eyes.

Seconds later, a resounding crack filled the room. Pain flared in his jaw, and his head snapped to the side. He faced forward. Slade stood in front of him, lowering his arm from the blow he’d just delivered.

“Pay attention, Angel. You will not be spared this.” Slade moved away.

Looking back at the monitors was the hardest task he had ever undertaken.

* * * *

The dungeon. Sickly familiar now—chilled, damp, the darkness alive and hungry for its prisoner. Jenner's tattoo bench had been removed. Now, only the stool and the empty table remained.

Gabriel knelt on the floor, arms still bound painfully behind his back. He shivered with the cold and the violent emotions wracking him.

Lillith's "session" had lasted just over ten minutes—he could tell only by the small digital readout in the lower corner of the panel of screens. His agonized guilt had prolonged time, until it seemed the bastard had been born raping his sister. Until he could remember nothing outside of sitting in that chair, watching helplessly while Lillith was defiled. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing her face, blindfolded and terrified.

They would do something equally horrendous to him. Or worse.

An hour passed. The pain in his strained arms and shoulders grew unbearable, the slightest movement sent spears of agony ripping through his limbs. His mind conjured frightful images of his sister, alternating with grotesque scenarios of his impending torment.

If Jenner was involved, it would be excruciating.

He entered the second hour aware the wait was intended, the anticipation meant to be part of the punishment. His father had employed the same technique on countless occasions, tormenting him throughout the day with scathing reminders of what he had to look forward to. *Boy, you're gonna get it...wait until I get my hands on you...by the time I'm done, you'll wish you were dead.*

When he'd eventually taken the beating, or strapping, or whatever his father had in mind, the pain became almost a release of the tension that had built during the drawn-out wait. He resolved not to reveal his anxiety when his tormentors arrived.

The click of the door latch sounded at last, magnified by the emptiness of the room. Despite his stiff, protesting muscles, he rose to face Slade and Jenner on his feet.

Slade spoke first.

"I'm disappointed in you, boy." He shook his head, crossed the room and circled him, let out a sigh. "You can forget wandering around the arena, at least for the coming fight. You'll stay cuffed until the matches start."

He offered no response, and Slade went on. "You left yourself open for a cheap shot. Twice. That's not going to happen again. Since you have yet to learn how to protect yourself, you can let it all hang out."

"What are you talking about?"

Slade smiled thinly. "You will perform the next fight naked."

A long moment of silence followed Slade's pronouncement. He froze, speechless and aghast. Jenner's face reflected mild disgust.

"You'll remain confined to your room until the fight. Apollo will escort you up when Jenner is through with you." With a final scathing look of disapproval, Slade turned to the lieutenant and said, "Don't hurt him too badly. I still need him to fight."

“Of course.”

Jenner’s soft, inflectionless voice pierced him, effective as any knife. His legs weakened beneath him. Slade left the room—and locked him in with Jenner.

Chapter 18

Jenner remained uncharacteristically silent. He stood a few feet in front of him with arms folded loosely, face impassive, gray eyes dark and unreadable.

He was trying to make him squirm. It wouldn't work. Fresh determination filled him and he stood his ground, gritting his teeth against the fire that seared his arms. He met the lieutenant's maddeningly serene countenance with outward calm.

Jenner wore black silk today, a Japanese costume with intricate thread-sewn characters, blood red outlined in gold. A single column adorned each side of the long, flared-sleeve tunic. He wondered briefly what the symbols said, but decided he didn't want to know.

At last the lieutenant seemed to reach a decision. He dropped his arms with a slight frown, an expression that unnerved Gabriel more than the customary sneer, and produced a small silver key with a notched barrel end.

"Turn around, angel."

Jenner's voice held an odd, flat note. He performed the requested action, and recognized the sliver of feeling in his tone with a nasty start—disappointment.

Once again, he'd been wrong about Jenner's reaction. Where he expected the lieutenant to be pleased, even elated at the prospect of inflicting further torture, there seemed resignation. Sadness. A human reaction from a man he'd begun to suspect a demon.

He was playing with him. Fear torqued his stomach and intensified when Jenner's cool hand gripped his forearm. The key turned. Steel ratcheted against steel.

Free of the cuffs, he lowered his arms and resisted the need to soothe his wrists. He stayed with his back turned until Jenner commanded, "Face me."

He executed a reluctant half-turn. His hands clenched into fists.

Jenner stared at him. "You are expecting pain."

"Stop. Just get it over with."

"You really must pay more attention, angel. I told you this was not my decision." Jenner walked past him, approached the table at the far end of the room. A folding chair leaned against the wall beside it. Jenner lowered the seat, settled the chair on the floor and turned. "Come here."

He approached warily. Did he plan to tie him in the chair? Maybe he had more needles hidden in his jacket somewhere. Whatever the lieutenant had in mind, he doubted he'd find out until it happened.

"Sit." Jenner gestured to the stool, and took the chair himself.

He settled on the stool. He tensed and waited. A minute passed in silence. Another. Jenner simply looked at him. "Well?" he said at last. "Aren't you going to..."

“Beat you? Cut you, perhaps. Belittle you with vague insults, or terrorize you with empty threats. No, angel. I am not.” Jenner shifted, smoothed a tiny fold in the sleeve of his jacket. “There are far more effective methods of control.”

“Lillith,” he whispered. “Leave her alone. Please.”

“*Baka!* I will not harm your sister. She does not interest me.” Jenner’s gaze hardened for an instant. “Marcus and I have little in common. You would do well to remember that.”

He shuddered. Jenner’s refusal to torture him worried him more than Slade’s threats. The lieutenant must have had something horrific in mind, just waited for the right opportunity. “What do you want, then?”

Jenner regarded him with a frown. After a pause he said, “I want you to think. You are more intelligent than you allow yourself to be, angel. And you are the primary cause of your own suffering.”

“What? Are you saying this is my fault?” He gripped the sides of the stool and fought the instinct to attack. “I’ve been kidnapped, beaten, tattooed, forced to fight a bunch of thugs. You bastards will murder my sister if I don’t jump when you say frog. And I’m the cause of it?”

“You are rash and impulsive. You rely on your emotions to make decisions. You do not listen, and do not know yourself.” Jenner folded his hands in his lap. “By now you should have realized that you cannot win this game by following the rules.”

He stared. Jenner’s statements almost sounded like advice. “So...how can I win, then? Without getting Lillith killed.”

“I cannot tell you that. You must figure it out for yourself.”

“Great,” he muttered. “Thanks a lot. That’s a big help.”

“I am not here to help you, angel.”

“Yeah. I know.” He dropped his gaze and wondered when the lieutenant planned to pull the other one. When Jenner said nothing further, he looked up to find gray eyes gazing at him expectantly. He half-cleared his throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Ask it.”

“What does *baka* mean?”

Jenner smirked. “Idiot.”

“Fair enough.” He exhaled sharply. “Look, you’re his lieutenant. Slade’s, I mean. If you think this is such a bad idea, can’t you talk him out of it? I mean, how am I supposed to fight naked? I’ll just lose again.”

“Perhaps you will. If you do, you will have no one but yourself to blame.”

“You son of a bitch! None of this is my fault!”

“With whom does the fault lie, then?”

“Damn it! Slade. You. All you assholes around here. I—” He stopped abruptly, and his eyes widened in horror. He’d lost it. In front of Jenner. He shuddered and looked down, aware it was already too late.

“On your feet, angel.” A near whisper, tinged with steel.

He stood. His stomach dove for his feet.

Jenner rose and circled him.

He stiffened, waiting for the sting of a needle or the slice of a knife. Cool, dry hands gripped his shoulders with surprising strength and pulled back.

“You make yourself small. Do not cower like a dog. Stand straight. Your lack of confidence betrays you.”

He drew himself up and found he stood several inches taller. Had he always hunched over? His muscles felt strange, unused to this new position. Hands clenched, he resisted a glance back at Jenner, who’d fallen silent.

The lieutenant came to his front. “I am certain you have been told this, but you did not listen. If you wish to survive, you will listen now. Trust no one, angel. No one. Not your dear doctor or the other fighters. Not yourself. You have made yourself blind, and you must open your eyes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. The sooner you do, the better off you will be.” A shadow of disgust darkened Jenner’s face, and he produced a cellphone. “Apollo will escort you to your room.” He dialed, waited. “Come down.” Disconnecting, he replaced the device, and his lips compressed.

He hardly dared to breathe. “Is that it?” he whispered.

“I can still hurt you, if you wish.” The smirk returned, coldly amused. “On some levels you welcome pain—another part of yourself that you deny. You would do well to embrace it. Particularly in the ring.”

“No. You’re wrong about that.”

“Believe what you want, angel. You will regardless.”

The dungeon door opened. Apollo must have been waiting nearby. He glanced at him and caught the flash of cruel desire in his eyes.

“Apollo.” Jenner spoke sharply, as though correcting a dog. “Escort him to his room and nothing more. You will not touch him.”

He couldn’t have been more shocked if the lieutenant had broken out in song.

Apollo murmured something unintelligible. Jenner stepped forward, fury flowing from him in almost tangible waves. “I did not quite hear you,” he said, his voice low and excessively smooth. “I am certain you meant to agree. Correct?”

“Right. I mean...yes, Mr. Jenner. I won’t.” Apollo’s expression said he’d been on the receiving end of Jenner’s wrath and wouldn’t risk it again.

“Do not merely remember my words, angel. Take action. Use your head, and not your heart.” Jenner didn’t look at him. His gaze became distant and vaguely troubled.

“Uh...okay.” Though “thank you” danced on his tongue, he didn’t release the words. Jenner probably wouldn’t appreciate them. He followed Apollo out, and realized he still held himself erect—for perhaps the first time in his life.

Chapter 19

Every arena possessed its own flavor, a separate personality to match its host. Slade's glorified nightclub dripped with sensuality and dangerous thrill. Gloom, decay, and an undercurrent of treachery permeated the stifling atmosphere of Diego Mendez's warehouse.

In Dell Ramone's modified aircraft hangar, decadence and raw sex prevailed.

Men and women of every variety stood packed in shoulder to shoulder. Desire and lust romped through the throngs, living beasts. Couples screwed openly in shadowed corners, and a few of the sequestered sex parties included three or four members.

Even the furnishings reflected frivolity and wealth. Royal purple and gold satin draped tables surrounded with plush chairs and benches, their centerpieces clusters of bottles containing expensive wines and white powders. All four walls boasted vast, richly detailed murals of forests through which playful mythical creatures romped. A centaur, nobly bemused and at rest on a slab of rock. A satyr grinning and brushing the long tresses of a slender, laughing wood nymph. Plump, naked cherubs frolicking among the tops of trees.

A fitting tribute to House Dionysus.

He followed Apollo to Slade's table, clad in a long black hooded robe belted at the waist with nothing beneath. He'd been permitted soft shoes—slippers, really—but he'd have to take them off before he entered the ring.

They passed Dell herself seated at one of the tables, a queen surrounded by delectable, fawning courtiers of both sexes. One hand held a champagne glass with easy elegance, and the other rested lightly on the muscled thigh of a young man who knelt next to her. Stoic Ania, her features firm and impassive, stood to her right and surveyed the scene with hawk-like eyes.

Dell spotted them and raised her free hand to wave them over. Obedient, Apollo wove his way to her, and he had no choice but to follow. The attractive transvestite cleared the space nearest her with an impatient brushing gesture, sending her acolytes scurrying to make room.

"Apollo, darlin'." She extended her hand to him, and he grasped it lightly, almost affectionately. "Who's your ghost there?"

"S Angel, Miss Dell."

"Well!" Dell set the glass on the table with a muted clink and brought her hands together. "Impressive fight last time out, Angel-baby. Any enemy of Mendez's is a friend of mine. Why don't you take off that hood so Dell can look on your lovely face?"

Apollo cleared his throat and sent him a nasty glare. From the depths of his hood, he said, "I would, ma'am, but just now it's not so lovely. In fact, it's still rather lumpy."

"That just adds flavor, sugar. Come on, let's see you."

Before he could comply with her demand, Apollo jerked the hood down with a snort. "Do what the lady says."

Dell loosed a purring squeal. "Honey, you are a piece of work. I could just look at you all day." Her arm snaked out, and fingers trailed down his chest in a familiar manner. "Sure you're not for rent, Angel-baby?"

"I'm sure, ma'am."

She smiled. "Call me Dell."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh! Such a bad boy." Her laughter trilled like bubbling water. Turning her hundred-watt smile on Apollo, she said, "Better take this baby back to his papa before he gets in serious trouble." Clear brown eyes came to rest on him, and as Apollo replaced the hood she said, "I'll be cheering for you, Angel-baby. Don't let me down, now. Hear?"

"Yes, ma'am." He bowed, and her delighted laughter followed him through the crowd.

They neared Slade's table. The crowd thinned the closer they came. The massive shape of Apollo blocked his view, but soon they reached cleared floor. Apollo moved aside and revealed the reason for the lack of spectators there.

Jenner occupied the seat to Slade's right, resplendent in shimmering gray silk the exact shade of his steely hair. His easy posture and mild expression suggested nothing of his nature, but the lack of crowd here spoke to his reputation. They certainly weren't avoiding Slade.

He stopped in mid-step. Apollo seized his arm, dragged him to the table and thrust him into an empty chair with a growl.

Jenner leaned forward. "Surprised, angel?"

"No."

"Good." A mirthless smile split his lips. "You understand that I could not miss this performance."

"Of course not. You have to drink in every minute of my humiliation, don't you?"

"Watch your tongue, Angel." Slade's sharp retort fueled the rage swelling inside him.

"Leave the boy alone, Marcus," Jenner said, stunning him into silence. His storm-cloud eyes skewered Slade, who withered slightly under the scrutiny, then he turned to him. "Actually, I came to determine whether you have learned to listen. Your humiliation is merely a bonus."

"Yeah, great." He met the lieutenant's stare with what he hoped resembled confidence. "I haven't just remembered. I'm ready."

Jenner nodded. "Perhaps you are. We shall soon see."

Slade rose suddenly and motioned for him to do the same. He circled the table and in a sullen voice said, "Come on. I want you in the pen, now." His eyes darted to Jenner, as though he expected his lieutenant to stop him. But Jenner barely glanced at the pair of them.

Slade led him across the arena. Dell's pen resembled a miniature version of Slade's back room lounge. The cordoned-off clusters of couches and arm chairs, heaped with satin-covered pillows, made an odd contrast to the empty space around it, as though some massive invisible hand had scooped up a roomful of furniture and jumbled it in a pile on the floor of a stadium.

Only two fighters occupied the area. One he didn't recognize, but the other was Pandora's Akuma. The devil himself.

Akuma crossed the small space and met him at the entrance. After Slade walked away without a word, the blond Asian said, "At last, the world will witness the ultimate battle between good and evil. Tonight, Angel, we meet in the arena."

"No," he gasped before he could stop himself. "Jesus. I'm sorry. It's just... I have to fight you? Tonight?"

"Yes." Concern furrowed Akuma's brow. "You do not wish to fight me?"

"No. I mean, yes. Okay. That's great." *Change the subject, moron.* "How did you know who I was?"

Akuma laughed. "I have studied the way you move, my friend. Everyone has a distinctive gait, a special rhythm all their own. Come, and let us commiserate before the games begin."

He followed miserably. He'd expected humiliation tonight, but facing Akuma naked would insult both of them. This little stunt would cost him any respect he might have earned.

Akuma took a seat on one of the couches, and he lowered himself slowly next to him. The other fighter frowned. "Are you uncomfortable speaking with me?"

"No," he replied too quickly. "No, I'm just a little tired." The obvious concern from his soon-to-be opponent only served to further his shame. Maybe he could tell him. Confess everything—his capture, Lillith, the real reason he was being forced into this degradation. Maybe...

Confession, however, was not an option. Trust no one.

"Something troubles you," Akuma insisted. "I have seen you fight before, and each time you met your opponent with courage and honor. Today you are diminished. What has happened to cause you such pain?"

He couldn't look at him. "Please don't ask."

"Very well." Akuma fell silent for a few moments, and then ventured, "I saw you speaking with Jenner when you arrived."

At the name, his head whipped around. His mouth went dry, and his heart pounded hard against his ribcage. "You...know him?"

"I do." Akuma's voice dropped. "He is...it is difficult to explain. I work with him, but not for the organization." The fighter paused, then whispered, "What have they done to you?"

He coughed, a poor attempt to disguise a raw sob of relief. "I—" He choked. After a shuddering breath, he tried again. "I can't. I can't tell you."

"What do you stand to lose?"

On the verge of breaking, he admitted, "My sister."

Akuma stared into the crowd. “Jenner gave you that tattoo, did he not?”

A nod.

“All at once?”

His silence spoke for him.

Akuma sighed. “My name—my real name—is Shiro Kuroda,” he said. “What is yours?”

“Angel.”

“Come now. That is not your name.” Akuma faced him with a worried frown. “I am aware Jenner’s actions are not always...kind. But I can assure you that he will forgive you for confiding in me.”

He offered a mocking snort.

“Please.” Akuma placed a hand on his shoulder, and he tried not to flinch. “Trust me.”

He stared out from beneath his hood, rigid and desolate. A sharp increase in volume from the crowd indicated the announcer had stepped into the center square. Time had run out.

Though he suspected he’d regret this, he answered the fighter with a barely audible whisper.

“I am sorry,” Akuma said. “I could not hear you.”

He turned toward Akuma and spoke in a stronger voice.

“Gabriel. My name. It’s Gabriel Morgan.”

Chapter 20

Time to go.

Akuma stood beyond him, already in the ring. The announcer had called his name. Gabriel's legs moved him toward the spotlight, even as his mind protested. He couldn't do this. He would not do this.

He must do this.

He slipped the shoes off and walked down the cordoned aisle toward the ring. The passage seemed miles long. He felt eyes on him, hundreds of derisive stares, as if the crowd already knew what he would do. He reached the stairs, stopped.

They waited for him. The announcer, the mob, Slade and Jenner. Akuma. Compassion flooded the fighter's face—and from it he drew the strength to step into the roped-off square.

“Begin!”

Thankful Akuma didn't rush him after the announcer retreated, he loosened the knot at his waist with stoic determination. Under his opponent's puzzled gaze, he let the belt fall, then pushed back the hood.

There is only Akuma. He tried to work up the courage to remove the robe. No crowd. No Jenner or Slade. Just Akuma and him. Despite his best efforts, the roar of the crowd lingered. It became soft and far, an echo. A pale shadow of itself.

Do it.

Before his nerve could fail him, he tugged the material away from his shoulders. The robe slid down his skin to puddle on the floor.

The mob shut down with an audible crunch, like a plug pulled on a stereo.

Across from him, shocked out of his ready stance, Akuma stared open-mouthed.

A single voice rang out, a shot parting the stunned and heavy silence: “Oh, baby! Now *this* is action!”

The ringing laughter that chased Dell's impassioned shout startled his heart into beating again. Grateful, he turned in her direction and gave a slow, open-armed bow to a chorus of whistles and catcalls, and brought his attention back to his opponent.

Akuma held a hand in the air and pivoted in a half-circle to quiet the mob. When only a slight murmur remained in the air, he faced him and said, “I cannot fight you like this.”

Panic infused him with the statement. What would Slade do to him if the match didn't even take place?

“You have an unfair advantage.” Offering a predatory smile, Akuma began to unfasten his shirt. “Without clothing, I cannot hold you. You will slip from my grasp.” He stepped from his flat shoes and slid his pants and undershorts off, rendering himself exposed.

“There. Now we are even.”

“Lord, have mercy!”

Both fighters’ heads whirled in the direction of the statement. Dell shot to her feet, waving one hand before her face in an exaggerated flutter. “You boys want me to bring in something wet and slippery? Mud, jell-o, whipped cream—you name it, it’s yours.”

Raucous laughter engulfed the arena and infected even his desolate mood. He faced Akuma with renewed resolve, as prepared as this abysmal situation would allow him to be.

“Ready?” Akuma asked.

The fighter’s easy grin bolstered him. He might not win, but he wouldn’t hand over an effortless victory. He owed Akuma a good fight, and he would deliver.

Nodding once, trying to convey his gratitude with a single look that was far from sufficient, he struck a defensive pose and waited for the onslaught.

Akuma attacked with the grace of a leaping jungle cat, and he barely dodged a blow to the midsection. Knuckles grazed his skin as the other fighter passed. He laced his fingers together, tried to connect with the retreating back, and failed. Akuma dropped to the floor, rolled and sprang to his feet a safe distance away.

“You missed.”

“So did you.” An unfamiliar smile stretched his lips at the verbal thrust. The two fighters circled each other, both waiting for the other to move.

He tried the double punch that had worked for him in the past. Akuma caught the first blow in mid-flight, batted aside the second as though he were swatting a fly and maintained a grip on his hand.

“You will have to do better than that.” Akuma grinned.

“I will.” He feinted a hit and swept a leg to hook his opponent’s ankle, felling him with a quick tug. Brief surprise flooded Akuma’s face, but he caught himself with a mid-air twist and pushed off the mat, propelled his body upright again. A collective exclamation of awe rose from the crowd, and he paused to stare at the display.

Akuma lunged back the instant his feet touched the floor, and this time connected with a solid jab.

Wheezing, he concentrated on blocking a blur of fists. Rising panic threatened as he realized in his present condition, he couldn’t win.

He didn’t think he could best Akuma even in top form.

Desperation drove a blow that somehow broke through and struck his opponent’s jaw. Blood-flecked spittle flew in a fine spray. Akuma recoiled.

He dropped back, panting and rubbing sore knuckles.

Akuma straightened with a wicked glint in his eye. “Very nice.” He passed a hand over the redness along his chin. “Now it is my turn.”

The mob drew to its feet, gazes riveted to the ring. Their unorthodox match was becoming the very thing Akuma had predicted—an epic battle, the likes of which the organization had never seen.

Twenty minutes in, exhausted, he staggered and fell hard on his knees. Akuma, too spent to take advantage of his defenseless state, dropped into a squat across from him. “I think...we are...an even match,” Akuma panted, swiping one palm across his sweat-soaked brow.

“Yes,” he gasped. His lack of clothing no longer bothered him. In the heat of their battle, he had forgotten Slade’s ridiculous punishment. The torment of having to fight the only man who might be on his side eclipsed every other factor—Lillith’s safety, Slade’s cruelty, even Jenner’s presence at this demented spectacle.

In a whisper, Akuma said, “One of us must finish this. Now.”

It wouldn’t be him. Weary resignation filled him. With effort, he rose to one knee, but before he could gain his feet Akuma reached him. A powerful hand gripped his forearm, wrenched upward. The rest of his body followed. Bloodied knuckles rushed toward his face.

Though he had intended to surrender, instinct removed his head from harm’s way. Only a rush of air connected. In a past sparring bout with Apollo, he’d had the thug in a similar hold—and he knew what he had to do.

Using his sweat-slicked skin for lubrication, he twisted in Akuma’s grasp. His hand clamped the arm beneath it and gave a tremendous jerk. The other man’s grip relaxed in surprise. At the height of Akuma’s forward motion, he let go and drove one bent leg sharply into his stomach.

Fingers skittered for purchase on him. Akuma landed on all fours on the mat. Tasting bitter regret, he raised his arms and formed a two-handed fist over his head. He dropped to his knees beside the dazed fighter and hammered down with every ounce of strength remaining in him, directly into the small of his opponent’s back.

Akuma’s limbs shot from beneath him. He landed prone with a snarl of pain. His body’s impact with the mat turned on the background noise at full volume, as if a switch had been thrown. The announcer began the count. On “two,” the crowd joined her.

The chant swelled. He closed his eyes and remained kneeling beside his fallen opponent. Akuma struggled to rise. His hands scrabbled for purchase on a floor slick with perspiration and blood.

Get up. Whether the command issued from his captor or from within his mind, it had to be obeyed. He drew on strength he hadn’t known he possessed, managed to stand, and swayed in place while precious, decisive seconds ticked by.

Seventeen...eighteen...nineteen...

Twenty disappeared in a colossal cacophony of cheers. He allowed the announcer to raise his arm in a victory salute, but couldn’t summon the strength to lift his head and face the crowd. He stared at Akuma instead. The fighter lay motionless on the mat, eyes closed, skin pale and slick with sweat. At least he was still breathing.

When the purple-costumed girl released him, he limped toward the stairs. A Pandora fighter vaulted into the ring and pushed past him. He glanced back. While the other fighter collected the discarded clothing, Akuma pushed up and onto his knees. Their eyes met, and Akuma bowed his head briefly. A small smile curved his lips when he raised it again.

He nodded in return. He reached the stairs, where a scowling Apollo waited with the robe that had been shifted to the sidelines. Accepting the garment, he pulled it on and negotiated the steps. Apollo grunted and moved to support him.

He shoved him away. "Don't need your help. Thanks. Fuck off." He made his way to the pen and collapsed on an empty couch. The gazes of the astonished fighters seemed to burn holes through him. He jerked the hood over his head and ignored them.

No one approached him for the rest of the night.

* * * *

No matter how quickly the traffic moved, it would be a long ride back to the hotel.

Gabriel slumped in the back of Slade's limo, facing the rear of the vehicle. Sol and Apollo occupied the front, separated by a smoked glass partition. The other Ulysses fighters had gone their own ways after the fight—leaving him alone with Jenner and Slade.

Jenner, seated beside him, had little to say. Slade had plenty.

"What in the hell were you trying to prove out there, boy?" Slade sat opposite him, rigid and flushed. "What did you say to Akuma to get him to do that? You must have struck a deal. I saw you talking to him. Best fucking pals now, are you?"

He drew a breath and tried not to scream. "I did what you told me to. I fought naked." He favored Slade with a disgusted glance. "I didn't know he was going to do that."

"Bullshit!" Slade's eyes narrowed, and shifted to Jenner. "You—Akuma is your fucking flunky. You put him up to this, didn't you?"

"Shiro and I do not discuss this ridiculous organization at work. You know that, Marcus." Though Jenner must have been furious, he spoke in calm, even tones.

"Ridiculous? Insulting me isn't a good idea right now, lieutenant. You must have said something to him. Damn it, I want to know what it was. I won't have you going behind my back!"

"For Christ's sake, Slade." He straightened and glowered at him, dimly aware that for the moment, he seemed on Jenner's side. "This is dumb. I won, didn't I? What's your problem?"

"You keep your mouth shut. I fucking own you." Slade shot Jenner a scathing look. "Come to think of it, I own you, too."

"Is that a fact?"

He shivered at the undiluted hatred in Jenner's voice. If Slade noticed, he didn't show it. "Yes. It is. I'm tired of your fucking games, old man."

"And I am tired of your feeble attempts at discipline, Marcus. Watching my work does not make you me, any more than you staring at your precious paintings makes you an artist."

This time, Slade noticed. He sputtered incoherently, and finally spat, “Your work with the boy is through. I’ll handle it from here.”

“Oh, I am certain you will.” Jenner almost smiled, but the expression on his face failed to convey pleasant emotions. He raised a hand and rapped the glass partition. It slid down with a droning hum. “Sol. Stop here for a moment. I believe I will walk back.”

“Yes, sir.” The glass lifted back into place. The limo slowed and drifted to the right as Sol changed lanes.

“Damn it, Jenner, don’t you dare get out of this car. I’m not finished with you.” Slade’s commanding tone wavered a bit. He punched a button on the side wall and barked, “Sol, we’re not stopping. Keep driving.”

The limo slowed further and halted at the curb.

Jenner smirked. “We are quite finished, Marcus. You have set the terms yourself, and you cannot take them back. You are a...businessman, after all.” He gripped the door handle and faced him. “*Sumimasen*, angel. I must take my leave, and allow Marcus his tantrum.” A soft click sounded, and light filled the interior of the car as Jenner opened the door.

“You son of a bitch.” Fury leached the color from Slade’s features. “If you set one foot outside—”

“What will you do, Marcus? Dismiss me? You cannot subject me to my own devices. However, if you wish, I will tender my resignation immediately.”

“No you won’t! You work for me, you sadistic freak.”

“Very well. I would bid you good evening, but the sentiment is rather pointless. *Baka*.” With a final, inscrutable glance in his direction, Jenner exited in a rustle of silk. The door snicked shut, trapping leaden silence inside the limo.

“One word,” Slade said through clenched teeth. “One sound out of you, boy, and your sister is finished. I’ll slit her fucking throat myself.”

He stiffened, closed his eyes and leaned back against the seat, uncertain whether the tightness in his throat stifled a sob, or a laugh.

Chapter 21

Three days after his humiliating nude fight, Slade released him from Doc's care under terse instructions to continue training. He made his way slowly to the basement, and to his relief saw no sign of Apollo or Sol.

But Lonzo lay on one of the benches, working with a barbell. Hoping the exuberant fighter had somehow missed his latest spectacle, he crossed the room and took a seat on the bench beside him.

Lonzo replaced the bar on its brace, sat up, and grinned. "Hey, Angel. I see you're going for the modest look today."

He shrugged, attempting to appear lighter than he felt. "Yeah, I figured I'd save my modeling skills for special occasions."

Laughing, Lonzo clapped him on the back and rose to stretch. "Well, *mijo*, I still don't know what that was all about. But if you're trying to make a name for yourself, you succeeded."

"I did?"

"Oh yeah." Still smiling, Lonzo plucked a towel from a nearby bench and mopped his face. "Everybody's talking about the crazy kid from Manhattan who likes to fight in the buff. Akuma too—they figure he's just as loco as you."

Akuma. A spasm of guilt wound through him at the name. Beating him was the hardest thing he'd done since his arrival here, and he prayed he'd never have to do it again.

"So, you gonna enter the tournament?"

He looked up. "Tournament?"

"There an echo in here?" Lonzo shook his head. "How do you fight so well and still know so little? We have an all-House tourney every year. This one'll be in Staten Island, at Pandora."

"Oh."

"First prize is five mil."

"Five million dollars?" Half of Slade's ridiculous price of freedom, all in one shot. "When is it?"

"Three weeks from Friday."

Less than a month away. How much training could he get in before then? Forsaking the scraps of freedom Slade allowed him, and giving himself time to rest and recover, he could make twelve to fourteen hours every day.

He would win.

The thought evoked a rueful smile. Determination had never been his strong suit. Most of his life he'd taken a passive stance in just about everything—school, work, leisure activities, such as they were. He'd even taken the punishments his father meted out with fearsome regularity as a matter of course. The only active steps he'd taken were on Lillith's behalf. Now the cycle had begun again. Only the names had changed.

This time he looked forward to the fight, relished the opportunity to prove himself once more. The fragile flicker of interest worried him. If he enjoyed the fights, did that make him one of them?

Dismissing his concerns, he turned a grin to Lonzo. "Let's spar."

* * * *

"What the fuck is he doing here?"

Diego Mendez, the last of the House leaders to arrive at the meeting in the lobby of the Marquis-Grant, folded his arms and glared at Gabriel. Nails slipped in behind Mendez and mirrored his leader's fierce expression.

"Funny you should ask, Mendez." Slade stood and pointed to the far end of the conference table he'd had set up for the occasion. "He's here for you. Sit down. You've kept us waiting long enough."

He stayed in place, standing against the far wall by the bathroom, tracked the drug lord across the room, and refused to drop his gaze. His report would have to be convincing. If he let Mendez intimidate him, he'd probably get himself killed.

Mendez reached his designated seat, settled in and shook his head. A languid smirk crossed his lips. "This ain't like you, Chief. We're supposed to be talking tournament. What's the deal with the fish?"

One of the others, a man he hadn't seen before tonight, shifted to face Mendez. A gun and a badge were clipped to his waistband. That had to be Captain Wolff of House Orion. "Before we get to the tournament, there's something we need to discuss." Wolff looked pointedly at Mendez. "Slade. Go on."

Slade motioned for him to approach. "Angel here tells me one of your fighters cheated during the last match at your place."

"Is that right?" Diego smiled, but his gaze hardened. "You're a sore fucking loser, aren't you? There are no rules, kid. Maybe somebody should've explained that to you before you went up against my boy."

He stopped just behind Slade and Jenner. "He brought a weapon into the ring."

Mendez's smile froze and fell away. He stood slowly, put his hands on the table, and leaned forward. "You're so full of shit I can smell you from here."

"He had a weight. I saw it."

"You fucking pussy! Duke didn't need a weapon to kick your scrawny ass."

"I guess we'll never know for sure, because he sure as hell used one."

Mendez loosed a rapid stream of Spanish, caught a breath and fixed him with a lethal, glittering stare. "You'd better be able to prove it, little fish. You have no idea who you're fucking with. I will end you."

"That's enough, Mendez." Wolff rose and strode to Mendez's side of the table. "We've all seen how big your balls are. Now tuck them back in, before I blow 'em the fuck off."

"Aw, c'mon, Wolfie. You're not buying this cocksucker's line, are you?"

"He has the right to bring it up." Wolff's scowl fell on him. "But he'd better be able to back it. This is a serious accusation, boy. If you're lying, you can drop it right now and I won't arrest your sorry ass. You get one free fuck-up."

"Jesus. I'm not lying. But how the hell am I supposed to prove it?"

"I will." Slade turned to Jenner and nodded. The lieutenant stood without a word and left the room. He returned a moment later with Doc in tow. "Seth," Slade said. "You're all familiar with Dr. Stephens, I assume."

The leaders and their respective seconds nodded, or grunted assent. He sent Doc a look of disbelief. He'd expected to be the only one incurring Mendez's wrath—and the last thing he wanted was to see Doc burn by association with him.

"Wait. I... Never mind. Forget I said anything." He glanced at Doc, shook his head. "Just drop it, all right?"

"So you were lying." Mendez grinned at Slade. "You ought to exercise a little more control over your lapdogs, there, Chief. Somebody could get hurt."

"He's telling the truth." Doc moved closer to him. "Don't worry about me, kid," he said quietly. "Mendez can't touch me."

"Wanna bet, Doctor Dead Man?"

"Mendez, if you don't shut the hell up, I swear to Christ I'll shoot your ass right now." Wolff gestured to Doc. "All right, let's hear it."

"I examined G...Angel after the fight. His injuries were inconsistent with reasonable force. The breaks were too clean for blunt force trauma without enhanced weight and a corresponding increase in velocity. He exhibited localized contusions and hematoma within constricted areas, absent the typical spread caused by repetitive applications."

Wolff grunted. "Any chance you could repeat that in English?"

"He was seriously fucked up." Doc's jaw clenched for an instant. "Medically, the pattern of damage couldn't have been caused by one person's strength alone. The worst injuries he sustained were the results of single, concentrated blows. Whoever beat him down had help, something heavy and small." He paused, and sent Mendez a cold stare. "Is that plain enough for you, or should I use smaller words?"

Nails growled and lurched forward. Mendez put a hand on his arm. "Easy, *'mano*," he said. "They ain't got jack. Tell me somethin', Doc, how does this prove anything other than Duke hit him really fuckin' hard? Because I'm just not following you here."

"I told you, it's not possible to cause that level of damage in one hit without augmentation. If it were from multiple blows, the injuries from the breaks would have spread further, created larger, uneven areas of bruising. He either used a weight, or a baseball bat. And since no one saw him bring a bat into the ring, it must have been a weight."

"Oh, give me a break. This is pure speculation." Mendez's eternal smile had fled. "Just let me know if you need me to use smaller words, like this. I'm calling your bluff. You can't prove a damned thing. Your evidence is long gone, *ese*."

"How about a demonstration?" He strode the length of the table and stopped in front of Mendez. No turning back now. Determined to see this through, and to protect Doc with the meager means available to him, he peeled his shirt off and spread his arms aside. "Pick a side and hit me a bunch of times. Then get yourself a weight—if you don't have one, I'm sure Apollo will let you borrow his—and try the other side. Slade has cameras everywhere in here. I'm sure we can find some footage to compare with the results."

Mendez flashed him a look capable of crushing diamonds. "If I hit you right now, *maricon*, you ain't gonna get back up."

"So does that mean you're confessing?"

"You little—"

"Enough!" The Pandora leader, a stone-faced Japanese man who looked older than Jenner, punctuated his statement with a fist on the table. The tall, pale red-haired man beside him, whom he assumed was his lieutenant even though he wasn't Japanese, displayed no reaction. "Mr. Mendez, your childish behavior only adds to your guilt. The boy has demonstrated his willingness to back his accusations. It is sufficient proof for me."

"Same here, sugar." Dell frowned at Mendez. "You and yours slip outta trouble too often. We can't let it go this time."

The Pandora leader nodded. "Indeed. I am tempted to disallow your House from the tournament."

"Harada-san." The mocking rebuke in Jenner's voice commanded the attention of the room. "Though your suggestion may have merit, surely you do not believe the authority to decide Mendez's fate rests with you?"

Deep crimson suffused Harada's features. He spat a mouthful of harsh syllables.

Jenner smirked and bowed slightly. "*Sumimasen*. I would, but I am afraid that is not physically possible...Tomi." He drew out the name like a curse, and Harada whitened with fury. Jenner ignored his outrage. "Since all but Orion have agreed, we need not pursue the question of guilt. However, Captain Wolff, if you would care to offer your opinion for decorum's sake?"

"Wait just a goddamned minute." Mendez glanced at Jenner before his gaze settled on Gabriel again. "You all aren't doing shit to me. Especially not because of this little scrap. Something's not right with this kid. Why don't you tell 'em how much you paid me to bring him in, Chief?"

“You did what?” This time, Slade received the weight of Wolff’s stare. “Slade, what the hell is the deal here?”

“Angel and I have an agreement, which is none of your business, and not what we’re discussing. Don’t try and change the subject, you worm.” Slade drew himself to full height. “We’re dealing with whether or not your man cheated. He did. Now we’re deciding what to do about it.”

Mendez opened his mouth, but Jenner spoke first. “For the moment, it would seem monetary restitution is the most fitting course of action. Determine what the boy would have commanded in winnings, and pay that amount to Ulysses.”

“Fuck no. His odds were long. It’d be more than twice what Duke brought in.”

“Perhaps you would rather we implement Harada-san’s suggestion and ban Prometheus from the tournament?”

“You...” Mendez closed his eyes, opened them. “Fine. I pay you, and you get off my back. Right?”

“Your fighters will be monitored, of course. If you break any more rules, I am certain we will impose a more permanent penalty.”

“Who appointed you the fucking emperor, freak?”

Jenner arched an eyebrow. “If anyone here disagrees, you are welcome to speak.”

Silence answered, signifying general assent.

“Cowards. The bunch of you. You’re a flock of goddamn chickens. And you.” Mendez swung a vicious snarl in his direction. “*Vamos a matarle, pendejo.*”

“Mendez. It’s settled. Stand down.” Wolff thrust an arm between him and Mendez, and pushed the Prometheus leader back.

Mendez shoved the arm down. “Don’t you fuckin’ touch me. It’s settled, but it ain’t over. You got that, fish? Not over.”

Wolff’s gun seemed to appear in his hand, pointed at Mendez’s chest. “It is over, damn it. You save that shit for the streets, and pray I don’t ever catch you. In here you follow the rules or you’re gone—and so is your protection.”

Mendez stepped back and raised his hands. “All right. Chill, *capitan*. I’ll back off.” An assured smile graced his lips. “I got better things to do than gut fish.”

Wolff lowered the weapon. Mendez remained frozen, then his expression morphed to disgust, and he spat at his feet. “That don’t mean I like you, though. Stay the fuck away from me and my boys, and I’ll return the favor.”

A flicker of real anger surged through him.

“Seth,” Slade said before he could respond, “Take the boy upstairs. We have business to attend to.”

Doc strode across the room and grabbed his arm. “Come on. Let’s go,” he said carefully. “Just let it drop.”

Though he was tempted to spit back at the bastard, he pivoted and headed away. He kept his gaze straight ahead, but something compelled him to glance at Jenner on the way out.

He could have sworn the lieutenant was smiling.

* * * *

“So, Doc. When did you develop suicidal tendencies?”

Adrenalin draining fast, he collapsed on the low bed in Doc’s office. Doc shut the door and turned to him with a smirk.

“I told you, Mendez can’t touch me. Won’t touch me,” he corrected. “He’d lose his police protection. He’s not as stupid as he acts.”

“Great. That’s not exactly good news, you know.” He sighed and leaned back against the wall. “I’m pretty sure I’m on his shit list. You got any idea what he said to me?”

Doc looked away. “No.”

“Liar.”

“My Spanish is rusty.”

“Come on, Doc. You do know. If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to ask Lonzo.”

Doc sighed. “Gabriel, you really don’t want to hear it.”

“Yes I do.”

“Damn, you’re stubborn. Talk about suicidal tendencies.” Doc shook his head. “I’m serious, my Spanish is rusty. But I think he said ‘we’re going to make you dead, asshole.’ Or something like that.”

“Heh. That sounds about right.” He closed his eyes. “So, as long as I work for Slade he won’t touch me. But when I leave, I’m fair game.”

“Yeah. Right.” Doc whispered the words, and his voice caught.

He stared at him. “You don’t think I’m leaving, do you?”

“Gabriel. Don’t do this. Please.”

The revelation hit him, a phantom fist to the gut. “I’m not leaving. Am I? Slade never intended to let me go.” He stood slowly. Sick fury made his muscles tremble. “Why would he, when I’m making him so much money? Shit! I can’t believe it took me this long to figure out—” He met Doc’s stunned gaze, and his voice shook. “You knew. You must have known. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Doc didn’t reply.

“Damn it, Doc! Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t have made a damned bit of difference!” Doc’s eyes glittered with emotion. “If anything, it would have made things worse. Don’t you understand?” He staggered back and propped himself against the desk, head hanging. “If you hadn’t believed you had a chance, if you hadn’t gone along with Slade’s twisted little scheme, he would have just killed you. And Lillith. You’d both be worthless to him.”

His throat tightened. The urge to vomit threatened to overtake him. “Jenner was right,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Jenner. He told me not to trust anyone. Not you. Not me.” He swallowed hard and blinked a few times. “Look, Doc. I understand your position, and I won’t hold it against you. But I am not staying here forever, and neither is my sister. There’s no way in hell I’m going to keep fighting for that bastard. After I earn his fucking blood money, we’re gone.”

“And just how do you plan on doing that, without getting yourself killed?”

“I don’t know. Yet.” He clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead. “But damn it, I’m going to figure it out.”

Chapter 22

The urgent whisper of light rain, amplified by its impact with the surface of the bay, sang through the evening air when Gabriel boarded the boat that would take them to House Pandora. Actually, the term “boat” didn’t quite fit. Slade’s yacht, the *Private Ambition*, seemed almost as large as a cruise ship to him. A hundred feet long, easily, and the width of a small house.

He’d arrived in a group with the other Ulysses fighters, along with Slade and Jenner. He had been told Sol would arrive shortly with the girls, which he understood to include Lillith. Attendance at the tournament was by invitation only. Other than members of the organization, there would be only a few hundred guests—high rollers, all criminals or “gentlemen” with a lot of money to burn.

Torn between excitement and terror, he paced along the rail edging the front deck of the ship. The waterlogged air misted his skin, warm and almost pleasant. He breathed in the scent of the water and listened to the slow, steady waves slosh against the shore while the boat swayed gently beneath him. The rhythm lulled him, dulled his screaming senses. He could almost forget why he was here and what he would have to do in a few short hours. He could almost forget everything.

“Hello, angel.”

The voice behind him shattered the moment. “Jenner.” He remained facing the bay, unable to directly address the lieutenant.

“Waiting for someone?”

He closed his eyes. Though Slade had officially decreed Jenner’s work over—whatever that meant—he doubted the lieutenant found it necessary to listen. “What do you want?”

“Ah. An interesting question.” Jenner approached, stood beside him, and looked out across the glittering gray expanse of the water. He wore a full-length charcoal trench coat against the rain, an odd contrast to his typical attire. “And not one with an easy answer, I am afraid,” he continued. “Perhaps we could discuss what you want instead.”

“Okay. What do I want?”

“I cannot read your mind, angel. To be honest, I do not wish to.”

He sighed. “I’m...sorry.” He paused, scarcely able to believe he’d just apologized to Jenner on purpose. “You were right, you know. About not trusting anyone.”

“Of course I was.”

“And you’re so modest, too.”

Jenner said nothing, but he practically heard his smirk.

“I figured out a few things.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I know Slade isn’t going to let me go.”

“Correct.” Again, a hint of approval colored the lieutenant’s tone. “And?”

“And...I have no idea what to do about it. Any suggestions?”

“I am no longer involved.”

“Yeah, I got that. But it does look like we have a common enemy.” He inhaled and let it out slowly. “Speaking of enemies, you and that Harada guy don’t get along too well. He looked ready to kill you at that meeting.”

Jenner gripped the rail hard enough to whiten his knuckles. “The relationship between myself and Tomi Harada is none of your concern. I warn you, angel, do not pursue this. I am aware that you have not heeded my advice in regards to Shiro. You will speak with him again. Do not discuss me.”

“I...okay. I won’t.” Shaken by the lieutenant’s snake-fast reversion to his vicious demeanor, he concentrated on the water again. For a moment he’d believed he and Jenner might at least establish an accord. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“Hey. Runt,” someone snarled behind him.

Apollo. “What?” he said without turning.

“Slade wants to see you. Now.”

A hand clamped his arm and pulled him across the deck. He tried to wrench free. “I can walk all by myself. Honest.”

“I don’t give a shit what you think you can do.” Apollo didn’t release him. “Move your ass and keep up. Now means yesterday.”

Scowling, he stumbled to match Apollo’s long-legged stride. He glanced back at Jenner, who stayed in place, maintaining a death grip on the rail before him.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Fuck you, too.”

Apollo shook him. “What was that, boy?”

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

* * * *

Apollo led him through rooms and corridors, deep into the heart of the ship, until they stopped in front of a closed door. Soft light spilled from beneath the entryway into the absolute silence around them. With a weighted glare, Apollo opened the door and stepped aside, giving him just enough space to walk through. He did, without hesitation.

The door closed behind him. “Sit down,” a familiar voice said.

He looked around for Slade, trying to adjust his eyes to the gloom. A slender floor lamp provided the room’s only illumination, its circle of brightness pooled on a single metal folding chair in the middle of the floor. He approached the seat slowly, squinting into shadows that swallowed the room’s dimensions. A vague shape just beyond the light’s reach might have been a table, and behind that, the silhouette of a man. Slade.

What was he playing at? He lowered himself into the chair, fixed his gaze in the direction he assumed Slade to be and waited.

“What do you think of my boat, Mr. Morgan?” Slade said.

The question took him aback. “Why?”

“Just curious.” A shuffling, a shifting of limbs, crept from the shadowed void. “Mr. Morgan, I think you should know that I expect you to win this tournament.”

He couldn’t reply. He conjured Lillith’s face, blank with terror as the “client” Slade had forced on her approached. His captor expected the impossible, or at least the improbable, and he already knew the price of failure.

“I’m sure you doubt your capacity to live up to my expectations,” Slade went on. “So I have something for you that will ensure your success.”

Lillith! He stood halfway from the chair. The scuffling sounds resumed from the back of the room.

“Sit down!” Slade said. “Your precious sister is safe, for now.”

He backed down, turned toward the sound—and Doc materialized at the edge of the light. His face reflected pure misery and resignation. He stepped closer, a syringe in his hand.

“No!” He shot to his feet, knocking over the chair with a resounding clatter. The sound seemed to be a signal. The door flew open. Apollo launched himself at him and bore him to the floor. Through sheer brute force, the bigger man wrenched his arms behind his back and jerked him to his feet, where he met Doc’s haunted visage.

“Sorry, kid,” Doc muttered. With his free hand, he pulled up the sleeve of his shirt. “Struggling won’t do you any good. If you don’t hold still, he’ll just knock you out and I’ll have to give it to you anyway.”

“What is it?” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“It’s...a performance enhancer.”

The needle hovered inches from his skin. He stilled, and then twisted violently to the left, away from Doc. He managed to break free of Apollo’s grasp. “You little shit,” Apollo growled. The thug lunged for him, missed.

“Marcus, you truly are an idiot.”

Jenner spoke from the doorway, his tone dripping disgust. The occupants of the room froze.

Slade recovered first. “I told you to stay out of this. Angel doesn’t concern you anymore.”

“You did, and I am. It is not about the boy. This concerns House Ulysses.” Jenner stepped inside and flipped a switch on the wall. Soft light emanated from the baseboards, revealing rich furnishings around the perimeter that banished the illusion of a bare interrogation room. “You have just levered charges of cheating against Prometheus, and now you would sabotage your own fighters?”

“This isn’t sabotage. It’s insurance.”

“It will ensure your downfall.” Jenner glanced at him. “Besides, I am certain the boy does not need enhancement to win.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“He’s right. I don’t need that shit.” He straightened and stared calmly at Slade. “I’ll get your damned money without it.”

“Oh, really?” Slade returned the gaze, his ice blue eyes piercing and intense.

He stood his ground, refusing to move, to breathe, to even blink as long as Slade scrutinized him.

At last, Slade laughed. “Yes. I believe you will, boy.” He shook his head. “My instructions still stand, Jenner. You’re not to interfere. Apollo, stay with me. The rest of you leave.”

Jenner exited first, with he and Doc close behind. Doc pulled the door shut and released a long breath. “Damn. That was close.”

“No closer than you allowed, doctor.” Jenner started down the corridor.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

The lieutenant stopped. “It means precisely what I said. You would have allowed this nonsense to continue.”

“You son of a bitch! Do you think I wanted to—”

“Doc.” He gripped his shoulder in what he hoped was reassurance. “Come on, Jenner. We all have our reasons for doing what we’re told. Including you.”

“You are far too forgiving, angel.”

“Maybe. At least I’m not a heartless bastard.”

For an instant, Jenner seemed to stiffen. Must have been his imagination.

“Perhaps it is better to be a heartless bastard than a doormat.” Jenner spoke softly, though his anger came through loud and clear. “And perhaps you have learned nothing after all.” He strode away to disappear around a corner ahead.

Doc cleared his throat. “Uh, Gabriel? Maybe that was a little much. I mean, I hate Jenner just as much as the next guy, and he did insult me...but he also stopped Slade from drugging you.”

“Shit.” He stared down the empty corridor. “Do you think I hurt his feelings?”

A strangled cough that might have been a laugh escaped Doc. “I doubt it. Jenner and feelings are active enemies. I think he’d rather swallow broken glass than admit to having them. Still, you were a bit harsh.”

“Yeah. I guess.” He frowned. Jenner had intervened, but he’d also made it clear that his intentions had nothing to do with him. If it were anyone else, he might have suspected the lieutenant had clarified just so Slade wouldn’t have a reason to refuse. With Jenner, he just as likely meant what he said.

Besides, heartless bastards didn’t appreciate apologies.

Chapter 23

Full dark had fallen by the time the yacht reached its destination. Behind them, the lights of New York's famous skyline were tiny jewels embedded in the silken backdrop of night.

Before them, House Pandora's private island loomed like the setting of a Grimm Brothers fairy tale.

Two other boats bobbed and swayed on the ends of their tethers, moored to a long wooden dock that would have looked at home spanning a ravine in Tibet. A stone path wound onto the island from the end of the dock, snaking under a tall black wrought-iron gate to disappear into a forest of lush greenery. Small, colorful lanterns dotted the walkway, extending up from the grass on black poles.

Rising above the trees, dominating the center of the island, stood a palace.

Illuminated from the ground up with muted spotlights, the four-story structure appeared to consist of individual buildings stacked on top of each other, from widest to smallest. Polished ebony slats of wood formed the low walls, and the tall tiled roofs, blood red in the wash of light, bore the distinctive curvature of Japanese architecture.

A shiver of awe swallowed him. This island, with its terrible beauty, was Akuma's world—and he felt like an intruder.

Slade and Jenner approached—the former impatient, the latter oddly relaxed, leaving him no time to contemplate his feelings. “Come on,” Slade said to him.

He followed the pair down the gangplank and onto the dock. They stopped, and Apollo and Sol soon joined them.

Near the iron gate, two black-clad men stood to one side. Both young and lithe, they looked off into the distant darkness with identical bored expressions, occasionally addressing each other in brisk Japanese.

“Good evening, Mr. Slade,” one of them said when the group reached the entrance. The other glanced at Jenner and inclined his head slightly. Jenner returned the wordless greeting in similar fashion. Another figure, this one in black silk with red piping along the sleeves and legs, dropped silently from the branches of a nearby tree, turning his curiosity at their interaction to full fledged shock. The man approached them, stopped in front of Jenner and bowed deeply at the waist.

“*Konbanwa*, Jhyaneshwar-jana-sama,” the new arrival said in a low, satiny voice.

“*Konbanwa*, Serizawa-san.” Jenner bowed in return.

They regarded each other somberly for a moment—and the other man burst into rich, rolling laughter. He spoke rapidly, eliciting a smirk on Jenner's placid face. When he paused for breath, Jenner replied in Japanese, his soft voice barely carrying, and the man laughed even harder.

One of the guards rolled the gate back to admit the Ulysses group onto the pathway. Jenner's companion fell into step beside him, and his booming voice accompanied them to the house.

Up close, House Pandora took his breath away. Sections of the lower levels, unseen from the edges of the island, had been constructed of glass panels, showcasing a series of open rooms inside with burnished wood floors and ornate bamboo panels. Two smaller buildings flanked the main house, each single-floored and made of the same black wood and red tile.

Many people had arrived ahead of them and stood in loose groups scattered across the front lawns. Some were obviously guests with no House affiliations, others he recognized as belonging to Dionysus or Pandora. He didn't see anyone from Prometheus or Orion yet.

Scanning the crowd, hoping for a familiar face, a shadowed alley between the main house and one of the smaller edifices drew his attention. The third time he looked there, he made out the form of a man standing in the shadows, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

The figure stepped into the light and glared directly at him. Captain Wolff.

He suppressed a shudder at the malevolence in Wolff's eyes. The Orion leader appeared impressively frightening. Tall, muscular, with an angular face and square jaw bristling with salt-and-pepper growth, his buzzed jet-black hair sported wide stripes of white along his temples. Dressed in jeans faded to the color of gunmetal and a silver-gray tank top, the collection of steel dog tags on the chains around his neck and the gun at his side warned of his profession.

"How interesting."

The voice at his ear sent a stab of panic through him before he recognized it as Akuma's. Tearing his attention from the brutal cop's stare, he turned and said, "What is?"

Akuma grinned. "It seems the illustrious Captain Wolff has noticed you."

"Er, yeah." He shrugged. "He's noticed me, all right. I don't think he likes me much, especially after that little meeting the other day."

Akuma's brow lifted. "What meeting?"

"The one where I accused one of Mendez's fighters of cheating, and the rest of them agreed. Eventually. Some time after Wolff threatened to shoot Mendez, and before Mendez promised to make me dead."

"*Aré!* You have a knack for finding trouble, my friend. Or perhaps it is that trouble finds you?"

He didn't answer. The word friend reverberated in his mind. He'd beaten this man unconscious, if only for a moment—and still he'd called him friend. He wasn't sure he deserved the sentiment.

"Gabriel?"

"Sorry." He shook his head. He'd almost forgotten he'd shared his name with Akuma...with Shiro. "I'm pretty sure it finds me. Hey, uh, Shiro?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. About the fight. My being—unclothed and all. You didn't have to do what you did, but I wanted to thank you. I never did get to do that."

"It was nothing." Shiro's gaze hardened. "Though I do not know precisely what is going on, I am aware your choice of attire was not your wish."

"You are?"

Shiro nodded. "Do not worry, my friend. I will not jeopardize your situation."

"Thanks." *I think*. At this point, a little jeopardy might be the answer. He still didn't know how he would get Lillith away from Slade. For now he intended to win the tournament. He'd worry about the rest later. "Is there somewhere I can hang out until the fights start that isn't quite so crowded? I'd like to get away from Wolff, at least, and things might not be pretty when Mendez gets here."

"Of course. Come with me."

He followed Shiro toward the house and turned for one last look at Wolff. The captain remained in the same place, his enraged stare burning the air between them.

* * * *

At the back of the main house, Shiro stopped before a wide, smooth door with no windows and no handle. He knocked and stood back. "Many have gathered on the main floor," he said. "We will use the back stairs."

An elderly Japanese man in a long white coat pushed the door open and peered out. A frown surfaced. "Kuroda-kun, *nani o wa?*"

"*Konbanwa*, Hoshi-san. My friend and I wish to avoid the crowds. May we pass through here?"

Hoshi's gaze flicked to him. He grunted and turned away, leaving the door open. Shiro gestured for him to enter first, and closed the door behind them. "This is our medical facility," Shiro explained, taking the lead across the large open room lined with hospital beds in curtained sections. "Hoshi and Endo, our physicians, have worked with the Harada family for many years. They are quite skilled." Smiling, Shiro called across the room to Hoshi, who had opened a cabinet and stood searching its contents. "Are you prepared for the evening, Hoshi-sama? No doubt you will be quite busy."

Hoshi responded with a smattering of clipped words, *baka* among them.

"Hey." He laughed. "He just called you an idiot."

Shiro flashed a bemused smirk. "He did. I am impressed, Gabriel. You speak Japanese?"

"Not really. I just know that word, from—"

"Jenner?" Shiro said softly.

"Yeah. He called me that once."

"I see." Shiro's features relaxed, grew serious. "And he told you what it meant?"

"I asked him."

A strange look clouded Shiro's face, at once concerned and intrigued. "How unusual," he said. They reached the opposite end of the room, and Shiro opened one of the double doors onto a well-lit, silent corridor. "Come. The stairs are just through here. We will...hang up, did you say?"

He suppressed a laugh. As smooth as Shiro's English was, he apparently didn't have much practice with slang. "Hang out," he said, and managed not to smirk.

"Yes. We will hang out on the terrace."

If Shiro knew he was amused, he didn't show it. They walked to the end of the hall, ascended three flights of stairs, and emerged in a corridor similar to the second floor of Slade's hotel—many rooms on either side. The fighters' living quarters. Shiro led him to a sliding wood panel door and out onto a spacious tile-floored balcony, devoid of furniture or decoration and bordered with a three-foot stacked stone wall.

Shiro crossed the space, settled on the wall and motioned for him to follow. He approached and looked out across the lit grounds below. A worn path led between bushes to a rock-bordered square of gleaming white sand with swirling patterned lines raked carefully on the surface. Wrought-iron benches had been placed beneath shade trees alongside the sands. Beyond this, a pond glistened darkly in strategically placed artificial lights, and a stone bridge arched above the surface. More forest covered the land, presumably to the opposite shore.

"Harada-sama spares no expense for his gardens," Shiro said when he noticed where Gabriel's attention lay. "One may find tranquility there, if one were so inclined."

"Sure. They're nice." He sat with a sigh. "I guess we don't have much time, right?"

"A few hours yet."

"Well, that's something." He frowned and stared at the floor. "Thanks for bringing me out here, Shiro. You don't have to stay with me. You probably have better things to do."

"On the contrary. I find you far more interesting than most *gaijin*."

"*Gaijin*?" he echoed.

Shiro chuckled. "*Sumimasen*. I did not mean it as an insult, though many Japanese do. The word means...foreigner. Outsider."

"Oh. I guess I am that." Gabriel shifted aside to view the gardens again. "*Sumimasen*. Does that mean 'I'm sorry'?"

"It does. You are quick to learn, my friend. Are you certain you have not studied?"

"Nope. I've just been listening. Does it always mean that?"

"In most cases, though it depends on the circumstances. It can also mean 'I beg your forgiveness.'"

"Hmph," he muttered. "I doubt that's what he meant."

"Jenner has said this to you?"

He nodded. "And to Harada. But I think he was being sarcastic, there."

"That is likely." A slight frown creased Shiro's brow. "Gabriel, how did you come to join House Ulysses?"

"I...can't. Can't tell you that. Shit." For the first time, keeping his secret hurt like hell. He had no lies ready, no story concocted to cover the glaring fact that here was the last place he wanted to be. He suspected Shiro knew that much already.

"*Gomen nasai*. I should not have asked."

"It's all right. Long as you don't mind me not answering."

"Perhaps we should discuss something else." Shiro resumed his relaxed demeanor. Anger lurked beneath the surface, but Gabriel knew it wasn't directed at him. "I am certain you have many questions. Ask me whatever you would like."

What could he ask without betraying himself? Nothing came to mind.

"Are you not permitted to question?"

"That's one way to put it."

"Very well. I shall tell you what I please, and then you will not have asked." Shiro smiled. "You see, I have learned to interpret some of Jenner's behavior—though I do not believe anyone knows him well, other than Ken Serizawa."

"Serizawa. He met us at the front gate, and went off talking to Jenner." He shook his head. "Shocked the hell out of me. That Serizawa guy actually seemed happy to see him."

"Yes. I am not certain of their history, but they have been acquainted for many years. Longer than I have known...well, anyone here. As for my involvement, Jenner is my *sempai*."

"Your what?"

"*Sempai*, superior. A mentor of sorts, though the relationship between *sempai* and *kohai* is a bit more complicated. You know he is a psychiatrist, yes?"

He nodded.

"I am as well. I work in his office, and he shares his methods and his knowledge with me. In a sense, he is grooming me for the field."

"So you're going to be like him? You actually want to be cold and cruel and calculating?"

Shiro laughed. "I admire Jenner's professional work. He is quite skilled, and his methods are very effective. Personally, I do not wish to divest myself of emotion as he has. He finds sentiment a nuisance, and believes emotion clouds judgment and perspective."

"I've noticed that."

"It is difficult not to notice." Shiro lowered his gaze and released a pent breath. "I will explain one other detail that may help you to understand the situation. Jenner used to belong to House Pandora."

He blinked. "That really shouldn't surprise me. It does explain a lot, though."

"More than you know, I believe." Shiro regarded him with the same strange expression he'd displayed when he first mentioned Jenner. "He had been something of an advisor to Harada-sama. However, a few years ago, there was a falling out over one of our fighters, and their relationship was strained. When Marcus Slade joined the organization, Harada-sama gave Jenner to him. Soon after that, the fighter involved in the problem...left."

“Wait a minute.” His stomach clenched. “What do you mean, gave? He can’t... I mean, that makes it sound like—” *Like Jenner is just as trapped as me.*

“The Japanese do not view business in the same light as Americans. Also, Jenner is *gaijin*, and not afforded equal respect,” Shiro said quietly. “I do not know the details. I know only that Jenner serves Marcus Slade against his wishes. He will not speak of it with me.”

He hadn’t wanted to feel sorry for the bastard. Was this why Jenner had forbidden him to talk to Shiro about him? He didn’t seem the type to welcome sympathy. But maybe he could do something without tipping Jenner off to his knowledge. Struck with a sudden inspiration, he turned to Shiro and grinned.

“Will you teach me Japanese?”

Chapter 24

A cheer went up from the gathered crowd when Lonzo's opponent, J.C. of House Orion, stumbled and fell off the platform. On the outskirts of the ring of spectators, Gabriel smiled at Lonzo, who flashed an exhausted grin and limped from the arena.

In order to get through the dozens of fights involved in the tournament, two matches occurred at the same time—one in each of the smaller buildings, which had turned out to be spacious practice dojos. In the vast center room of the main house, two theater-sized screens broadcast the simultaneous bouts to a roomful of guest spectators enjoying the comforts of House Pandora's assorted delights: food, drink and women.

Most of the organization's members divided themselves between the two dojos, preferring to see the action live. He'd been relieved to discover the qualifying rounds used ring-outs to determine the winners. The raised platforms used for the initial fights had no walls or rope borders. Knockouts would only become necessary in the final rounds the following night.

In the meantime, he stood silent and waiting for his first match of the tournament, scheduled to occur in about twenty minutes. He had drawn Juno of Pandora as his opponent, and he looked forward to an even, honest fight. He hoped.

He waited alone. Shiro would soon be fighting Eddie from Dionysus in the adjacent arena. He had yet to catch a glimpse of Lillith. If she'd been on the boat, he hadn't seen her there. Maybe she'd come another way. Or maybe Slade had decided to keep him from seeing her, except through his terms. That wouldn't surprise him. Still, he missed her, and longed to know how she was doing.

The soft tone of a bell signified five minutes until the next match. Sighing off his melancholy, he worked his way toward the platform and tugged his shirt off as he walked. He pulled it over his head, stopped short and almost fell on top of someone who had halted in his path.

"Hey, watch where you're—Lillith!"

"Gabriel. I'm so glad I found you." Lillith threw her arms around his waist, and he returned the embrace. He held her gently back and looked down at her, smiling.

Damn. If only the fight wasn't about to start, he could have more time with her. "Are you okay?"

"I am now." She dropped her arms and eyed him up and down. "You look good, Gabriel, really good."

He released a short, bitter laugh. "Yes, I'm in great shape. And it's all thanks to Marcus Slade's miracle train-or-die program. Works wonders on the physique."

Her face fell. "Oh, Gabe. I'm so sorry..."

"No. Lilly, don't cry. It's okay." Instantly contrite, he drew her to him. "I'm sorry. It was a joke. A bad joke."

She sniffled and gave him a watery smile.

“That’s better.” With one finger he traced her delicate jaw line, lifted her chin up until her eyes met his. “I’ll be fine.” He pronounced each word deliberately, reassuring her. She nodded, and he hugged her briefly. “I have to go. Wait for me?”

“Okay.”

With a final fond look at his sister, he proceeded to the foot of the stairs leading to the platform. His opponent appeared on the opposite side. They mounted the steps together and stepped into a blur of light and applause. Juno bent at the waist in greeting, and he reciprocated. He sent a quick glance toward the space Lillith had just occupied, but couldn’t make out anything in the wings outside the brilliance of the spotlights.

He forced himself to focus on his opponent, who had dropped into a ready stance and waited for the starting bell to sound. It did seconds later, catching him unprepared. Juno’s opening rush carried him to the edge of the platform and nearly pushed him over.

He threw himself onto the mat. He avoided immediate loss, but the move allowed Juno to land the first strike, a foot to the ribs that elicited a sharp gasp from him. He rolled with the blow and gained his feet, ducked the next punch and landed one to Juno’s stomach.

Achieving ring-out required a different set of skills from the usual hit-until-you-fall-down style most of the fighters employed. He had to unbalance his opponent—if not physically, then mentally. Maybe he could try some of the psychological devastation Jenner had used on him with regularity. But he’d throw in a slight twist.

When Juno came at him again, he relaxed his stance and let his opponent’s blow hit him. A fist plowed his jaw, drove his head to the side. He remained silent and immobile for a full five seconds before turning slowly to face Juno. A trickle of warm blood leaked from a split corner of his lip. He lifted his closed hand, deliberately wiped the blood away—and grinned.

“Thanks. You wanna do that again, though? I don’t think I got the message.”

Blowing a frustrated breath, Juno balled up a fist, drew back and let fly. The blow slammed his sternum, momentarily robbing him of breath. He regained his wind and cast a scathing look at his opponent.

“Come on, now.” The grin resurfaced, and he took a step forward. “My grandmother used to hit me harder than that.”

A look of pure fury flashed across Juno’s face. He roared and swung, and he caught his arm on the upswing. Sweeping Juno’s feet from beneath him, he sent him crashing to the mat, and before his opponent could recover, shoved him hard. Juno tumbled off the platform.

The resultant roar of approval from the main house lifted over the calls of the crowd in the dojo. Ignoring their appreciation, he descended the stairs and returned to the place he’d left his sister.

His heart sank when he realized she was gone.

* * * *

Gabriel's fourth match of the evening ended with his fourth consecutive victory, and his opponent's second loss. Unfortunately, his opponent had been Duke. This didn't bode well for future interactions with House Prometheus.

Shiro met him at the foot of the platform and made things worse.

"Well, my friend." He slung an arm around his shoulder and steered him through the crowd. "You have just removed Prometheus from the tournament."

"I what?"

Shiro grinned. "Duke was the last of their fighters in the running. Prometheus will not be represented in the final rounds."

"Oh, great." He winced and cupped a hand against his ribs. He didn't think anything was broken this time, but Duke's boot had once again left its mark. "Just what I need. Another reason for Mendez to hate me."

Shiro lowered his arm. "Are you all right? Perhaps I should bring you to the medical facility."

"No, I'm fine. Let me grab my shirt." He worked his way toward the far wall, to the makeshift pen comprised of straight-backed wooden chairs. Few of the fighters had bothered using the area. His shirt lay where he'd left it, draped over the back of a chair. He grabbed it, and quickly let go when he found it soaked. "What the hell?"

Blood coated his palm and stained his fingers.

Shiro came up beside him. "Is something... Gabriel! What happened?"

"It's not mine." Sickened and furious, he picked up the shirt again and spread it open. PIG had been drizzled in spray-paint white on the plain black surface. The saturated material glistened darkly. Where did they get this much blood?

"*Kusotare*," Shiro snapped. "You must show this to the leaders. They cannot be permitted to harass you like this."

Rough, mocking laughter sounded behind them. "Yeah, good idea, Gabriel. Go on and squeal some more. That's what pigs do best."

"Mendez." He dropped the shirt on the chair's seat and turned to face the grinning bastard without bothering to wipe his hands. "Whose blood is this?"

"It should be yours, *puta*. One of these days, it will be."

Nails emerged from the mob and stood just behind the House leader. "Guess the pig found his present, huh? Oh, but he don't look happy. And we worked so hard on it, too." He leaned on a chair and smirked. "I think he should put it on. After we went through all the trouble to personalize it, it's only fair."

"Mendez, you are out of line." Shiro moved forward with a threatening glare. "Leave."

"You stay out of this, devil-boy. You're not even a lieutenant." Mendez crossed his arms and nodded at the discarded shirt. "How 'bout it? You gonna try it on, or what?"

“Fuck off.” He glanced at Shiro. Beyond him, Cortez and the towering bald fighter, Boomer, approached the pen. “Oh, nice. And you called me a coward? Have to get all your thugs in on this, don’t you?”

Mendez laughed. “Boy, you are so dead. The minute you’re out of this gig—and believe me, you’re not gonna last long around here—I will hunt you down. I’ll drop your friends and save you for last.”

“Goddamn it, Mendez!” Wolff’s voice roared above the general din. The cop shoved his way through the crowd toward them. “You’ve been warned. Back off.”

“Hey, now.” Mendez spread his arms and smirked. “Don’t get cranky, *capitan*. We were only havin’ a chat with Angel, here. Ain’t that right, boys?”

“Yep. Just talkin’,” Nails said. “No law against that, is there?”

Wolff glowered at the Prometheus leader. “I think you’re done talking now.”

“Sure.” Mendez jerked his head, and the fighters wandered off. He gave him a chilling smile. “Later, pig.”

“Mendez.” Wolff infused the name with warning.

“Okay. I’m gone. Christ, Wolfie, you never let me have any fun.” Mendez shrugged and walked away.

He watched him, and then turned to Wolff. “Thanks. I think.”

“Shut the hell up, kid. You’re worse than he is.” Wolff’s furious stare moved from him to Shiro, and back. “You’ve made a friend. How nice. I’m warning you now, both of you. Stop antagonizing Mendez.”

“I didn’t do anything—”

“I heard what you called him. That was stupid. Just stay away from him—and damn it, stay away from me.” Wolff whirled and plunged into the mob.

“Well,” he said. “He’s a pleasant fucker, isn’t he?”

Shiro shook his head. “Perhaps not, but I believe his advice is sound. Come, Gabriel. Let us go somewhere Mendez is not.”

“Good idea.”

He followed Shiro out. He’d worry about finding another shirt later.

Chapter 25

Only the main house remained open for the second night of the tournament. Gabriel stood in the ring, first in a line consisting of the five finalists. Shiro and Apollo had also advanced, along with Ice of Dionysus, and Captain Wolff.

Maybe he'd have an opportunity to crush Apollo, but he'd take Wolff in a pinch.

A red-garbed Pandora woman entered the arena with a microphone and a seductive smile. "Gentleman, select your markers."

He blinked at the black wooden box emblazoned with crimson *kanji* symbols she thrust toward him. Shrugging, he plunged his hand through the round cloth-covered opening in the top. His fingers closed around a cool, smooth object the size of a stack of quarters. He kept the object enfolded in his hand, withdrew his arm, and waited.

The other four finalists followed suit, each choosing a polished stone to decide their placement in the upcoming cage match. The box contained four white stones, and one black. Those with white stones would take positions in each of the four corners of the cage. Whoever selected the black stone would stand in the center, with his back to at least two of his opponents, until the starting bell rang.

He glanced around the room while he waited for the go-ahead to look at his lot. The crowd seemed to have doubled in size since the previous day, though he knew this wasn't the case. No one was allowed on or off the island during the tournament—one of the reasons he had been given such abundant liberties. Still, the gathered throngs in the immense central room of House Pandora appeared to outnumber any he'd seen at a fight before.

The arrangement of the furnishings remained largely unchanged from what he'd glimpsed yesterday. Tables dotted the floor, and two colossal viewing screens bathed the darkened room with eerie blue-white light. Both screens showed the same image: the feed from the cameras trained on the fighters. In the center of the floor, tables had been moved to allow space for the twenty-foot square, roofed steel cage in which they stood.

"Please show your selections now."

He opened his fingers and gave the object in his palm a rueful smirk. The black stone. Hundreds of eyes recorded the fighters' reactions as the box made its way back up the line to recollect its contents.

A neutral and genderless voice blared from overhead speakers. "The finals round of this year's tournament will begin in one hour. The betting window will close in forty-five minutes. Thank you, ladies and gentleman."

He left the cage. Stopped just outside the entrance and leaned against the outer wall. Three more wins—if he made it, he would nearly double what he'd taken so far. He'd be a match or two away from supposed freedom, which he intended to take one way or another. If he lost the tournament, he would face another year of hell. Maybe longer.

He didn't think he could handle another year.

"Perhaps we will face each other again, after all."

He flinched and sent Shiro a troubled look. "Christ, I hope not. I only got lucky last time."

Shiro smiled. "Do not dismiss your skills so easily, *mikata*. You have improved more rapidly than any fighter I have seen in this organization, though you do not seem to notice. I believe you have a fair chance at winning."

"Maybe." He heaved a sigh and cast another glance around the dimly lit, close-packed room. He didn't recognize a single face in his range of vision, and thought it for the best, at least until this free-for-all fiasco had ended. His shaky confidence had stabilized as far as one-on-one matches went, but this would be a new experience. One he wasn't sure he could win.

* * * *

"Fighters, please take your positions in the ring. The match will begin in five minutes." The near-mechanical voice cut through the crowd noise. Exchanging looks of wordless encouragement, Gabriel and Shiro clasped hands, broke apart and headed for the cage.

Inside, he took up his designated spot in the center and tried to calm the incessant hammering of his heart. The other fighters circled the inner perimeter, each stopping at an unoccupied corner. He rotated in a slow circle and looked at each of his opponents in turn: Shiro. Ice. Wolff. Apollo. There, he halted with a smirk and dropped onto his haunches, placing one hand on the mat before him like a runner on a starting block.

He tensed, measured seconds by the blood pounding in his ears. The starting bell sounded. He launched at the lumbering shape before him, oblivious to the other fighters. Apollo reached for him. He ducked and rammed his head into the brute's massive belly. A satisfying whoof of air escaped.

He pulled away, and a hard blow between his shoulder blades sent him crashing to the floor. A quick upward glance confirmed the assault hadn't come from Apollo. He rolled away instinctively and just missed Wolff's foot.

As he sprang to his feet, a look passed between Apollo and Wolff. So that's how it was going to be. He straightened, leveled a come-get-me glare at both of them, and raised his fists.

"Bring it on."

Apollo stepped back, and Wolff moved to the side. Rather than take the path he thought they'd expect—straight for Apollo—he rushed Wolff and stopped just in front of him. He sensed movement behind him. Apollo swung for his head, he ducked—and laughed when Wolff leaned out of the blow's trajectory with a loud curse.

Uttering a snarl befitting his name, Wolff launched a punch and caught Apollo in the ribcage. The big man responded with surprised anger, raised a hand to return the blow, but he delivered a sharp kick to his shin. Apollo grunted, missed.

Wolff threw a puzzled glance at him. The cop spun on his heel and sprinted across the cage toward Shiro and Ice, locked in combat on the opposite side.

In the split second his eyes roamed to track Wolff, a fist plowed into his side. Pain restored his focus, and he turned once more on Apollo. Forcing himself to stay calm, he avoided Apollo's attempts to pummel him with a show of outward patience and watched for an opening that would let him do some damage.

There. The sharp rattle of the cage wall behind them drew Apollo's attention. His fist flew at his opponent's face with lethal precision. Warm blood burst beneath his knuckles on impact.

The other fighter bellowed.

He grinned, held up bloodstained fingers, and beckoned Apollo with a curling motion.

Apollo rushed at him. From behind him, a faint groan penetrated the din of the crowd. He whirled, ignored the white-hot pain flaring in his kidney when Apollo landed a direct hit.

Opposite him, Shiro leaned against the cage wall facing the crowd, arms above his head, fingers entwined in the metal mesh for support. Wolff and Ice flanked his motionless body and alternately pummeled him with fists and feet. Barely conscious, Shiro attempted to lift his head and straighten, but his attackers gave him no pause in the volley of blows.

"You son of a bitch!" He sprinted for the threesome, ripped Ice away and tossed him to the mat. The lanky Dionysus fighter glared, and then raced to engage Apollo, who charged across the ring toward them.

Either Wolff didn't notice his fury, or he didn't care. The captain continued battering the still form that clung to the wall until he wrenched his arm behind his back and spun him away.

"Enough." He struck a ready stance. "This is supposed to be a free-for-all, not a gang beating. Fight fair, asshole."

Wolff shrugged and raised his fists. "You forgot the other rule."

His eyes narrowed. "What rule?"

"Anything goes."

Wolff's hands flashed out and gripped his shoulders. The cop jerked him forward and simultaneously drove a knee into his groin.

He fell with a sharp intake of breath. The projector screens magnified the action, and the crowd echoed his gasp. His hands moved instinctively to cover the injured area, but he forced them to his sides, refusing to give the asshole the satisfaction. He slowly regained his feet.

"Don't do that again," he said with deliberate pause, infusing each word with warning. Once again he raised his arms to fight.

"Try and stop me." Wolff stepped forward—and a thud shook the floor of the cage. Both fighters froze. They turned toward the sound.

Ice had dropped Apollo. Game over.

“I’ll face you again,” he said to Wolff. “Be ready.”

“Boy, don’t threaten me. You don’t know shit about this outfit.” Wolff sighed over the ghostly echo of the count: fifteen...sixteen...seventeen...and frowned when he saw him watching.

“If you really want to do the right thing, be a fucking hero, go back to wherever the hell you came from and stay there.” Fury flooded his features. The count reached twenty. Wolff pivoted and strode for the cage’s exit.

At last he turned to Shiro. The fighter stirred, groaned.

He reached up and disentangled lax fingers from the mesh. Shiro had gripped the metal wire tight enough to cut into his flesh. Nausea swelled, bile surged in his throat. He slung his friend’s arm around his shoulder and supported him out of the ring.

Chapter 26

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.” Shiro spoke softly, grimacing as the Japanese doctor—Hoshi, he thought—pulled a bandage tight around his bruised ribs. With two hours until the next round, he had accompanied Shiro to the medical facility to assess the damage.

Shiro insisted he could still fight. The doctor didn’t appear pleased with his decision.

Hoshi secured the bandage and gestured to Shiro’s bloodied hands, and then his torso. He spoke in chopped phrases. Shiro shook his head. Hoshi grunted and walked away.

He frowned. “What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, man. That wasn’t nothing.”

“It is nothing, Gabriel.” Anger tightened his features and ended in a wince.

“Right. You’re just as stubborn as him, you know.”

“Hoshi?”

“No. Jenner.” He folded his arms. “He acted like this when I asked him about Harada. Shut up, Gabriel. None of your *business*, Gabriel.”

Shiro choked on a laugh. “I am sorry, my friend. Truly, I cannot imagine Jenner saying such things.”

“Well, he didn’t exactly use those words, but that’s what he meant.” He relented with a smile. “Fine, don’t explain. I can pretty much guess what he said—in his professional opinion, you’re fucked up.”

“Gabriel. Do not make me laugh. It hurts.” The corners of his mouth lifted. “You are correct. But I cannot...”

Hoshi returned with a plastic basin. Muttering, he moved a wheeled table in front of Shiro, set the basin down, and removed a brown bottle, gauze packages, a roll of tape, and a folded towel. Shiro held his hands over the basin, and Hoshi uncapped the bottle to pour liquid on the fighter’s wounds.

“You. *Gaijin*.” Hoshi addressed him in heavily accented English. “He is...friend of yours?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

“You tell him no fight. Too great risk.”

Shiro exploded in Japanese before he could respond. Hoshi interrupted him with angry words and gestures. The doctor grabbed the towel, dried Shiro’s hands none too gently, and opened a package of gauze, then glanced at him. “He bleeds inside. You tell him no fight.”

“Damn it, Shiro!” His hands clenched tight. “Can’t you die from internal bleeding?”

“It is possible.” Shiro watched Hoshi wrap his hands and avoided his gaze.

"You can't do it. Please, withdraw. No one will think any less of you."

"I will." His voice strained with effort. "I cannot dishonor my House, or myself, by giving up. I will fight to the death if it becomes necessary."

"And what if you're paired off with me?" Anger born of frustration fueled his words. "Do you expect me to fight you, knowing I could kill you?"

"Yes."

The barely audible reply, laden with regret, cut deeper than any knife could. He turned away.

"Please understand." Shiro tried to get to his feet, but a stern look from Hoshi seemed to force him into reconsidering. He sat down. "It is a matter of honor. Of pride. I must fight, until I am either victorious or beaten."

He caught his gaze and held it. At last, he nodded.

Hoshi finished dressing Shiro's wounds. He taped the gauze and moved the table away. "*Sunil-kun ga hanashimasu desu.*"

"No. Hoshi-sama, *dôzo...*"

"*Ache kaere.*" Hoshi pointed to the door.

Shiro stood slowly and bowed. "*Dômo arigatou gozaimasu.*" He headed for the exit. A glance at the furious doctor, and he followed Shiro out.

In the hushed corridor, he cleared his throat. "I won't push you about this, but I'd really like to know one thing. Who is Sunil-kun?"

Shiro stopped. He didn't turn around. "Jenner."

"I was afraid of that."

* * * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, the betting window is now closed. The first single finals match of the evening will begin in fifteen minutes."

Gabriel sat at a table beside Shiro, who huddled around a steaming mug of green tea as though it were the only thing keeping him alive, and had remained silent and still since Hoshi finished treating him in an attempt to conserve energy for his upcoming ordeal. They'd announced the match-ups for the final rounds, and Shiro would not be fighting him, but Wolff.

Shiro didn't expect to win.

A slender figure materialized in front of them. In the darkened outskirts of the room, it proved impossible to determine who it was—but the figure spoke, leaving no question of its identity.

"Hello, angel. I see you are consorting with the devil. How interesting."

He didn't bother to reply.

Without waiting for an invitation, Jenner sat down in the empty chair across the table. "I wish to speak with you before the match."

"Why? I didn't do anything."

Jenner snorted. "Not you." He leaned forward and extended a finger toward Shiro. "Him."

“*Doushita, sempai.*” Shiro’s weakened voice drifted across the table. Jenner replied with a short string of Japanese that had Shiro shaking his head.

“No. He can stay.”

“Very well.” Clearly displeased with his presence, Jenner spoke, the words flowing as though Shiro’s native language were his own. Occasionally he stopped, and Shiro interjected a word or two in answer to some question or statement.

Something Jenner said made Shiro pause. At last, the fighter answered, “You know I cannot do that, *sempai.*”

Jenner stared at him. “*Kohai.* You would die for Tomi Harada’s honor?”

“No,” Shiro replied. “For my own.”

Silence befell them. At last, Jenner rose with a frown twisting his narrow features. “*Kentô, Shiro.*” He turned to him. A smirk lifted one corner of his lips. “And good luck to you as well, angel. Watch out for the wolf. He bites.” He turned and walked away.

“What was that all about?” he asked, staring at the space where Jenner had been.

Akuma raised his mug to his lips and swallowed. “He wanted me to withdraw. I refused.”

“What? You mean Jenner actually cares about someone?”

“I am not certain of that. However, his behavior is...odd.”

A loud click signified the speaker system coming to life. “Fighters, please enter the ring,” the voice boomed. Shiro stood, stifled a groan and wove slowly through the throngs. He stayed by the fighter’s side. They gripped each other’s wrists in parting, and Shiro climbed the stairs. Wolff already waited in the opposite corner.

The cage had been drawn upward into the recessed ceiling to leave a more traditional square ring with roped borders. He stood as close as he dared, aware he risked one of Pandora’s omnipresent security team removing him bodily from the area.

In the dazzling glory of the spotlights, Shiro appeared fragile. Recent bruises from the cage match stood out livid and grotesque against ashen skin. His blond hair lay lank along his skull, and his wavering stance betrayed his exhaustion.

The bell sounded, and Wolff rushed Shiro. His dismay swelled—it looked impossible to avoid. Shiro’s eyes lit with a predatory gleam and his body drew itself erect a split second before impact. He stepped aside in a blur of motion. Wolff, who had been assured of an easy target, hurtled by and crashed to the mat with the force of his intended blow.

Wolff bounded back. The two fighters circled each other, looking for an opening. Wolff lunged again, and Shiro whirled back. Knuckles rushed by him.

Getting nowhere fast, Wolff changed tactics. He lowered his arms and walked across the mat to Shiro. The injured fighter drew back with a blow aimed at the cop’s jaw, but Wolff bent his knees and dropped, then wrapped both arms around Shiro’s ribcage and squeezed hard.

A fist glanced off Wolff's temple, barely fazing him. Shiro gasped and struggled to free himself from the viselike bear hug. He managed a sharp jab to the base of Wolff's neck. An ominous crack, audible even from the sidelines, signaled danger.

Shiro swung again and connected in the same spot. Snarling an oath, Wolff let go and stepped back. Shiro fell to his knees with a sharp intake of breath. Before he could regain his feet, Wolff drew back and kicked the downed fighter.

Shiro gagged. Coughed. Bright red blood stained his chin and shirt, splattered the mat below him.

Eyes snapping fire, Shiro rose to one knee, stood and swung. He connected. Wolff's head whipped away and back. The cop glared.

Shiro's knees found the mat. Wolff lashed out and kicked him again.

Another crack. More coughing, more blood, neon red under the spotlight. Movie blood, bright enough to appear fake. Horrified, he watched their movements—Shiro struggling, Wolff smirking. Shiro gasping.

Shiro collapsing.

One...two...three... Why were they counting so slowly? Shiro's blood still flowed, collecting in an ominous pool around his head. He needed help now.

Eight...nine...ten... Shiro wasn't getting up. Wolff's impassive face revealed nothing, and his apparent callousness fueled his growing wrath.

Nineteen...

Twenty.

A few subdued cheers rang out when the automated count ended. His feet hit the steps before the last word rang from the speakers. An instant later he knelt at Shiro's side. With trembling fingers he felt for a pulse, and at last found a telltale flutter beneath clammy skin. He glanced around, noticed two or three crimson-clad men from Pandora rushing through the crowds. Standing, he fixed the scowling cop with a look of pure hatred. "You could have killed him."

"Yeah." Wolff sent a glance at the fallen fighter and raised emotionless eyes to him. "Isn't this fun, now?"

"You son of a bitch!" He leaped at him, unmindful of the thunder of feet behind him. Pandora's security caught him before he reached Wolff and wrestled him to the floor. Two of them drew him to his feet and pinned his arms behind him.

He jerked and heaved against their grasp. A figure appeared at the far end of the ring, ascended the stairs and entered the cold glare of light. "Enough," the new arrival said. Tomi Harada. He ceased his struggles. Harada nodded once, and the men released him.

"Angel, is it not?" Harada strode toward him.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Well, Angel, though your blatant show of concern is appreciated, I must insist that you do not attack the other fighters outside of tournament matches."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Harada cut him off. “Akuma chose to fight. He knew the consequences his actions could bring, and he was prepared to take them. End this now or you will be disqualified.”

Two others he didn’t recognize entered the ring and loaded Shiro’s limp body onto a portable stretcher. His friend was not yet out of danger, and there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it.

His eyes met Harada’s, and understanding passed between them. He would drop it. For now.

“You have twenty minutes until your next match begins, Angel. Use them safely.” Harada turned and walked after the stretcher-bearers. Alone with Wolff now, the temptation to attack proved almost too great to resist. He let his expression speak for him, and silently promised revenge before he, too, stalked from the ring.

Twenty minutes. Not enough time to see Akuma, and too much to pass quickly. He spent it fuming, letting his anger grow. When he finally faced Ice in the ring, he made short work of his opponent and dropped him in under five minutes. He strode out before the count ended, leaving a disappointed crowd to occupy themselves until the final match—the real match—began.

He would make Wolff pay.

Chapter 27

A thunderous whirring rose in the air and swallowed the sounds of the crowd on the island. From the terrace, he watched a small white helicopter rise into the black sky, turn and speed toward the distant New York skyline—airlifting Shiro to a hospital on the mainland.

Keep him safe, he thought. Concern, fear and outrage vied for positions in his mind. When the ominous whap of the blades no longer sounded, he turned to go back inside, but found the way blocked.

“Is your pal leaving so soon?” Dressed sharply in a three-piece suit of obsidian silk, Marcus Slade leaned on the doorjamb and regarded him. A sly smirk played on his lips, a warning that he’d screwed up and was about to be punished.

Rage prevented him from bowing to Slade’s whim. Only his concern for Lillith’s safety kept his tongue, and his fists, at bay.

“That last match was rather brief,” Slade said casually when he didn’t respond. “Now, I could be wrong,” he continued, watching his face for a reaction, “but I believe I told you to make sure your fights lasted long enough to entertain me.”

Nausea hit him hard, and his mouth went dry as sand. Oh no...he’d forgotten his damned rules. A panicked beat lodged against his skull.

Slade straightened and approached him. He stopped a foot away, reached out and jerked him forward. The smirk fled his face in favor of frosty rage.

“Since you have come so far in this tournament, and since I am a patient and forgiving man—” He paused and glared, daring him to refute the statement. “—I will forgive you this one transgression. But know this.” Slade pulled him until their faces nearly touched, and his voice dropped to a menacing whisper.

“If the bout between you and Captain Wolff is not the longest, the bloodiest, the most spectacular match I have ever witnessed, I will rape your sister myself.”

His eyes bulged.

“And then I’ll let Jenner have her.”

His heart plunged into his churning stomach. “You wouldn’t.” The words forced themselves from his throat, but he’d known even before he’d spoken that the bastard would. He’d enjoy it. Would probably watch.

Harsh laughter erupted from Slade. He released him with a shove. “Do you want to try me, boy?”

“No.” Damn his weakness. Slade had him by the balls and knew it.

“Good.” With a final contemptuous sneer, Slade went back inside and left him to simmer in his boiling emotions.

* * * *

He wanted to kill the bastard.

The final round would begin in five minutes. He stood at the base of the ring, glaring at the shadowed recess where Wolff waited. For two hours he'd wandered the corridors of House Pandora in search of anyone who could give him news of Shiro's condition. At last he'd found out what he could from an unlikely source.

"He is still alive," Jenner had told him when he discovered the lieutenant sitting alone in a quiet side room, disconnecting from a cellphone call. "For now." The look of absolute disgust that twisted Jenner's face made him decide not to ask any more questions. He'd withdrawn from the room and returned to the main chamber to face his last challenge of the tournament.

Now, the house lights dimmed around him. Beams of blood-red luminescence shone from the darkness and washed over the stage. A soft hissing heralded clouds of smoke that billowed into the ring. The crowd gasped its pleasure.

He smirked at the production and mounted the steps to disappear into the mist.

A blast of cool air issued from above, clearing the fog. Clad only in sleek black pants and his notorious tattoo, he squatted on his haunches inside the ropes, arms draped casually across his thighs. Wolff stood rigid and erect, fists clenched at his sides. A muscle along his jaw twitched spasmodically beneath gritted teeth. He still wore gray. Under the crimson light, he appeared drenched in blood.

The starting bell sounded a distant chime amid a sea of expectant murmurs. He came up slowly as Wolff strode toward him. He made no move to block the swing that arched up toward his chin and connected. Expressionless, he spat a mouthful of blood at Wolff's feet and shot the captain a piercing look.

"If he dies, you die." His words emerged more statement than threat, a flat timbre with the barest vibration of fury.

Wolff executed a spirited attempt to break his jaw.

Displaying exaggerated disinterest, he let the fist hit. He sagged to soften the blow, stepped back and ejected a spray of scarlet spittle. A few droplets splattered on Wolff's chest, darkening the material of his tank top.

Wolff sneered and brushed the moist spots on his shirt as if they were bugs. "You can't keep this up forever, boy," he snapped. "Fight or fall. Now." He drew back again and aimed for his temple. The strike whizzed through empty air, and he dropped beneath it.

Wolff narrowly avoided his foot sweeping toward his kneecaps.

He sprang upright and danced away, just out of range. Wolff charged him. They launched into an awkward shuffling circuit of the ring. More often than not, Wolff's blows smote the air.

He didn't try to strike back. If that bastard Slade wanted this drawn out, he'd get it.

The tide of the battle took a sharp turn when an uppercut sent him hurtling to the mat. Wolff leapt on him, and they rolled around locked in a crushing embrace—until Wolff pinned him down, one hand gripping his throat while the other repeatedly hammered his stomach.

Gasping for breath, unable to move, he clung with desperation to his need for victory. The world dimmed around him. His eyes rolled back, and he allowed his body to go limp. The brute above him didn't relax his hold, or stop the storm of blows he dispensed. Consciousness slipped further away. A black curtain descended. Through it came a ghostly electric slur of sound that sent a bolt of terror into him.

Se...veeen...eiiight...

He had to get up. Now.

He moaned and raised a tentative hand. The crowd gave a collective gasp beyond him, the speakers droned: e...le...veeen...tweelve... Too slowly, the thickness drained from his senses. He flipped himself over, placed his palms on the mat for leverage. A piercing flare ignited his ribs. Wolff. Kicking him.

The count reached fifteen. Despite Wolff's vicious feet, he struggled to his hands and knees—and then something that felt suspiciously like a freight train collided with the curve of his back. The elbow-to-the-spine maneuver, one of Apollo's favorites. Anguish coursed through him like acid, and he sprawled back on the floor.

The count, which had stopped at seventeen, began over at one.

On a surge of hate-induced adrenalin, he hauled himself from the floor. His fist flew at his opponent's astonished face. A satisfying crunch accompanied warm liquid splashing his knuckles.

"Damn it!" Wolff put three fingers to his nose and drew them back stained crimson. "How in the fuck am I gonna explain this at work?"

He hesitated at the captain's odd statement, long enough to catch the quick grin just before knuckles drove into his forehead. His head snapped back with the force. Wolff's arm lowered, revealing the thick gold, diamond-encrusted ring the captain wore—now stained with his blood.

Warm wetness dribbled into his right eye from the gash. The flow branched off and seeped into the left one too. He blinked and tried to clear his vision. The stream continued unchecked, blinding him. Dropping to his knees, he swiped the back of his hand across his eyes, but only succeeded in smearing the thick liquid further.

Wolff struck.

A boot caught him in the temple and spun him in a half-circle. Tears of pain began to wash the blood from his eyes. Another blow to his spine spiked him to the mat.

Half-blind, he rose and lashed out with a fist. Luck directed his blow and he caught his opponent in the gut, knocking the wind from him.

"You dirty son of a bitch." He punctuated his words with another jab. "What the hell—do you think—you're doing?" At every pause he drove his fist into the nearest vulnerable patch of flesh, and when he halted his tirade, Wolff stood panting in front of him, bent nearly double with pain.

“Isn’t this fun, now?” He spat his words back at him. Wolff raised his head to glare, and he hooked a fist beneath his chin. The force of the blow lifted him off the floor and laid him out on his back.

Wolff sat up slowly, groaned, but didn’t stand. He fixed him with an incredulous stare. “You were fucking with me,” he said slowly. “The whole time. You could have ended the match whenever you wanted.”

He didn’t respond. At last, he nodded once.

“Well.” Wolff struggled to his feet and raised gore-streaked fists before a hideous grin. “Come on. Let’s finish this.”

“With pleasure.”

Wolff ran at him.

He bowed his head and leapt aside at the last moment. One leg licked out and hooked the front of his opponent’s ankles. Wolff began to fall, and he bent his arm and plunged an elbow between the descending shoulder blades.

Wolff thudded to the floor. The impact forced a fresh mist of blood from his lips. He coughed once and stilled.

Chest heaving, he stood over him. He echoed the count in silence. Sweat-soaked tendrils of hair clung to his scraped temples. Clumps of it hung across his brow, matted with blood. A lifetime passed before him, suspended in a red glow, and drowned while he watched.

The mob stopped breathing.

Twenty.

* * * *

The MacPherson Memorial Hospital was private in the strictest sense. Few people outside of the organization knew of its existence. Slade’s limo pulled up to the curb outside the modest four-story brick structure on the north end of SoHo, and Jenner emerged from the back door with Gabriel at his heels.

They entered through double glass doors and stepped into a nondescript lobby that could have been at home in any of a hundred office buildings. Jenner nodded to a nurse seated behind the main desk, turning the leaves of a newspaper. The woman barely glanced at them. They proceeded to the right and down a short hall. Stopping before a gleaming steel elevator door, Jenner thumbed the up arrow and stepped back to wait.

He stood beside Jenner in silence. It had been two days since the tournament, and though his own injuries were just beginning to heal, Shiro had fared much worse. The fighter had been upgraded from critical to stable only that morning, and when Jenner had offered to bring him along for a visit, he’d shoved aside his suspicions at the lieutenant’s apparent generosity and agreed.

The elevator arrived and whisked them to the third floor. He followed Jenner to Shiro’s room, steeling himself for the grim sight he knew awaited them. The door to room 320 stood slightly ajar. Jenner gave a perfunctory knock and pushed it open without waiting for an answer.

Inside, a young woman in mint green scrubs bent over the bed adjusting the controls of a machine, obscuring the figure within from view. She didn't acknowledge their presence until she finished her ministrations, then straightened, regarded them with a bland smile. He focused on Shiro.

Save for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, the fighter might have been dead. He lay on his back, eyes closed, covered to the waist with a crisp white sheet nearly the same color as what little exposed skin remained undamaged. Bruises and shallow cuts covered his chest, stomach and face, and a purple-black band encircled his ribs, marking the area Wolff's embrace had crushed.

Bile coated his throat. He almost regretted not killing the brutal cop who'd nearly cost Shiro his life.

The nurse wrapped a blood pressure cuff around the fighter's limp arm and stared at her watch as she pumped the black plastic bulb. She glanced at the red line rising up the gauge on the wall. Appearing satisfied, she removed the cuff and stowed it in a pocket.

"Not too long," she admonished before strolling past them and out into the hallway. The door swung closed on silent hinges behind her.

He glanced at the chair beside the bed, and then at Jenner, who nodded. He took a seat. Silence filled the room, punctuated by the soft, intermittent beep of the IV monitor.

"So, angel. How much have you told him?"

Startled from his thoughts, he turned. Jenner leaned casually against the wall, arms folded across his chest. Intensity lit his piercing granite eyes.

"Nothing. I'm not that stupid."

Jenner snorted. "And how much has he guessed?"

"He has guessed enough."

The rasping words came from the bed. Shiro's eyes opened and his mouth twisted in a grimace. He stared at Jenner, but could go no further.

The look on the lieutenant's face suggested mild amusement. He strode across the room and stood at Shiro's bedside. "I must tell you," he said to the supine fighter, throwing a sidelong glance at him, "that for as much as you have guessed, there is far more you do not know." His features hardened. "*Okina osewa da*, Shiro."

"*Sumimasen, sempai*." Shiro dropped his gaze, then looked up at him. "So. You won."

It was a statement, not a question. He gave Shiro a quizzical glance. "How did you know?"

"You are still standing." Shiro laughed softly. The sound ended in a pained groan, and he closed his eyes again. His expression grew somber when he opened them a moment later. "You must trust in Jenner. In what he teaches you."

He gawked at him. Jenner's expression hadn't changed. In fact, he barely seemed to be paying attention to their conversation.

"Are you serious?" he finally said, and Shiro nodded.

"Please. I know how this must sound to you, but you must. Jenner—"

Whatever else he had to say became lost in a spasm of apparent agony. The machine the nurse had been adjusting emitted a shrill, keening alarm, and less than a minute later the nurse bustled through the door with a syringe in one upraised hand.

"All right, Mr. Kuroda," she said, not unkindly, and injected the contents of the syringe into the IV bag with practiced motion. "I think you've had enough fun for today. Say goodbye to your visitors." She looked sternly at him and Jenner.

"Goodbye, visitors," Shiro mimicked weakly. He cracked a small smile beneath eyes that fluttered closed, the effects of whatever the nurse had added to his drip, and Gabriel tried to smile back.

Jenner bowed his head slightly, raised it. "*O daiji ni, kousoku.*"

Shiro's lips curved upward briefly in acknowledgment before he drifted into sleep.

When they stepped out the front doors of the building, the limo idled at the curb. Jenner motioned for him to enter, slid in and settled on the seat facing him. He closed the door, and the vehicle glided away. Night had fallen. The windows glittered with the myriad reflection of a hundred lights.

"You may come back in a few days," Jenner said, breaking the awkward silence between them. "I will have Apollo bring you."

He stared at him. "Alone?"

"Yes, angel. Alone. Just remember what will happen should you decide to take your leave of us prematurely."

"How could I forget?" Bitterness crept into his voice, and he turned his face deliberately to the window.

Another minute passed. "Do you understand what Shiro was attempting to tell you?" Jenner said.

He faced him. "Do you?"

Jenner made a sound resembling a sigh, as though his patience were sorely tested. "I did not make you what you have become," he said. "I merely uncovered what was already there."

"Bullshit!" Fuming, he leaned forward—but the tirade of injustice against him, ready on the tip of his tongue, guttered and died. He'd begun to suspect with mounting disgust that Jenner might be right.

Chapter 28

Slade took the call in his office, three weeks after the tournament—much earlier than he'd expected. He didn't bother with a greeting. "Damn it, I told you to wait until after the next fight."

"Hey, Chief. If you're gonna get all riled up, you can do this your damned self." Mendez spoke smoothly, though he detected annoyance in the tone. "This ain't exactly risk-free for me, either."

"Cry me a river. You're doing it. Unless you'd rather pay what you owe me."

"Nah. I like this idea better." Mendez paused, and a hollow click sounded on the other end of the line. "You just keep up your end of the deal. Once the kid's out of your hair, you forget you ever knew him. If this comes around on me, I will bring you down."

"Don't bother threatening me, Mendez. And don't worry. I have no intention of seeking him out. As far as I'm concerned, he's already dead."

"Good." Another click. A metallic ringing rose and fell in the background. "Here's the plan. I'm havin' a little throwdown here tomorrow night—a couple of Dell's guys, a couple of mine. You send the kid and another one of yours. I don't care who."

He drummed his fingers once on the desk. "And what exactly is this going to accomplish?"

"We're holding out in the lot, on account of remodeling. It'll be a shame when someone calls the cops and the kid gets busted for assault with a deadly weapon."

"He doesn't have weapons."

"No worries, Chief. I'm supplying those." Mendez laughed. "Little bastard won't know what hit him. Tomorrow night. Send the kid over, and forget him. Then we're square."

"Done."

He disconnected. A slow smile spread on his face. He'd keep Lillith, and the money. For that, Angel's blood was a small price to pay.

* * * *

"What the hell are we doing out here?" Lonzo leaned against the fence surrounding the dimly lit parking lot with disgust stamped on his face. "Man, this ain't even worth my time. Why'd you come, *mijo*?"

Gabriel looked at him and shrugged. Slade told him to come, but he couldn't reveal that to Lonzo. He had visited Shiro in the hospital three times, alone, and didn't want to give up his newly awarded freedom. Such as it was.

Still, something about this fight felt strange—other than that only three matches were scheduled, and no one from either Pandora or Orion had shown.

"Oh well." Lonzo straightened, stretched, and jogged in place. "We still get our grand, right? Slade doesn't make any money, who cares."

“Yeah. Right.” He scanned the thin crowd rimming the edges of the lot without seeing them. He’d come close to ten million in winnings. This match might put him over the edge if he won. Unfortunately, he still had no idea what he planned to do when Slade inevitably refused to release him, or Lillith.

Movement from the clearing at the center of the rough human ring caught his eye. Diego Mendez stood there, one arm raised in the air. The Prometheus leader held up one finger, and then two. The crowd parted to allow Eddie from Dionysus and Kaiser from Prometheus into the makeshift arena.

The two men went at each other the instant Mendez rejoined the mob. The cheering rang out immediate and loud, reverberating through the derelict buildings around them, rising to the black sky above. He watched the action for a few minutes, and turned away, paced relentlessly before the fence. He would be next. The prospect of tumbling with another man in the open air, on crumbling asphalt, seemed less than appealing. His muscles still ached from the injuries he’d sustained at the tournament.

The volume of the crowd’s raucous calls increased. He returned his attention to the match. Game over—Kaiser lay motionless and bleeding on the ground, and Eddie leaned over him, panting. A Prometheus fighter entered the clearing and assisted Kaiser to his feet. Mendez came back into view and signaled again. Three, then four.

Apparently there would be no breaks tonight. Thankful Slade had at least allowed him to remain clothed, he strode through the mob to take his place in the clearing.

Nails pushed between two front-row spectators just after him, grinning like a vulture in a funeral home. Something was definitely wrong here.

From the corner of his eye he saw Mendez disappear. Nails headed for him at an easy stroll. He tensed and waited, and when his opponent entered striking range, he rammed a fist into the other man’s jaw.

Nails didn’t even blink.

Strong fingers formed a band around his upper arm. He wrenched from the grip, but not before Nails’s clenched hand caught him sharply in the gut. A grunt exploded from him. He stumbled back, out of reach, and threw another jab at his opponent’s face. This time he drew blood—and still, Nails grinned.

He crouched and went for the legs in an attempt to bring him to the ground. Nails made a grab for him, snagged his wrist, and impaled his ribcage on an upraised knee.

He jerked back, lost his balance and hit the pavement. Breathing hard, he scrambled to his feet, expecting to be tackled before he made it up. His opponent, however, didn’t make a move toward him until he gained his feet.

Nails drew closer. The distant wail of sirens washed over the jeering crowd. Nails heard it too, and as if in reaction to the ghostly call, flashed a cruel smile and lurched forward suddenly, bearing them both to the ground.

The sirens grew louder.

The crowd noise spiraled down to a low, puzzled mutter. Panicked whispers swept through the spectators as he lay pinned beneath a few hundred pounds of Nails. The wailing reached a deafening pitch. A few souls at the edges of the mob split. A nearby alley lit with whirling blue and red, and the exodus began in earnest.

“What the fuck!” he shouted. He jerked and twisted beneath Nails’s weight in vain. Nails shifted, knelt on his chest and raised a hand, revealing a gleaming switchblade.

Laughing, the Prometheus lieutenant plunged the knife down in a sweeping arc—deep into his own thigh. He pulled it out with a grunt. Blood spurted from the wound and sprayed his face and shirt.

The police had almost reached them. The crunch of tires on gravel reached his ears, the vibrations of the cars hummed through the ground beneath him. The sirens ceased in mid-warble. Nails reached down and gripped his wrist, thrust the bloody knife into his open palm and forced his fingers to close around the handle.

Just as the first click of a car door announced the arrival of the cops on the scene, Nails rolled off him. The Prometheus fighter lay moaning on the ground while two officers hauled him to his feet, cuffed him and dragged him away.

Chapter 29

Numb with shock, Gabriel sat in the back of the squad car and tried to figure out what to do now.

The cops in the front seat, after tossing him roughly in and slamming the door, had so far ignored his existence. He assumed they were headed for the nearest precinct house, though he didn't know where it was.

He'd been set up. And he couldn't prove any of it.

If this had happened months ago, he would have welcomed the opportunity to tell the cops everything: his real name, where he was from, the name of the man holding his sister hostage. Now, though, he knew too much. The organization was so vast, so well-funded and connected, there wasn't a chance in hell he would get anywhere by confessing.

In fact, if he told them anything, he might get Lillith killed.

"Shit," he growled in frustration. At the sound of his voice, the cop on the passenger's side half-turned and rapped the metal mesh between them with a nightstick.

"Hey! Shut the fuck up back there, scumbag." The look on the cop's face—part annoyance, part spite—said he hoped for an excuse to get a few licks in before they hauled him inside. He pressed his lips together and turned to the window.

Would anyone bother to come for him? Maybe Slade would bail him out. The thought forced a grim laugh. If Slade did pay his bail, he'd be expected to earn that money back, too.

"Hey!" Another rap, this one harder, rattled the cage in front of him. "I said, shut the fuck up." The cop turned around completely, his eyes glowing in the gloom like a hawk watching a cornered rabbit. "You deaf or something?"

He met his eyes in silence.

"Jesus. Fuckin' street freaks," the cop mumbled, shifting in his seat to face the road again. "Wonder what he's strung out on."

The car slowed and came to a stop in front of a tall concrete building with steel-threaded glass windows. Both cops exited simultaneously, but his door didn't open until they stood on the same side, ready to react if he tried to struggle or run. The driver opened the door. His partner stood at the ready and motioned for him to come out.

Cuffed hands and ribs that ached from the pummeling he'd just endured made climbing onto the curb difficult. He stumbled and almost fell. The nightstick-happy cop clubbed him between the shoulder blades. "Move it. We ain't got all night."

The driver laughed and started up the steps.

He shot a poisoned glance at his new tormentor, the cop behind him with the stick. It earned him another whack. Gritting his teeth, he followed the driver inside.

They stopped in front of a desk. “We got an assault, possible assault with intent,” the driver said to a dour-faced man who sat behind it.

“Name,” the desk cop intoned.

“What’s your name?” Nightstick hissed.

He said the first thing that came to mind. “Mouse. Mickey Mouse.”

A shove from behind sent him crashing into the desk. He struggled to right himself and looked into the face of the desk cop, who seemed to be doing a Queen Mother impersonation: We are not amused.

Without batting an eye the desk cop said, “Take Mr. Mouse here down to booking.”

They led him through a twisting maze of hallways and desks and into a small, gray-walled room containing a plain wooden table and two metal folding chairs. Driver removed the cuffs. Nightstick stood in front of him, tapping the end of his club in the palm of one hand.

“All right, strip.”

He turned to look at Driver, who stood with his arms folded, waiting. Humiliation burned him. He faced forward again, removed his shirt and dropped it on the floor. Nightstick cast a scorn-filled glance at the bruises that marred his chest and stomach, and as his fingers worked to unbutton his jeans, a low whistle sounded behind him.

“Christ, wouldya get a load of this.”

Nightstick moved behind him to regard his tattoo.

“Holy shit, he’s got wings. You gonna fly away on us?”

Raucous laughter burst from the two cops. He kicked off his shoes and slid his jeans and underwear down. He stood rigid with the expectation of another blow from the stick at any moment. However, Nightstick seemed content to go through his discarded clothing.

The distinctive snap of rubber gloves chilled his blood.

“You gonna give us any trouble, boy?” Driver circled around to his front, sounding eerily like Marcus Slade.

He swallowed and shook his head.

“Good. Open your mouth, real wide.”

He performed the order. Driver raised a gloved hand to his face and hesitated. “If you try anything stupid, like biting me, my partner here will bash your fucking skull in. Got it?”

The cop didn’t bother to wait for an answer. Vinyl-coated fingers entered his mouth and probed roughly at the roof, around the tongue. They slid down his throat far enough to produce a retching gag. The hand withdrew fast. “Don’t you fuckin’ puke on me, punk.”

He glared at him, but the look didn’t faze the taciturn cop. “Turn around and put your hands on the table.”

His father’s face flashed before him. He froze, unable to obey the command—and in response to his apparent refusal, the club swung into his lower spine. Pain exploded through his body. With a sharp hiss of air, he slowly assumed the required position.

Jagged, degrading pressure invaded him. Driver probed with one finger, and then two. Gabriel bit his lip to keep from crying out as the cop prodded deeper, deliberately twisting his assault to cause more pain. At last, he withdrew and stepped back.

“He’s clean.” Disgust filled Driver’s voice.

Shaking, he stood and clenched his fists at his sides. “Siddown,” a voice barked at his back. He couldn’t tell which cop had spoken, but he sat anyway. The cold steel of the chair seared his exposed flesh on contact.

Driver pulled the other chair around the table and sat facing him. Nightstick remained standing just behind him. The insistent tap of the club against a palm was the only sound in the room for a long, agonizing minute while Driver stared at him.

At last, the cop sighed and leaned forward as though he were a concerned buddy. “Look, we’re gonna need your name for the paperwork. Just give it to us and we’ll get you a bed so you can grab some sleep. We’ll sort the rest out in the morning.”

He offered no response.

“Come on. Spit it out, kid.”

Silence.

The club smashed his right shoulder, almost knocking him from the chair. “Answer him, fuckhead,” Nightstick said in menacing tones.

His defiant stare answered for him.

Nightstick raised the club for another blow, but Driver held up one hand and shook his head, and the club lowered.

“Get your cuffs,” Driver told his partner. He rose, reaching for his own steel bracelets, and ratcheted one end tight around his left wrist. The other end he clamped around the rear leg of the chair. Nightstick repeated the process with the right wrist, and the two walked to the door.

“Seems you got some thinking to do,” Driver said from the doorway after Nightstick went through. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours to find out what you came up with.”

A harsh bark of laughter buffeted his stiff, shackled form. The door closed and the light went out, bathing him in blackness.

* * * *

Time crawled. Gabriel waited, silent and numb. Whatever happened, he resolved not to give them a name, or any indication of what he’d been doing. He had no idea what they would do if he refused to identify himself—but he supposed he’d find out soon enough.

He wouldn’t put it past Slade to hurt Lillith, or kill her, if the cops traced this arrest back to the organization.

Mendez, you dirty son of a bitch. The Prometheus leader must have orchestrated everything. If he managed to get out of this somehow and went back to Slade, he'd end up taking the fall regardless of whether he implicated Mendez. Slade would punish Lillith again. Make him watch. Arrange another degrading experience for him. And the bastard still wouldn't release them. There had to be another way.

Gradually he discovered an advantage—a small one, but an advantage nonetheless. Before, he'd been thrust into unfamiliar territory. Now, after nearly a year of captivity, he knew the location and the layout of Slade's hotel. He might be able to get in, find Lillith, and get out. All he had to do was sneak in the back and hope no one was watching the damned monitoring system, figure out which of the fifty or so rooms was Lillith's, and avoid all contact with every other person inside, especially Apollo, Sol and Jenner. Right after he broke out of jail.

No problem.

Despair dampened the spark of hope. Here he sat, naked and handcuffed to a chair in a police interrogation room, planning to infiltrate Slade's fortress. He laughed. The sound echoed in the bare space, bouncing back as though the walls scorned him.

Light flooded the room. He snarled and squeezed his eyes shut. A muffled voice spoke outside the door. "Damn it, how long has he been in there?"

"A couple hours."

The sullen responder was Nightstick. The door opened. An older cop entered and stopped short. "Christ! Blake, what the hell did you do to him?"

"He looked like that when we brought him in, Sarge."

Nightstick had a name. Blake glowered at him from behind the sergeant, silently daring him to refute the statement.

"Right. And that nasty bruise on his shoulder just happened to be shaped like a baton." Apparently, the sergeant wasn't buying Blake's story. The knowledge afforded him little relief. "Unlock him, and get out. I'll deal with this."

Muttering incoherently, Blake moved to do as the sergeant ordered. He released both sets of handcuffs and stalked from the room with his partner right behind. The door closed, and the sergeant drew his gun out in plain sight.

He resisted rubbing his sore wrists and waited to see what this one would do.

"I don't think I need to use this." The cop gestured with the gun, crossed the room, and took the empty chair Driver had left in front of him. "Call it insurance, if you want, but I'll just hold onto it for a few minutes."

He nodded.

"I'm Sergeant Ames. Look, I can't let you go, but I can at least get you a place to grab some sleep. I understand you didn't identify yourself to the other officers."

He stared at him.

"If you'll just tell me your name, I'll take you to a bed."

No. The temptation to speak nearly won out, but he might say something incriminating. He shook his head and kept his mouth shut.

"Fine," Ames snapped. "Get dressed, you little shit."

He stood and gathered his clothes. Ames watched him dress. The cop's expression relaxed, and when he'd finished he said, "I know why you didn't want to talk to Blake or Sullivan. But if you don't give me something to go on here, we're gonna have to move you to a nuthouse. You don't want to go to a nuthouse, do you?"

He shrugged. At this point insanity sounded convenient. If he lost his mind, maybe he wouldn't care any more about what happened to him. Or Lillith.

"Why do I always get the crazies?" Ames sighed, rose from the chair and holstered his gun. He unhooked a complicated set of handcuffs from his belt: two pairs of steel bracelets connected by lengths of slender chain. One pair hung open. "Well, this'll be just loads of fun. Christ. Sit down."

He took a seat. The cop drew his gun again. He lowered the open cuffs on the chain, held them out, and nodded at his feet. "Put those on your ankles."

Unease coursed through him, the same feeling he'd experienced at the fight. Something about this wasn't right. "What if I don't?" he said.

"So, you can talk. Amazing." Ames offered a grim smirk. "If you don't, I guess I'll have to shoot you. Your choice." He shook the cuffs.

Reluctantly, he fastened the bracelets. Ames directed him to stand and loop part of the chain around his waist. The cop completed the circuit by snapping the second pair around his wrists. "You sure you don't want to tell me your name?"

"Positive."

"You know, you scrubs really need to stop getting yourselves busted. It's a pain in the ass."

"What?"

Ames grunted. "Now you're gonna play dumb. Fine." He retrieved a cellphone from his belt, dialed, waited. "Hey. I got another banged-up JD over here. You want him?" Ames' gaze crawled over him. "Black hair, green eyes. Fucking bizarre tattoo on his back. Big black wings." The voice on the other end surged loud, and Ames moved the phone away from his ear. "I don't know. Blake and Sullivan brought him in." He paused. "Yeah, all right. I'll stick him down there." Ames disconnected and replaced the phone.

His stomach lurched. "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't ask questions, and neither do you. Those are the rules. Come on."

Ames headed for the door. He hesitated and shuffled after him. Apparently, whoever had been on the phone knew him. He wouldn't be surprised if the cop had called Slade.

The sergeant led him away from the main part of the station and down a flight of stairs. He stopped in a dim hallway, opened a door and gestured. "You'll wait here. I don't know how long he's gonna be."

He moved into the room. The door closed. Inside, a number of empty metal utility shelves lined the left and right walls. Graffiti scarred the otherwise blank rear wall, scratched into the faded paint with God knew what—probably the corners of handcuffs. Amid crudely lettered epithets and absurd cheerful phrases, one symbol stood out. A five-point star.

At once weary and beyond caring, he stumbled to the wall, turned to face the door, and leaned against the vandalized surface. He wasn't the first fighter to occupy this room, and he wouldn't be the last. He couldn't beat the organization. No matter who came to get him, he'd be returned to Slade. And things would go downhill from there.

He slid to the floor and rested his head on his bent knees. His body shut down, forcing him toward sleep. Before he drifted off, an odd thought occurred to him and he realized they were Jenner's words.

By now you should have realized that you cannot win this game by following the rules.

Maybe the lieutenant hadn't been talking about the fights. And maybe he'd been playing the wrong game from the start.

A light slumber claimed him, interrupted by moments of half-waking dreams. Some time later the click of the door snapped him awake. He raised his head and blinked away the grogginess to find he'd been joined by the last cop in the world he wanted to see.

Captain Wolff.

Chapter 30

Wolff closed the door behind him. A few faded bruises and healing cuts still decorated his face, souvenirs of the tournament. “Kid, I thought I told you to go the fuck home.”

“You probably did.” Gabriel grimaced and struggled to stand. “But here I am anyway. So now what?”

“Well, let’s see.” Wolff ticked off fingers. “Assault with a deadly weapon, possible assault with intent to kill, against one Giles Torres, a.k.a. Nails. Resisting arrest. And failure to identify yourself to law enforcement personnel.” He lowered his arms and scowled. “I had to wreck my car because of you. It was the only way I could explain what you did to me. And I don’t appreciate it.”

“We’re even, then. I don’t appreciate what you did to Shiro.”

“It was his own fault. He should have withdrawn.”

“So you did know he could have died.”

“Damn it, boy, I wouldn’t have killed him. I know the rules. I made the fucking rules.” Wolff’s hands clenched at his sides. “They aren’t my rules any more, though. Everything got away from me—and assholes like you only make it worse.”

“What are you talking about?”

Wolff sneered. “You think I enjoy containing this shit? Mendez and I set this up for turf control. I wanted to keep the gangs from killing each other—and innocent bystanders—in the goddamn streets. Mendez had the clout to make the rest of them participate. I was going to bring him down, eventually. Then Harada and your buddy Slade got involved.”

“Slade is not my buddy.” The words rushed from him, steps ahead of his brain.

“Why am I not surprised?” Wolff shook his head. “Whatever he’s got on you, I don’t want to know. All I’m saying is, the more wet-nosed punks that come sniffing around looking for street cred, the harder my job gets. I have to follow them around wiping their asses after they make a mess.”

“Look, I didn’t—” He clamped his mouth shut before he could finish with *ask for this*. He’d be signing Lillith’s death warrant...and apparently Wolff didn’t care anyway. “Sorry about the mess, but it wasn’t my fault. Mendez decided to hold a fight outside. It got busted.” He refrained from tacking on the part about Nails stabbing himself. Mendez already wanted him dead.

Fury glittered in Wolff’s eyes. “Mendez held a fight?”

“Yeah. In his goddamned lot.”

Wolff stilled. Without warning, he spun and rammed a fist into the door behind him. Wood cracked and splintered on the heels of a tremendous thud. He lowered his arm slowly. Blood drizzled down a finger, and a few drops spattered the floor.

He shuddered, thankful he hadn’t been on the receiving end of that punch.

Wolff stood with his back to him, motionless again. At last, he shoved his uninjured hand in a pocket and yanked out a set of keys. He turned, selected a short key with a rounded stem and jabbed the air. "Hands." He seemed barely able to speak.

He raised his wrists. Wolff advanced, snagged the chain leading to his waist, and released the cuffs with rough twists. He ratcheted them open and let them fall. Thrusting the keys at him, he nodded down. "You get the ankles."

He accepted them and sat on the floor to unlock the leg cuffs. He disentangled himself from the chain, stood, and dropped the keys in Wolff's waiting hand. What now? The captain didn't seem inclined to keep him under arrest, at least. Would he call Slade? Deliver him to Mendez? His gaze drifted to Wolff's gun. Maybe he'd just take him somewhere and shoot him.

If he did, no one would look for him. And Wolff probably knew that.

"I want you gone."

He stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"I'm taking you out the back, and I want you to leave. Leave my precinct. Leave the goddamned city. Don't go back to Slade, don't go anywhere near Mendez—unless you have a death wish, in which case, be my guest. Just get the fuck out."

"And if I don't?"

Wolff shoved him one-armed against the wall. "If you don't, I'll find a way to bust you. I'll make sure your ass rots here. And I'll put Blake in charge of your supervision. Understand?"

He nodded.

"Good." Wolff released him and stalked toward the door. He yanked it open. "Come on."

He followed him through darkened corridors, past empty offices and rooms cluttered with boxes of files. They ascended a short flight of aluminum stairs leading to a solid metal door, and Wolff opened it onto a narrow alley.

Beyond, the world waited for him to rejoin it.

He squared his shoulders and stepped past the captain. Wolff offered a bitter smile. "I'm not sure if you'll know where you are once you get out to the street, and I don't care. Goodbye, Angel." He slammed the door with a hollow bang.

He breathed in a hesitant lungful of pure freedom and headed into the breaking dawn.

* * * *

Gathering clouds, dark above the towering concrete buildings, promised rain. In the distance an ominous rumble of thunder sounded, and a jagged stroke of electric blue split the gray velvet of the sky.

Gabriel walked Fifth Avenue, headed uptown, shivering despite the warmth in the moist and heavy air. Free. He wanted to shout the word, scream it from the rooftops—but he didn't dare. Everything seemed surreal, and he feared at any moment he'd wake from this dream to find himself on the floor in Slade's attic, bloodied from a fight, still trapped in the nightmare that had become his reality.

He would go back. Despite Wolff's threats, he had no choice. He'd try to save Lillith. He might succeed, or be recaptured...or die. For now, he would savor this moment. This freedom.

I'm not following the rules anymore, Jenner. He smiled and slowed his steps. Even if the lieutenant had known, he doubted he would care. Still, Shiro had been right to say what he had.

Shiro. Would he ever see the man again? If things went his way, it wasn't likely. The thought saddened him—but having Slade and Mendez out of his life forever would compensate.

Wouldn't it?

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Almost immediately, someone collided with him from behind.

"Hey, move it, asshole!"

Startled, he backed toward the nearest building and muttered, "Sorry." A man in a windbreaker and a blue baseball cap glared at him and stalked past. He leaned against a wall, shaking, repulsed by his own thoughts.

He didn't want to leave the organization.

After the initial shock passed, he tried to make sense of the notion. He sure as hell didn't want to stay Slade's prisoner. The problem was, he still wanted to fight. Damn it, he was good at it. He'd never been good at anything, except taking a beating. He laughed. That particular talent did lend itself to the ability to fight.

But he'd taken the beatings to spare Lillith...and she was still out there, under Slade's thumb. She was an adult. She'd gotten herself into this.

He shook his head. If he didn't know better, he would swear someone else's thoughts had invaded his mind. True, Lillith had made a mistake. A stupid one. But she didn't deserve to die for it. Doc had warned him that Slade wouldn't hesitate to dispose of anyone who proved useless to him, and he didn't doubt that.

He drew a deep breath, released it slowly. Closed his eyes. *Lillith needs me.* He recognized what had become a ritual he'd used to steel himself before his father punished him, and took bitter comfort in thinking this time he had a chance to escape the invariably painful ending.

One last breath. One final moment that belonged to him. He tried to capture it, savor it. The memory might have to sustain him forever...and forever might not last long. He smelled faint exhaust, impending rain on the air, a mélange of breakfast food from the open door of a nearby diner. Horns bleated, engines grumbled, a cooing and fluttering threesome of pigeons burst from the eaves above. A cool breeze teased the hairs erect on his skin, stole the sting that formed in his eyes. At last he straightened, and his feet carried him toward fate.

He was still half a mile from the hotel when the clouds opened up and drenched him.

Undaunted, he advanced through the downpour. A sea of umbrellas emerged around him to protect the early risers on the sidewalks. The hotel came into view, and he slowed his pace and searched the area for any face he recognized. He estimated the time at around eight in the morning, which meant business inside would be winding down. He didn't expect to encounter anyone who knew him here and now, but it didn't hurt to be safe.

The moment he decided he'd be all right, a lone figure crossed the street and headed for him. He froze, watched, and breathed a sigh of relief when he recognized Lonzo jogging toward the back of the building.

The fighter disappeared into the mouth of the alley. He followed. This was his best chance of getting in unnoticed.

"Lonzo," he called softly after him. "Hey, Lonzo!"

Lonzo spun around, eyes snapping, fists at the ready. An instant later, he smiled. "Hey, Angel," he said with a laugh. "I thought you were downtown, *mijo*. How'd you spring out?"

"Long story." He glanced up the alley, and back toward Lonzo. "Where you headed?"

"Downstairs. Wanna join me?"

"Sure."

They rounded the corner, and Lonzo heaved open a door leading to a vestibule and two sets of stairs—one headed up, the other down. Inside, he hesitated on the landing.

Lonzo descended three steps, stopped, and half-turned.

"Hey, you comin' or what?" he called over his shoulder.

"Well..." Now or never. Aloud he said, "I'd better tell Slade I'm here. I'll be down in a while."

"Suit yourself." Lonzo shrugged and tossed a grin up at him. "I'm glad you're back, Angel. You make us look good out there."

A cynical laugh burst from him at the fighter's unintended irony. "Right," he said. "See you around."

Before he could change his mind, he forced his feet to carry him up the stairs and into the heart of hell.

Chapter 31

Gabriel didn't meet a soul. He slunk down dim hallways, headed toward Slade's first-floor office, still unsure what he intended to do. Outside of the attic, Doc's rooms, and the basement, he barely knew where anything was.

But he knew where to find the monitors.

If he could get in unnoticed, he could figure out how to work the system—at least long enough to find Lillith. That bastard Slade had to sleep sometime. He reached the corner leading to the main lobby, risked a glance into the room and discovered a problem in the massive form of Apollo.

The giant sat behind the front desk, reclined in a leather swivel chair with his feet propped on the desktop surface. His arms lay folded across his chest, and his eyes rested at half-mast as though he would fall asleep at any moment. Even if he did, though, he couldn't get past him without a fight that would alert everyone in the building to his presence.

Flattening himself against the wall, he held his breath and tried to think of a solution. A slight cough rebounded through the lobby. Sol stood in the opposite hallway. Staring right at him.

He swallowed hard. No way he could take both of them.

Sol glided from the shadows to stop in front of his languid twin. "Apollo," he said in his usual inflectionless manner.

Apollo swept his feet off the desk, sat up and scrubbed a meaty hand across his face. "Yeah?"

"You must come with me."

Damn it! He prepared to bolt. If he made it outside he could probably lose them. He'd have to come back another day. Sol glanced his way again, and something in the look made him wait.

"What for?" Apollo clearly wasn't in the mood for anything that required physical effort, including rising from the chair. Sol frowned at him, and then glared with palpable anger.

"I need a ride. Come on."

Nothing he said could have shocked him more. Sol was...helping him? Why?

"Ah Christ. Fine, I'm comin'." The chair scraped in protest across the floor as Apollo eased his weight from it. Still muttering, he circled to the front of the desk and stalked out the door. With a last intense look at the shadow in which he hid, and an expression that approached a smile, Sol followed him.

The front door closed. He darted across the lobby and entered the corridor leading to Slade's office. He didn't understand why Sol had lured Apollo away. The trainer never gave any indication of liking him. Or hating him, either. In fact, Sol seemed more emotionless than Jenner.

He had no time to ponder this latest mystery, though. The quiet state of the hotel could change at any moment.

A glance in the window of Slade's office confirmed the room's emptiness. He reached for the handle, and for the first time it occurred to him that the door might be locked. However, the knob turned easily and the door swung open without a sound.

He crossed the carpeted floor and rounded the barren desk to pull out the tray he'd seen Slade use for the monitors. A keyboard emerged. He looked down and pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

The smug son of a bitch must have never even bothered learning how to use his own damned system. The commands had all been typed out and taped neatly over the corresponding keys.

Following the printed directions, he opened the wall panel and switched on the system. Images flashed into erratic life. Nine scenes played out on multiple electronic eyes. Three or four screens showed girls, either sleeping or working, none of them Lillith.

He waited for the images to cycle to the next set of cameras, keeping an eye trained nervously on the door. If it opened, he would either try to overpower whoever came in, or turn and crash through the closed window beside him. A few lacerations were a small price to pay for freedom.

The moving pictures changed, and he scrutinized each screen in turn, looking for any hint of his sister. He glimpsed the dungeon, and the attic room where he'd spent so much time. A shudder coursed the length of his spine at the sight. In the bottom right corner he caught a hint of cascading black hair. Before he could focus on it, the image flickered and changed, resolving on an empty bedroom.

He had to get it back. Studying the typed commands, he discovered one key labeled PREVIOUS SCREEN. He depressed it and kept his gaze on the lower right monitor.

There. Long raven curls tumbling to the waist; that had to be Lillith. Her back faced the camera, and she moved back and forth in slow rhythm, as if she were dancing, or...

No.

Even as the full impact of the image hit him, his eyes refused to believe it. Lillith—if that was Lillith—naked, writhing above an equally naked form. A man with thick sandy hair slicked with moisture, and piercing blue eyes that danced with lusty abandon. The girl turned her head to the side, and he caught her familiar gut-wrenching features in clear profile, drawn with sensual bliss.

Lillith. Fucking Slade. Enjoying it.

Fury formed ice in his veins. He couldn't look away. He watched her...him...both of them, twisting in carnal heat. A small, catlike smile of satisfaction curled her lips as she raised herself, slid her body down the length of him and took him in her mouth.

At once the background features of the room they occupied leapt out at him with crystal clarity, and he knew where they were.

Right behind him.

With a roar of animal fury, he pivoted and launched himself at the other door in the office. The one Slade told him Lillith had been behind for her “punishment.” He rammed it with his shoulder, barely noticing the flare of pain. The thin wood cracked beneath his weight. Bellowing incoherently, he drew back and hurled himself into it again.

The door flew open on the third blow.

He stepped through, clenching both jaw and fists. The two of them, Slade and Lillith, perched warily on the double bed she’d been allegedly taken on. Lillith, trembling and white as the sheet she bunched tight in front of her, gaped at him in terror.

Slade hadn’t bothered to conceal himself. Instead, he reached for the drawer of the small table beside him, opened it and extracted his cellphone. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here, but you aren’t—”

“You. Don’t. Dare.” He was incapable of stringing two words together.

Slade regarded him with mild interest and slowly replaced the phone. “All right, boy. I won’t. For now. You look like you have something to say. I’ll hear you out first.”

Lillith stirred and sat forward cautiously. “Gabriel, wait,” she said in a voice devoid of strength. “This isn’t what you think—”

“Don’t!” he roared, whirling on her. “Just shut up.”

Her mouth snapped closed, and he returned his attention to Slade.

“How long?”

Slade gave an exasperated snort. “I beg your pardon?”

“How long have you and L-Lillith—”

“Oh.” A slow grin stretched his lips. “Since the beginning, of course.”

“Since...” Anguish consumed him with the full extent of Lillith’s betrayal. He looked at her, at her tear-filled eyes and trembling lips—and a wave of nausea threatened to drop him as he recalled where those lips had been just minutes ago.

Rage returned, leaving no room for pain.

He turned away from her and stepped toward Slade’s side of the bed. After several breaths deep enough to burn his lungs, he could finally trust his voice.

“I want my money.”

“What was that?”

“I. Want. My. Money. Ten million dollars.”

Slade uttered an incredulous laugh. “Your money?”

He nodded.

“I’ll tell you what,” Slade said after a lengthy pause. “I’ll give you a break. Even though you’ve only earned me nine and a half, you and your sister are free to go. Walk out that door and freedom is yours.”

“No.”

The single word carried months of bitterness and anguish. Enraged, Slade jumped to the floor, still naked, circled the bed and faced him.

“No?” he said in a voice that promised swift retribution.

“No,” he repeated. “I don’t want her. I want my money. The way I see it, you stole a year of my life. I’ll spare you the details of how I arrived at the amount—” He paused, savoring the look on Slade’s face as he threw the bastard’s words back at him. “—but you owe me ten million dollars.”

Slade’s features flushed brick red. He seemed ready to strike out. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“All right, boy,” he said after he’d regained control. “You have a deal, under one condition.”

“What?”

“You have to win one more fight.”

“With who?”

Slade’s eyes bore into him. “Me.”

Stunned, he opened his mouth, and closed it. “You?” he whispered at last.

“That’s right.” Slade held out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

He hesitated, then reached out and took the hand without a word.

“Tomorrow night,” Slade told him without releasing his grip. “In my arena.”

“Fine.”

He pulled his hand free and managed not to wipe it on his thigh in disgust. With a final, wrathful glance at Lillith, still huddled on the bed, he spun and stalked from the room.

* * * *

In his blind flight down the corridor outside Slade’s office, he collided with something, or someone, that failed to get out of his way. Jenner.

Reeling, he halted and took a stumbling step backward. Ragged gulps of air entered his throat and heaved back out. His swollen eyes skittered in every direction, seeing nothing. His lips moved soundlessly, senselessly.

Jenner backhanded him.

His vision cleared and his twitching body stilled. His gaze focused on the figure in front of him.

“Ah,” Jenner said softly. “You know about your sister.”

Jenner’s dizzying leaps of intuition had long ago ceased to amaze him. He simply nodded in confirmation.

“So now what are you going to do, little angel?”

His jaw clenching, he stared into Jenner’s smoke-swirled eyes and spoke the words he learned from Shiro, the words he had intended to direct at the sadistic lieutenant, but now applied only to Slade. “*Setsujoku wa teikurimashita desu.*”

I will take my revenge.

Astonishment infused Jenner's face. A full minute passed before his familiar smirk resurfaced, and lengthened to become a genuine, if sardonic, grin. A guttural sound rattled in his throat and burst through his lips with a force that shook his body.

His eyes widened in witness to an event he suspected no one else had ever seen.

Jenner was laughing.

The outburst ended quickly as it had begun. Jenner flashed a look at him that might have been approval. "Come with me...Angel."

He followed without question.

Jenner led him to the third floor. Eerie silence permeated the corridors, as though the entire hotel sensed the events that had just occurred and demanded hushed respect for his grief. Every step jarred him. He had been emptied, and stuffed full with things broken and splintering. Trust no one. Not himself, not his perceptions of duty, or obligation, or love.

Not Lillith.

The lieutenant stopped before a door identical to the dozen others lining the hall. He placed a hand on the knob and faced him. "I do not suppose Marcus has offered you restitution."

He laughed. The splinters inside lodged in his throat. "He offered to let me leave. With her. I demanded my money. All ten million."

"Did you?" Jenner raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. He said I could have it, on one condition. I have to fight him. Tomorrow night."

Jenner's expression sobered. "You realize Marcus has won three tournaments, and still trains regularly."

He nodded. "Doc told me. I don't give a shit if he can beat up Superman. I will win."

"I am certain you will, Angel." The lieutenant smirked. He opened the door on a room containing a bed and a dresser, and nothing more. "I do not live here, but I stay on occasion. I will not tonight. You may use this room, and I will ensure Marcus does not object."

"Thank you," he whispered. Exhaustion seized him with unseen teeth and shook him like a carnivore tearing flesh from a kill. At Jenner's nod, he stumbled inside. The lieutenant started to close the door.

"Jenner, wait."

He paused, cast him a quizzical glance.

"Got a few minutes?"

"I suppose I do."

"Good." He forced a smile. "I have an idea, and I think you're going to like it."

Chapter 32

“Come to gloat?”

Slade spoke to the shadowed figure in the doorway of the training room without breaking his reps on the butterfly bar, without even looking in his direction.

“Perhaps.” Jenner entered the room and let the door swing closed behind him. “And if I have?”

Halting in mid-lift, he eased the weights down, sat forward, and fixed his lieutenant with an angry glare. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Jenner shook his head. “Temper, temper,” he said. “Really, Marcus, you must learn to control yourself.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Jenner said, “I assume you believe you knew what you were doing, then, when you challenged the boy to a fight?”

“Yes, I did,” he replied. “Why?”

“Have you not yet realized that you cannot bend this one to your will?”

Fury engulfed him. Smug fucking bastard. “Yes I can,” he said. “I can control anyone.”

“So this is what your ridiculous condition is about?” Anger simmered beneath the placid surface of Jenner’s voice. “You simply must prove that you are the one giving the orders.”

“That’s right.”

“You have never controlled anyone without me, Marcus.”

“I own you!” he exploded. He gained his feet, fists clenched at his sides. He strode across the floor, approaching Jenner with injurious intent—and stopped short at the sight of the glittering gray eyes, the sadistic, soul-shriveling stare Jenner had honed to perfection. Knowing full well what his lieutenant was capable of, he swallowed with an audible click and stepped back.

“Do you wish to test that theory, Marcus?” The soft, sinewy voice sent a chill racing through his blood. He dropped his gaze to the floor with an angry snort.

“I did not think so.”

Jenner turned and left, as silently as he’d arrived.

He stared after him and then returned to the weights, uneasy for the first time since he’d issued the challenge.

Losing the money would sting, but it wouldn’t sink him. Even losing Angel wouldn’t take him out of the game. The boy’s notoriety had already spread through the underground, elevating his House reputation, and he’d lined up plenty of prime fighting material to take his place. He had

expected the boy to die, after all. It galled him that he'd survived, but it wasn't the end of the world. He'd still have Lillith, and she had become the most profitable whore in his stable. The twisted bitch enjoyed high-end role-play—though she preferred the dominatrix position.

He could afford to lose the money, and Angel with it. Still, ten million was a serious chunk of cash that he didn't feel like parting with. He'd just make sure he won.

Jenner, however, he'd have to deal with. He'd prefer to do it with a bullet—but his lieutenant was the one man he wouldn't dare try and have killed. The freak would find out, and get to him first.

* * * *

Gabriel slept through the morning and woke with an empty stomach. Though he had no clue regarding his current position in the bizarre arrangement of the organization, he headed for the kitchen with the idea that the bastards at least owed him a solid meal.

His tumultuous anger had abated, but agony ran deep through the marrow of his bones. For a long, harsh year, he had subjected himself to more torment and degradation than he'd experienced in the years combined under his father's iron rule—all to save someone who had no desire to be saved. He recalled with vicious clarity each gesture, each tear-filled embrace at the few meetings he and Lillith had been allowed during his captivity, and fresh rage flowed. How could she? And he'd fallen for it. Every single time.

His strength left him suddenly on his way through the deserted dining room. He collapsed at the nearest table and buried his face in his hands. A shuddering sob rose from him. Hot moisture burned his eyes.

He sat shaking, unaware of time's passage, until a hand brushed his still-bruised shoulder. He sprang to his feet, knocking the chair beneath him to the floor with a loud clatter. His arm drew back automatically poised to strike, and his blurred vision resolved. Lillith stood in front of him.

She had been crying. Tears still streaked her dusky skin beneath her red, swollen eyes. Her tears no longer moved him. In fact, her mere presence returned his temper to full boil.

Rather than lash out at her, he turned his back and walked away.

"Gabriel, wait," she called in a tremulous whisper.

Vibrating with emotion, he halted but didn't face her. He didn't speak to her, either. Couldn't trust himself to keep from throttling her once he got started.

Her footsteps approached, and stopped just behind him. "Please listen," she said. "I just...well, I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" he repeated in disbelief. "You—"

He turned around at last, and she shrank back. "You want to apologize?" he said hoarsely. "You were fucking him the whole time, Lillith. Weren't you? You let me think..." He stopped, not sure if he would be able to go on. At last, he found his voice and said, "I fought for you. I bled for you. I went to hell and back, just so you could—oh, my God."

Realization slashed at him. He recalled their first face-to-face conversation after his capture. When she'd asked how much he made on the fight.

“The money,” he said. “You just wanted the money.”

“Gabriel, I’m sorry,” she insisted. “I was trying to—”

“Fuck your sorry!” He took half a step toward her, and reined himself in just before he could wrap his hands around her throat. The voice that issued from his mouth didn’t sound like his, and yet he recognized it. He’d heard the same voice in his head that morning, insisting she’d gotten herself into this. The voice had been painfully right. “And fuck you, too. Better yet, Slade can fuck you. You’d enjoy that, at least.”

“Yes, I would enjoy that.” She advanced on him with a malevolent smile. “Just like I enjoyed watching you suffer. And almost as much as I enjoyed delivering you to Marcus.”

His heart shattered somewhere around his feet.

“I told him to bring you in,” she said. “I knew you would do anything for me, even fight—to the death, if you had to. You’re so predictably honorable.” The words twisted from poison-spewing lips, and his legs weakened.

She sidled up to him. “Oh. One more thing, *brother*. All those years we lived with Father, all those times you took a beating in my place? I arranged that, too. I fucked up on purpose because I knew you’d take the punishment for me. And I wanted to watch him hurt you.”

Flashing an acid grin, Lillith turned and sauntered away. He forced his frozen tongue to move, called her name, and she stopped without turning.

“You were right about one thing,” he said. “You don’t deserve me.”

With that, he entered the kitchen and closed the door on her rigid back with an air of solemn finality.

Chapter 33

It felt strange walking the streets of Manhattan alone. With every step he had to remind himself that no one would come after him, revoke his walking license or chain him like an animal, humiliate him into silent obedience.

No one needed him. Especially Lillith.

He shuddered and pushed her from his mind. The idea that she'd orchestrated the endless brutality that had been his life was still too raw, too enormous to consider. If he entertained it long, he would break beyond repair.

Instead he concentrated on Slade. The bastard. Tonight, he would do the humiliating. And he'd walk away with more money than he'd ever dreamed existed.

He slowed his pace. He'd entered unfamiliar territory, and his destination neared. Second Avenue, between 84th and 85th. He moved with the crowds, crossed when they did, and watched the buildings for Parkview Towers Plaza.

The structure looked just like the rest. Unassuming concrete and glass, one more high-rise in a city full of them. A sliver of apprehension lodged in his throat when he pushed through the doors and headed for the elevators. He tried not to look at anyone else, unable to shake the feeling they would know exactly who he was, what he planned to do. And who he was here to see. He caught a car, punched the tenth-floor button, and waited.

When the elevator arrived, only he stepped out. A quick glance confirmed his direction: right, since the hall to the left ended abruptly in a window. He passed closed and windowless office doors, scanning the names until he found the right one.

SUNIL DAS JHYANESHWAR-JANA, B.A., Psy.D.

He depressed the buzzer next to the door. An answering hum sounded almost immediately—someone releasing the lock from inside. He swallowed, jacked the handle and pushed the door open.

“Hello, Angel.”

“Jenner.” He stepped through and let the door close. “Sorry I’m late. I hope you’re not...busy.” He faltered as the man stood from behind a massive mahogany desk and approached. Jenner wore a dark gray tailored suit over a crisp white shirt and a shimmering silk tie that looked almost silver. Polished shoes, an expensive watch, and wire-rimmed glasses completed the transformation from sadist to doctor. Even his braid looked almost natural. Not a hint of his usual terror-inducing nature remained—except in his eyes. He couldn’t change that cold, penetrating stare.

“I am not. Many of our clients have been rescheduled until we can determine when Shiro will return.” For an instant his voice seemed to catch, but he recovered. “You had an unpleasant encounter this morning. With your sister?”

He shook his head. Explaining would open a floodgate, and the last thing he wanted to do was cry in front of Jenner. "Have you talked to them?"

"Of course. Ms. Ramone was most receptive. That should not surprise you. And Harada will not object." Fury and disgust warred in his gaze at the mention of the Pandora leader. "You have leave to proceed, if you wish."

"You sure you're okay with this?" He forced himself not to look away. "I mean, it seems like you're getting a raw deal here. I'm just a kid from Buffalo, and Slade is..."

Jenner stopped him with a gesture. "Marcus Slade has no true strength. You must understand this if you are to be victorious tonight."

"Right. He seems pretty strong to me—asshole's almost as big as Apollo."

"You are not listening again. True strength, not brawn. Strength is power." Jenner frowned, folded his arms. "Think, *tenshi*. I cannot spoon-feed this to you. Who is the stronger?"

He fell silent. Slade had money, influence, followers. Motel, limo, yacht. Everything. And what did he have to compare? Nothing but a year of hell. A lifetime of hell.

A lifetime he'd survived in spite of Slade's—and Lillith's—best efforts to destroy him.

"I am," he said softly. "I didn't give in. Didn't run when he thought I would. I stopped playing by his rules. And now I'm going to make my own."

Jenner almost smiled. "There is hope for you yet, Angel. Perhaps one day you will arrive at these conclusions without my assistance."

"Thanks. I think." He smirked and shook his head. "You know, Jenner, you're not half as bad as everyone believes."

Jenner cocked an eyebrow. "Interesting. I was under the impression that I am much worse. If you are disappointed, I will gladly prove your observations wrong."

He surprised himself by laughing aloud. "I'll take your word for it."

* * * *

Slade stalked into his dimly lit suite and locked the door, then tugged off his sweat-soaked shirt. Two solid hours of working out, pushing his limits, had done little to dampen his disgust. Young Mr. Morgan had been damned lucky so far, and smarter than he'd suspected. He'd managed to avoid Mendez and taken the only step that would let him live. For now.

So the brat wanted his money. He'd damned well work for it—and on the extremely slim chance he won, Mendez would take him out before he could buy so much as a cup of coffee.

He ignored the vague thought that the monster he'd created in Gabriel Morgan might actually be unbeatable.

Intent on draining every ounce of hot water and tolerating the cold as long as possible, he headed for the shower. A female voice from the general direction of his bed stopped him.

"You're not worried, are you?"

"Goddamn it, Lillith!" He threw the shirt down. "Did I tell you to come in here?"

“Ask me if I care.” Lillith slid off the bed and approached him. She’d worn his favorite outfit—a black leather bodysuit laced wide up the front that left nothing to the imagination, netted thigh-high boots, and a studded ring-clasp collar. He couldn’t help seeing the extra wiggle in her walk, the sultry sway of her body—her fuck-me glide.

The woman was almost as good as him at getting what she wanted.

He shook his head, both to indicate the negative and clear it of the desire she invoked. “Of course I’m not worried. You think I can’t take that bleeding-heart brother of yours?”

“I know you can.” She trailed fingertips down his slick chest. “My bleeding-heart brother is a broken man. He lived for me. And now he knows exactly what a pathetic...painful...humiliating...waste his life has been.”

“Yes. You are an utter bitch, Lillith.” He smiled and seized her wrist. “I could hold you responsible for this, you know. Taking him was your idea.”

“But training him was Jenner’s job.”

And he hadn’t let him do it. He shouldn’t have taken Jenner out of the boy’s training. Lately, though, the old man had been far more trouble than he was worth. He never should have accepted Harada’s offer. Given time, Jenner could take over House Ulysses.

Still, there was no way he’d just hand him back. He was worth too much.

“You give him too much power, Marcus,” Lillith said, as though she’d read his mind. “He shouldn’t be lieutenant.”

He couldn’t help but agree. Jenner should be dead—the world would be a safer place. But since that wasn’t possible, maybe a demotion would give him greater control over the bastard. “Really,” he said. “Who do you suggest for the position, then?”

“Let me motivate them.” Lillith grabbed his crotch and squeezed. “I can be very persuasive.”

“Persuade me that your brother won’t be a problem.”

“You are worried.” She laughed. He wanted to slap her, but she’d enjoy that. “Don’t. You got what you wanted from him. Your precious reputation is restored. Now just beat his ass, keep the money and forget him.”

“Ah, Lillith. My sweet little snake.” He flung an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, almost crushing her. “He’s strong. I’ve made sure of it. And I would really rather not lose to that boy.”

“Then hit him where it hurts.”

“And where is that?”

“Use me.” Her tongue moistened her lips, pink on red. “Remind him of how long he suffered for nothing. Tell him how much I hate him.”

He grinned. “I’ll take great pleasure in doing that.”

“Good.” Sure fingers unfastened his jeans, slid them down. Lillith followed their direction and sank to her knees. “And get rid of Jenner. You catch more flies with honey. Let me show you.”

“God, Lillith...”

His hands plunged into her hair, and the world fell behind a pulsating curtain of pure lust.

Chapter 34

The electricity in the arena adjacent to Slade's nightclub crackled thick in the air. The place had filled with people dying to discover what was behind the mysterious invitation to the "match of the decade."

Every House seemed represented equally, along with a vast number of the usual spectators. Lights blazed from the ceiling and washed the crowd in fluorescent glory. There was no sign of a betting window, no friendly informal gatherings for wagers. In fact, even the tables had been removed. Only the audience and the ring remained.

Twenty minutes after the gathering began, the lights dimmed and went out altogether. A collective gasp rose as the room plunged into darkness. Spotlights came on with a snap, trained on the empty cage. Murmurs rippled through the spectators, and silence fell when Marcus Slade strode into the light.

"Ladies and gentleman, welcome." His voice boomed through the stillness. "Tonight we have only one match—but I promise it will be worth your while. After a brief explanation, I will allow you time to place wagers among yourselves, and then the fight will begin."

Slade revolved in a slow half-circle, scanning the shadowed masses of the crowd before he went on. "One of my own fighters," he began, "will face me in the ring. We have ten million dollars riding on this match, ladies and gentlemen. The winner walks away with the money, and the loser just walks away. If he can." Nervous laughter from the mob chased his statement.

The silence returned.

"My opponent will be...Angel."

As Slade announced his name, he entered the cage at the opposite end, already devoid of shirt and shoes. The quiet intensified for a brief instant before the first cheer rang out, bringing with it an avalanche of whistles, shouts and applause. He smiled, bowed his head briefly and melted back into the shadows beyond the spotlights.

"The match begins in fifteen minutes, ladies and gentleman. Place your bets."

Slade left the cage. The house lights came back up, and the noise level spiked a few decibels. Spectators scrambled around the floor, placing wagers and exclaiming in amazed anticipation over the coming fight.

* * * *

Near the edge of the crowd, Diego Mendez pulled Nails aside. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Nails shot his boss a reproachful look and rubbed absently at his wounded thigh. "How the fuck am I supposed to know?" he said. "I ain't his keeper."

He pounded a fist into his open palm. He'd been looking for the kid ever since Wolff reamed him out for holding a match outside. He wanted him dead—but as long as the pretty-boy stayed in the organization, he couldn't touch him. At least not directly.

Now he'd have to pay Slade, too. That pissed him off.

"Angel," he whispered. "I will send you to Hell."

* * * *

Gabriel entered the cage just after Slade, bringing with him every scrap of rage and frustration he'd gathered since Lillith's crushing confession, and planning to pound it all into Slade's miserable hide. However, when his erstwhile captor stripped off his own shirt to reveal broad, sculpted muscles and arms thick as tree trunks, he realized it wouldn't be that easy.

There was no bell. Only Slade, who simply said, "Let's go."

And he went.

Slade dodged the first few punches he threw at him. A sharp right caught him along the jaw, staggered him. He recovered and landed a blow, knocking the wind from Gabriel long enough to backhand him to the ground.

He bounded back to his feet, shook his head and came at Slade again. He hooked with both fists, hitting solid flesh.

Slade crouched and swept his knees. His feet slid back. He fell forward, palms smacking the mat. Slade twisted a hand in his hair, forced his head up and delivered another stinging slap that drew blood.

The salt tang of it filled his mouth. Slade was intentionally humiliating him. Once again, he stood and squared off, facing his opponent.

No more.

He strode forward, drew a fist back at head level. He didn't throw the punch until he reached Slade and gripped the other man's arm with his free hand. His knuckles rammed the bridge of his opponent's nose.

Blood gushed from Slade's nostrils. He took a step back.

He rained blows on the figure before him, letting conscious thought depart and instinct take over. Though Slade gave as good as he got, he barely noticed the pain the other man inflicted on him. At last a crushing uppercut sent Slade to the mat.

And still, he advanced.

Slade drew himself up, and he fisted both hands, hauled one back and drove forward.

Slade dashed his arm aside.

"You're pathetic." Slade spat blood and grinned. "Look at you. Trying to play with the pros. And for what?" He swung, and he avoided the blow by a whisper. "She was never yours to fight for, boy. You would have died for her...and that's exactly what she wanted."

"Shut up!" The clamor of the crowd swallowed the conversation in the ring. He lobbed a punch, missed. "I don't care about her."

Slade jabbed him. He stumbled back. "I think you do," the man said. "You loved her so much, and all the time she despised you. You made her sick. She couldn't wait to get away from you."

His words hit harder than his punches.

He blinked through blurred vision. His head spun with feelings too powerful to name. He tried again, but his strike landed weak, and his knuckles glanced off his opponent without effect. "Fuck you," he said through dulled lips. "And her. Fuck her."

"I have. Dozens of times." Slade's mouth rose in a sneer. "I'll do it a thousand more, and the bitch will love every minute of it."

"God..." Nausea clamped down on his throat.

Slade grinned. "Funny. Your sister calls me that, too."

Rage propelled him forward blindly. He lashed out, hit something. A fist collided with his gut and stole his breath. His knees met the floor.

"Lillith was right. You are broken."

In a single motion, Slade grabbed his arms and threw him into the cage wall. He tried to stand. Failed. Slade snagged a fistful of hair and pulled him to his feet.

"You get nothing, boy," Slade snarled. "I told you I keep what's mine. What made you think you could ever beat me?" A cage-rattling blow detonated pain in his ribs. "So weak. I don't know how you survived your father, but you won't survive me."

He closed his eyes. Weak. Broken. He'd always thought he was. Always been told, and never decided for himself. He'd simply accepted the labels. Worthless. Stupid. Sniveling. But he hadn't been any of those. He'd taken the beatings without complaint, taken the humiliation of endless verbal abuse, of counting strokes when his father demanded it, never wavering.

Not for Lillith. For himself. Because he could.

Screw Lillith.

"Pay attention, brat." Slade's palm struck his face. Sparks exploded behind his eyes.

He looked at him. "One."

"What?"

Slade's grip on his hair loosened. He twisted away, stood straight and held himself open. After a beat, Slade drove a blow into his sternum.

"Two."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Slade flushed crimson and backhanded him. "Are you insane? Snap out of it!"

He grinned. Blood leaked from his mouth. "Three."

"Knock it off, goddamn it!" A rabbit punch pounded his kidney.

"Four."

A frustrated growl strained through Slade's clenched teeth. He drew back and lobbed a fist at face level. His head whipped aside with the force of the blow. The leak became a hot, flowing stream.

He spat blood, pivoted back to meet Slade's eyes. "Five."

"You little bastard." Slade glanced down at his groin. "Count this."

Moving faster than he thought possible, he delivered the blow Slade intended for him. Slade gasped and dropped to the mat.

"Five is all you get," he said. "You won't touch me again."

"The hell...I won't." Slade scrambled back and gained his feet. "I'll kill you."

"That's against the rules." He stepped forward.

Slade swung, and he swatted the blow away, responded with one of his own that sent the man reeling. "You know, Slade, you should really learn to protect yourself better. Maybe you should take your clothes off. Tell you what—you do it first, and I'll join you."

"No." Slade shook himself. "You won't win. You're just a boy." He lunged.

He avoided the strike with ease, then laced his fingers and pistoned the double fist in Slade's gut. Slade flew back, bounced off the cage wall. Landed hard on the mat. "This is my game now," he said. "My rules. And the first one is that you will not touch me again. Ever."

"You don't make the rules." Breathing hard, Slade struggled to stand. A grim smile stretched his lips. "You're alone, boy. Even your sister hates you."

He smirked. "Thank God for that," he said. "I'd hate to see what she does to people she likes."

"You won't best me!"

Slade rushed him.

He felt the vibrations of his advance in his feet, and stood his ground, timed his response for the last instant. Just before Slade reached him, he dove aside, half-turned on the ball of one foot, and slammed an elbow between his opponent's shoulders.

Slade's face made contact with the mat. Something crunched.

"Want to know my second rule?" He squatted next to Slade's head and lifted it by the hair. "It's a simple one," he said. "The only one that matters, actually. And it's all thanks to you."

"What..."

He leaned down and spoke near his ear. "Don't lose."

He bounced Slade's head hard on the floor. A long exhale indicated the man's loss of consciousness. He straightened to a near-silent crowd and turned in a slow circle, absently wiping a runner of blood from the corner of his mouth. Their anticipation washed over him. They hovered on the verge of frenzy.

His lips stretched in a parody of a smile. "One."

The mob took up the count at two. He stood over Slade's motionless body until they reached twenty. An explosive clamor proclaimed their acceptance of the fight's outcome.

He decided not to wait for the loser, and walked away alone.

Chapter 35

The morning ushered Gabriel to his final task. His aching muscles made climbing the stairs to the second floor of the hotel a challenge, but he didn't mind the pain. It reminded him that he'd ended on his feet. He'd won.

Now he intended to collect Slade's debt and get on with his life. His real life. Unfortunately, Slade wasn't going to like what he had planned.

He stopped in front of a door and knocked. From inside, he heard a chair scrape across the floor, a muttering voice, footsteps. The door opened to a familiar disgruntled face.

He lifted a hand in greeting. "Hi, Doc."

"Jesus Christ!" Doc slipped into the hallway and closed the door. "You look terrible. Are you all right?"

"No worse than usual."

"In that case, let me be the first to shake your hand." Grinning like a kid with a new bike, Doc clasped one hand in both of his. "You don't know how long I've wanted to see someone kick the crap out of that arrogant son of a shithead. I'm so glad it was you."

"You saw the fight?"

"Damn straight I did. Think I'd miss the match of the century?" His grin widened. "Besides, somebody had to pick up after you boneheads."

He laughed. "Yeah. There's always that."

"I wasn't the only unusual one there." Doc's expression smoothed. "Jenner saw it, too."

"He did?" He shook his head. "Guess I should've expected that."

Doc sent him a suspicious look. "Why would you? Jenner never attends fights. Come to think of it, the old psycho looked almost happy. Something you want to tell me about, Gabriel?"

"I...can't. Not yet."

"Why am I not surprised?" Doc grunted. "So where'd you take off to last night? I looked for you then. Asked around a little. No one saw you leave."

He shrugged. "I went out browsing for a while. I'm in the market for some real estate. Business property."

"Well I guess since you're a millionaire now, you can afford it. What are you looking for?"

"I'm going to open a gym."

Doc blinked at him. "Any particular reason?"

"Yes, but I can't—"

"—tell me right now. Yeah, I know."

He inclined his head toward the door. "Is he in there?"

"Where else would he be?"

“Good.” He put a hand on Doc’s shoulder. “I need to talk to him. Alone. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“Sure, it’s your funeral. He’s pretty pissed. You want to bring a gun with you or something?”

“No. I think we understand each other now.” He smiled. “Thanks for everything, Doc. I’ll see you around.”

“God, I hope not. No offense, but you should take the money and get the hell out of here. You don’t want to give these assholes a chance to...why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re not listening to a word I’m saying.”

He didn’t reply.

“Damn it, Gabriel. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“My mind’s made up, Doc. And my eyes are open.”

Doc sighed. “Okay, then. Go have your little chat. I’ll probably have to tranquilize him when you’re done.”

“Probably.” He reached for the door. “Oh, and Doc? If you do have to put him down, make sure you use a really big needle.”

Doc’s laughter followed him inside.

* * * *

Slade lay on Doc’s cot, hooked to the ubiquitous IV. His eyes found Gabriel the instant the door closed. “Well, boy. I didn’t expect you so soon. Having a good laugh, are we?”

“Not really.” He crossed to Doc’s desk and leaned against the edge, took in the massive bruising on Slade’s face, his battered torso. The mat burn blazed across his forehead. “You know why I’m here. And I half expect you to say you’re not going to pay me.”

Slade sat up slowly and swung his feet to the floor. He closed his eyes, gripped the edge of the mattress. “We had a deal, Mr. Morgan. I don’t renege. The money is yours.” He grimaced, either from pain or the admission. Probably both. “You’ll have to be patient, though. It will take some time to liquidate that much cash. I can give you a million and a half today, but it’ll be at least two weeks for the rest.”

“That’s fine.” He crossed his arms. “There’s another reason I came here.”

“Your sister—”

“No. That’s not it. Do what you want with her.” He felt nothing at the mention of Lillith now. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Do you?” Slade leaned back against the wall. “This should be interesting. Let’s hear it.”

“How much would you like to keep the other eight and a half?”

Slade’s eyebrows raised. “Go on.”

“I want to buy something from you. For eight point five million dollars.”

“And that would be...”

“Jenner.”

“What?”

He forced himself to breathe evenly. “You heard me. I want Jenner. Give me him, and the cash you have now, and we’ll call it even.”

“You—” Slade stopped abruptly. “Explain this to me. Why in the hell would you give up that much money for Jenner? What are you going to do with him, teach him needlepoint?”

“I need a lieutenant.”

“Boy, you have about five seconds before I break your neck. What are you talking about?”

He smiled without warmth. “Here’s the thing. I like fighting. I’m good at it—as I’m sure you know.” He paused, enjoying the fury that spread on Slade’s face. “So I’m starting my own House.”

“You can’t do that!”

“I can, according to Dell Ramone and Tomi Harada. They want fresh blood in the organization...and they have more money than you. It’s already been settled.”

Slade fell silent. At last, he smiled. “You really are stupid, aren’t you? You have the opportunity to take ten million dollars and do whatever you want. And you’d rather play tough-guy with truly dangerous men.” Rough laughter escaped him. “You can’t control Jenner. The minute your back is turned, he’ll stab it.”

“I don’t have to control him.”

“You’re serious. I don’t believe this.” The smile lingered on his face. “Very well. We have a deal—eight and a half million for Jenner. The rest in cash. And you never so much as walk past this place again.”

He held out a hand. Slade took it and squeezed hard. He let him, holding his gaze steady until he released it. “Goodbye, Slade. See you in the ring.”

He headed across the room. Slade called to him.

“You’re going to fail.”

He stopped with a hand on the door. “Is that right.”

“You’ll never make it in the organization. I certainly won’t go easy on you, and if Mendez gets the opportunity, he’ll kill you.” Slade stood and advanced with a sneer. “I’m going to enjoy watching you burn. You have no idea what you’re getting into, Mr. Morgan.”

This time the rage passed almost before he acknowledged it. He turned and let his gaze linger on the bruises he’d inflicted, the beginnings of uncertainty he’d placed into those ice-blue eyes. And smiled.

“My name is Angel.”

About SW Vaughn

http://www.lyricalpress.com/sw_vaughn

S. W. Vaughn is a collection of crazy ideas and bad habits who got it together long enough to write a few books. Street fights and New York have always been passions for Vaughn, so it was only natural to put them together in the most twisted way possible.

The entire House Phoenix series started with the last line in *Broken Angel*, and grew from there. It's been a real trip so far.

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