

Heather Killough-Walden



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Chapter One

That was too close. It had been so hard this time.

It was becoming more and more difficult to say ‘no’ while staring up into those stark green eyes. And she was just positive that he was well aware of that fact, too.

He’d asked her the same questions so very many times; he never stopped trying. He never *would*. It was his job to be dark, to be a touch on the wrong side, and he had his job down to an art form.

Victor Black was breaking her down. Little by little, Game after Game...

If she’d had any sense at all, she would have turned herself over to Game Control and allowed someone else to take over her team. But she couldn’t do that. They were *her* team. She had trained them from the very beginning, and they were some of the best.

They depended on her and, in return, she needed them. They were her purpose, her very reason for being. If she stepped down as Red Command, what would she do next? Where would she even go? What in the world would she become?

No. She shivered at the thought. *I won’t back down. He will not win.*

“He’s getting to you, isn’t he.”

Victoria spun in her chair from the control center monitor to face the source of the voice behind her. Max stood in the doorway, his large frame eating up most of the light coming from the other room. He was gazing down at her with blue eyes as troubled as stormy skies.

He knows, she thought.

She suddenly wondered if every member of her team knew. *Probably. Hell, I trained them to be observant, didn’t I?*

“Yes,” she replied, simply. She hated to admit it. Especially to Max. But she had never lied to them before and she wasn’t about to start now.

“You’re...” He paused, swallowed. “You’re not thinking of resigning, are you?” He asked next, and the anxiety in his handsome features kicked up a notch.

She stared hard at him. “I wasn’t planning on it. Not yet.”

He seemed to relax a bit. Then he came into the room and sat down at the command seat next to hers. Victoria watched as the muscles beneath his t-shirt rippled with his movements. It was a well-trained body, toned and strong. She couldn’t help but admire it.

If he noticed her watching him, he had the grace not to show it. He turned those blue eyes on her again and pinned her to her chair with them. “You’re doing fine, you know. You aren’t the second place Competition leader for nothing,” he said.

He was trying to make her feel better. He knew her will was weakening when it came to Victor Black and his team. He knew it and he wanted her to know that he was still on her side. That he still trusted his leader and believed in her abilities to pilot her team.

That was Max for you.

“Thanks,” she sighed. She didn’t know what else to say. It was embarrassing as hell that Black had come as close as he had. She couldn’t explain it and she didn’t understand it and, at that very moment, she was at a somewhat desperate loss as to how to stop it.

Victor Black was the Game leader of the Gray team and had been for as long as anyone could remember. It was this span of time, this eternity of leadership that made Black as powerful as he was. And he grew more so every day.

Victoria was the Game leader for the Reds. Victoria Red.

Victor Black.

Their real names had been erased, along with their previous identities, the moment each of them had been chosen to lead a team.

But, unlike Black, Victoria had only been in charge of her team for a decade; since she was fifteen and Game Control had noticed her innate talents during one of their required high school aptitude exams.

As they did with all promising Game players, they “acquired” her, gave her a new and fitting name, and placed her in charge of her own team. The Reds.

They’d made a wise decision, apparently, because Victoria had proven herself over and over again. She’d been a team leader for ten years now and the Reds were currently in second place on the Field.

At twenty-five, she was just reaching maturity. At around twenty-five to thirty, Game players ceased aging.

Black had been Gray leader for hundreds of years. He’d stopped aging long ago. He looked no older than thirty. But for his eyes... There was always something in the eyes that could not be held in the check of time. Knowledge could always be glimpsed there, through the windows of a person’s soul.

Victor Black’s jade green eyes were replete with experience and secrets untold. No one on the Field was older than he was.

As Red leader, and, hence, leader of the second most powerful team on the Field, it was Victoria’s job to prepare the Reds for Black’s attacks, for the Gray team’s assaults and for whatever plans their incredibly intelligent, frustratingly clever leader might be hatching.

It was baffling to her sometimes. There were moments in her young life when she found herself freezing – just stopping in everything she was doing – and standing stark still. Wondering. Wondering what the hell it was all for.

Why do we Play? She would ask herself.

Why do we keep going like this?

And there was never an answer. It made no sense, but that was just how things were done.

Their world had been like this forever. No one could recall it ever being different.

There were good teams and there were bad teams. And it was the thrust of these two forces – the Yin and the Yang of their actions and the ebb and tide of their gains and losses on the playing Field that kept the world turning as it did.

Victoria couldn't let the Grays win. Not wholly. Not completely. She knew that if she did, the balance would be forever upset.

She wondered if Victor Black fully realized that. Did he truly understand that if he won – if he *really* won – all life on their world would be forever altered?

He was so cunning, so fully immersed in his role as leader of the Grays that she could almost swear he didn't care. Or that he *did* care – and that he wanted it that way.

There had never been a better Dark leader than the handsome, enigmatic Victor Black. The Red team was now the last Light team left on the Field. It was up to them to maintain their ground where everyone else had failed and fallen beneath Black's advances.

No pressure, she thought. *It's just the world at stake.*

"I think this break will do me some good." she said, wanting to get her mind off of the gravity of the situation.

Max watched her carefully for a moment. Just before the weight of that gaze would have become uncomfortable, it lifted and he stood. "I agree. We're heading to the TGB later tonight. Will you join us for a drink?"

She chewed on her lip for a moment. She normally didn't drink. She wanted to keep her mind clear and sharp and ready for anything at any given time. But there were parts of her that

felt as if they were pulled so taut and tight that if she didn't do something to loosen them up soon, they would snap. And then she would have to step down for sure.

"Yeah," she said, finally.

Max smiled, flashing perfect white teeth.

"I'll join you. Be there in a few." She finished.

"Good." He said, simply, and turned away. As he left the control room through the arch way that led to the meeting room beyond, Victoria let out a long sigh and returned to the monitor in front of her.

"Show me current Gray team locations," she issued, softly.

The computer lit up and a hologram of a map appeared before Victoria. There were no lights of any color anywhere on it.

"Current Gray locations are unknown," the computer told her.

Victoria blinked. "Son of a bitch," she muttered. Black had just begun another Game; made another move. And now she had no way of knowing what it was.

* * * *

Victor closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and slowly pulled his fist back out of the wall that he had shoved it through. White dust and chunks of plaster clung to the black leather of his glove and then crumbled to the floor.

He turned in place, his boots crunching the chalk into more dust on the marble, and made his way back to the table at the other end of the room where a decanter of wine waited, along with the crystal goblet he'd just finished draining.

He poured himself another drink. Maybe this one would help where the other had not. He raised the glass to his lips and stopped, his green eyes peering over the rim of the glass at the man who had just entered the room.

He lowered the goblet and waited for the other man to speak.

“She’s getting to you, isn’t she.”

Black stared at his captain and it was a good long while before he deigned to respond. When he did, it was with the slow, careful deliberation with which he did everything. He turned and placed the still-full goblet back onto the table beside him and then crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “What of it?”

The captain smiled and shrugged. “Nothing, really. It is only that no other team leader has taken this long to fall before your ministrations before. It must be slightly... Frustrating.”

A muscle in Victor’s jaw ticked. “She will lose, in the end.” He pushed away from the wall and strode to the command seat that awaited him. “They always do.”

“Aye, but Red is different, isn’t she.” Again, it wasn’t a question.

Captain John Storm was not a young man. He knew almost as much about the Game and all of its idiosyncrasies as Black did. Right now, the man’s inherent ability to detect things where they were supposedly hidden was getting under Victor’s skin.

“Did you have a purpose to coming in here?” Black asked him, without looking at him. He appeared to be focused on the machine in front of him and the maps it showed him as he deftly waved his hands this way and that, moving holograms left and right, backward and forward, zeroing in on elements within the four quadrants of the Playing Field.

The captain of the Gray team just watched him for a moment in silence.

Finally, Black turned to face him. “Hmm?” He pressed.

Storm smiled again. “No sir.” He said softly. “I’ll be on my way.” He turned to leave, calling over his shoulder just before he stepped through the archway into the other room. “We’ll be at the TGB taking full advantage of the break.”

Victor watched him go, the jade in his eyes darkening.

Gray had struck a nerve. Victoria Red was different, indeed.

Victor had been running the Game for more than four hundred years. Time became something other than simply time when it lasted that long and a person's brain was around to witness it. It was like giving the cosmos an audience. It both sped up and slowed down. It became astronomical and diminutive. The things that would take forever still took forever, but it was a slightly faster forever than it would have been had he not been there to see it.

It was like stepping out of a painting. And then stepping back.

He was cursed with a vision of the big picture.

And Victoria Red seemed to be able to see it, too. Despite her youth, despite the fact that she was only now reaching maturity, Victor could see the knowledge there in her golden eyes. Those eyes like the sun...

Victor swallowed and turned away from the door to peer, unseeing, at his controls once more.

How many hours – how *many* – had he spent manipulating the aspects of the Game from these controls?

Enough.

How ever many it had been. It was enough.

Questioning the Game was pointless. No one understood why it existed or why it seemed to be the life blood of their world. They only knew that it had to go on.

That wasn't good enough for Victor.

Not any more.

And he recognized that dubious dissatisfaction in the pretty fifteen-year-old girl who had become the stunningly beautiful woman, Victoria Red.

Black smiled to himself and it was a nasty smile. He knew she didn't even remember her real name.

But he did. *He* knew who she had once been. It was a knowledge that he kept buried within himself like a treasure. A boon, hidden, somewhere near the darkness where his heart had once been.

Now he stood and paced back to the goblet of wine that he'd neglected a few minutes before. Hastily, he lifted it and downed its contents, closing his eyes as the liquid fire roared past his teeth and down his throat, warming him from the inside out.

He'd almost had her tonight.

But she was strong and her sense of duty was unbreakable.

Victor set down the goblet with a loud thunk and ran a hand through his wavy pitch black hair. And the frustration was back. Despite the wine and its numbing warmth, he felt as if there was a storm building inside of him.

If it wasn't for the Game and its requisite responsibilities, he'd have had her long ago. He was certain of it. She understood. She *knew*. There was a part of her that empathized with him in a way that no one else on their forsaken world had ever done before.

If she would only surrender. If she would only give in... *Join* him.

They could change the world together. Their combined abilities would be insurmountable.

They could end the Game.

Victor pinched the bridge of his nose; a headache was coming on.

The Game. The endless fucking *Game*.

He straightened and turned to the control panel, closing the distance to it in two long strides.

"Show me the Red leader."

The computer's holographic lights flitted and flashed and then Victoria Red was smiling back at him from her Game portrait. It was the portrait that every leader possessed. That, in and of itself, irritated Victor. The idea that other leaders had a piece of Victoria made his blood heat uncomfortably. It made him... *Edgy*.

The picture was a current one, taken just recently, if the length of her caramel colored hair was any indication. The long, shimmering wavy locks fell past her shoulders and over the swell of her breasts beneath her snug Game leader uniform.

Her golden eyes sparkled, clear and bright and keen. Her teeth were straight and white, her lips perfectly pink, her complexion slightly tanned. She'd spent some time outdoors before the photo was snatched.

Victor took a slow, deep breath and let it out through his nose. He unfisted his hands, which had curled tight at his sides. The leather of his gloves creaked as he straightened his fingers and once more ran a hand through his own shoulder-length hair. It was becoming a nervous habit. He'd never had one before.

Not in four centuries.

"Show me the Red team's current location, pin pointing each member."

The computer complied and the holograms shifted once more. Four distinct red dots throbbed in space, all clumped together in the South East quadrant of the playing Field.

"They are currently located in Room one-thirteen of the TGB," the computer told him.

The TGB was the Team Gathering Building. It was a neutral ground for the teams; they could visit any one of its recreational rooms or clubs and consider themselves safe from attack by any other team member. Fighting within the TGB was strictly prohibited and, as far as Black could recall, it had never occurred.

Its safeness was taken quite seriously by every player on the Field. Victor wasn't surprised to find the Red team there this night. The battle had been a trying one and they had barely won. Most likely, they were celebrating their victory and the break they'd earned.

The red glowing lights of the team were labeled with likewise glowing numbers. Victor's gaze narrowed on the light numbered with a glowing red "1."

Captain Maxwell Blood. Otherwise known as "Bloody Max," and, to Victoria, just plain "Max."

Victor wanted to kill Maxwell Blood as he had not wanted to kill any other man in his long life.

But out-and-out premeditated murder was forbidden by Game Control. True Death was a crime punishable by means best left unfathomed.

Victor was not necessarily afraid of Game Control and its punishments. Team leaders were chosen for their jobs because they were born with *exceptional* abilities and Victor's were more exceptional than most. Add to that the power that came with being a leader – authority over the entire playing Field and everyone on it – and Victor Black was not a man who had much to fear.

Even from Game Control.

But killing Maxwell Blood would not go over well with Victoria Red. That was the only reason Bloody Max continued to live and breathe and gaze at his team leader through those ice blue eyes of his that Black so badly wanted to rip from the captain's handsome face.

Victor leaned back in the plush leather chair and brought his gloved hand thoughtfully to his chin.

Inspiration had just flashed through his mind's eye. A buzz and an unsettling at the base of his spine and a few moments later, Victor Black had an idea.

The last Game had only ended hours ago. But he was ready for another to begin.

He could easily handle it. So could his team. And it would give the Reds less time to recover; to recuperate. The weaker they were, the better.

The weaker Victoria Red was, the better.

Victor smiled and the green in his eyes lit up like emeralds.

He'd almost had her tonight.

He laughed low in his chest as he waved his hands expertly over the controls and then gave the computer a new set of commands. It complied, and the holographic screen went blank, all lights disappearing from its virtual surface.

Let the Games begin.

Chapter Two

“We’re supposed to be on down time...” Victoria muttered under her breath, her hands moving quickly through the computer’s holographic interactive screen. Nothing she did would bring the lights back. And though it should be impossible, a buzzing at the back of her skull told her Victor Black had everything to do with it.

If she was right, then Black was crossing two Game lines, not one.

The Game should have been at a halt at that moment. A battle had just been waged and won and team members needed a break. Game Control had granted a respite and when they did so, the edict was to be taken as law.

No team leader was allowed to initiate another Game at that time.

Secondly, if Black had actually found a way to infiltrate a system other than his own, then... Well, there was no description for his actions other than to say that he was cheating. And it was down-right scary cheating, at that. It should have been feasible. Team systems were supposed to be secure, hardened by years of bullet-proofing by trained system techs and their apprentices.

Time to notify Game Control. Victoria spun in the control seat and stood, striding across the room to the exit. There was a communications console in the next room. She made her way toward it, straightening her uniform as she went.

Contacting Game Control always made her very nervous. She wondered whether the feeling would ever go away. She also wondered whether she would be team leader long enough to find out.

“Summon GC intermediate for Red team.” She commanded.

The computer complied and, within a few seconds, a face was materializing within the holographic space between Victoria and the console.

It was not a face she recognized.

She frowned slightly as the image sharpened and the man before her peered at her through scowling, beady eyes. “What seems to be the problem, Red leader?” He asked, his tone bored and more than a touch impatient.

Victoria blinked. “I’m sorry, sir. What happened to MacDougal?” She’d grown accustomed to having the same intermediate contact for Game Control for the last decade. This man, however, was new. She’d never seen him before. It was unsettling.

The man blinked lazily and replied, “He has been re-assigned. I am your new contact, Red leader. Now, what is it that you want?”

Victoria was surprised and a bit befuddled, but she recovered quickly and managed to hide the bulk of her disappointment. She straightened and said, “My controls are malfunctioning. This has never happened before. I suspect Black is at fault and I believe he has initiated a new Game.”

The contact glared down at her over the fat of his cheeks and considered her words. For a half a second. Then he smiled a saccharin smile and shook his head. “I’m afraid that is not possible, Red leader.” He seemed to turn away for a moment and appeared to be moving his arms around something that was not visible through the holographic transmission.

“*My* controls show that *yours* are working fine.” He told her, his words dripping with unspoken innuendo. He turned back to her, cocking his large head to one side. “Are you certain you are using them correctly?”

It was an insult beyond insults. Victoria had been using those controls for a decade. She knew them like the back of her hand. This man had to know that. She was the Red leader, for crying out loud.

He was baiting her – and she had no idea why. She didn’t know who he was or why he’d been assigned as the intermediate contact for the second most powerful team on the Field.

Something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones. But if this man stood in between herself and Game Control... There was no recourse.

Victoria stared back into the stranger's face and came to a decision. She was good at making command decisions, after all. And her instincts told her to make this one.

So, she went with it.

"You're probably right," she sighed, at once affecting a rather tired voice. "That last battle took a lot out of me." She ran a hand through her hair and pressed her fingers to her temples as if she had a headache. "I apologize, Mr...."

He smiled an entirely unfriendly smile and supplied, "Constantine."

Victoria nodded. "Mr. Constantine, I bid you good night."

Constantine did not hesitate. "Good night, Red leader." The connection was broken immediately.

Victoria stared at the blank space where the stranger's face had been a second before and allowed herself a moment to contemplate the situation.

The Game was the heart of their world. To an effect, this was an almost literal truth. The playing Field was at the dead center of their realm, sectioned off and separated from the rest of the land by a wall built long, long ago and of materials and means that no one living today fully understood.

What they did understand was that, inside of that enormous square wall was a Field – a stretch of land containing mountains and oceans, deserts and valleys, plains and plateaus – upon which a Game had been played since time immemorial.

The Game, itself, was simple. One battle after another, waged by team against team. One team would win, the other would lose, and the Field would be satisfied for a while. Play could

stop and the world would not cease to exist as long as play continued before too much time passed.

The Game *had* stopped once.

Once.

There was a tale about that time, passed down from generation to generation.

Victoria turned away from the blank console and paced slowly back toward the control room. It had been so long since she'd heard the tale told, she was fuzzy on the details. But, if memory served her correctly...

Once, long ago, the teams of the Playing Field had decided to take a break. The break had gone from one day to a few days. And then lengthened into a week.

Here, the story tended to shift. Depending on which version you heard, one of several things happened next.

People in the outside sectors began to get sick. They came down with fevers no one could break and no one could explain.

The days and nights became longer; noon was too hot, midnight too cold.

People became angry. Selfish. Commerce crumbled and life as the world knew it simply ceased to exist.

What had changed? What was the one constant that was no longer constant?

Whispers became screams and then became riots and all of the world's leaders gathered and decided that the Game must go on. It must be Played once more and it must never falter again.

The tale tells that they formed Game Control to make certain that this would be the case. And it has never stopped since.

Victoria thought of the tale now, as she sealed the control room door behind her and took her seat. She had no idea how old the tale was. At least as old as the Game, surely. It was what the people of her world lived and breathed by.

Because of the tale, individuals were tested for Gaming skills at a young age. Those with proven aptitude for certain aspects of the Game were taken from their homes and secluded within the Field – within its otherwise impenetrable walls – to be trained or to be allowed to train, and to ensure that the Game went on. Forever. And ever.

To be chosen for the Game was a great honor. In exchange for service, a Gamer was given much: The chance to see the famed Field. The ability to heal from wounds and sicknesses. The gift of youth. And, if you played your cards right, you could live forever.

That may very well be the way Victor Black was headed. He'd been in charge of the Grays forever. Or, it seemed so anyhow.

No one but Black even remembered which sector of their world he had been pulled from, all those years ago. Whichever it was, his home sector had given him an accent. Victoria didn't remember enough about the outside world to know what kind of an accent it was or what it would mean. And after so many years, it was so faint now, it was barely detectable. But it was there. It seemed to grow stronger when he spoke with emotion. It lent a charismatic quality to the team leader's voice.

Not that Victoria would admit as much to anyone. It was just something she noticed. That was all.

Now Victoria waited. There was a humming in her blood. A fluttering in her stomach and a growing warmth in her chest that told her what she needed to know. She could sense him. Just as he could sense her.

It was part of the Game. Team leaders became more and more aware of each other as time passed. Gamers speculated that this was so that they would know when their territory was being trespassed against by another leader. It made sense, but it was speculation and no more.

Just like everything else when it comes to the Game, Victoria thought, dryly.

Nonetheless, there was no denying that Victoria could sense Black's essence in certain things. Just as she did now. She knew, in her heart, that he had essentially cleared the board and moved one of his pieces. She *knew* it. With every fiber of her being, she knew that he had begun another Game.

But this one was different. Somehow, this new contact, *Constantine*, was in on it. He was a wild card. And, with a cursory glance at her all but dead control screen, she had to admit that she was running blind. This Game was already beyond anything Victoria had ever played.

What was Black's plan? Why was he doing this now? After so many years of playing by the rules? Why would he break any of them at this juncture?

Victoria closed her eyes and sat back in her chair. She recalled his last words to her, as they faced off after the battle on the cliffs in quadrant four, the wind whipping their hair into a frenzy, his stark green eyes burning a hole through her.

"Don't you grow tired of it, Victoria? I know you do. I can feel your weariness. You can't hide it from me."

He had moved toward her, closing the distance between them so that the bands they wore on their arms began to heat up painfully – a warning that barriers were being breached. A reminder of protocol.

He'd ignored it.

And she had let him. She refused to back up as he came to stand before her, a mere breath away, so close that she could smell the leather of his uniform and hear the ragged catch to his breathing as he implored her.

She had the sudden, nearly overwhelming urge to reach up and touch his hair where the deep black, shining locks brushed against the collar of his jacket.

When he spoke again, she could feel his words caress her lips and the world seemed to slow around them.

“I see the questions in your eyes, Red.” He whispered, his very lightly accented voice wreaking havoc with her senses. *“I have the answers. Give in to me... Join me, luv. There need be no secrets between us.”*

Victoria flinched and gasped as he raised his gloved hand, and in a move utterly belying all regulatory codes, he very gently brushed the backs of his leather encased fingers across her cheek.

Max had stepped in then. He’d drawn his sword and swept between them, knocking Victoria back several paces.

She’d caught herself in time to see Black and her captain standing boot to boot, head to head, their gazes locked in silent challenge.

When her silver wrist band flashed brightly and Black’s did the same, the end of the Game was signaled and both teams were instantaneously transported back to their headquarters.

It was sudden and it was harsh and, this time, it was strangely painful.

Victoria had gone straight to the control room. Shaking. Uneasy. She hadn’t wanted her team to see the emotion in her face or notice the tension riding her body. She hadn’t wanted to face the truth of what had just transpired.

Because the truth was, he had come too close. By all rights, she should have turned Black in for daring to touch another team leader on the Field. But she wouldn't. She couldn't. Because it wasn't just one team leader touching another. It wasn't Black breaking a rule.

It was Victor. Touching *her*.

And that was different.

* * * *

"I need you to deliver a message to the Red leader." Victor Black strode across the room to the messenger who had been summoned there. As far as the messenger was concerned, the Game was on downtime. He would be allowed into each territory and there was nothing in the rules that stated team leaders were not allowed to communicate while a Game was not running.

So the young boy took the small wooden box that Black handed him and nodded his assent. He left the Gray team's headquarters at a brisk run, heading for the transporters that would shift him from Black's quadrant to Red's.

Victor watched him go.

Then he turned back to the tall windows that stretched from floor to ceiling along one wall of his massive quarters. His jade green eyes peered out over the lights of the Field – and of the sectors beyond the wall – below.

Then his gaze shifted and locked onto the tall Red tower in the far distance.

Enough time had passed, he was sure. Now he just needed to lay the trap.

Spin the web.

And invite the butterfly for a drink.

* * * *

Victoria read the note again. She bit her lip, chewed on the inside of her cheek, and read the note one last time.

Then she put the note, with its scrawling black letters, down on the table and took the coin out of the box. It was a solid platinum coin. On one side was the Gray crest. On the other was a single letter. “B.”

Victoria turned the coin over in her hands a few times, and then straightened, pocketing the coin – and the note – before she turned back to the windows in front of her. She had an amazing view of each of the quadrants from way up here.

Her personal quarters were the highest rooms in the Red team tower. Looking out to one side, she could see the distant right angle of the Field’s impenetrable wall, and the forested sector beyond it. She often wondered what lived in that forest. It was dark at night. Just a long patch of black that must have been hundreds of acres across.

On the other side, she could see the wall fade into nothing but darkness, blending with the ocean that it sliced into in the second quadrant.

Victoria pulled her gaze from the darkness and the unknown and focused it on the Gray tower, which stood miles away, opposite of her own, and rose just as high. She thought of the man who lived within its highest walls.

This was probably a very bad idea.

Victor Black was the *Dark* team leader.

Victoria sighed a somewhat frustrated sigh. “Dark” was an overly simplistic and, in her opinion, incredibly miss-used term for what Black and his team had to do day in and day out. After all, there was nothing wrong with the dark. She preferred it to daylight, actually. She came awake at night. She loved the stars. She felt more energized beneath the softer, bluer light of the moon.

But no one had ever come up with a better description for it. So, “dark,” it stayed. Someone had to be the hero. And someone had to be the villain.

Hundreds of years ago, Victor Black's aptitude exams had garnered the attention of Game Control and earned him the rank of Gray leader. Because, as it would seem, that was where his talents lied.

His Game plans were devious, tricky, deceitful, and underhanded. They *had* to be. It was his *job*. And he was very, very good at it.

And that was what worried Victoria.

Because, despite the fact that her entire team was at the TGB, celebrating what they thought was a well earned break and that, as far as Game Control was concerned, no new Game had begun, Victoria knew differently. She knew the truth.

Victor was Playing. And if this invitation was part of his plan, then she was about to fall for it hook, line, and sinker.

But she'd weighed her options and she truly felt that she had no other choice.

Besides. He claimed that he only wanted to talk. Thus far, Victor Black had done everything a Dark leader could do, but one thing. He had never lied to her. Not once. It was something about his character. Lying did not suit him.

The coin would get her into his private room at the TGB. And she had to admire his confidence, arrogant though it was, in expecting her to use it.

Oh, she would meet him all right. She would hear him out – on safe ground, in neutral territory, and surrounded by team players.

Not in his private room.

If he wanted to talk to her so badly, he would have to find her himself. It was the only means she possessed, at that moment, of putting the ball back in his court. She needed the breathing room. She needed the extra step.

When Victoria neared the door to her personal quarters, she stopped and turned to consider the Game band that rested in its glass case on the cabinet against one wall. It wasn't customary to wear the bands when Game wasn't in Play, but... It amplified her abilities and made it easier for her to access her powers.

And she might need that edge tonight.

Besides.

Black was most likely wearing *his*.

With that thought, Victoria opened the case, extracted the silver cuff-like band, and touched it to her right wrist. The device immediately ensnared her arm, hugging tightly to her flesh as it melded with her body, sending an electric jolt of energy through the pathway of her nerves, and into her brain.

For an instant, she saw lightning. She heard crackling.

And then it was gone. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing the glass case once more.

She was used to the sensation by now. After all of these years. At this point, donning the device was like brushing her teeth. It was somewhat annoying, but more often than not, necessary.

With one last glance at her quarters, Victoria stepped through the archway leading into the hall beyond and closed the door behind her.

Chapter Three

When the transporter doors closed behind her, Victoria had the fleeting thought that she should have worn something else. At first, the image of a low-cut dress floated before her mind's eye. It was hurriedly chased away by the much more practical thought of a downtime uniform.

She was still dressed in her leather Game jacket and pants and, though she'd secretly always loved the way she looked in them, they were a dead giveaway as to the fact that she was a team leader.

It was something she had a feeling she should keep under wraps tonight.

With a sigh and a building sense of anxiety for the passing time, Victoria waved her hands over the transporter console and the machine shifted, whizzing her back through space to her quarters once more.

She hurried through the motions of changing, not bothering with anything but the essentials, and when she was finished, she tucked her Game band beneath the sleeve of her uniform. The giant "R" scrolled into the silver would have given her away at a single glance. So, it was best to keep it out of sight all together.

Once more, she was in the transporter and headed toward the TGB.

I have flutterbies in my stomach, she thought to herself. *At least, I think they're called flutterbies...* It was hard to remember such things. Training had wiped away so much of who she once was. *But it makes sense, right? An insect that flutters by...*

My mind is wandering, came a harder thought. *Time to pull it together, Red.*

Focus.

The transporter doors slid open and Victoria stepped out into the marble foyer of the TGB. Servers bustled by, carrying trays filled with colorful concoctions. Gamers lounged by the indoor waterfalls or sat at round tables, playing cards.

This was the main room, and had no particular designation. It was where you met your party before you moved on to the more private, numbered rooms beyond.

There were five halls that led off of the main room. Each hall had three levels, and each level had approximately twenty rooms. In essence, Gamers had their choice of literally hundreds of different gathering spaces, each unique in its own way. It was important. Game Control did not want Gamers to feel as if they were getting bored with life. Because, this was all there was for them. There was no going back. Once you were in the Game, you were in the Game forever.

Victoria stepped out into the foyer and scanned her surroundings. No sign of Black. Not yet, anyway. She chewed on her cheek for a moment and then decided on a room. Room 72 was not normally frequented by winning teams. It was a darker room, made up to resemble a tavern in some Old World realm, long before the days of transporters and communications devices.

She was not concerned with Black's ability to find her. She knew he would.

What she didn't want was for one of her own team members to see her speaking with Black. For now, she wanted to find out what was going on with him and deal with it herself. The Red team wasn't likely to wander into Room 72 any time soon. Ty preferred the dance clubs and April preferred to be anywhere that Ty was. Simon was the intellectual in the team and would be bent over some leather-backed tome right now in one of the TGB's many ancient libraries.

Max was... Well, Max was probably in a training room. The captain's idea of having fun was to beat the living hell out of an opponent during a grueling sparring match and then take a hot bath. And then do it again.

So, no Room 72 for the Red team. She should be okay for now.

Victoria was young enough and relatively new enough at the game, after only ten years of being a leader, that not many people seemed to recognize her for who she was as she made her way up the escalators, down the halls, and finally to the room that she wanted. With her Game band well hidden beneath the sleeve of her gray jacket, she felt just inconspicuous enough that this almost seemed... *fun*. It was different for her.

She'd never gone sneaking anywhere before. She'd never tried to duck under Game Control's radar before. It was definitely a novel experience.

She suppressed the smile that threatened to curve her pink lips and opened the tavern-like door to Room 72, stepping into the fire-lit room beyond.

There were about a dozen round tables made of wood, surrounded with like-wise wooden chairs scattered throughout the dimly-lit tavern. The fires in the hearths at either end crackled warmly; the temperature in the room was perfect. It felt as if she'd stepped out of a cold winter's night and into something much more cozy.

The conversation was subdued. It was mostly men in the tavern, hunched over ceramic plates that were piled high with what looked – and smelled – like mashed potatoes, gravy, and fresh baked bread.

The patrons of the room, themselves, seemed out of place in this atmosphere. As if they'd stepped back in time and forgotten to wear the proper costumes. They wore Game uniforms or downtime clothing so obviously not a part of Room 72's rather historical décor.

But they didn't seem to notice, or if they did, they didn't care.

The tankards set before them appeared to be constructed of metal. Possibly iron or steel. And filled with what smelled like beer. At the far end of the room was a bar, more or less, and several stools that sat around the bar were currently occupied by other patrons.

Victoria stood at the entrance to the room and scanned it for a moment, gaining her bearings. Then she made her way through the subdued crowd to a table more or less in the corner, surrounded by shadows, but for the single candle at its center that cast a dancing, flickering light across the table's scratched wooden surface.

She pulled out a chair and took a seat.

It wasn't long before a woman was at her side to take her order.

"Umm... I'll have whatever they're having," Victoria nodded at the table not too far from hers, where the men were playing a game of Chess and drinking the stuff that smelled like beer.

"A pint of ale, then. Anything else?"

Victoria shook her head and smiled. The woman returned the smile and then glanced around, almost nervously. "Erm... Will you be meeting someone else tonight, miss?"

At that, Victoria honestly didn't know what to say.

It was possible that Black would find her here. She hadn't made it easy for him, though. Then again, maybe he expected her to play this way. It was, after all, a Game.

"I'm not exactly sure," she finally replied, a shy shrug accentuating her words.

The serving woman nodded, her mouth forming an "O" of understanding. "Very well then. I'll get your ale." She sauntered off.

Victoria was about to lean forward, her elbows on the table, her hands beneath her chin, when a pair of hands slid over her eyes from behind.

"Guess who."

She didn't recognize the voice, but she could smell the liquor on the man's breath as he whispered across her ear, and a familiar, sickening feeling uncoiled in her stomach.

"I have no idea," she hissed, "but if you don't get your hands off of me this instant, you will lose them."

It wasn't exactly an empty threat. She had abilities other leaders didn't. And the band on her wrist would only amplify them.

He laughed a rather slippery laugh and removed his hands, coming around the table so that she could get a better look at him.

She remembered him now. Tall, blonde hair and hazel eyes. His name was Jack Emerald and he was the Green leader. It was obvious that he knew who she was as well. He remembered her from the Playing Field. Where her team had utterly annihilated his almost a year ago.

It was also obvious that he was toasted.

He leaned slightly to one side as he slid into the chair opposite hers, a strange twinkle in his light colored eyes and a half-smirk on his lips.

"Not your usual hang out," he said. His words were surprisingly crisp for one as drunk as he was.

"Nope." She replied.

"Slumming? I hear you're up against Black these days. Shouldn't you be in your private room with your team – celebrating?"

"Maybe." She replied.

Victoria's body was tense, her back straight, her mind alert and ready to whip out with her powers at a moment's notice.

What she had *not* been expecting, however, was the pair of gloved hands that slid over Jack's eyes and the pair of lips that lowered to his ear and whispered, in a slightly accented voice, "Guess who."

Jack stiffened and stilled, his breath quieting in his lungs.

There wasn't a Gamer on the Field who didn't recognize *that* voice.

Victoria gazed up at Victor Black, her golden eyes like saucers in her lovely face. Something about what he was doing was just so over the top.

So... *Scary*.

Everyone in the tavern had gone quiet. Jack Emerald tried to clear his throat. It didn't work and he tried again. And then, in a voice that squeaked, he said, "I... I'm sorry, sir. Is this your chair?"

Victoria almost laughed. But she managed to keep the hysterical squeak lodged deep in her throat, where it belonged. She shifted in her seat, apprehensively, and Black's gaze cut to her. Green eyes flashed in the dim light of the tavern. The candle's flame sent shadows dancing across the sharp angles of his handsome face.

He smiled an entirely evil, slow smile.

And then Victor straightened and stepped back, his gloved hands sliding away from Jack's face. Emerald was up in a flash, jumping from the seat and turning in place so that he could face the Gray leader. It was as if he'd known the devil was at his back and wanted to rectify that as fast as humanly possible.

"Mr. Black..." He stammered.

A few patrons in the room laughed. It was an amused murmur, but Victoria could hear the nervous note to it as well.

"Green leader." Black said, in greeting, as he gracefully took the seat that Jack Emerald had vacated. When Emerald continued to stand there, as if frozen to the spot, Victor glanced back up at him and cocked his head to one side.

"You may go now."

Jack glanced once at Victoria, opened his mouth as if to say something, and then, thinking better of it, closed it once more. He backed away from the table and Victoria watched as he

weaved out of Room 72, bumping into a man's chair just before he made it to the door and pushed through to the rest of the TGB beyond.

* * * *

She had no idea so many men were watching her. She never did. Victor was bewildered by her innocence. She could throw a grown human being across the room with nothing more than a thought and a flick of her wrist. She could cause a person's hair to catch on fire. She could bend metal objects with no more than her will.

And yet she was so naïve in the ways of seduction – of men and women... It boggled his mind.

Victor watched as she stepped off of the transporter and into the TGB foyer beyond. She glanced around, once, as if searching for him. She didn't find him, of course. He was extremely well versed in the art of hiding. It was incredibly easy for him to blend into a crowd. Hell, he could disappear in an empty room.

Victoria turned from the transporters and made her way through the main room and toward the long hall that would take her to a portion of the TGB that she'd never been to before. At least, as far as he knew, she'd never been there before.

And he knew everything about Victoria Red.

He had eyes and ears in all quarters of the Field. She never went anywhere or did anything without him hearing of it.

Except for when she was in her control room. And then she was on her own.

He allowed her that much. It was fair, wasn't it?

He chuckled to himself now as he watched her march past a group of young boys, no older than seventeen or eighteen. There were five of them. All wore deep gray down time uniforms

with orange insignias on their sleeves. The Orange team. They'd been beaten so long ago... Two years? Three?

They must have been bored out of their minds at this point.

But Victoria Red was providing a welcome distraction.

Best to keep an eye on them.

Victor followed at a discreet distance. No one knew he was there. Unlike most team leaders, Black did not need the Game band to amplify his given abilities. Not any longer. It had been years – centuries – since he had. Of course, he wasn't going to let on to Game Control about this.

That would be foolish.

And why should they need to know?

So now, as he moved down the hall at a brisk pace twenty to thirty yards behind the object of his desire, no one turned to look at him. No one stopped or pointed.

They would have. If they had been able to see him.

But they couldn't.

Victoria stopped at the door to Room 72 and studied it closely. The band of teenagers came to a collective halt several feet away. She didn't even notice them there, despite the fact that they ogled her openly.

She tossed a long, silken lock of caramel-gold hair over her shoulder and one of the boys groaned low in his throat.

Enough.

Victor lowered his head, his unseen emerald gaze concentrating on the young men until it began to glow. Within a few moments, one of the teenagers wiped his forearm across his brow and noticed that it came away wet. Another boy swooned. A third young man clutched his stomach, suddenly, his pallor turning slightly green.

Victoria stepped through the door and into Room 72.

Victor smiled and silently, stealthily, followed her inside.

It was no different in here. And, again, she failed to notice. He shook his head, at wonder with the woman before him. She was the most adept team leader he had ever come up against and possessed more innate ability than anyone he had ever met and yet she had been sheltered by Game Control.

At an age where she might scarcely have begun to learn about the finer things in life, she had been plucked from her world and deposited, unceremoniously, into an environment that demanded her undivided attention. She thought of the Game and only the Game.

It kept her team in the running. They had never had it so good and, if ever there came a day when Maxwell the Bloody was made to give her up as team leader, there was bound to be one hell of a battle on Game Control's hands.

But...

What about Victoria?

He watched her as she took a seat at one of the tables in the corner and, immediately, one of the men who had been eyeing her, like a child eyes candy, rose from his stool at the bar and approached her from behind.

A pulse of Black's power had risen within him in that moment. It happened so fast, so unexpectedly, and it was so nasty... He'd never experienced anything like it before. It felt red and hot and tasted like bile.

With great effort, he tamped it down and forced himself to watch.

The man stepped up to her chair and hurriedly slid his hands over her eyes. Victor could see her tense beneath the stranger's touch.

And that nasty feeling was back. This time, he couldn't rid himself of it entirely. He moved forward through the quaintly decorated room, careful not to touch anyone, and waited beside Victoria's table as she told the man to take his hands off of her or he would lose them.

That made Victor smile.

He hoped she would do it.

But the man stepped away and Victor recognized him for who he was. Jack Emerald, Green leader for seventy-five years. He'd been bested a year ago by Victoria on the Field. Did he hold a grudge?

The lust in the man's hazel eyes was understandable. But there was anger there, too.

So, he did hold a grudge.

Victor waited as patiently as he could while the other team leader attempted to make small talk with Victoria. She wasn't biting and Black could sense his growing agitation.

Again. *Enough.*

Victor materialized behind him, his gloved hands over the Green leader's eyes.

"Guess who."

He heard Victoria gasp and his gaze cut to her. She was so beautiful, sitting there, stunned at his sudden appearance. Stunned at what he was doing. He could hear her breath catch. Almost feel it.

It made him want to feel so much more...

In the space of a few more annoying moments, the Green leader was gone and Victor was seated across from the Red leader, unable to take his eyes off of her, even as she watched the other man stumble hastily out of the makeshift tavern.

"How did you do that?"

He smiled. He knew she hadn't meant to ask. The words had come forth before she'd been able to stop them. It was one of the things he found so alluring about her. She spoke from the heart and, often, without thinking. It was that innocence again. It was wrapped around her like a pair of white, downy wings.

"I can show you, if you like." He told her.

She shivered. It was almost imperceptible, and she was hoping he hadn't noticed. He could tell by the way she glanced quickly at the table top and licked her lips.

"What did you do to my control console?" She asked then.

He laughed. The sound rumbled across the space between them and she looked up sharply. Her lips were parted, her pupils expanded.

He sensed the energy building within her. He knew she was wearing her Game band. It would give her an edge. Not against him. But, all the same, she would think so. And it would give her the confidence she needed to defy him.

He needed her to hear him out.

He sighed and sat back in the chair, at once aware of the stares of every Gamer in the tavern. He ignored them, focusing on his golden-eyed prize. It wasn't hard.

"Not to worry, luv. It is easily repaired."

Her gaze narrowed. More energy was building. He wondered if the band on her arm was heating. Luckily, he wasn't wearing his, or their proximity would have become uncomfortable at this stage.

"I only needed to gain your attention."

"You have it. What do you want?" She ground out through clenched teeth.

He leaned forward then, pulling off his black gloves and placing them on the table. Then he laced his fingers over the wood and fixed her with another hard gaze. She met it head on.

“I propose a wager.”

“Oh?”

“A Game, Victoria.” He paused for effect. “Between us.”

* * * *

Victoria watched the man across from her with the wariness of a mouse watching a very large, very black cat. When he didn’t elaborate, she pressed, “What kind of Game?”

His smile was disarming. He was too handsome. It wasn’t fair. How was she supposed to defeat a team leader as handsome as he was? It shouldn’t be allowed!

“I’ve always been partial to tag, personally.” He told her. His accent was heavier now. It always became stronger when he spoke to her and her alone.

She blinked and tried to swallow. It wasn’t as easy as she would have liked. Her throat felt dry.

“And hide and seek.” He continued.

She bit her lip and ripped her gaze away to stare at the table top. Then the wall. Then some poor schmuck at another table who quickly looked in the other direction.

When she finally returned her gaze to Victor, it was to find he was still watching her as intently as ever. But she’d collected herself.

She wasn’t going to let him have this kind of effect on her. She was a professional. A Game leader. The *Red* Game leader, in fact! She’d bested half of the teams out there.... She could best him, too.

Right?

“What, exactly, did you have in mind, Black?”

“I won’t mince words, Victoria. You know I want you.”

Her heart stopped beating. Just for a moment. It hurt a little.

He went on. “I’ve wanted you for some time. So, here’s the deal. A Game. Seven rounds, as per Game regulations. Only, this Game is just between you – and me.” He seemed to lean even further in, and she found that she’d stopped breathing.

“If you can escape me for seven rounds, Victoria – if you can keep from being taken off of the board for that long... I will admit defeat. And I will step down as Gray leader. But if I find you. And capture you...” His voice trailed off just as his gaze trailed over her lips, her throat, her breasts....

His green eyes locked on hers again and she felt she would die right there at that table.

“Then you’ll join me.” His smile was the devil’s promise. “You’ll give yourself to me for one night.” He let the words sink in. His gaze was for her and her alone.

“And then you will help me overthrow Game Control.”

Chapter Four

Victoria stared across at Black and felt as if the world were falling away from her. After a moment, she managed to breathe again. And then blink.

His words had sent waves of sensations rolling through her body. Her head felt light, her ears buzzed, and her stomach was clenched tight. Beneath the weight of his stark green gaze, she felt at once stripped down, exposed and vulnerable, defenseless against his radiating heat. She was hot. *So hot.*

And then she was stone cold, his final words sitting like lead weights in her gut.

She swallowed. When she spoke, it was in the slightest of whispers. “You want to overthrow Game Control.” It wasn’t a question. She simply wasn’t sure that she’d heard him correctly.

His response was a slow, affirmative smile.

She couldn’t believe he had just suggested what he’d suggested. All of it was inconceivable. It was too much. Maybe she was dreaming? After all, Room 72 was rather surreal....

“Clearly you need time to consider your answer, Victoria.” Black stood slowly, reaching his full height with practiced grace. She gazed up at him with his jet-black hair and black garb, his emerald eyes flashing. “And time is a commodity I just happen to possess.” He waited as the waitress approached, shyly, and set down Victoria’s ale. Black drew a card from the inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to the server.

She nodded in understanding and hurried off again. Black turned back to Victoria. “When you make your decision, you need but call me.” He gazed at her steadily for several long heart beats. His expression darkened, the pupils in his green eyes expanding in warning. “In the meantime, sleep well.” His words were laced with hidden meaning. “And sweet dreams, luv.”

With that, he bowed his head slightly and then turned and left the tavern.

* * * *

Victoria stood at the foot of her bed and gazed down at it, uncertain. Her head was spinning and she knew that sleep would run from her, slippery and shifty, and that she would have to fight to pin it down this time.

On nights like this, her bed looked like a battlefield.

She sighed. Everything was an analogy of war. *It's all I know...* she thought. Then she ran her hand through her hair and walked to the tall windows along one wall. With a wave of her hand over a control panel on the right, the windows silently slid open. Cool air instantly raced along her skin, raising goose bumps and weaving through her long hair.

She closed her eyes and stepped out onto the balcony, breathing deeply. The air was slightly scented. Like... something she vaguely remembered. Everything was something she vaguely remembered.

Because of the Game.

Black's words came back to her. ... *You'll give yourself to me for one night. And then you will help me overthrow Game Control.*

Victoria shivered, suddenly chilled by the night air she had appreciated only moments before. How could he honestly believe she would accept such a challenge? What would make him think she would ever entertain such an idea?

What did he mean by overthrowing Game Control? What did he have in mind?

And why her?

Why now?

Victoria left the balcony and re-sealed the glass doors behind her. With one last defeated glance at the empty bed, she made her way to a cabinet along one wall. It slid open as she neared it. She reached in and retrieved a bottle of pills from the top shelf.

Max had given her the pills several battles ago. He'd told her she looked tired. At the time, she *was* tired. She'd been up for several nights trying to get the hang of using her powers without the Game band on her wrist. She hadn't wanted anyone to know she was doing so and she wasn't even sure why it was important to her that she practice it. She just felt it was something she needed to do....

Anyway, the pills were supposed to help her sleep. Max hadn't told her where he'd come by them, but he was a very charismatic man with a lot of his own "connections," so, most likely, they came from some buxom doctor or nurse in the Medical Research Unit.

That thought made her smile. He was shameless.

Of course, with a body and face like his.... He should be.

Victoria turned the bottle of pills in her hand and peered through the opaque glass at the small cylindrical capsules inside. There was no label on the bottle.

She sighed and looked back at her bed.

Thoughts of Victor swam in her head. His hair, his eyes, his tall dark form... His words.

She was so confused.

She screwed the top off of the bottle and poured one of the pills into the palm of her hand. She had never taken medicine before. Her abilities as a light leader had made visits to the MRU and medicines, in general, unnecessary for her.

But she'd never been propositioned by the most powerful Gamer on the Field before. She'd never been looked at by him quite like that before. His accent had never been quite that strong.

Victor Black was an illness that she couldn't heal. And she was far from immune.

This was the only way she was going to get any sleep tonight. And with that thought, she popped the pill into her mouth and swallowed it down.

* * * *

Victor opened his hand to the sound of chinking glass as the slithers of fine crystal slid from his palm to the marble floor beside the legs of his leather-backed chair. A few slivers of the now ruined goblet remained embedded in the skin of his hand and he gazed at them now in wonder.

Blood, thick and red, swelled around the shards and then dripped, languidly, to splash in colorful abandon across the white stone tiles.

If Victoria was here, she could heal me herself, he thought, absently.

But she wasn't here. She wasn't beside him, as she should be. She was miles away and most likely furiously plotting some means with which to defy him and his latest challenge. To turn him down.

Victor's gaze darkened and he stood.

"You need to start drinkin' out of metal goblets, Black."

Victor turned to face John Storm as the captain came through the archway that led to the rooms beyond. Storm was smiling a wry smile that told him he knew good and well what was going on inside of his team leader's head.

He should. He'd been Gray captain for a very, very long time.

"Nonsense. They don't shatter nearly as well." Black replied as he made his way to the adjoining restroom, opened a cabinet door, and pulled out a roll of bandages.

"You're not goin' down to the MRU to get patched up." Storm said. It wasn't a question.

The Medical Research Unit could heal Victor on the spot. They employed people who were, at one time, light team leaders and possessed the natural ability to mend wounds. It was a necessary boon; Gamers were constantly injured on the battle field, and many of those wounds were critically grave.

"Not at the moment. No."

“So I was right, then. She’s getting’ to you.” Storm sat down in the seat that Black had just vacated and propped his legs up on the ottoman across from him. He laced his fingers over his taut stomach and cocked his head to one side.

Victor turned an irritated glare on the man.

John Storm shrugged and smiled. He was a handsome man who bore the very rare regality of one older than the maturity age of most Gamers. Because Game Control had not noticed him and his talents until he was in his late forties, he was a little older than most of the players on the Field. However, he was locked in at this age now, and had been for hundreds of years.

It lent him an air of influence other captains did not possess. He was a natural on the Field. People automatically followed his orders. No one ever doubted his abilities and no one challenged his authority.

Black was lucky to have him as his captain.

Even so, the man could be a trifle annoying at times. He simply knew too much about the human condition. Chalk it up to age. Wisdom. Whatever. It was grating.

Storm chuckled low. “From the look you’re givin’ me right now, I’d say she’s more than gotten to you, lad.” He shook his head in wonder. “Aye. I’d say she’s well under your skin. Either that, or....” He considered his leader for a moment and then blinked.

“Or there’s somethin’ you’re not tellin’ me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Storm.” Victor moved to the hook that held his black leather jacket and shrugged it on over his broad shoulders. “As usual.”

The captain’s gray eyes narrowed inquisitively. He was silent. “Goin’ somewhere?” He asked, changing the subject.

“Out. And then home.”

“Aye, but not alone, I reckon. What poor defenseless lass will suffer the brunt of your obsession with Red this time?”

Victor had no answer for that. His look said it all, though, as it burned emerald fire into his captain’s very soul. John Storm stared right back.

Until he couldn’t any more. And then he looked away.

And Victor walked out the door.

* * * *

The woman was not what he wanted that night. She was not what he wanted *any* night. But she would have to do. Either that, or he would go mad.

Four hundred and thirty-one years on the Field and he’d been waiting all that time. He’d waited for the right Gamer to come along. The one who would possess enough strength, enough power. And when that Gamer did come along, it was in the form of a young girl, gangly and tall, with freckles and caramel-gold hair that literally smelled like honey.

She must bathe in it, he thought now as another woman gently ran her fingernails along the muscles of his back and nipped with her teeth at the taut skin on his neck. *She must.... Because her skin is touched with gold. It shimmers....* He thought, his green eyes closed, as a woman who was *not* Victoria Red nibbled his ear lobe and exhaled softly beneath his touch. *It glows as if flecks of the metal were embedded in her flesh....*

He had watched her grow and watched her powers grow with her. And he’d known. He’d known for ten years that she was the one. She was the only one who could give him what he wanted and grant him the reprieve his spirit so desperately desired.

She’ll never give in to you, his thoughts chided. Unwelcome, disturbing. His jaw tensed under the weight of the voice in his head. *She’s too responsible. She’ll always defy you. Run from you....*

Fine! He roared back. *Let her run. I can run too. I'll hunt her down until she can't run any longer!*

His grip tightened on the woman's wrists, pinning them to the bed above her head. She gasped, surprised by his sudden forcefulness. And then she slowly smiled. And so did he. It was not a kind smile.

Victoria will never accept the challenge, he thought. *Not without a little... persuasion.*

Victor thrust deeply into the woman beneath him and she sucked in a hard breath at the sudden pain and pleasure. He closed his eyes and reached out with his powers.

It was against Game regulations. To enter another's dreams was the ability of many dark team leaders. They used these abilities to weaken their opponents on the Field, sending nightmares to disrupt their rivals' sleep patterns in-between battles and weaken them with the resulting fatigue.

It was accepted as a tactic of war.

However, use of such abilities anywhere but on the Playing Field was strictly prohibited.

Victor knew this. He just didn't care. Not any longer.

Enough. Four hundred years was enough.

Red was ready. And he was tired of waiting.

And she wouldn't dare go to Game Control on the issue. If she did – if she showed she possessed a weakness against another team leader in issues not relating to Game play, then they would threaten to remove her as Red leader.

Her sense of accountability to her team and its members was too strong for her to risk it. *No.*

Victor laughed as the woman beneath him moaned, desperately, beneath his manipulations and he finally sensed the sleeping mind he'd been looking for.

Her heart beat slowly. She was deep in slumber.

So deep.... He frowned. Something was off. Was Victoria really so tired?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was the dream.

Victoria... he spoke her name in his mind. He allowed the word to curl out around her, to wrap around her thoughts like a silken cord. And then he pulled it tight, trapping her subconscious in his sway.

He willed her to feel his touch. To feel his hand as he ran it over her skin, pinned her to her bed, wrapped his fingers gently around her throat. He whispered in her ear, nibbled at her neck, grazed her clitoris with his fingers as he plunged deeply into her.

He could feel her writhing now – sense her dream state in disarray, helpless beneath his ministrations. His cruel, low laughter followed her down as he continued to take her.

Deeper. Deeper. Faster. Harder.

With all of the anger and desperation he felt. With every ounce of the desire racing, heated, through his veins.

Victor's hand cupped her breast – then expertly pinched her nipple. His mouth followed; he sucked the hardened bud into his mouth, imagining it was Victoria's – and then bit down on it, holding her fast as he thrust deeply one last time and emptied himself into her.

The woman in his bed screamed in ecstasy and agony.

And his mental connection to Victoria was broken.

* * * *

Victoria sat bolt upright in her bed, her breathing ragged, her body on fire. The sheets were soaked with sweat and every nerve ending from her neck down was painfully alive.

She moaned and gasped, frantically throwing the covers off of her as she swallowed what air she could get, and then jumped out of the large queen-sized bed.

“How.... How *dare* he!” She hissed into the humming quiet of her master bedroom. She shivered violently and hugged herself, then moaned again when her nipples grazed against the silk material of her night gown. Even *it* was too rough for her sensitized body.

“Son of a bitch,” she growled through clenched teeth. “Cheating son of a bitch!”

She yanked the night gown over her head, balled up the damp garment in her hands, and then threw it against the opposite wall in frustration.

She shivered again. A wave of dizziness washed over her and she swayed. She reached for the mattress, steadied herself, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Goose bumps were raised along her arms and legs. Her nipples were taut and almost seemed swollen. The moisture between her legs was growing cold in the night air of her room.

She crossed her legs, pressing them desperately together.

She had come so close. The dream had brought her one heart beat away from orgasm – and then ripped her from sleep with the disquiet cruelty she had come to expect and recognize of the Gray leader.

How dare he.... She growled and ran a hand through her dampened hair. He had already broken so many rules. The last twenty-four hours had seen him become a virtual rogue against Game Control. And they weren’t even aware of it.

Should she tell them?

And risk being forcefully resigned? Her thoughts hissed back at her.

No. I won’t be doing that any time soon. And he knows it.

That night, after she’d returned from the TGB, her transporter had malfunctioned, leaving her trapped within it for hours. It had never happened before.

Then her shower had been cold. That, too, had never happened before.

She knew what was happening. He was trying to wear her down. He was showing her what kind of reach he had. And, apparently, even her sleep was not sacred to him.

His green gaze flashed in her mind's eye and she felt his hands on her body, his teeth on her neck – his hardness lodged deep within her. She could not suppress the deep groan that escaped her throat as she threw herself back on the bed beneath her and closed her eyes against the blatantly painful need between her legs.

“Damn you, Victor Black.” She whispered into the night.

Was it her imagination, or did she hear laughter?

Deep and low and laced with promise.

Chapter Five

She could really only afford to stay in the training room for another fifteen or twenty minutes before she risked being noticed by maintenance. Victoria had a lot of experience plotting the schedules of the cleaning and tech crews that took care of the Team Gathering Building. She was well aware that she was cutting it close this time around.

But she had been so mad. So furious. And there was nowhere else she could go to work off the tension that had been riding her tonight.

Victoria exhaled loudly and bent at the waist, resting her hands on her knees. The tight, flexible material of her training garb was damp with sweat. Strands of her long golden hair clung to her rosy cheeks. The sound of her ragged breathing echoed throughout the training chamber.

The room around her was destroyed. Shards of glass and broken plastic pieces littered the floor. The metal legs of the punching bag stands were either bent or had melted into the marble on which they stood. The punching bags, themselves, were ripped open at the seams and their foam insides had been pulled out of them and scattered throughout the large rectangular area.

Metal discs of varying weight had been tossed into the walls, where they'd cracked the panels and then dropped to the stone, shattering the floor as well. Several of the larger ones seemed to have liquefied, the numbers on their faces running in metal rivulets to solidify once again in the cracked rubble beneath them.

The air was filled with the microscopic remnants of the materials that had been destroyed; dust moats floated, directionless, beneath the fluorescent lighting.

Victoria straightened at last and took a deep, calming breath.

She looked around. The room was a battlefield for her emotions. Desire warring with common sense. Anger warring with fear. Responsibility battling, uselessly, with a growing sense of need. Of *longing*.

Of lust.

Ten minutes now, she thought to herself, as her golden gaze landed on the melted barbells in one corner of the training room. *Ten minutes, tops, before someone comes in and sees all of this.*

And my arm without its band.

It was time to clean up.

Victoria took another deep breath – and closed her eyes. At once, she felt an energy within her answer her silent call. In her mind’s eye, she pictured the room as it had been before her visit. She saw the weights un-melting. She saw the panels un-cracking. She imagined everything moving back through the air to where it was supposed to be.

And as the bizarre sounds of telekinetic mending and repair filled the space around her, Victoria smiled a satisfied smile.

She felt much better now.

When the sounds died down a few minutes later, she opened her eyes. In front of her stretched a clean, white room with mirrors along one wall and a rack of weights along the other. Two perfectly whole punching bags dangled from metal chains and stands in the corner. The plastic panels of the room were polished smooth and intact. The marble floor shone beneath her feet and echoed her footsteps as she put her hands on her hips and confidently strode forward, thoroughly enjoying the job she’d done.

“Very –”

Victoria whirled around at the sound of the voice.

“– impressive.” He finished.

Black! Her mind screamed as the blood drained from her face and her heart fell into her stomach. She stared up at the man, who was once more dressed in the color of his name, and her legs began to go numb. He was watching her with glittering jade green eyes, his lips turned up in the slightest of cruel smiles. He was so close.

How had she not noticed him there? Heard him? *Felt* him?

His face was slightly pale, his eyes darker than normal. He looked troubled and brooding, as if he'd not slept.

It lent his handsome appearance a dangerous edge. Like a sharpened blade on a black knife.

He drew his gloved hands together and clapped in mock applause. "You are, indeed, amazing, Victoria." He took a step toward her to close the five-foot gap between them.

But she stepped back. And then she stepped back again, amazed that she was able to move her feet at all.

He was un-fazed by her retreat. His emerald gaze dropped from her face to her right arm. "And without your Game band," he commented. "My, my. Aren't you the industrious team leader." His accent was so strong now, it was as if he'd only recently come to be on the Field. And it was beautiful. *Disastrously* beautiful.

"Black..." Victoria's voice cracked. She swallowed, almost coughed on the dryness, and then tried swallowing again. This time, she managed. She cleared her throat. "How did you get in here?"

He shrugged, his expression innocent. "I have this room reserved this morning, luv. The clock on the wall is ten minutes off." He smiled then, and his smile was anything but innocent.

"You changed the *time*?" Victoria asked, disbelieving. The clock on the wall was not ten minutes off. It was the world – outside of the room – that was off as far as time was concerned.

And she knew that. She knew it because Victor Black possessed the ability to alter it. Every once in a long while. In very small fragments.

He could bend time.

Only, he wasn't supposed to do so unless he was on the Field.

Victoria shook her head in awe, and growing fury. "Have you broken every Game rule in the book?" Her gaze shot golden daggers at him. He'd messed with her controls, broken her shower, entered her dreams... "Is there anything left that you haven't done, Black?!"

Victor stood still, silently studying her with those piercing, unnerving eyes. And then he cocked his head to one side and drew his gloved hands behind his back as he began pacing slowly around her.

She turned in place, watching him carefully, as he circled her.

"There is much I haven't done, Victoria." His voice was low, his tone a gentle warning. "Shall I show you?" He stopped and turned to face her again.

Instinctively, she reeled back. But it was too late. His power uncoiled and shot out of him so quickly, there was no way for her to avoid the rush of potent magic that engulfed her and took her to her knees.

The strength in her muscles was instantly sapped and her eyelids felt heavy. *Weakening me...* She thought to herself as she fought the sleep that threatened to overtake her. *Another damned dark leader ability...*

She had a few abilities of her own, however. And she'd never been known to go down without a fight.

With what remained of her strength, she drew her hand back and then shoved it forward, palm-out, allowing her own power to race from her heart to her shoulder, down her arm, and out of her hand.

It hit him like a blast of warm, solid air, sending him into the wall behind him. He hit it hard, but he weathered the impact, landing easily on his booted feet.

The impact had, at least, broken his control over Victoria. As she got her legs beneath her, he slowly straightened, pushing himself off of the wall.

“It would seem I am not the only leader to have broken GC’s rules,” he said, then. “How long have you been practicing without your Game band?”

Victoria ignored the question. The truth was, she barely had the energy to stand, much less talk. His power had drained more than she was willing to admit. And she’d spent so much strength on destroying the training room... For no reason. It was a waste.

She needed sleep. And food.

But she wouldn’t let him see that.

“You think I don’t know, luv?” He laughed, then. Cold, hard, mirthless. “I can read your bloody mind, remember?”

I hate dark leaders, Victoria thought, wryly. And their fucking dark abilities.

“I remember,” she whispered. It was yet another power he wasn’t supposed to use off of the Field. “So, what am I thinking right now, Black?”

I hate dark leaders, I hate dark leaders, I hate dark leaders...

“You’re hoping I won’t notice how weak you are.”

She went still beneath his gaze.

“Shall I tell you about the other rules I have yet to break, Victoria?” He asked, softly. His footfalls echoed on the marble as he strode slowly toward her, his hands once more behind his back. “Let’s see... I’m fairly sure I have yet to put any of your team members into a coma. Or drive anyone mad.” He stopped a foot away and towered over her.

His nearness was like a drug. She felt dizzy and overwhelmed.

“Of course, there’s always True Death. Not that I would even consider such a tactic, luv. Especially against a certain Red team captain.”

Victoria stared up at him, her eyes wide in horror. Was he threatening her?

Threatening *Max*? He wouldn’t dare...

Oh yes. He most certainly would. He was threatening to kill Maxwell Blood.

“See?” He whispered. “There are so very many rules I’ve yet to break.”

“You wouldn’t risk getting caught.” Victoria whispered. Those flutterbies were back again and they were playing a nauseating game of tag in her belly.

The smile disappeared from his handsome face and, instead, he gazed down at her in all seriousness. “This needn’t be so hard, Victoria.” He shook his head. “It’s a Game, that’s all. Just a simple Game between you and me.”

“I don’t like the stakes.” She shook her head.

He smiled again, flashing straight white teeth. “I do.”

The silence between them stretched as Victoria tried to think of something to say. There seemed to be no way to win this argument. No way to get out of the corner that Black had backed her into.

At last, Victor seemed to come to some sort of decision. His expression hardened with a firm resolve. He stepped back and, at once, Victoria felt as though she could breathe normally again.

“I’ll give you twenty-four hours, Victoria. Come to me in that time and I will allow you to set half of the rules.”

“I thought you said that time was a commodity you just happened to possess,” Victoria hissed at him. Now that he’d put space between them, the fury she’d felt hours ago was building up once more.

“Oh, I do, luv.”

She watched as he turned to face the clock on the wall, raised one arm, and with a release of power that felt ice cold, he telekinetically moved the long hand forward ten spaces.

“Patience, however, is a virtue of which....” He pinned her to the spot with a blatantly hungry expression. “... I am in short supply.”

He finished with the clock and strode to the room’s exit. He spoke to her as he walked. “One day, Victoria. You have one day – and then the Game will begin, whether you’re ready or not.”

What the hell kind of choice is that?! Victoria thought frantically as she stared after him.

He laughed and turned to face her one last time, his tall, dark form outlined by the light of the exit door. “At the moment, it’s yours.” He said. Then he opened the door, stepped through it, and was gone.

* * * *

“Boss!”

Victoria didn’t hear the female voice calling her. Her thoughts were turned inward to some murky, muddy place where the present world drowned itself in the mucky mire of indecision and fear.

“Hey, boss!”

This time, the voice cut through the fog of her consciousness and Victoria frowned. She turned in the aisle of the library, where she’d been going through the leather-backed tomes on everything from battle strategy, to hunting and tracking, to psychic empowerment for close to seven hours.

April Rose and Ty Murrey, two of Red team’s four members, not including the leader, were at the end of the aisle, making their way toward her.

Victoria placed her latest book on the table in the middle of the aisle and forced a smile to her face. Normally, smiling at her team members came easily. They made her happy; they'd become her friends.

But today, they represented everything that Victoria feared losing. And she also didn't want them to get in the way.

"What are you reading?" April asked, glancing curiously at the book behind Victoria. "Did Simon talk you into checking out one of his ancient epics?"

"No," Victoria laughed. It sounded hollow, even to her own ears. "Just studying up for the next battle."

"We're still starting up in three days, right?" Ty asked. He was always on top of things. No schedule could change without him knowing it.

"If we weren't, you would know before I would, Ty." Victoria teased. "Four day break, as promised. We'll meet at the tower and then head out to the Field as scheduled, in three days' time." She may as well reassure them. No need to tell them that, within those three days, she may lose a personal Game to Victor Black and then die trying to overthrow the government.

No. No need to tell them all that just now.

Ty nodded and smiled a mischievous smile. "Then we're off to enjoy as much of it as we can," he said, taking his girlfriend's hand and pulling her back down the aisle. April's smile was both shy and excited as they waved a little goodbye. Victoria smiled back and then turned her attention once more to her book.

She'd read two paragraphs into the first page when a shadow fell over the tome.

She looked up into bright blue eyes framed by a handsome face and wavy brown hair.

"Max."

He smiled and, this time, Victoria's return smile was, indeed, natural.

“Since when do you hole yourself up in the library like Simon?” He asked gently, his voice laced with a light teasing note.

“Since we go up against Black for our final Game in three days.” She held up the book so he could see the title.

“*The Paranormal Edge – A Guide to Psychic Combat*,” Max read. Then he chuckled. “I’d say you have that pretty much down. Do you really think anything in there can help?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea. But it’s better to know it than not know it – just in case.”

“Fair enough,” he pulled out one of the chairs at the table and gestured for her to sit down. She smiled and slid into the seat. He moved around the table and sank down into the chair across from hers.

“You’ve bee in here for seven hours, boss.”

Victoria blinked. How had he known that?

He went on. “You’ve been under a lot of pressure. Your controls aren’t working and things have been going haywire and the most important Game in your career as team leader, so far, is in just a few days. I can tell you didn’t get any sleep last night,” he said, his tone lowering. “*Again*.” He gave her a reproachful look and she began nervously chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“Medicine’s not helping?”

She shrugged, not wanting to get into how the night had really gone.

“So, I was just wondering....” Max went on. “Is there anything you’d like to get off of your chest?”

“No?” She replied, her eyes wide, her innocent look completely feigned.

He smiled and there was something strangely familiar about it. Victoria blinked, feeling inexplicably apprehensive.

“Nothing at all?” Max asked.

She shook her head, but didn't answer. He slowly placed his hands palm-down on the table top and stood, leaning over the table to bring his face in close to hers. "Nothing you wish to share..."

She frowned, backing up a few inches in her chair.

"Such as the fact that Victor Black has challenged you to a Game and that if you lose you will find yourself in his bed for one night..." He came closer and lowered his voice to a whisper, but she could still hear the accent that suddenly laced his words. "One *precious*, long night that you will *never* forget, Victoria?"

Her eyes widened and she wanted to stand – to run – but once more, she felt frozen to the spot, her legs numb, her muscles at once like jelly.

"You have no honor, Black." She whispered. She wanted to scream it, but the whisper was all she could manage at that moment.

Maxwell Blood began to morph before Victoria's eyes. And in a few seconds, he no longer stood before her.

Victor Black stood in his place.

"You smile very easily at your team captain, Victoria. I must admit I'm jealous."

"You slimy son of a bitch. Nothing is beneath you, is it?" She managed to find enough strength – in anger – to put some force behind her words this time. "You leave Max out of this."

His gaze darkened.

She went on. "It comes to this." That same fury was chasing away the numbness in her limbs. "I could never go up against you in a Game." She pushed her chair back, putting more space between them. "Your powers are too great. You've more than demonstrated that in the last day and a half." She could feel the hatred within her leaking into her gaze and she hoped he could feel it too.

Black had no immediate reply to her accusation. He watched her for another moment and then straightened, coming off of the table. There was an ice-cold determination to his expression. “Fair is fair, Red. Accept my challenge and I promise not to use any power that you can not at least equal.”

“I don’t believe you.”

His smile was back. “Yes you do, Victoria.”

Shit. He was right. She did. Because he had never lied to her. Not once. Not even in the midst of all of *this*.

Victoria stood and met his gaze head on. For what seemed like a short eternity, they stared at one another across the aisle in that library – Red and Black, the two most powerful Game leaders in history, head to head in one tiny, neutral space within the Playing Field wall.

Finally, Victoria took a deep, steadying breath and steeled her nerves.

There was nothing for it. She had no choice. Victor Black would not back down on this. And things would only get worse.

“Very well,” she said.

There was a wealth of promise in the victorious look that flashed across Black’s handsome features. There was anticipation, too.

A chill raced through Victoria’s body as she recalled the feel of him above her, pinning her to her bed, his lips on her throat... her breast.... His teeth around her....

Warmth raced through her and she was helpless to suppress the blush that rushed up her neck and into her cheeks.

Victor took it all in with steady, dominant grace. And then he pulled the glove off of his right hand and held his hand out toward her, palm up.

She swallowed hard and swayed ever so slightly before finally nodding and placing her own right hand on top of his. His fingers curled around her and she felt the cold power of his hold rush up into her skin. She countered it with her own fire and heat met cold; fire met ice.

Their embrace held as he laid down the law. “You have until night fall, Victoria Red. Do whatever you can to get as far away as possible. Because when that sun goes down, luv, I’m coming after you.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, his grip tightening on her hand. “Run like the devil is on your heels, Victoria. Because, tonight, he will be.”

With that, he let her go. And, in another display of forbidden power, his form shimmered and disappeared into the dusty atmosphere of the TGB library.

Chapter Six

Six hours... I have six hours before the sun goes down.

Victoria ran at break-neck speed through the halls of the TGB toward the transporters. Her thoughts were moving almost as fast. They blurred through her mind as she considered one idea, found a flaw in it, and tossed it out the proverbial window for the next one.

Her raging emotions didn't help matters. There were so many different feelings vying for control over her body, that she sort of felt like oil on water – iridescent with different colors, soaked in a bucket load of trouble, floating directionless with her feet nowhere near the ground.

She was frustrated at the Game police for never being around when Black broke one of Game Control's rules. She was astounded at how powerful the Gray leader had become. She was confused as to why he'd kept it secret this long and had chosen now, of all times, to come forward with his challenge. She was curious as to why he'd chosen her to help him attempt an overthrow of Game Control. She was definitely angry at herself for falling so easily into his trap.

And, most of all, she was afraid. She was afraid she wouldn't find a place to hide in time. She was afraid that he would find her and overpower her and she would lose. She was afraid of what one night in Black's bed would do to her, both physically and mentally.... And she was afraid that she was soon going to die.

So she ran as fast as she could. She needed to get back to the Red tower and pack a few things. Just a few, essential things...

She accidentally bumped into another Gamer as he was leaving one of the transporters, and in the midst of muttering a quick apology, she glanced up to find herself once more staring into Maxwell Blood's light blue eyes.

“Victoria!” He reached out and steadied her with a strong hand, pulling her to a stop as her momentum tried to carry her right past him. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?” He asked, taking in her disheveled appearance, the flush to her cheeks, and the stark worry in her golden eyes.

She went still and stared up at him. Was it really him this time?

She couldn’t concentrate enough to send out the mental energy it would require to verify his identity. But there were small things... The miniscule fleck of brown in one eye. The tiny scar beneath his left ear that he’d gotten before he’d become a Gamer. There was the warmth of his touch; Black was always cold. And the scent of mint that always laced Max’s words and made her want to kiss him just to find out if he tasted as good as he smelled.

It was him. There was no way Black could have gotten all of those details right.

She tried to feign nonchalance. “Nothing!” She said. Too quickly. Too loud.

His blue gaze narrowed. “Uh-huh.” He didn’t release her.

“I’m just... late for something,” she lied. It hurt. She’d never lied to Max before. She swiftly tried to console her conscience by telling herself that it wasn’t *exactly* a lie. She *was* late, in a manner of speaking. She was late in finding a place to hide from Victor Black.

But Max wasn’t buying it anyway.

Without relinquishing the grip he had on her arm, he turned and pulled her back into the large metal cube of the transporter. There were others in there and they were watching Victoria and Max.

“Out!” Max ordered, gesturing to the others that they should leave the transporter.

For a moment, they just stared at him, not understanding. But he was a tall, well-built man and he carried a lot of authority; the uniform he wore said as much. His charismatic stature said the rest. So, he repeated himself. “Get out, *now* – all of you!” And, almost as one, the other Gamers in the cube hurriedly filed out of it.

Victoria nervously watched them go. Her stomach was churning now. She knew what was coming and she couldn't make her mind think of a way out of it.

Max closed the doors behind them, locking them in alone. Then he punched in some destination that Victoria wasn't familiar with, and the transporter blurred around them.

Only then did he let her go. She straightened her jacket and looked at the floor, refusing to meet his blue gaze.

"What the hell is going on, Victoria?" He strode forward, coming to stand before her; his height towered, making her feel small. "I know damn well that something is wrong, and I want you to tell me what it is." He never called her "boss," as the others did. It was always Victoria.

"If it has some bearing on the team or its *leader*, I have a right to know." His voice was soft enough that he wasn't exactly yelling at her. But his tone was hard enough that it wasn't conversational, either.

Victoria swallowed hard and then shoved her hands into the pockets of her uniform jacket. "It's personal, Max. You don't need to be involved." That much was true.

He gazed at her steadily as the blurred cube around them slowed, swirled, and then blurred in another direction. Inter-space travel at right angles and speeds shy of light, but fast enough that they still boggled the mind.

"I think I do."

Victoria took her hands out of her pockets and put them on her hips. "Excuse me?"

"I think I *do* need to be involved. Because whatever it is that forced you to run down sixteen corridors in the TGB without slowing is the same thing that has been keeping you up at night. It's affecting your health. And if *you* aren't well, then our *team* will suffer." He told her.

She blinked. "You saw me run through the entire building?"

He watched her for another tense moment and then sighed. He ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair and moved to lean back against the opposite wall, blurred as it was. The effect was strange enough that it was a tad disconcerting.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “There are no transporters in between the library wing and the first corridor off of section one. You didn’t hear me calling after you and, frankly, you’re too fast for me to keep up with. So I hopped into the section one cube and met you in the main room.”

That was why he had run into her when she was stepping into the transporter. And that was also why he’d known something was wrong.

Victoria studied him closely. He raised a brow – waiting for her to respond.

She chewed on her lip. She alternated her weight on her feet.

Then, finally, she sighed too. “There *is* something keeping me up, Max, but I was telling you the truth when I swore it has nothing to do with you.”

“What is it?” He asked. No pretense.

“I would rather not share.”

“I know.” He acknowledged, with a single nod. “But I can’t help you if you won’t let me in.”

Let me in... He wanted her to let him in? In what way?

“You can’t help me anyway, Max. And it isn’t your *job* to help me.” She was his leader. He wasn’t supposed to help her; she was supposed to help *him*! She wasn’t supposed to show this kind of weakness in front of her team members. It was humiliating. It was frustrating. And it was pointless.

Time was speeding by almost as quickly as the transporter was shooting them through space. And she was wasting it here with Max.

“My job?” He said, incredulously. With that, he slammed his hand against the stop control on the transporter console. The blurring slowed and ceased and the transporter cube went still and solid around them. The doors remained shut.

She’d never been inside a stalled transporter before. “Where are we?” She instinctively asked. Dangling somewhere above a precipice? Underwater?

It gave her a chill.

“Don’t change the subject, Victoria.” He left the wall and faced her again. “You just broke our relationship down into the most base compartments imaginable, and that’s insulting. You know damn well that I care about you as more than my leader.”

She gazed up at him, her heart suddenly beating a little bit faster than it had been a moment before.

He went on. “Whether your problems – whatever they are – affect your abilities as leader is, indeed, *my* problem and, hence, it’s my job to make certain that doesn’t happen. Just as it’s also April’s job and Ty’s job and Simon’s job.” His tone was still hard and his voice was raising in volume. He motioned to the nothingness around him as he spoke. “But that isn’t why we’re here right now, Victoria, in this transporter, in the middle of nowhere. We’re here because something is eating you up inside and I’ve never seen you this scared before – not in ten years.” He visibly tried to calm himself before he added, finally, “and I’m your friend. I don’t want you to suffer. Is that so hard for you to understand?”

It was a while before Victoria could answer. She considered telling him. For a second. She really did. But then she remembered Victor’s warning about True Death. And she thought of his immense reach. Even her intermediate contact for dealing with Game Control had been switched. What kind of nightmare would it be to deal with Constantine after something bad had happened

to Max? She would be depressed as it was... And Constantine would be a monster, she knew in her heart. The overweight contact seemed the embodiment of apathy.

No. Her inner self shook her head. There was no way she could involve her captain. Not in this.

When she did finally speak, her voice was no more than a whisper. "I'm sorry, Max. I can't let you get involved." She hoped her expression reflected even a fraction of the helplessness she felt at that moment. Because she so badly wanted to confide in him and let him protect her, which she knew that he would insist on doing. Or, at least, he would try.

And that was the rub. He would try.

And he would probably die.

For, although it was called a Game, it was more than crystal clear to Victoria that this time, Victor Black wasn't playing.

Max gazed down at her for what felt like an eternity. She was about to apologize again, just to break the uncomfortable silence, when he at last straightened and turned away from her to face the console. She stared at his broad back as, in silence, he pressed a series of numbers into the transporter key pad, and the cube began to blur once more.

A few seconds later, they came to another stop and the doors slid open. They were in the Red tower.

Victoria didn't wait. She stepped through the open doors and into the main meeting room of the Red team's home base. When she turned to look back, it was to find Max watching her once more.

The doors slid shut, blocking him from sight.

He had not gotten off with her. But he'd somehow known where she was going.

Victoria hugged herself to suppress the chill that wanted to roll through her frame. Then she walked across the large room and headed for the stairs.

* * * *

“There’s a possibility she told her captain about the Game.”

Victor turned away from the tall windows he’d been staring out of and faced his captain.

“What makes you suggest this?” he asked.

John Storm shrugged. “Can’t know for sure; they got into a transporter together an’.... Well, let’s just say, he didn’t look like he was gonna accept much from her but the truth. Shooed everyone else off of the cube, apparently. So he an’ his leader could talk privately.” Storm sat down on a couch and waited for his leader to mull over the information.

Black considered the news. In truth, he hadn’t expected Victoria to try to get through this alone. They’d never really set the rules, as he had expected they would. He’d lost patience with her and forced her hand.

As a result, they had both jumped the gun and, other than the basic tenets of fair play, there *were* no rules. Not really.

“What’d you finally say that made her agree?” Storm asked.

“Nothing of consequence,” Victor replied, easily.

“Threaten to kill Max, then?”

At Victor’s sharp look, Storm laughed. “Aye, that’d do it, I wager. You’re lucky she thinks you’d actually go through with it.”

Victor considered that. “Am I?” He asked, softly. His gaze wandered to the windows again. Did he want the Red leader to fear him as much as she obviously did? On the one hand, it forced her compliance. On the other... fear wasn’t exactly the emotion he most wanted to elicit in her. Something about her distrust of him was disquieting.

“If she’s gettin’ her team to help, then you might as well have us on your side.” Storm suggested.

Victor looked back up at him. He mulled this over, too. “It’s possible.”

But there was a chance that she’d told Max to mind his own business. And if she had – then five against one was hardly fair.

Victor turned away from him and paced back to the windows. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Approximately five hours until sun down. He would very much like to know what she was doing at that moment.... But he had to give her this time to herself.

Back in the library, as soon as they had grasped hands to seal the challenge, Black had left the TGB and gone to the nearest communications console. There, he had pulled all of his men – his eyes and ears across the Field – and told them to back off of the Red leader for the day. He did not, under any circumstances, want to give Victoria just grounds on which to call the entire Game off.

He couldn’t have that.

He needed her. *In so many ways....*

It was safe to say that he had been much more than impressed with her display of power in the training room that morning. In fact, truth be told, he had been stunned speechless for several minutes.

To rip apart a room telekinetically was one thing. To melt metal was even more impressive; it required immense control of atmospheric temperature and an innate understanding of the differences in object states.

But to put it all back together.... That was truly something else.

Victoria had destroyed everything around her, in probably every way imaginable. Black had barely managed to shield himself from her power while maintaining his invisibility.

But when she had closed her eyes and set it all right, he'd been blown away. Re-attaching jagged plastic pieces into seamless perfection? Un-melting fifty pound metal discs into their original shapes?

The air had even been cleared of dust motes. It was impossible, what she did.

She was very, very powerful. Almost as powerful as he was.

He'd waited for four hundred years for someone of her caliber to come along. Individually, the members of Game Control could not defeat Victor in a battle of magic and might. However, collectively, they were a force to be reckoned with.

Black couldn't win alone.

But he could win with Victoria on his side.

In the training room that morning, she had more than made that possibility clear. It wasn't until everything had been put perfectly back into its place and Victoria had opened her eyes and smiled that Victor at last managed to find his voice and hide his shock. He'd put on quite an act.

And when she'd shoved him into the wall, it had given him quite a headache.

A part of him had wanted to congratulate her. Another part had wanted to retaliate by shoving *her* up against the wall – and then pin her there beneath him as he ran his hands through her honey scented hair and grazed his teeth along her throat and the smooth, taut skin over her collar bone.

Now, Victor pressed his gloved hands to the glass of the tall windows and laid his forehead against its smooth, cool surface. He closed his eyes and forced the need in him to back down.

He had to admit that he felt a measure of trepidation. He wanted Victoria alive. What if she fought so hard that he had to use too much force? She was like a thorned rose. So dangerous. And so delicate at the same time.

Then again.... He could never truly hurt her.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

He would have to be very careful with her. The next three days would see seven rounds, each possessing of ten hour time spans. Victoria Red would do everything and anything within her power to keep from being captured for those seven rounds.

She was an incredibly bright and determined young woman. Victor had a feeling that this Game was fated to see most, if not all of those seven rounds come to fruition.

* * * *

“It’s crazy,” she muttered to herself. “You’ll be caught. You’ll be killed.” She shook her head and continued to pace frantically back and forth across the floor of her master suite. “This is nuts.”

But it was the only way.

She knew that, deep down inside. The only way to make certain that Victor Black did not find her and capture her – was to make certain that she was not *there* to be found and caught, in the first place.

She had to leave the Field. She had to breach the wall.

But was it even possible? Had it ever even been done? Attempted?

Surely, Game police would be all over the wall. How would she even get close to it?

Victoria ran a furious hand through her long golden hair and then stormed to her chest of drawers, yanked the top drawer out, and moved all of her undergarments aside until she found the small velvet pouch she was looking for.

She picked up the pouch, pulled the straps loose, and shook its contents into the palm of her hand.

A small gold pendant winked up at her in the soft overhead lights of her bedroom.

The necklace consisted of a thin gold chain and, attached to it, a small, square smoky quartz crystal.

Victoria did not remember where she had gotten the necklace. She only knew that, after she'd been brought into the Field and trained, she'd been escorted to her room for the first time – and this necklace had been waiting for her beneath her pillow.

It was a beautiful piece of jewelry, and the only one she owned, though she never wore it. She wasn't sure why, but for some reason, she felt it was necessary to hide the ornament. She didn't want anyone to know she possessed it.

And she especially didn't want anyone to know about its secret. It was a unique crystal because, though it looked whole and seamless, all it required was a touch of mental energy and the smoky quartz split all along its side so that it could be opened.

When opened, as one would open a book, it revealed two images – one on each side. The images were laid there, in three-dimensional and full-color detail, and portrayed a little girl on the left. And a flower on the right.

The little girl had long, golden hair that fell in ringlets around her shoulders. Her eyes reminded Victoria of her own, though they perhaps looked larger in their youth. She was smiling, but it was a strange smile. A touch sad. Maybe scared?

It was a hard smile to pin down. Victoria had been trying for ten years.

The flower was a charcoal gray rose. It was in perfect, full bloom and its stem was heavily thorned. It appeared flawless and exotic and it, too, seemed familiar.

But, in the end, Victoria had no idea what either of these pictures meant. She only knew that when she needed comfort, she reached for this necklace and put it on. Wearing it brought her a sense of peace. It seemed to help clear her mind of clutter and distractions.

It helped her think.

It was one of the two things she'd wanted to retrieve before setting out to hide for the first round of her Game with Victor Black. If there was a chance that she would never see the inside of this room again, she wanted the pendant to be with her.

Victoria opened the clasp, put the necklace on, and closed the clasp again at the nape of her neck.

Then she moved back to the chest of drawers to retrieve the second thing she'd come back to get.

It was a compass, but just as the necklace was different, so was this. Unlike other compasses, it was not flat and did not point to four different directions.

It was another smoky quartz crystal, and it was a perfect sphere. The sphere was encased in a shield of gold that could be slid open and shut. It possessed five bearings instead of four. North, East, West, South – and either Up or Down, depending on its mood. At least, that was what Victoria attributed its fluxes to. It seemed to have a personality of its own.

Again, she had no idea what it meant, and again, she could not remember how she'd come about the compass. She couldn't even recall if it had been in her room, waiting for her, after her initial training in the Field.

She only knew that she had it now and had owned it for several years.

The necklace and the compass were Victoria's clandestine contraptions. She kept them to herself. She had often wanted to take them to Simon Roon, the book worm of the Red team, to see if he could explain to her the meaning behind them both. But she had always back down from the idea. Not knowing why.

She sighed now as she placed the small round compass in her jacket pocket and turned toward the door of her master room. Already, she felt as though she could think more clearly.

A plan was forming in the dim recesses of her mind. It was sketchy. It wasn't very nice. But it was, at least, a plan. And with a great deal of luck, it might actually work.

Chapter Seven

Arthur One was drinking alone. It was the only way he ever drank, so he was used to it. It wasn't that he was mean or even that he wasn't nice, per se. He didn't shoo people away from him and he wasn't seven feet tall and covered from head to toe with ink. No, he was five feet and ten inches tall, wiry, and possessed a deep-seeded fear of needles.

It was just that people were... well, they were... *not computers*. They had all of these unreliable emotions and body language and *menstrual* problems – shit like that. Computers, on the other hand, were as perfect as people could get. They never suffered from sugar lows or hangovers or depression. All you had to do was punch in a few lines of code – a few very simple instructions – and the computer did what it was told. Nice and easy. It almost said “yes, sir.” He loved that obedience.

Loved it.

No human being in or out of the Field had ever said “yes, sir,” to Arthur. Not one.

With humans, Arthur One felt deficient. Stripped of his lines of code and his technical triggers, he was only a human and not a very impressive one, at that. A computer would not have cared that he was far less attractive than, say, Victor Black or Maxwell Blood. A computer would never compare him to them. Instead, a computer would lay back and open its legs and masturbate for him if he told it to.

Computers couldn't sense emotion or body language. They didn't mind if you left your quarters a mess or forgot to shower.

They can't smell. Not anything.

They can't even sense your fear.

But a human can smell it a mile away and that, probably more than anything else, was why Arthur was sitting alone in Room 55, drinking a Screwdriver. Or pretending to drink it, anyway. He'd seen one of the Gamers order the drink a few weeks ago before that Gamer had realized he was, perhaps, in the wrong room and left before downing even half of the alcoholic beverage.

Room 55 was the techie hang-out. It was all white and staffed, mostly, by Arthur's scantily-clad creations. The seats were vinyl. The food all had cheese in it. And the bar offered thirty-six flavors of soda.

Arthur didn't normally drink alcohol. What was the point? But... he was feeling strange again. Lonely. Frustrated.

Angry.

It happened like this when the magic of his creations seemed to wear off a little. It was akin to a silver that tarnishes or a gold plating that rubs away. It never failed. It always happened this way. He would design the perfect program and it would deliver amazing results. So amazing, in fact, that his dick would be positively sore and his protein levels would drop for weeks after the final versions were completed.

A computer did exactly what you told it to do.

It never had a headache. You told it to give you a blow job, and it would. You told it to do so while it was rubbing its own nipples and mewling and it would. You told it to bend over and pretend that it was in pain while you whipped it, and it would do so. Without a second thought. Hell, without a thought at all.

He loved computers.

So obedient. So predictable.

He loved his cock in their mouths while he whispered profanities at them and choked their man-made holes again and again and *again*. The last models he'd made were capable of

swallowing three entire gallons of cum. You couldn't top that. No wet dream could come close to three straight days of throat torture on a naked, perfectly proportioned, entirely acquiescing sex goddess.

No. He'd created perfection and nothing human could compare.

But.... After a while, something about the program always seemed to become inadequate. And he would get frustrated – and start working on the *next* program.

He had no idea why this happened. Their measurements were far more perfect than human measurements could ever be. That wasn't the problem. Their features were perfectly symmetrical and, as a result, far more lovely than any a human female could possess. The voices he gave them were soft and throaty and a computer's vocabulary could be programmed to recognize and acquiesce to any number of derogatory, defacing terms and instructions that never failed to make returning customers out of the male Gamers in the Field.

So, what was it that always came up lacking about these programs?

He seemed to be the only one that noticed. Arthur One was head tech in the Field for a reason. He was in charge of a number of mundane operations concerning the wall, Game Control regulations, and the every-day workings of the team towers and the TGB. But it was his after-hour creations that had become the raunchy rage amongst male Gamers for more than a decade and a half, and customer satisfaction levels had never fallen. So to speak.

Game Control needed his expertise in technical matters, that much was true. But they also understood the importance of morale. What he did in his off-time was as valuable, if in a rather underhanded way, as what he did during his working hours.

They needed his work. The population of Gamers on the Field was composed of far fewer females than males. No one inside the wall knew the reason for this, and Game Control wasn't sharing.

Anyway, those females that did make it inside the wall were always very well cared for. Protected. And, more often than not, *completely* capable of protecting themselves. Many a male Gamer had made the obligatory first and last trip to the MRU with injuries dealt to them by female Gamers who had felt the self-preserving need to prove a point.

Male Gamers learned fast. In the Field, the line between men and women was a thin one, indeed. They were both strong. They were both fast. And the team leaders, especially, all possessed immense power.

Gamers, in general, were not to be trifled with. Not off of the Playing Field, anyway.

And so, in the end, the men would go nuts without Arthur. No pun intended.

He was priceless to Game Control. He knew that. He kept the wall un-breachable, kept the transporters running, and all of that wonderful, essential stuff. He also kept the preponderance of the population on the Field *sated*.

For the majority of the one-hundred and sixty-two years that he'd worked for GC, that knowledge had filled him with a sense of pride.

But lately...

Well, lately – it *hadn't*.

Lately, he'd begun to notice that there was something lacking in his models. He couldn't exactly put a name to it. It wasn't something he could put his finger on. But, to him, it made the project a failure.

And, with each perceived failure, on his part, his own contentment and sense of fulfillment with his job – with his life – had drained away a little more. He felt as if his happiness was a mass of sand pebbles in an hour glass. Draining.

And that irritated him. It, frankly, pissed the Hell out of him.

Because if he couldn't get what he wanted out of human females – and he couldn't turn to his own creations as adequate alternatives – then, what the fuck was he supposed to do with himself?

At the moment, he hoped that the orange concoction he was drinking could make some of the hopelessness he was feeling go the hell away. Perhaps it would give him some courage. Make him feel taller.

And then he wouldn't be afraid. And then the *princesses* of the Field wouldn't turn tail and run the other way when he swaggered toward them. Maybe they would give him the time of day, after all.

Finally.

With that thought, Arthur One lifted the glass from the bar in front of him and downed another several, sweet swallows of his drink, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. When he lowered his arm and his gaze once more focused on the doors across the room, it was to find Victoria Red walking through them.

He blinked. But she was still there.

He rubbed his eyes, took another drink, and then looked again. She was not only still there, she was actually coming closer. *Toward* him.

For half a second, he wondered if he was dreaming. But as soon as he considered the thought, he threw it away. If he was dreaming, he would be seven feet tall and covered in tattoos and Victoria Red would be wearing next to nothing. As it was, however, she was dressed in a gray downtime uniform. She looked good in it, of course. She looked unbelievable. But it wasn't like it showed a lot of skin.

“Arthur, I want to make a deal with you.” She said as she approached him.

Arthur blinked again. Then he looked over his shoulder. Just to be sure. After all, one of the other Arthurs could have been seated at the bar behind him.

But it was just him. And she was gazing into *his* eyes. Expectantly. Waiting. She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side and he honestly didn't know what to say.

"Arthur?" She frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He managed to mutter. He put down his drink and tried to sit a little taller. It may be the first time the gorgeous, untouchable Red leader had ever addressed him of her own accord, but he didn't have to act like he was so damned aware of it, did he?.

"What – " He cleared his throat and tried again. "What do you mean you want to make a deal with me?"

"Remember when you came to me and asked me to help you repair some equipment that human hands were too big to repair?"

"Yes." He remembered. The Red leader was the most powerful telekinetic master in the Field and he'd wanted to get a jump start on his next program by not waiting for more new supplies from Game Control, but re-using the ones he already had that were damaged in some way. He had wondered whether her powers could be used to such a fine manipulative degree, too, and had to admit he was curious.

But she'd refused to help him, claiming that it was against Game Control regulations to use those powers outside of the Playing Field. And she was right. The reasoning being that if one Gamer began doing it, then another would. And another. Until chaos reigned on and off the Field.

But he still hadn't liked it. "I remember. What about it?"

Victoria glanced around the room, a tad nervously, and then leaned in a little and whispered, "what if I tell you, 'screw Game Control,' and agree to help you make those repairs after all?"

He stared at her for a moment. Honestly, he could stare at her all day; he loved her gold eyes.... He'd given his last creation gold eyes like that. But not *exactly* like that. He'd tried, but in the end, there had been something missing.

At least right now he had a viable *excuse* for staring at her.

"Why the sudden change of heart?" he asked, his gaze narrowing.

"Well, I won't lie to you. I want something from you in return."

Oh, there's the rub, he thought. *But, that's okay. In fact, that's good.*

"Um..." she bit her lip and glanced over her shoulder once more. His prick hardened a little as he watched her white teeth press down on the plump, pink flesh. "Can we go somewhere private and talk?"

There was no pretense in her voice. He would know if there had been. He was an expert at voices and their inflections. He'd been studying them for what seemed like forever – just so he could get them to sound right when he programmed his buxom little companions.

She was nervous, but she wasn't lying. She really did want to speak to him in private and she really did want to make a deal.

Either it was the alcohol or he had simply reached some sort of pinnacle in his life, but either way, Arthur One was getting an idea. It was risky and it was out of his league, but in his opinion, it was the best idea he'd had in a long – *long* – time.

"Yes," he said, rising from the stool at the bar and gesturing for her to follow. "I know just the place." *My lab*, he thought. *Surrounded by my machines who follow my orders, where you'll be out of your element, princess.*

A deal, indeed. As they walked toward the transporters, he was most definitely becoming more and more open to the idea of a deal.

“Is this private enough or do you want to wait until we’re at my lab?” He asked, innocently, vaguely, as the transporter doors closed behind them. She looked at the transporter console and the walls around her.

“I don’t know. Do they watch us in here?”

“Nope. Got sick of watching people pick their noses and adjust themselves. Nothing interesting ever happened anyway. So, we took the cameras out a long time ago.” *Of most of the transporters*, he added mentally. But this one was honestly clean. He was telling the truth there.

“Okay, then I’ll fill you in on the way.” She turned toward him, her expression now earnest. “This is the thing. I need to get past the wall. I agree to use my powers to help you fix anything you want fixed for the next ten years – I honestly don’t care. As long as you’ll give me the transporter access code that gets me beyond the wall and into the outside sectors.” She shrugged helplessly. “You’re the only non-Game Control person who knows it.”

Arthur stood stock still in the whirling, blurring transporter and stared some more at Victoria Red. What she was asking for was over the top. It was so very illegal, so wholly and utterly against regulations that if he were to give her what she wanted, he could not only be banned from the Field – he could be subjected to Game Control punishments. The unmentionable kind.

“You *what?*” he finally asked. He wasn’t even entirely sure that he’d heard her correctly.

“You heard me, Arthur. I need out of the Field. And fast. Before sundown, in fact.”

So, he *had* heard correctly. The access code was top secret. Actually, that was putting it lightly. The code was so valuable that an inordinate number of precautionary measures had been taken to ensure that it remained a secret for everyone but Arthur One and Game Control’s higher officials.

In fact, because many dark leaders had the ability to read minds, Arthur's memory was wiped of the information as soon as he'd entered the code into its safe-guarded envelope within his lab's most un-hackable computer.

He was the only one who could reach it.

And he wasn't certain he could do so before sundown. Even if he'd wanted to.

Which he didn't.

What he *did* want to do before sundown, however, was get Victoria Red stripped naked and wired down to his bed so that he could have his way with her.

He had to keep himself from smiling now as the thought blossomed to its full beauty within his mind. *Oh yes....* He knew what he would do. He would pretend to help her. Pretend to agree. Then he would take her by surprise. Knock her senseless. By the time she woke up, she would be helpless.

And then, when he was finished with her – in a few days, maybe – he would wipe the ordeal from her memory. He'd figured out how to do that recently. There was only so long Game Control could keep a secret like that from Arthur One. He wasn't head tech for nothing, after all.

Right now, Red was watching him with those sultry, golden eyes that held so very many emotions. Most of them were scared. There was trepidation there, in those honey depths. And worry. She so badly wanted him to agree.

Might as well give her what she wants!

"Okay," he told her, throwing in a sigh for good measure. "But the deal is *twenty* years, not ten, and you have to understand that the code is well hidden. It might take me longer than you want for me to retrieve it. You'll have to be patient."

Though she truly tried not to, Victoria was frowning when the transporter doors re-opened a minute later and he stepped out into the main tech lab at the center of the Technical Research

Facility where Arthur One – and Arthur Two, Arthur Three, and every other Arthur all the way up to Arthur 77, worked day and night on keeping the Field and all of its equipment running smoothly.

This main lab was currently empty. Only Arthur One had the transporter code to take them there. She had never seen this room from the inside before. It was as white as Room 55 of the TGB, but it beeped and whirred and was filled with computers that looked like people, but were somehow – *not*.

It instantly gave Victoria the creeps. But she suppressed her shudder, figuring it would be considered rude, and told herself to focus on the task at hand. Make the deal. Get the code.

Then get out.

She didn't like having to do this. She didn't like the idea of going against Game Control regulations. She felt like the line between light and dark was becoming blurred for her. First, there was the practice at night without her Game band. Then the lie that she'd told to Max. And now this. It wasn't nice. It wasn't her.

But she had no choice.

"This way," Arthur One spoke over his shoulder, gesturing for her to follow him back through the stacks of machinery and wires and body parts and toward a hall at the other end of the main room.

They walked down this hall and turned a corner into yet another room filled with machinery, but this one was more orderly. There were no body parts. No loose wires. Against one wall was the TRF's mainframe computer. All forty square feet of it.

In front of the gigantic beeping, blinking panel was a single plush, white leather chair. It looked to Victoria like a captain's chair in its isolated self-importance.

Against the wall on the far side and directly opposite the main frame was a couch, two love seats, and a coffee table with a marble white and black chess set atop it. The white king's pawn had already been moved, expectantly, two spaces forward.

"Go ahead and have a seat, Red. I'll get started. You may as well get comfortable, because it's going to take me a while."

"Define 'a while,'" she said.

"Probably longer than you want to wait, and definitely longer than I want to take, but hopefully not so long that our deal will be void. Good enough?" he asked.

She bit her lip again. And then she caught herself and wrapped her arms around her chest instead. "Fine. But please hurry."

He nodded and she turned and made her way to the couch.

"Just out of curiosity, why do you need to leave the Field?" Arthur asked as he sat down in his plush white "captain's" chair and began pressing buttons and flicking switches.

Victoria sat down, watched him, and considered her answer. She was getting a bad taste in her mouth already, just thinking about the lie she would probably have to tell him. She couldn't let him in on the Game between her and Black. That was a given.

But maybe she didn't need to be that specific...

She began to formulate a response in her mind; one that was not necessarily a lie, but was not a whole truth, either.

However, before she had drawn a full breath to give him an answer, something vibrated beneath her on the couch. It felt strange – like a very, very small electric current, such as the one you would get accidentally touching a fork to the bottom of a boiling pot of water on an electric stove.

Only, this vibration shot through her whole body.

She blinked and was about to ask Arthur if he knew what it was, when it happened again. Stronger than the first one. Some of her muscles tensed up a little under the electric current and her teeth pressed together.

As Victoria's innate alarm bells began to ring, distantly, inside of her mind, a third electric current hit her. This time, it was hard and fast and it hurt like hell. Pain shot up her spine as the lab around her seemed to tilt and she feared she would slide into the right wall. She was helpless to avoid it when her back arched off of the couch and stars erupted behind her lids as the gripping pressure of the electricity suddenly forced them shut.

Miraculously, she didn't slide across the room to slam into the wall. Instead, the current released her and she slumped, stunned senseless by the terrible electric shock that was gone as quickly as it had come.

"That was a doozy, wasn't it?"

Arthur's voice. It sounded hollow; as if it was coming to her through a tunnel. It was punctuated by an erratic drum beat that kind of hurt. She was pretty sure it was her heart.

"See, the thing is, that couch is actually constructed of a very fine wire and leather mesh material." He laughed. "You can't see the metal in it, but it's there. And it's solid gold. An excellent conductor of electricity."

There was a shift of weight and she was being lifted. Set down again.

And Arthur's voice was in her ear. "I've been playing with the effects of electric charges over the last twenty years. I've perfected a certain type of conductivity, which renders a human's musculature unresponsive for anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, depending on the individual."

She couldn't answer him. She couldn't talk. She couldn't even open her eyes.

She could barely breathe.

“I could just turn you over to GC for asking me to give you that code, you know.”

Those alarm bells were ringing loud and clear for Victoria now. “But I won’t,” he said, and she felt her erratic, painful heart beat speed up ever so slightly. “No, princess” he continued, “I have something much more fun in mind.”

Chapter Eight

Arthur One couldn't believe his luck. The most beautiful girl on the Field walks into his bar and she's not even wearing her Game band – she's defenseless. And then she asks him to go somewhere private with her.

Does it get any better than that?

He laughed out loud. *It's about to*, he thought, darkly. *Just as soon as I get her tied down.*

Victoria could feel Arthur's hands on her body – yanking her arms over her head, spreading her legs. She thanked her lucky stars that she was, at least, still wearing all of her clothes. But her stomach felt sick and her muscles felt as sore as they normally did two days after a grueling work-out in one of the training rooms at the TGB. That jolt of electricity that had gone through her had tensed every muscle in her body to the point of pain; some had torn and others had stretched beyond their capacity.

She also felt tired. She supposed that was the fault of the electric shock as well.

But she wasn't so tired that she was willing to give up without a fight.

She knew that Arthur would expect her to be without her powers right now, because she wasn't wearing her band. And she suddenly felt more grateful than she'd thought possible that she had decided to go against regulations and practice late at night without it.

If she could look around the room, she could get a feel for what kinds of furniture or fixtures were around her. She could learn what was loose, what was heavy, and what would make a good weapon. But she couldn't lift her head. She could barely force her eyes open – just before they stubbornly fluttered shut again.

They were no longer in the mainframe room. She could tell that much. If they had been, Victoria could at least throw the stupid “captain’s” chair at him. She knew where it was and had a general idea of how heavy it would be. But nothing here, in this room, was familiar to her.

It was some kind of bedroom. And she only knew that because she was on a bed. She could feel it beneath her.

She could smell it, too. It smelled as if he should have washed the sheets a week ago. Maybe two. It smelled like sweat, a hint of morning breath, and something else... something that made her mind flash to scenes of twisted bodies and heavy breathing and moans of – pleasure? *Pain*?

She tried to talk. “... let ... go...” Her voice wasn’t quite working yet. She couldn’t make the muscles of her throat form the words correctly, and her breathing was too shallow.

“Don’t try to talk, princess. It’ll take you longer to readjust if you do. And nothing you can say is going to make me change my mind, anyway.” He punctuated his last words with a tight pull of the rubber-encased wire that he’d wrapped around her left ankle and secured to the baseboard of his bed.

Victoria felt bile inch up her esophagus. She tried to swallow to keep it down, but the burning, aching attempt only failed when her muscles wouldn’t respond and she suddenly tasted the iron-acid bitterness at the back of her mouth.

She could always set him on fire.

But she had never tried to light anything on fire without her Game band before. What if she lost control of that ability? The results could be disastrous. She could not only kill Arthur – but kill herself as well. Destroy the entire room – and whatever lay beyond.

Was it worth it?

Arthur One finished tying her down and then came to stand beside her at the edge of the bed. She forced her eyes open once more to stare up at him. The look she saw there, in the depths of

those lewd, hungry brown eyes, caused more bile to slide inexorably toward the back of her tongue.

It was worth it. She made up her mind.

“... Warning you...” she croaked.

He threw back his head and laughed.

That did it.

She closed her eyes and pictured his brown hair as nothing but a mass of red, orange and yellow flames. She felt the swirl of energy begin to churn and eddy inside of her. She imagined it fanning out, riding down her arms and legs, and leaving her body.

She watched those flames in her mind’s eye. She felt their heat. So much heat. Crackling, popping, rising, feeding off of the oxygen in the room.

FIRE.

The sudden shriek from beside the bed was all of the reward she needed. It was her blessed confirmation that the attempt had been successful.

As Arthur babble-screamed incoherently and backed away from the bed, Victoria’s strength flooded back to her, aided in its return by the use of her abilities. She thought of her muscles, torn or weak or over-stretched inside of her body.

She imagined them healed. Whole. Strong.

And they were. She flexed to make sure, and was pleased with the results.

Then she turned her concentration outward, to the wires at her wrists and ankles. She opened her eyes and looked up, arching her neck to get a view of her hands. Two red wires bit into the skin around her wrists and were wrapped in knots around the wooden posts at the head of the bed.

She focused on the one around her left wrist just as Arthur One's screams pitched up an octave in pain.

The wires began to slide and slip and soon, her left wrist was free. She used her left hand to free her right and then she sat up. She glanced around the room hurriedly, taking everything in even as she went to work on the wires around her legs.

Arthur had backed up against one wall and was flailing madly; his clothing had caught on fire, as had the curtains that he'd undoubtedly brushed against at some point. Heat from the flames was roiling outward and if Victoria hadn't been a very powerful light leader, the high temperatures would have been uncomfortable to her at this point.

As it was, she could feel their growing warmth like a warning. She could sense that the fire was growing out of control. If too many more things were allowed to catch, then she would not be able to force the flames back down again when she was free.

She finished releasing both legs and then slid quickly off of the bed. She backed up toward the room's single, white metal door and once more looked around.

There was a window against one wall. Curtains had been drawn, but were now on fire. There was a dresser against another wall. The closet door was open; uniforms, two pairs of shoes.... The floor was marble. There was a big leather chair beside the closet – or was it leather and *gold mesh*?

She took all of this in within milliseconds and then returned her attention to Arthur. He was completely engulfed by flame at this point and his flailing was beginning to slow. He dropped to his knees.

Victoria swallowed forcefully, trying to get past the distracting bitter bile taste in her mouth enough to pull together the energy she would need to squelch the flames.

She closed her eyes and saw Arthur whole again. Without the fire. Dressed in his white uniform and white leather boots, his short black hair un-touched by the blazing fingers that encircled him now. She saw his brown eyes in his wrinkle-free face with its weak chin and too-wide mouth and small nose. She saw his skinny neck and the collar of his jacket, all the way down to the small cheese stain just below the zipper lock on his left pocket.

She kept the image and its details clearly in her mind and allowed the tentacles of her power to unwind and expand once more. As she did so, the heat in the room subsided. The crackling and popping of rising flames quieted and died down. Finally, Arthur's screeching wails hushed to whimpers – and then into silence.

Victoria opened her eyes.

"*You...*" Arthur knelt a few feet away, his entire form shaking from head to foot. He was whole again. Completely healed. As if he had not been on fire only seconds before. He looked down at his hands, turning them over in disbelieving fascination. He felt the hair on his head. And then he looked at Victoria as if she were a monster, the devil, a pile of vomit – or all three wrapped into one. "*You... evil, temptress bitch!*" His voice shook as he spat his accusation. "*How dare you?*"

Victoria had never before made a person catch completely on fire before. Not even on the Field. The closest she'd ever come was to singe an opponent's hair when he'd been about to stab Simon in the back after he'd promised a truce.

There had been no pain involved. It had only been a warning.

This was different. This was crossing a line. And that darkness drew ever closer...

Though she was almost as shocked at what she had done as Arthur was, Victoria knew enough about strategy to realize that now was also not the time to show it. An attack meant nothing if you didn't follow up on it, plant your feet, and stand your ground.

So, she forced her body not to begin trembling.

She made her heart rate slow down.

“Give me the code, Arthur. Or I will light you up again and I’ll leave you in here to die that way.” She knew that burning the way he had been burning had to hurt like nothing he’d ever imagined. She was hoping the memory of the pain, alone, would serve to coerce his cooperation.

“*Fuck* you.” He hissed.

Victoria wasted no time. She narrowed her gaze.

Energy coursed through the room and the bed began to rise slowly off of the ground. Arthur glanced nervously at it. It rose a foot. Then two. And then it hovered in the air, three feet above the marble before it suddenly spun around like a top and then went flying past Arthur toward Victoria. She dropped into a roll, moving out of the way as the bed slammed into the door behind her and lodged itself against the only official exit in the room, effectively blocking it.

Victoria came to her feet once more and returned her glare to Arthur, a small smile playing about her pretty lips. Then she looked at the window. The metal frame around the glass began to heat up and melt. It dropped in columns from the top of the window to the sill below and then instantly cooled, forming bars across the glass.

That exit was now blocked as well.

“Last chance, Arthur. Get back to the console and figure out the code or I’m going to melt your boots into your feet. It’ll hurt. A lot.”

Arthur One glanced from the windows to the blocked door and back to Victoria again. He glared at her. Looked at the door one last time. And then he twitched.

“F-fine. B-but the console is in the other room. And you’ve locked us in.” He accused. His face was sulky. Angry. His eyes were a little too wide and shiny.

Victoria shook her head. “Nonsense.” She rushed forward then, with the kind of speed that only a light leader could possess, and grabbed his arm. She spun them both around and ran straight for the wall. Arthur screamed-

And then his scream died down into another whimper after they’d gone straight through the wall and come out on the other side, unscathed. They were in the main frame lab again.

Victoria had melded them through the wall. It was another light leader ability – and one that she, again, had never before used off of the Field.

“Now get to work, Arthur. Don’t piss me off and don’t make me wait.” She commanded.

He spun around and glared at her some more. He opened his mouth as if to say something – and then shut it again when she crossed her arms in front of her chest and gazed at him through the tops of her very gold eyes.

He turned away from her and stormed to the “captain’s” chair in front of the giant main frame console and angrily threw himself into it. With a final fuming glance cut in Victoria’s direction, he began to move his hands over the controls.

Victoria watched him with a growing sense of unease. She wished she had the dark leader power to read minds. Then she would know whether he was actually searching for the code or not. He could very well be messing with her – trying to waste time until someone started looking for him. Or even alerting Game Control to her plans.

But if he was, they couldn’t get into the lab without his personal access code, right?

Which, if they were from Game Control, they would most certainly have.

She bit her lip. Her stomach was churning with apprehension. It was time for another lie.

And the line between light and dark blurred a little more...

“You did something to me with that electric charge, Arthur. I have heat building up inside of me again.”

He stopped what he was doing and turned in the chair.

“If you don’t give me the code soon, I won’t have anywhere to go with it. I’ll have to set it free here again. It’ll eat up your lab,” she gestured to the lab around them. “And probably you, too.”

With that, his eyes widened a little, his jaw set in extreme irritation, and he spun back around and faced the console.

Two and a half minutes later, he was turning back to face her. “I have the code.”

“Give it to me.” She said, coming forward.

He didn’t take his eyes off of her as a small metal transporter key slid from a slot on the main frame console and he reached out, grabbed it, and pulled it free. He held it out toward her. It was constructed of solid silver-hued metal, with a series of lines and dots across its flat, rectangular surface.

“Any transporter will work.” He told her through clenched teeth.

She took the key from his hand and went very still. For the second time that afternoon, she wished she had a dark leader power. She really wanted to know what was going on in Arthur’s head at that moment. What had he just given her? Was it truly a code? If so, where would it take her? Beyond the wall? Or straight to Game Control’s front door?

There was no way for her to know.

... one of four... get her beyond the wall... but not the best one...

Victoria blinked.

She’d just heard Arthur’s voice. But he hadn’t spoken. His lips hadn’t moved. His mouth was still closed and he was still shooting daggers at her with his brown eyes.

... hope she drowns...

Victoria straightened a little as a realization, both good and absolutely horrible presented itself to her.

She was hearing his thoughts.

But she was a light leader. It shouldn't be possible.

In fact, there was only one way that it *could* be possible....

She couldn't suppress the shiver that claimed her then.

But she covered it quickly. "You and your fucking electricity, Arthur. You've awakened something inside of me. I feel power here that I didn't feel before. I don't know if I can control it—"

Her act was worthy of some kind of award as she then spun away from him and shoved outward with her right palm, sending the mesh couch, the love seats, the coffee table, and the game of chess flying into the wall behind them. The chess board shattered, as did most of the pieces. And the mesh couch was instantly engulfed in flames.

She had to be honest with herself.

That had felt good.

She spun back around and leaned over his captain's chair, one hand on each arm of the seat, caging him in beneath her. He shrank back into the leather as she glared into his eyes.

"Breathe a word of this to anyone, Arthur One, and I will come for you. You have no clue as to the extent of my abilities. Fire is child's play." She told him. She leaned in even closer so that her lips were mere inches from his. "And if you think that Game Control will stop me before I get to you, just remember this, Arthur." She smiled and she knew it looked as nasty as it felt. "If I have to, I will *die* trying."

With that, she slowly rose and took a step back.

The color had completely drained from Arthur's face and his eyes were the size of tea cups.

... she'll kill me... let her die outside the wall... good riddance...

That was good enough for her.

She turned away from him and strode out of the room. When she was in the hall beyond the main frame lab, she expended a bit more energy and slammed the door shut behind her and then telekinetically moved at least a dozen very large scrap computer parts down the hall to lodge them against the closed door.

For the time being, Arthur was locked in. And from the mess she'd made outside of his only exit, she figured it would take at least another light leader to get him back out again.

Once she had made her way back to the transporter and closed the door behind her, she slumped against the far wall and stared down at the key in her hand. It was shaking. Actually, her hand was shaking. Pretty badly, too.

"I can't believe I did that," she whispered. *I can't believe I did any of it at all. That wasn't me. I set a man on fire. I told him lie after lie. I threatened him and stole from him and locked him in a room without food or water.*

She exhaled a shaky breath and dropped her face into her hands. "What have I become?" she muttered into her palms. *I'm evil. I've become evil! Why else would I suddenly be able to hear his thoughts?*

Tears built swiftly in her eyes and she hurriedly brushed them away, using a touch more force than was necessary. She felt angry, suddenly. Impatient.

"Pull yourself together, Victoria," she hissed. She never accepted regret or guilt from her team members in the middle of a Game. She shouldn't accept it from herself, either. *One does what one must...*

Who had told her that? She couldn't quite remember. But it made sense to her; perhaps now more than ever before.

She pushed herself up off of the wall and straightened her uniform. She smoothed her hair, touched her smoky quartz locket, and felt in her pocket for her compass.

Then she strode to the transporter's console and inserted the small key that Arthur had given her.

At once, every button on the console flashed red and the transporter blurred into impossible motion.

Victoria forced herself to take a few deep, steady breaths.

By the time the transporter slowed again and the walls solidified once more, she was feeling a little better and ready to face the next challenge in Victor Black's god-forsaken Game.

She turned toward the doors and waited.

They slid open with a quiet hiss that was instantly drowned out by the mad rush of water that blasted through the opening and into the transporter cube. Victoria gasped as the impact shoved her hard against the back wall and, in doing so, she inhaled a painful amount of water.

She coughed violently and tried to inhale again, only to get another mouth-full of water. The cube was already full.

Salty... she thought, vaguely, as the water filled spaces in her body where water was never supposed to go.

... hope she drowns... Arthur's mental words came back to her now as her lungs began to scream at her and her head began to pound. Thinking fast, she tried to punch the doors closed again as she treaded water in front of the transporter console, but the doors would not budge.

And then the console began to spark, and currents of electricity began to arc through the water. She could vaguely hear them, though they sounded different than they would have had they been in air instead of water.

Victoria left the console and dove through the open doors into the unknown water beyond. She managed to hold her breath even though every fiber of her aching being was telling her to cough and inhale. *Cough and inhale!*

As she glided and propelled herself through the water, swimming in a salty brine that she could barely see through, she imagined her lungs full of air instead of water.

But it didn't work. They didn't listen. They still hurt and they were still filled with salty liquid, caustic and un-breathable.

And she was drowning. She swam and swam, but there seemed to be no surface to this ocean. Stars swam in her stinging vision. Her toes were going numb in her boots.

Arthur One was going to get his wish, after all.

Chapter Nine

The first thing Victoria noticed was sound. It was a crackling and popping and a slow whoosh-shoosh kind of sound. The whoosh-shoosh was distant. Far off. The crackling and popping, on the other hand, was very close – and Victoria immediately recognized it for what it was.

Fire.

She tried to open her eyes, but when she did, her vision was a mass of blurry orange and black and the air burned her eyes. She closed them again, blinking rapidly to wet the sting away and clear her sight.

“It’s the salt,” a man said. He was somewhere to her left. Beside the fire, which she now realized must be a camp fire, because she could feel something like grass and sand beneath the fingers of her right hand. “Go slow, Victoria. Take it easy.”

She knew that voice. *Max?*

She tried to say his name. But when her lips peeled apart, and she attempted to force air through her wind pipe, it was to find it horribly swollen and incapable of sound. All she managed was a raspy gasp.

“Shh. It’s okay. I’m here.”

It *was* Max. She felt the cool brush of his fingers against her cheek, then her forehead. He was moving the hair out of her face.

“That was close, Victoria.” He sighed and seemed to move away, perhaps sitting back. She still couldn’t tell because her eyes were shut tight. Her world was nothing but feeling and sound. Not even her sense of smell was working right; it was as if her nostrils had been seared with salty acid.

“You were almost at the surface, you know. Another few feet and you’d have made it. You just didn’t know because it’s dark.” He was moving again and she heard the creaking of leather. A downtime uniform jacket? Then there was a muted clunk of thin metal, followed by the sound of pouring liquid.

“Here, drink this. *Slowly.*”

Max wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders and helped her to sit up. She could tell by the feel of him that he’d positioned her back against his chest and was kneeling behind her.

He placed a metal cup of some kind to her lips and she still could detect no scent. She hesitated.

“It’s water,” he said, “and not salt water this time.” His voice was very slightly reprimanding, and perhaps a bit impatient. But gentle, none the less.

Victoria took a sip. It hurt to swallow and almost instantly turned her stomach. It was just water. Why did it have that effect?

“You almost drowned, Victoria,” Max told her as he gently laid her back down. She once more tried to open her eyes to look up at him and, this time, managed to see the outline of the fire a few feet away and the dark shadow of Max’s tall form as he moved about the camp.

She rubbed her eyes, ignoring the burn, and wondered exactly what was injured within her body so that she could concentrate on healing it. When she removed her hand and opened her eyes again, they were clearer, but burned worse than before.

A shining and sharp long sword was resting against a boulder on the other side of the camp fire. It was Max’s sword. He must have taken it off. Its scabbard lay on the ground beside it, along with a dagger, also in its sheath, and a small metal canteen – Field issue.

A few feet closer to Victoria, Max was bent over a leather sack, searching for something. As if he could sense her eyes on him, he stopped what he was doing and peered at her over his shoulder.

Victoria would have gasped at that stark blue gaze if doing so had been possible. As it was, however, all she could do was stare back at him in wonder of his appearance. He was wearing black, which she had never before seen him wear. The dark color caused his wavy shoulder-length hair to look darker than normal and his eyes to look lighter – brighter. They were so stark in his handsome face.

He looked good in black.

He had a bit of stubble on his chin, the way he always did after they'd been on the Field a few days in a battle against another team. It lent him a rugged and careless air. And right now, it made him look like a rogue playboy.

It almost didn't fit his demeanor. He was always so careful and capable and responsible. But right now, he looked like he could easily bed a woman and leave her in the morning.

Victoria blushed at that thought. She could feel the heat of it rush across her neck and up into her cheeks. She knew that Max had seen it when the blue in his eyes sparked with perceptive interest and the corners of his mouth drew up in a slight smile.

But then Victoria tried to sit up and her ribs and lungs ached as she moved. She winced and watched as Max's smile disappeared. He stood and made his way back to her side.

"Why are you moving? You should rest." He chided her even as he helped her sit up again, as if he knew that arguing with her stubborn nature would be useless.

She wanted to ask him what had happened. The last thing she remembered, she was in a transporter cube and the doors had opened into what could only have been the ocean. She had been trying to find the surface. And failing.

She had been drowning.

And then she was waking up here... on solid ground – with Max.

She opened her mouth to speak, and this time managed a croak that was almost half a sentence. She cleared her throat violently, frustrated at her inability, and when she felt the painful protest of a throat that had been grated raw, she decided enough was enough. At least had something to concentrate on healing.

She held up her finger in a gesture that meant “wait a minute,” and then closed her eyes. She imagined her throat, her lungs, her ribs, and everything in between as *healed*. Whole. Normal. Healthy.

As these images solidified in her mind, she released a tendril of power and felt it uncoil and lift, snaking through her body until it brushed its healing fingers against the tender flesh that burned so persistently. Within a few seconds, the burning ceased and Victoria reigned in her power and opened her eyes.

She cleared her throat. This time, there was no pain.

“What happened?” She asked. “How did you get here? Where are we?” She looked around, but all she saw was night beyond the blinding flames of the camp fire. A cool breeze rustled some tall grass in that darkness and then moved through the small clearing to breathe against her exposed skin. She looked down to find that her downtime uniform had been removed. All she wore was a white tank top and matching underwear.

She gasped and hurriedly covered herself with her arms, shooting a horrified look towards her captain. “And where are my clothes!”

Max sighed and shook his head, but his smile was back. “Your clothes were soaked,” he told her. He gestured to where they had been laid out on rocks near the fire. “They’re drying. You can put them on now if you don’t mind chafed skin.”

“I can heal chafed skin.”

“If the clothes are wet, you’ll have to do it over and over again. Can you do that too?” He teased.

She pursed her lips. “Okay, at least give me a blanket.” It was a ridiculous request, she knew, but she was feeling a bit off at the moment.

“I don’t have one. But you’re welcome to this,” He stood then and, as always, Victoria was impressed with the captain’s imposing height. He curled his fingers under the hem of the black shirt he’d worn and began to raise it up over his head. Victoria automatically wondered why he wasn’t wearing a matching uniform jacket. It wasn’t cold out here, but for the slight cool breeze. However, the ensemble of pants, shirt, jacket, and boots was the standard mode of dress for everyone on the Field.

Max quickly lifted the black t-shirt over his head and Victoria watched in muted appreciation as the toned muscles of his abdomen and chest rippled with the movement.

There was that blush again.

When he handed his shirt to her, she stood to take it. It was then that she realized the reason he wasn’t wearing the matching jacket was because she had been sitting on it. He had laid her down on the black coat and a thick patch of green grass in a beach of fine white sand.

Her blush deepened. As did Max’s smile.

His eyes were sparkling when she finally turned away from him so that she could pull his shirt on over her meager under garments with some pretended semblance of privacy. When she turned back around, he was still watching her. And that gaze seemed to have gained solid, tangible weight.

His eyes remained locked on hers when he bent to retrieve his jacket from where she'd left it on the ground. He straightened and slipped it back over his broad shoulders, his movements slow and deliberate.

He looked hungry.

The partial cover he now wore over his sculpted form only made Victoria want to brush the edges of the leather jacket aside and open him back up to her view all the more.

Crap, she thought, suddenly. Even as warmth spread across her stomach and her legs began to feel heavy, she felt angry, too. At herself. *What the hell is wrong with me? I can't jump my captain's bones right here outside the Field wall with Victor Black hot on my tail!*

She ran a rough hand through her long damp locks and tore her gaze from his body to stare, fixedly, at the orange and gold flames of the camp fire. When she did, they jumped a few inches, crackling and popping with new hyperactivity. Victoria had to remind herself to remain calm so that the fire did not inadvertently react to her aroused state.

I'm running from Victor Black, I was almost raped by Arthur One, I set a man on fire, stole a breach code, and nearly drowned – and now, despite my efforts, Max is embroiled in this mess, too.

She was suddenly dumbfounded by the sheer magnitude of the situation and the realization made her go strangely cold and numb.

I need to calm my ass down and concentrate on getting us out of this disaster waiting to happen.

She couldn't believe that Max was here with her at that moment. How in the world had he found her? And why had even gone looking, in the first place?

“Okay,” she finally sighed, crossing her arms over her chest and attempting to ignore the fact that she looked like a child, draped in his overly-large shirt. She turned back around to face him, forcing her gaze to his blue eyes and not his partially exposed chest. “How did you find me?”

Max eyed her in silence for a moment. His expression was unreadable.

And then he cocked his head slightly to one side and asked a question of his own. “Why did you venture beyond the wall?”

“Crap, Max...” Victoria felt helpless. “You saved my life, so I can’t say that I’m not happy you found out, but this is honestly not how I wanted this to play out.”

“Play out?” He asked. He still gave no outward indication as to his mood. But Victoria had known him a long time. She could almost feel the storm building behind the deceptive blue of his eyes.

“Yes,” she said. “*Play*.” She sighed again and moved to the rocks where her clothes had been laid out. She lifted them to test their dampness and when she found they were still quite wet, she considered drying them telekinetically.

But she was a little tired. Why rush it? She wasn’t cold.

And she liked wearing Max’s shirt. It smelled good.

So she moved her clothes over to make room and sat down on the rock next to them. Then she pulled the large shirt over her knees and hugged them both to her chest. “Victor Black approached me at the TGB the other day.”

Max stiffened. She could see it, and she knew she had his attention, whether she wanted it or not.

“He offered me a deal.” She swallowed hard. “More or less.”

Max said nothing. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

“He proposed a Game. Private. Just between us. Seven rounds, as usual. Only I didn’t have to beat him. I just had to escape him. If he was able to capture me, then I –” Her voice caught and her eyes widened just a touch. She quickly looked away. She felt strange. Hot and cold. The memory of her conversation with Black was bringing her nerve endings to life. She could see the nearly glowing emerald green of his eyes so clearly. She could hear the sound of his accented voice. So deep and intoxicating. She could see the blue tint to his ultra-black hair and recall how she’d wanted to touch it.

This wasn’t good.

It was disconcerting. And to add to that, repeating the conditions of the Game to Max felt suddenly like... *cheating*. She was letting someone else in on their secret. Was she breaking the rules? Would Black consider this a forfeit?

How would he even know?

He can read my mind, she thought, ruefully. *He’ll know*.

When she looked back up at Max, it was to find that the storm building inside of him had made its way to the blue of his eyes. They were visibly darker than before. His entire visage was grim.

“You made a deal with Victor Black.” His voice was tight, his tone low. It wasn’t a question.

So, she didn’t answer him.

“I don’t need to ask what he wanted from you, Victoria.” Despite the fact that she was dressed in a tent of a shirt that hid her figure from him, his blue eyes blazed a hot trail down her body and back up again.

Victoria’s stomach knotted and her heart rate kicked up a notch.

“But I *will* ask you what Black could possibly offer *you* that was so important it was worth breaching the wall and leaving the Field.”

He was pinning her to the spot with this question. But she was the team leader – not him. And not only did she not want to answer his question, he still hadn't answered hers.

"Max, how did you find me?" She repeated, this time allowing a touch of the power she possessed as a light leader to weight her words.

His head raised a little and he peered at her through narrowed blue slits. "Very well. Another Gamer saw you leave the TGB with Arthur One. I don't trust the man – never have." He paused and looked down at the ground. "So, I transported to his lab and Arthur and I had a little talk."

Victoria blinked. "You what?"

"He gave me a transporter code to get past the wall, but there are four codes – and I knew he wouldn't give me the same one he gave you. It's beyond obvious how he feels about you." His expression hardened, something dangerous flashing in his blue eyes. "So, when he let it slip that I was 'probably too late anyway,' I knew he'd sent you into the Mare."

Victoria was stunned. Everything Max was telling her was mind-boggling. How had he made it into Arthur's lab without the code? How had he gotten past all of the junk that she'd shoved up against the door of the inner lab using her telekinesis? How had Max at last retrieved the breach code for the Mare Ocean from Arthur One once he'd realized what the techie had done?

It was too much. She didn't know which question to ask first. And she was feeling sort of dizzy.

"Here," Max moved with deft speed, closing the distance between them in two long strides and bending to retrieve the canteen of water that he'd left on the ground before. "Drink this. You're dehydrated. You vomited something like a hundred times when I was reviving you. That's why your throat hurt so bad."

Another deep flush of red swept across Victoria's face and neck, but this one was born of embarrassment. She took the canteen from him and brought it to her lips.

“Go slow. Don’t drink too much or you’ll just retch again.”

“Do you have to keep making barfing references?”

Max smiled, looking sheepish. “Sorry.” He knelt beside her as she tilted the canteen and took a drink. “For what it’s worth, you’re a very dainty puker.”

She nearly choked on the water. But, instead, managed to finish swallowing and then lowered the canteen, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “Please!”

Now Max laughed. It was a deep, contagious chuckle that awakened those damn flutterbies in Victoria’s stomach. She tried to hide her reaction to him, but his eyes were very blue. And he was very close.

Finally, he settled down and sighed, still smiling. “I suppose you want to know how I managed to remove all of the furniture and computer equipment you stacked against Arthur’s door.”

Victoria’s eyes widened a little. She nodded.

“And I bet you’re wondering how I managed to get the key code to gain entrance to Arthur’s lab in the first place.”

“Well...” she stammered. “Yes, actually.”

“Let’s just say that I’ve spent a fair share of time training Simon Roon. And Simon spends a good deal of time with books.” At that, he flashed her a brilliant, meaningful smile, and she couldn’t help but smile back.

Simon Roon was the bookworm of their team. Intelligent, well-read, and knowledgeable about nearly everything – almost to a fault. Victoria had to admit that if anyone could figure out how to gain access into Arthur One’s private lab, it would be Simon. But the furniture and computer bits?

“As for the crap you piled up in our way – the Yellow leader owes Ty a favor, so we collected. He telekinesed it down for us and we swore him to secrecy.”

“If Ty and Simon helped you, where are they?” She and Max were alone in their camp. “And where’s April?”

“They were all there in the lab, actually, including April. But once I had the code, I told them I was going alone.” His gaze darkened and his tone lowered. “The fewer of us to break Game Control’s firmest law, the better.”

Victoria sighed. “Oh, Max. I’m so sorry about all of this.”

“What did he offer you, Victoria? What did he promise if he lost?” He asked the question as if he was desperate for some semblance of a sane answer – some clue as to what would make Victoria put her life and her team’s reputation at such risk.

But, the absolute truth was – Victoria had no idea why she’d agreed to play Black’s Game. Yes, he’d thrown his weight around. He had invaded her dreams. He’d threatened her team; in particular, Max. But she hadn’t been without option if she’d decided to turn him down. She could have turned to her team for help. She could have notified Game Control and, despite the probability that they would make the situation difficult for her, in the end, Victor would have regretted cornering her the way he had.

So, why had she said “yes?”

He’d promised he would step down as Gray Leader. After four hundred years in that position, it was quite a pledge. What would it mean? The Gray team would lose more often, that was almost assured. Would it tip the balance at all? As things stood at the moment, light and dark teams seemed to win and lose with a fairly even frequency.

And if it did tip the scales, would that matter at all? After all, it was only a Game. Right? The only reason they continued to play – and to put their all into it – was because if they ever stopped,

the world would die. Of disease. Of starvation. Of strange things that people couldn't clearly recall and no one could really remember.

Why did I agree to do this? She asked herself. *Was it because I want to win?*

Or... She thought of Victor's words, "... *then you'll join me. You'll give yourself to me for one night...*"

He wants me to help him overthrow Game Control. It's insane and impossible and could have disastrous consequences.

And all I can think about is the fact that he wants to bed me.

For the love of the Game, is there seriously a part of me that wouldn't mind losing?

At the unbidden thought that snaked so insipidly through her brain, Victoria paled. Max noticed the change in her immediately. His furrowed brow and narrowed gaze intimated as much.

"This isn't good, Victoria," Max muttered, shaking his head as he took in her stricken expression. "I think you and I need to have a serious talk." He rose then and moved back to his pack, where he pulled out two foil wrapped meal bars – the chocolate flavor that Victoria loved so much.

He tucked one smoothly into the interior pocket of his black leather jacket and Victoria caught a glimpse of his perfect chest as he did so. The other bar, he held up in front of him by its wrapper. "Bar for your thoughts."

Victoria stared at the food. It struck her, then, that she hadn't planned on where she was going to get food for the next three days. In fact, she hadn't really done any logical planning at all.

She had simply run.

Why?

Because, she thought, Victor Black is the most powerful man in the world. And he's coming for me. There's no time to plan. No time to think. No time to talk – no time to eat.

"Fine," she said as she stood then and strode to her clothes. She'd come to a decision. With a wave of her hand, she borrowed some of the heat from the fire behind her and sent it through the clothes, drying them instantly. It was easier than creating heat of her own accord and it saved her some precious energy.

Then she gathered them up and told Max to turn around.

He obeyed. Barely. He tucked the second bar into his other interior pocket as he slowly turned to face the other direction.

"I'll fill you in, Max. I owe you that much," Victoria told him. "But we have to talk and walk. We can't stay in one place for long." With a twinge of regret, she pulled Max's shirt over her head and off of her body. The salty sea air caressed her skin, raising goose bumps. She lifted the black garment to her nose and inhaled deeply, enjoying his scent one last secret time before she set the shirt to the side and picked up her pants.

She pulled them on, buttoned them, and then yanked her own, tighter t-shirt over her head. The leather jacket followed. "Okay, you can look now."

Max turned around as Victoria was sitting down on the rock to pull on her boots. "Where are we going?" He asked, softly.

"I have no idea." She shot him a helpless look. "What is there around here?"

"You know as well as I do, Victoria. Gamers aren't exactly educated on the sectors outside of the Field, are they?" He was watching her intently, something unspoken flitting behind the stark blue of his piercing eyes.

“No,” she replied, simply. That was definitely true. Game Control wanted Gamers to forget. *Everything*. They claimed it made it easier for Gamers to accept their roles within the wall, and to cope with the fact that their loved ones in the outside sectors would die long before they did.

“It doesn’t matter,” she finally said. “We’ll just walk.” She stood and waved her hand once more, this time at the camp fire. It instantly went out, smoke and all. “Where there’s a transporter outlet, there have to be people to ride in it, right?”

Max chewed on his cheek. He sighed, shrugged off his jacket again, and scooped up his discarded black shirt. He slipped it on and then retrieved his sword from where it rested against the boulder. Victoria watched as he slid the weapon into its scabbard, which he then strapped to his back, lacing the leather over his shoulders and around his waist.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” he told her as he finished tightening the last straps and then fastened the dagger sheath to the inside of his forearm. “And I trust you’re going to do it.” With that, he shrugged back on his leather jacket, grabbed her by the wrist, and began to walk her out of the clearing.

Victoria was a little startled at the sudden contact. His hand was cold, reminding her of Victor’s. But it had always been that way. Max simply ran cool. What surprised her was that his grip slid from her wrist to her hand, where his fingers then laced themselves with hers. His hold was firm and unyielding.

And very, very personal.

Victoria considered pulling away. For a moment. And, as if he could read her thoughts, his grip tightened. Some kind of dark thrill raced up Victoria’s spine and warmth coiled once more in her belly.

He turned to peer down at her as they walked. “I’m listening,” he prompted, pulling her a touch closer with the hand that held hers.

“Okay,” she started, hesitantly. “Here’s the deal...”

Chapter Ten

You didn't run a team on the playing Field for four hundred years and not learn a thing or two. One of the many things Victor Black had learned was how to extract codes from various computer consoles located throughout the Field.

Doing it while invisible was an added measure of security. Doing it while invisible and time had been temporarily stopped around him ensured that he was virtually undetectable.

So, it didn't take long for him to retrieve the code he wanted to get into Arthur One's private lab.

As soon as the sun had gone down on that day, Victor had flown into action, calling in his contacts throughout the Field. Within minutes, he had received word that Victoria Red was last seen with Game Control's head tech, making her way to the TGB transporters.

The strange thing was – no one knew where she was now. It had been just over three hours since she'd stepped into a transporter cube with Arthur One, and no one had seen Victoria since.

Was she foolish enough to have remained with Arthur One in his lab? Would she seriously think that she was safe from Victor there?

Black doubted it. She wasn't that stupid.

So, where was she?

Now, Victor stepped into yet another transporter cube and let the doors slide shut behind him. He entered the code to Arthur's private lab and waited. The cube whirred to life, blurring around its edges as it skated through space to bring him to his destination.

When it stopped and the doors slid open again, Victor faced a vast empty lab – and a wall on the other side, completely covered in stacked furniture and computer parts.

“What the bloody...” His brow furrowed and he scanned the area beyond, not only with his emerald eyes, but with the feelers of his power.

Arthur One was in the room beyond that blocked wall and doorway. Black could sense his mind, like a terrified bird, flitting about in a flight of hysteria. The man was not well.

At once, Victor was on alert, his body and mind ready to fight. Something had gone extremely wrong here and the last person to be seen with Arthur One was Victoria.

With one strong gesture of his gloved hand, Victor waved every item, large and small, away from the wall across the room and sent it flying to the side, where it slammed loudly against the adjacent wall. Some of the items split or cracked before they fell to the marble floor below; others shattered completely. Victor paid them no heed. With a few long strides, he was across the room and standing before the double sliding doors that led to the inner sanctum of Arthur One’s lab.

He reached out and grabbed hold of the man’s mind with his power once more, ruthlessly extracting the code from its depths. As he did so, snippets of other images raced through his thoughts, a side effect of his search through Arthur’s fevered brain.

What he saw and heard there caused his starkly handsome visage to darken into a dangerous mask.

Victoria...

Victor bared his teeth and punched in the code on the pad to his left. The doors slid open. Arthur One was curled in a ball on his side beneath a single, white leather chair, rocking back and forth. He was mumbling about “fire” and “crazy bitches.”

Victor strode to the chair, knocked it aside so that it went sailing back into the wall, and then he reached down and lifted Arthur One from the floor by the lapels of his white jacket.

“You think you’re scared now, mate?” Victor hissed.

Arthur stared down at him, their faces so close, and a whimper escaped his throat. “Wh-what?” he stammered, his brown eyes too wide, his breathing too quick.

Victor smiled a dark smile. “Wait until I’m done with you.” With that, he focused his energy on Arthur’s wild eyes and delved deep.

He was fast and furious and merciless. Every terrifying image he could muster, he sent hurling through the man’s brain, forcing the waking nightmares to take form with terrible detail. He built upon them and dug deeper; the maws of laughing demons grew bile-dripping fangs, bottomless waters darkened with the swimming forms of giant, waiting sea creatures, the walls of Arthur’s mind dripped with blood. Somewhere in the recesses of the techie’s subconscious, he was running from swarms of snakes, insects, and spiders. Ghosts inhabited his robots, changing them from the inside out; the faux women’s fingers sharpened into claws, their hair became a mass of flames that melted their skin, and their perfect vaginas developed rims of slicing, razor-sharp blades.

At length, the light of sanity drained entirely from Arthur One’s eyes and they unfocused, still open but staring at nothing. His breathing became the mumbled mutterings of irreversible psychosis and his body went slack where Victor held him several feet off of the ground.

When drool pooled in the corner of Arthur’s open mouth, Victor let him drop. He took a step back from the prone form of Game Control’s now useless head tech and tried to get himself back under control.

He closed his glowing green eyes and took a deep breath. His head was aching and his hands were shaking. The connection he’d shared with his victim had inadvertently filled his own mind with the images of Victoria’s demise.

And the barely tamped fury that now rushed through his veins like liquid fire was nearly painful. He opened his eyes again and glared down at the fallen techie. It wasn't enough. Madness wasn't enough. He wanted to do it all over again.

How dare he touch her? How dare he *hurt* her?

The things he had been planning to do to her helpless form...

With a roar of rage, Victor spun around and shattered every glass screen on the floor-to-ceiling console of the TRF's mainframe computer. The console began to spark and hiss, and smoke billowed out in thin streams through the seams in the metal. At the same time, a thin coating of rime began to cover the buttons and gauges, spreading across the computer with rapid determination, until it dove through the cracks in the screens and iced the computer over from the inside.

The damage would take a long time to repair.

And it still wasn't enough.

But it would have to do for now. Because one of the most frightening things he'd been able to pull from Arthur One's brain was the fact that the man had given Victoria the transporter breach code that would take her into the Mare Ocean.

That transporter destination had long ago been determined off limits to anyone who knew its code. Apparently, at one time, it stood on firm ground – on a stone pedestal in a city that once rose above the water. No one was certain what had happened. They only knew that, one day, the cube's doors opened into the ocean and not the open pavilion that it had always opened into before.

The city had been destroyed.

Right now, it was night. Victor knew that the darkness would make it that much more difficult for Victoria to make her way to the surface of the water once the transporter opened. She could very well drown.

He didn't have much time – if any at all. She could have pulled herself out long ago. Or she could be dead.

But if neither of those was the case, then she needed help. The ability to stop time was one that Victoria did not have. If he used his now, he was using power that she could not equal. Was he breaking his promise?

Worth saving her life. And, in that light, he didn't care.

So, with that thought, he closed his eyes and concentrated. *Hard.*

With every fiber of his will, he imagined Victoria, beneath the salty brine of the Mare Ocean, struggling to reach its elusive surface. He imagined time slowing down. From the movement of the waves to the frantic beating of Victoria's heart, he forced his power to the brink of its boundaries and wrapped a cold, firm hand around the passage of minutes and seconds and every precious pulse in Red's body. *Slow*, he commanded.

Slow down.

He concentrated harder. Focused until sweat broke out along his brow.

Slow down.

And then – *Stop.*

It did stop.

He opened his eyes. He had no idea how long the effect would hold. And with that thought, he turned and raced from Arthur One's lab, back toward the transporters.

* * * *

Victoria walked in silence beside Max. Her mind worked overtime. Something about what Max had shared with her felt out of place. It gave her that strange sensation that one gets when they know they've left something behind on a trip, but can't recall what it was. Not for the life of them.

She felt like she was forgetting something. Failing to notice something.

But she was tired. She'd used quite a bit of power in Arthur's lab. She'd just used a bit more to dry her clothes and put the fire out and heal herself. And she was hungry. It was fouling up her ability to concentrate.

Max stopped beside her and turned toward her. Victoria stepped back when he pulled a bar from the inner pocket of his jacket and held it out for her once more. How had he known?

She shook her head and smiled, taking the bar from him with resignation. They'd worked together too long. He practically knew her thoughts at this point.

"Thanks, Max. I sort of, well..."

"Forgot to pack?"

She frowned. *Yes*. But they'd already been over that. She knew that she'd jumped the gun and fled the Field without planning properly and she already admitted that it wasn't like her and was probably a little stupid.

How many times was he going to bring it up?

"Yes, but I really didn't think I had a choice," she said, stubbornly, as she yanked the bar out of his hand and ripped the wrapper off with angry gusto. "Time was of the essence, remember? Hell, I barely made it past the wall before night fall, as it was."

"You almost died, as it was, too."

Okay! She shot him an incredibly irritated look. *You mentioned that a few times, as well!* She thought, but kept her mouth shut. She was frankly tired of arguing. They'd been fighting, off and

on, for more than a mile now. She'd come clean and told him everything. Well... everything except the part about the dream Victor had sent her.

She didn't think Max really needed to know about that.

And as he had listened, his black-clad form had become more rigid. Tense. His expression became more closed off and his blue eyes began to look as if they would actually be cold to the touch. In fact, his touch *had* turned a little colder.

It was probably just her imagination – her perception of his sudden “cold” demeanor. But it was enough to make her let go of his hand. Reluctantly, he allowed her to slip away.

And then he'd started in on her. He was angry about the stakes that Victor had set on the Game, and that was an clearly obvious. However, he was also angry that she hadn't trusted him or confided in him. He was upset that Victoria had not come to him for help when she'd needed him.

She'd tried to tell him that it wasn't his job. It wasn't his place. And that she was trying to protect her team, as was her duty.

That had only pissed him off more.

And so it went.

They would yell and then settle down and yell some more. Now, they seemed to be losing their argumentative steam. And Victoria was beginning to get worried. Not about herself or Max or their differences, either.

They'd gone several miles and hadn't come to a settlement yet.

There should have been something there. Anything. Even one of those fishing villages that were talked of so frequently in Simon's ancient books.

But there was nothing but sandy shoreline, a billion white stars, and an unknown darkness that stretched off into the land and beckoned with its mystery.

Victoria took a bite of her chocolate meal bar and wondered where Victor was now. Had he discovered that she'd left the Field? How far had he gotten?

How close is he?

And then she shivered.

"Cold?" Max asked, his jaw rather tight.

She shook her head. "No. I was just..." *Thinking about Black.*

Max waited, arching a brow. His expression told her that he didn't expect her to finish her sentence – and that he was disappointed in her inability to open up to him.

Victoria turned away from him and looked out over the dark shoreline. The tide was receding and she could make out the outlines of strange objects that were now visible in the smooth, wet sand.

I wonder what those are...

She took another bite of her bar and began to head in that direction.

"Where are you going?" Max asked, his tone irritated.

"We're not getting anywhere anyway," Victoria told him, flatly. "And I've never seen any of this stuff before...." She blinked. "I think." She had a funny feeling inside. There was a round, disc-like white stone in front of her feet. Its edges had sunk a little into the sand, but it positively gleamed up at her.

She bent to pick it up and was surprised to find that it was very light. She shook it and her suspicion that it was hollow was confirmed when something inside rattled.

There are angels inside...

Victoria froze. That hadn't been her own voice in her head. And she would recognize that accent anywhere.

There was a chuckle, deep and soft and oh, so familiar. *Five of them, luv. Break it open and you'll see for yourself.*

Victoria spun around to face Max and the horrified look on her face must have told her captain all he needed to know because, in one fluid movement, he both pulled his sword and rushed forward, grabbing her wrist once more to pull her away from the shore and toward the darkness that waited inland.

They moved with incredible speed, even though Max could run nowhere near as fast as a light leader could.

Or a dark leader, for that matter. Along with a knack for telekinesis, both kinds of leaders possessed unnatural speed. And Victor Black and Victoria Red were the fastest leaders around.

How is he doing this? They ran over the sand, kicking up sprays of the miniscule pebbles behind them as they moved. Victoria's heart pounded. How could she hear Victor in her head? As a dark leader, he could read minds – but project his thoughts? That had never been done before.

Not between a light leader and a dark leader.

But between *two dark* leaders.... Theoretically, it was possible.

Victoria almost groaned inwardly, but was too frightened and was running too fast to make any sound at all.

Where are you, Black? She wondered.

I'm here, luv.

She nearly gasped at the sound. It was so close. She yanked her wrist free of Max's grasp and came to a stop. "No, Max!" She hissed at him, trying to keep her voice down, but feeling like screaming. "He's after me – not you. And I can run faster than you."

"No way in hell," Max growled, grabbing her by the upper arm this time.

She used her light leader strength to pull away from him again. His gaze narrowed, his grip on his sword tightening. “Don’t you dare do this, Victoria.”

You breached the wall. Clever girl. But bringing the captain along? Black chuckled again and the sound vibrated through her body. Her nipples hardened.

Tsk, tsk, he scolded. This doesn’t concern him.

Victoria stiffened, listening to the smooth, cool voice in her head. It was definitely louder now. Closer. *Much* closer.

She frantically glanced around, but saw nothing. That didn’t mean anything, of course. Victor Black could become invisible.

The bastard was too fucking powerful.

“I’m not arguing with you any more,” she told Max. And then, before he could object, she lifted him with her telekinesis and sent him flying twenty feet back, to land safely on a dune of sand. He was up on his feet with incredible, deft ease, but by the time he was once more racing toward her, Victoria had already broken into a full-out run in the other direction – toward the shadowed unknown that waited long past the shore line.

She wished that she could fly. It was supposed to be a light leader ability, but she’d yet to learn of anyone actually having manifested it. How did Game Control even know that it was a light ability in the first place? If they’d never seen it done...

Her mind was wandering, skating around in hyper chaos as she sped across the ground so fast that anyone watching from outside would have seen her form blur as it passed. She had no idea where she was going and she had no clue what she would do when she got there.

And she wasn’t at all sure that leaving Max alone on that beach had been the best plan. She just hadn’t wanted him to get hurt.

And Victor was so strong.

So, she ran. And the forest loomed closer before her.

* * * *

Victor stood still, watching with keen admiration and interest, as the object of his desire drew nearer. She was running straight for him.

And she had no idea.

She was probably mad as hell at him at that moment. He'd invaded her mind. She would think he was breaking his word not to use any power she could counter with on equal footing. Not that he cared about the promise – especially after he'd already broken it once to save her life.

But the truth was, he wasn't breaking it in this, anyway. He'd sensed her burgeoning darkness. Telepathic ability was burgeoning to life within her. He didn't know why. Maybe it was Arthur One. What she'd been forced to do to him.

But regardless, without that awakening talent, he would not have been able to communicate with her in that manner. He wondered if she would ever realize that....

As to his invisibility – yes. He was being a bastard.

And he didn't care.

As she gained ground, he focused his power through the blur of her motion and took in her form. She was dressed in a downtime uniform. But around her neck, she wore a smoky quartz crystal on a delicate chain.

He inhaled sharply and his heart skipped a beat. His hands came away from where he'd been clasping them easily behind his back.

Suddenly, she stopped, and he instinctively went as still as she did.

She was still a good thirty yards away from the tree line, where he stood waiting for her. But she came no closer. Instead, her brow furrowed and she cocked her head to one side, as if

listening. Her eyes scanned the tree line, skating right over him. The gold in their lovely depths flashed brightly.

So beautiful, he thought.

... you're there!

Victor blinked, his eyes widening. She was better at this than he'd thought.

... can hear you... Black...

When his initial shock subsided, his lips parted in a predatory smile. She was a quick study. He was, again, impressed.

Where are you!

The demand was nearly shouted into his mind.

He moved with speed that matched her own and, suddenly, he was standing beside her and bending to whisper in her ear. "The first round is nearly over, Victoria. Do you admit defeat?"

She whirled around and narrowed her golden gaze. He saw her next move coming before she made it and was able to counter before she could wave her hand and send his invisible body flying into a tree trunk, which would have undoubtedly caused his invisibility to falter.

He had moved out of range, but still close enough to rush forward and grab her if she tried to run again.

He watched her closely, noting the frustration in her lovely features. She realized that he'd moved when she most likely felt an emptiness at the end of her mental rope. She lowered her hand and tried to quiet her breathing. She peered through the darkness surrounding her.

Her long, golden hair was wavier than usual because of the sea air. It caused ringlets to frame her beautiful face and the ends of her long, thick locks curled preciously at the small of her back. Her skin glowed, pore-less and peach, her cheeks flushed with fear and adrenaline and the exercise she'd just had.

Her lips were parted and he could see her straight, white teeth where they rested behind the plump, pink pillow of her bottom lip. He wanted to kiss that lip. To bite down gently and then deepen the kiss, forcing her to open to him. *Open...*

Victoria gasped and whirled around again, this time coming to face him properly. She searched the area directly around him with a fierce tenacity and Victor realized his mistake. He hadn't meant to lose control of his thoughts that way. He'd let it slip and it had met her mind with a sense of direction. Which she'd latched onto with adept skill.

"Show yourself," she commanded.

"Very well." He let his invisibility drop. There was no point to it now, anyway.

Victoria's eyes seemed to widen when they fell on his now visible form. He watched her gaze slide to his hair and then to his shoulders and then to his eyes and he could swear that she blushed then.

She tore her gaze away and the blush deepened and a semblance of hope leaped to life within Black.

She wanted him. It was undeniable.

And, if she wanted him half as badly as he wanted her, then there was definitely hope.

"Are you going to come willingly, Victoria, or shall we have it out here and now?" He asked her, intimating that he'd won – and in the first round of their Game, no less.

"I think we'll have it out here and now," came a voice from behind them. They both turned to look just as Max rushed forward from whatever darkness he'd been hiding in and swung his sword toward Victor's head.

* * * *

There was a moment of horrible awareness for Victoria, when she feared that Max might be successful in his attack – and then *realized* that she feared Max might be successful.

And then some old brain instinct within her took over. Self preservation kicked in and she turned around to run once more.

Within seconds, she was crashing through the underbrush of the dense forest in front of her and racing deeper and deeper into the woods with every pounding step she took and every drumming of her heart.

After what seemed like hours, but was most likely mere minutes, she came to a stop. There was no sound from the forest around her. There was only the heavy hitching of her quick, tired breathing. She had no idea how she'd managed to make it so deep into the forest without falling. Or smacking into something horrible.

She only knew that she was here now. Lost and alone. And that Max was back on the shore, fighting with Victor Black.

He didn't stand a chance.

Chapter Eleven

There was no time to duck; the sword's heavy, razor-sharp blade was going to split his skull wide open.

So, Victor *created* time. He'd never had to do it that this before and he'd never been forced to do so in order to save his own skin. It was a sobering moment in perpetuity and one that instantly chilled him to an even colder degree than normal.

But he managed it.

His efforts afforded him an extra precious second and a half to dodge to the side before Blood's sword finished its downward arc. The flashing blade sliced with ease through the black leather of Victor's jacket and onward into the thick muscle of his bicep before he could completely roll away.

Victor hissed and bared his teeth, hitting the ground to kick up sand and dust and then come up with his booted feet beneath him. He could feel his eyes glowing now; it was like a pressure and a heat and everything came into sharp focus. It happened when he was angry. Or in pain. Or when he dreamed about Victoria Red.

But his eyes weren't the only ones glowing.

Maxwell Blood stood across from him, a towering, hard-built form in black with a pale, angry visage and blue eyes that had taken on the bright and eerie appearance of ancient, ocean-top ice.

Black was a new color for the Red captain. Maxwell Blood was, in effect, dressed in precisely the same manner as Black. Victor took in the change and filed it away, focusing on his opponent's stance and the deadly weapon in his strong grip.

It was time to do away with that strength. With a concentrated effort, Victor shoved a bit of his power at the captain and imagined it leaching the vigor from his muscles.

He waited to see the signs of his attack on the captain's face. But instead of the grimace or deepening glare he'd expected – Blood smiled.

"It won't work on me this time, Black." The man shook his head, his cold blue eyes flashing. "Surprise, surprise."

Again, he lunged forward, bringing his sword around with expert speed and efficiency and, again, Victor found himself needing every extra bit of alacrity he could muster to avoid being killed. He called on his dark leader ability and blurred out of the way a milli-moment before the weapon would have carved a deep line through his midsection.

He countered as he came to face the captain again, gathering a bit more of his power and sending it into his opponent's body, an invisible, insipid lullaby that should have forced Captain Blood to his knees with unwanted sleep.

Instead, Blood waved his free hand and a blue-green spark erupted in the air between them, negating Victor's powerful effect as easily as if he had swatted at a fly.

Impossible...

He tried something else. Victor rarely used what he considered the most malevolent of his abilities, as something about opening a wound in another person's body had never set well with him. However, now, he didn't hesitate. He imagined the lesion splitting across the captain's chest, and concentrated on the pain it would induce as opposed to the actual damage the cut would cause.

Blood hissed and recoiled, bearing his teeth as Victor had done when he'd been sliced with Maxwell's sword, but just as a damp, dark spot was beginning to appear on the front of his black shirt, the captain straightened and closed his eyes.

Victor felt his power recoiling, turning back as if he and Blood were two negatively charged ions and their essences did not want to touch.

When the blood stopped spreading across the captain's shirt, Victor knew that his opponent had managed to fend off the mental attack. Which also should have been impossible.

"Victoria's mine, Black." Blood opened his eyes. "She doesn't belong out here, playing your stupid games. She belongs with me, at the head of her team, on the Field, where she was born to be."

Victor listened to and watched the captain with the highly astute circumspection that came with one who had judged opponents for four centuries. Blood's voice had changed. It was a slight divergence and anyone else would have missed it. But it had lowered a touch and seemed to grate a bit more. His eyes were glowing and no captain's eyes should glow. And there was a confidence about him that Victor had never before noticed. As if he'd been wearing a lamb's skin. And was shedding it.

An idea began to uncoil within Victor's mind. It was a dark inkling, a sense of wrongness, like the flickering of a building's lights before a storm took the power out. His gaze narrowed and he straightened, lowering his arms to his sides.

"You're not here because Victoria told you about the Game, are you." It was a question, more or less, but he didn't exactly expect a response.

What he got was a single shake of Blood's head.

"Then how did you find her?" Victor's instincts were humming. His senses were more alive than they'd been in forty decades. He knew that Maxwell Blood hadn't gotten his information from Arthur One. If he had, Victor would have detected the memories when he'd ransacked the techie's brain.

But he was here with Victoria, despite the fact that she hadn't confided in him.

How?

“It isn’t your concern, Black. Give up now and return to the Field.” The captain lowered his head, his intense glacial gaze slicing through the tops of his blue eyes. “I will take care of Victoria.”

At that, Victor smiled grimly. *Not bloody likely...*

And then, almost knowing that it would fail, he attempted one last mental assault on the captain. But the moment his thoughts brushed those of his opponent’s, they were swatted away with a touch of power that felt very much like his own.

Victor shook his head, his smile deepening as he hence acquired the confirmation he’d been looking for. “It’s been an act all along, hasn’t it, Blood.”

No answer.

“I must admit that I’m impressed.” Victor permitted. He had no idea what was going on. He had no clue as to why Captain Maxwell Blood would have hidden his true nature all of this time. Or how it could have escaped Game Control’s notice, for that matter. But he knew that it couldn’t have been easy. Blood would have had to allow his dark leader opponents just enough leeway to read his surface thoughts when he wanted them to. He would have had to allow himself to be batted around with telekinesis, chilled with cold waves, even wounded using the most iniquitous dark powers available to his adversaries.

And for what?

“She’s worth it, Black.” Blood said. “It’s a pity that you’ll never know exactly *how* worth it she is.” He lowered his sword.

Victor’s jaw tightened. “Oh?”

“There’s no point to continuing this sport of yours.” Blood continued. “You’ll never beat us both. And even if you do...” he paused, cocking his head to one side as he appeared to study Black with the same intensity that Victor used on him. “You’ll never truly win.”

With that, the captain slid his sword back into its scabbard at his back and began to slowly fade from sight.

“We’ll see,” Victor replied.

The now transparent Blood smiled again and shook his head. The ghost of his form laughed. “You don’t even know where she is now, Black.”

Victor tensed. Another realization hit him in the chest. “And you do.”

Blood nodded. “She’s fast. But so am I. I will have caught up with her long before you even know where to start.” He seemed to taunt the Gray leader as he grew fainter and more see-through.

Victor said nothing to this last statement. He simply watched in continued silence as Maxwell Blood disappeared entirely and the forest clearing fell into a quiet that was broken only by the distant sound of waves on a shore – and the warning bells ringing loudly in Victor’s head.

* * * *

Where the hell am I... There were lights up ahead, but they were dim and not at all what she had expected. Where were the buildings? The walk ways and transporter cubes and business consoles? Where were the people?

The night was so quiet and the darkness was so deep. Victoria had been forced to stop running long ago; whereas she had been lucky in the forest and failed to trip over anything or run into anything, in her mad flight back out the other end of the forest and further inland, she had begun to trip over brambles, rocks, and other objects. Part of it was that she was growing tired and could no longer lift her legs as high as she had.

She was also scared, and fear could sap the strength from a body just as surely as a dark leader would.

Victoria crept quietly through the last few yards of twisted vines and then pushed aside the branches of a moss-draped tree to finally step onto what appeared to be some kind of road.

It was flat and had been smoothed out, but it was made of packed dirt that made barely a muffled thud beneath the heel of her boot. Her brow furrowed. She glanced quickly around to make certain she was alone. It was out of habit, more than anything else, since she'd been doing it a lot while practicing without her Game band.

But, of course, there was no one on the road but her.

So, she held out her hand, palm-up, and stared into it. After a second of concentrated effort, a small yellow-orange flame rose to life in the center of her palm. It was no larger than the flame of a candle, but its brightness had the same effect, lighting the road for ten feet in both directions so that Victoria could see the details in the hardened earth.

There were long thin lines on both sides of the road; they were ruts that ran several inches deep and were smooth enough that they must have been dug there over some time. What had caused them?

There were a few footprints too. The shoe soles that had left them had been plain and unmarked. Some were roughly the same size as Victoria's; others were larger. They are all pointed in the direction from which Victoria had seen the light up ahead.

She sighed and, with her free hand, dug into her jacket pocket for the crystal compass. Once she held it aloft in her other open palm, she lent it a small amount of her power, and the gold casing on the compass slid open to reveal the clear crystal sphere inside and the four directional letters that came standard with any compass. The single arrow of the compass was pointing

North. And, at the moment, a fifth letter also shimmered into view, directly at the center of the compass' face. It was the letter "U." For "Up."

On hopeless impulse, Victoria glanced up into the night sky. The stars were very bright outside of the Field. She could even see a band of them that seemed to run through the center of the sky like a thick spray of twinkling white. Directly above her, a single star shone more brightly than those closest to it, and seemed to be tinged ever so slightly pink.

It was a lovely star. The kind that Victoria would make a wish on – if she were that kind of person.

But she wasn't. And never had been.

So she looked back down at the compass, shook her head in the same mystified manner that she always did after studying it, and extinguished the flame in her right hand. Then she re-pocketed the compass and took a deep breath.

"Very well." There was really nothing to do but head toward the lights.

She walked along the road for several minutes before it became obvious that the lights were coming from windows – and the windows belonged to houses that reminded her somehow of Room 73 at the TGB. In the darkness, details were vague, but the homes appeared to be constructed of wood and most were two-story, with small roughly hewn windows that bore opaque glass panes and cross-beams, also constructed of wood. Each home sported a chimney composed of brick or something like it, and though it was not a particularly chilly night, smoke rose from every single one.

Victoria could not see to the end of the village – there could be no other word for it – so she couldn't tell how big it was. However, it seemed rather small, all in all. Perhaps fifty houses, at most, and a few other, larger buildings. One of those larger buildings stood just ahead on the left, and as she neared it, she saw that there were animals tethered to a log outside.

Horses. She had never seen them used domestically before. On the Field, there were a few wild horses that roamed from quadrant to quadrant. But, these animals seemed larger than those, brawnier, and they had leather seats strapped to their backs and harnesses around their muzzles.

Perplexed, but intrigued, Victoria approached one. It was the bigger of the two, with a coat as pitch as Victor Black's hair. She could see its muscles outlined beneath the sleek black coat and its mane was long and shiny. It was an impressive animal; Victoria very much wanted to touch it.

As she came forward, moving calmly and steadily, she could hear sounds coming from inside the large building. Oddly enough, they were familiar sounds.

The black stallion whinnied and skittered back a bit as she approached, eyeing her warily from where it pulled against the straps that held it in place.

"Easy..." She whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The horse seemed to narrow its gaze, reminding her of someone. She persisted, however, as she'd never been one to shy away from a challenge. "Are you someone's mount?" She asked, softly. "I'm surprised anyone could tame a beast like you."

The stallion seemed to calm, put at ease by the gentle tone of her voice. Victoria slowly raised her right hand toward his muzzle and allowed him to nudge it. She wasn't sure this was the correct way to approach a horse, but it had always worked with the wolves she'd occasionally come across on the Field.

When the stallion whinnied again, but remained still as she slid her hand over his mane, she smiled, a tad nervously, but with honest pleasure, despite herself. "You're so beautiful," she told him. "I hope your owner deserves you."

"I'm impressed," came a voice from behind her.

Victoria turned, tamping the sudden fear that swelled to life within her. She instinctively felt that the animal beside her would smell that fear and react badly to it.

A man stood on the top step of the wooden stairs that led into the building beyond. He was leaning against a wooden support beam, his arms crossed over his chest.

Victoria blinked. So much about this man took her by surprise, she wasn't certain where to begin assessing him. For one, he was as large for a human as the stallion was for a horse. No one on the Field looked like this. It was as if someone had plopped muscles on top of muscles and then molded them perfectly to his tall form. He had a good foot and a half on her.

His white-blond hair was so long that he had gathered it at the back of his neck with what looked like a leather strap. She couldn't see where the locks ended, as he was facing her at the moment. There was a bit of a goatee-like beard on his chin, also very blond. And his eyes were a deep, dark brown. They reminded her of chocolate.

His chin was strong and nearly square, his bone structure so male, it was slightly intimidating. There was absolutely nothing small about this man. And the strange clothing he wore did nothing to hide his assets. A light tan leather vest of some sort covered most of his chest – but not enough. His massive legs were encased in a darker, stronger looking leather, much like that which constructed her downtime uniform jacket. His boots were knee-high leather and, again, slightly darker than his breeches. There were odd designs on the sides of the boots, matched by tattoos that ran the breadth of his immense biceps.

He appraised her now with his deep brown eyes, just as she did him, and the look on his face told her that he liked what he saw. But he stayed where he was, and that might have been the only reason Victoria hadn't yet telekinised him into the wall of the building behind him.

"I'm sorry?" She finally asked, trying her best to keep any kind of quaver from her voice.

He smiled, flashing very white teeth, and gestured to the stallion. “Brom doesn’t normally take well to strangers,” he told her in that deep, timbre voice. “He hasn’t tried to bite you or kick you and he’s actually let you stroke his withers. Trust me,” he chuckled and it was like the rumble of thunder, “that’s impressive.”

“Oh.” She said. It was all she could think of. But she did notice the damn blush that crept into her cheeks. It seemed she would never stop blushing in front of intriguing men.

He seemed to consider something for a moment and then his gaze narrowed slightly and he pushed off of the support beam, coming down the stairs toward her. She backed up. She couldn’t help it. Her power swirled beneath the surface, ready to tap, ready to release.

He stopped after descending the last step and slowly held up his hands in a sign of peace. “I mean you no harm,” he repeated her own words to her, his smile turning mischievous. “You’re awfully skittish.” He paused, and then cocked his head to one side and Victoria could see that his hair fell clear to his mid-back, as it moved behind him and into view.

“You’re running from someone, aren’t you.”

She blinked. How did he know that?

“It’s fairly obvious,” he told her. She stepped back again as he made his way to his horse and the stallion nudged its master’s open palm in a gesture of loving familiarity. The man glanced at her over his shoulder. “You’re obviously new to these parts, if your clothing means anything.”

Victoria still said nothing. Sometimes it was better to let the other guy do all of the talking.

“Something made you leave your home. You’ve got no bags, seem to have no food or drink on you. Which means you left in a hurry.”

He was hitting the nail on the head so far. His astute observations made her uncomfortable; she shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and grasped her compass as if it could soothe her anxiety.

“So, who or what is it, then?” He turned fully toward her then, placing his hands on his hips. He was waiting, pinning her to the spot with those keen eyes.

He wanted to know who she was running from. What should she tell him? What business was it of his, anyway? Who the hell was this man?

“I’m sorry,” she said, squaring her shoulders and taking her hands out of her pockets. “I need to find a place to stay for the night. Do you happen to know if there’s....” She searched her thoughts for the right word. This town looked nothing like any city in the Field, so it most likely wouldn’t have a Gamer’s Auberge, where team members could pay by night to gather with their friends and throw parties or get together with romantic interests away from the sometimes invasive aspects of living in a team tower.

Then she recalled that Room 73 in the TGB was known as a “tavern.” And it was supposed to have rooms on its second floor. She didn’t know what they were for. Perhaps they were to purchase for the night?

Worth a try.

“Do you know if there’s a tavern nearby?”

At this, the man blinked. And then his smile broadened into true amusement and he chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re standing in front of a tavern, little one.” His laughter died down and he gestured toward the double front doors of the building. Now that Victoria thought about it, she recognized that the reason the sounds coming from inside sounded familiar to her was because they *were* familiar to her.

She’d heard them in Room 73.

“Would you like me to escort you in? Since you seem to have no currency on you, I’ll buy you dinner and an ale. Any friend of Brom’s is a friend of mine,” he offered, his smile putting her at ease, despite herself.

Victoria considered that for a moment. She had dropped her bar somewhere during her run. And she was definitely hungry. More than a little thirsty. And quite tired.

This stranger was offering to buy her a meal. And he would be doing it in public – more or less. In front of other people, she would be safe. Right?

“All right,” she nodded, speaking softly. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” he nodded, back, raising his hand to signal that she should go inside first.

Victoria climbed the stairs, feeling the presence of the large man at her back. His nearness was causing her body to flush warm. Or maybe that was just her power, waiting to be used. Either way, she felt the heat course through her veins and tease her nerve endings.

When she made it to the double doors, the blonde man reached around and over her and pushed one of them open. Her hopeless blush deepened and she went inside.

* * * *

In the darkness beyond the reach of the village lights, a man in black watched the golden-haired woman disappear into the tavern’s warm environment. His gaze narrowed, his eyes glittering with dark deliberation as the tall, fair-haired stranger followed closely behind her.

The watcher’s eyes began to glow in the shadows, jealousy rearing its head and rushing liquid fury through his tall form. He stood from where he’d been crouching beneath the sheltering black leaves of a low-lying tree.

He waited there, silent and still, for several minutes, his dark gaze never leaving the double doors where Victoria Red and her very large acquaintance had disappeared. He weighed his options carefully.

And then he stepped out onto the village road and made his way toward the tavern.

Chapter Twelve

Victoria sat down in the wooden chair that the large man held out for her, and then jumped only slightly when he pushed the chair in toward the thick, round table. He took the seat across from her, his massive form as sturdy-looking as the rough hewn furniture that supplied the large tavern.

He raised his arm, and she assumed he was going to wave a serving woman to their table, as she'd seen someone do in Room 73 at the TGB.

"Wench! Over here!" He barked the order, and a woman with short black hair and breasts shoved up so high that they nearly bounded out of her girdle spun around to face him. Her blue eyes were wide and her face was ashen.

"I'm on my way!" She responded, and Victoria's own eyes widened at the exchange.

"You could have said 'please,'" she told the man across from her.

Brown eyes cut to her and she stilled in her chair, pinned beneath that damn steady gaze again. He smiled, but for some reason, it didn't so much put her at ease as change the nature of her anxiety. Still, she noticed that his eyes glittered with something like amusement.

"Is that what they say where you're from?" He asked.

Victoria took a moment to clear her throat; it had closed up a bit. "Yes," she finally replied. Then, with more force, "it is."

"I see." He nodded his understanding and she wasn't sure whether he was teasing her or not. "Very well."

The woman approached the table and the man turned to her. "*Please* bring my companion a dinner and an ale, wench. And make it quick. I swear I can see her losing weight even as we sit here."

Again, Victoria's eyes widened. She blushed furiously this time, a hard retort rising to her tongue even as the serving woman nodded her consent and spun away.

"Excuse me!" she hissed, trying to keep her voice down, despite her sharp disapproval. "My weight?" She asked, incredulously. "What in the world is wrong with my weight?"

He chuckled. "Not a thing, little one, except that you need more of it. You're a beautiful woman, don't get me wrong. But you look as if you'd break in a bit of rough and tumble."

Victoria's eyebrows shot toward the ceiling. She was torn between being complimented, albeit embarrassed, by his calling her a "beautiful woman" – and being insulted by his reference to sex. After several seconds, she still couldn't think of what to say, so this time, she just kept her retort to herself. *If you can't say something nice....* Her mother had always told her that.

Victoria froze.

Her mother? What the hell was she thinking? She *had* no mother.

Right?

That's what Game Control had told her. She was an orphan taken from one of the sectors when she was ten years old and brought to play on the Field after one of those tests they give to every child – orphan or not.

The stranger was watching her carefully now. His expression was guarded, but his eyes took everything in.

Victoria hurriedly filed the mental misstep away and attempted to regain her composure. The man was buying her dinner; she should at least engage him in friendly conversation. There was no good reason to piss him off with a lecture on table etiquette – or bore him with strange memories.

"What is your name?" she asked, glancing up as someone came through the front doors of the tavern. The newcomer was a young man with dirty-blond hair and worn clothes that matched

the general, sensible fashion of everyone else in the tavern. He took a seat at the bar and Victoria looked back at the man across from her.

He studied her for a moment. "I'm Anders," he told her. "Now it's your turn."

She thought about whether she should tell him or not; could he be questioned by Victor later? Then she sighed and shrugged. It didn't matter. She already stood out enough that she made an impression; her manner of dress, alone, would set her apart in his memory.

"I'm Victoria," she said, "Victoria Red." She started to extend her hand in order to shake his, but when she recalled that she was no longer on the Field, she hesitated. Did they shake hands here?

As if to quell her fears, he extended his own hand over the table top. When she relaxed and brought hers out again, he grasped it firmly at the wrist.

Victoria's power leapt to life inside of her and her palm grew warm. But, just as she was beginning to wonder if she would have to set Anders on fire, he chuckled and gestured to the hand he held. "You're supposed to grasp my wrist as well, little one. It's the way people greet in these parts."

She blinked. "Oh." *Wow, am I ever astute tonight. How many stupid times am I going to say "oh?"*

"Why do you grasp wrists instead of hands?"

"To check for blades," he answered, easily. He released her wrist and they settled back into their chairs.

Victoria's hand tingled where his bare skin had come into contact with hers. Vaguely, she wondered if she was her imagination. Maybe she was too hungry; too tired.

“Blades,” she repeated, thinking that over. There *had* been a few Gamers that had kept combat weapons of different types strapped to their wrists for battle on the Field. “That makes sense,” she conceded.

Another patron came into the tavern; this time a woman. She rubbed her hands on the apron she wore and looked around. Her gaze skirted over Victoria and Anders as they searched the room. Then, as if not finding what she was looking for, she made her way toward a door at the back of the tavern.

“What’s the name of the place you left?” Anders asked.

Victoria frowned. What did she tell him? The Field? The other side of the wall? She was baffled enough that she was different from him, in the first place. Why was she the only one dressed as she was? Where were the cities?

Her head was beginning to ache.

“I’m...” she racked her brain, “... from... the Red Tower.” Then, before he could ask what the hell the Red Tower was, she countered with a question of her own. “What is this place called?”

He watched her in his dark, ardent way for a few seconds and then he sighed heavily. As if he was weary. “It’s Ocanus. A fishing village off of the Mare. There’s nothing anywhere near here for miles.” He leaned forward then, placing his muscled arms on the table and lacing his fingers together. The leather straps of his bracers swayed slightly as he did so, and the leather smell that wafted toward her reminded her of Victor. “Not for *hundreds* of miles.” He added, meaningfully.

He wanted to know where she’d come from. By all rights, she shouldn’t have made it to Ocanus alive – not across hundreds of miles. Not without food or water.

He was suspicious, and she couldn’t blame him. But again, it wasn’t his business.

She tore her gaze from his, concentrating on the door.

At that moment, another man walked through the double doors, accompanied by a teenage boy. The pair made their way toward an empty table and the serving woman was at their side moments later.

“You’re waiting for him to come in, aren’t you.”

Victoria blinked and turned back to face Anders. At first, she wasn’t sure what he meant. And then she realized that he was talking about the person she was running from. He’d figured out that it was a man; that, too, made sense. And she kept watching the door. So, he figured she was waiting for the man to walk through it.

Smart guy, Anders.

It was a tad unnerving.

She sighed and would have crossed her arms over her chest, except that the serving “wench” sidled up to the table, then, and placed a plate full of food and a mug full of ale in front of Victoria.

“Here you are, miss. That’ll fill you up right nice.” She turned to Anders. “Anything for you, sir?” She asked. Her voice carried an accent that Victoria had never heard.

Anders waved her away and Victoria barely cared. The food on the plate in front of her smelled too divine. Better than anything she’d ever caught a whiff on the Field. She stared down at the meal. There was a baked potato, still in its skin but split open, and atop it was some kind of gravy. The gravy was thick and creamy-looking, and covered both the potato and the sliced, juicy meat beside it. There was some kind of vegetable there, as well, which seemed to have been roasted. Instead of each item being compartmentalized in portion-appropriate division platters, as she was used to, it all ran together.

And it looked *so* good like that...

“Oh my,” she whispered, picking up her fork. The prongs on the fork were roughly-hewn and there were three as opposed to the four she was used to. The knife beside it was also roughly shaped, seemingly sharpened using some kind of scraping technique, if the scratches down its length were any indication.

“Fascinating, is it?”

She jumped a little and looked up. “What?”

“You’re staring at the cutlery. I take it you do use these items where you’re from?”

Victoria blushed again. *Damn it!* And then she began cutting into the meat. She didn’t normally eat meat, as she’d never liked the way it tasted. And she’d grown too fond of the wolves on the Field to appreciate the thought of eating animals not all that different from them.

But right now, she was very hungry. And this smelled very good.

And she needed something to distract her from Anders and his observant mind and his immense muscles.

“Yes, we do. They’re just different, that’s all.” She mumbled. Then she forked a piece of gravy-covered meat and stuffed it into her mouth.

It tasted as good as it smelled. She couldn’t help the little eye-roll of pleasure she did, and she’d be damned if she could do anything to stop the way she then began eating the meal with genuine gusto.

Anders was polite enough not to mention the speed with which she downed her dinner. He said nothing as she ate. He just sat there and watched her in silence, smiling a small, pleased smile as she finished each bite off with a few swallows of her ale.

When she’d finished, she placed the knife and fork across the plate and licked her lips, picking up her goblet for a final drink.

“Better?” Anders finally asked.

Victoria nodded. She was too sated to deny it.

“Good. Now, here.” Anders lifted a small leather pouch from somewhere beneath the table and set it in front of Victoria. “It’s enough money to pay for a room tonight – and breakfast in the morn. I wouldn’t argue if I were you, little one, as I can see you’ve no money on you.” He nudged it toward her. “Take it.”

Victoria truly didn’t know what to think of this. She stared down at the bag of what she assumed was some kind of coinage. Her forehead knitted as she considered all he’d already done for her. If she wasn’t suddenly so tired, she would be too stunned to speak.

“Why would you do this?” She asked.

“It’s my right, little one. You’re a woman in need – and I am a man who can provide. Take it and think no more on it.” He rose then, drawing to his full height with the effect of a mountain growing from a chair. “I’ll see that you get to your room safely and I’ll bid you goodnight.”

Victoria gazed up at the stranger before her. *He looks like a god*, she thought, bewildered. She was completely overwhelmed. She was full and tired and confused about where she was and what the hell she was going to do. And, in the end, he was absolutely right.

Finally, she nodded, closing her eyes and looking down as she said, “Thank you.”

The blush was back, of course, but it wasn’t as bad as before. And she was sort of getting used to it.

It took them a few minutes to secure a room and Victoria had to endure a few strange glances from the tavern keeper, or “inn keep,” as Anders called him. But once Anders gave the man a warning glare, the inn keep kept his glances at Victoria to an absolute minimum, tending to their transaction with quick efficiency.

Once Anders walked her to her door, he also opened it for her, scanned the room beyond, and then gestured that she should go in.

So she did.

He waited outside the door and Victoria turned on the threshold to thank him one last time.

“Think nothing of it. Get some sleep. I’ll have someone bring you a change of clothing in the morning.”

At that, Victoria glanced down at the downtime uniform she wore.

“Whoever you are running from will no doubt question those he comes across.” Anders explained, softly. “A physical description of you will be the first thing to leave his lips. So,” he smiled, “you’ll want to fit in.”

“Anders...” It was the first time she’d said his name, and it brought to their exchange a personal nature that made her stomach flutter. She looked down, licked her lips, and started again. “Anders, I can’t thank you enough. I don’t know why you’ve helped me, but you’ve been very kind. And I am very grateful.”

Anders smiled and shook his head, his eyes glittering. His white-blond hair swayed at his back as he then turned, and without a word, left her alone in her room.

Victoria watched him go.

Wow, she thought. That man is beyond words.

And I am beyond beat.

She closed the door and bolted it shut. Then she turned toward the room’s interior and took it all in. One bed. One dresser. One window. A rocking chair.

And that was it.

She yawned and pulled off her leather uniform jacket.

That’s good enough for me.

* * * *

Max watched the large man leave the tavern. He finished off the drink that was in front of him and then concentrated on the two coins a patron down the bar had left on the counter before leaving the inn. It was exactly how much Max, himself, would need to pay for the drink he'd ordered.

When the bar keep wasn't looking, and he was certain that no one else in the tavern would notice as well, Max telekinesed the coins into his palm.

Then he plopped them onto the table loud enough to get the keep's attention and pushed away from the bar. The barkeep turned and nodded toward him, bidding him a wordless good night.

Max left the tavern, walked around the building to the alley between the tavern and what appeared to be a neighboring shop of some kind, and waited as his form melted from the rather scrawny appearance of a blonde man in village clothing to the tall, well-built team captain that he was.

Then he turned and looked up at the second-floor window above him. Candlelight flickered behind thin, gauzy windows. The slim form of a woman moved in front of the dancing light, casting an erotic shadow across the curtains as she pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Max's blue eyes lightened into glowing ice.

It was Victoria's room. Max had spent the last hour watching her flirt with another man, and knowing that she was up there now, alone and undressed did not hamper the dark mood he was in. It only changed it.

Into something else. Just as brutal, and just as desperate.

For the second time that night, Maxwell Blood willed himself into invisibility. Then he used another of his powers to speed through the tavern and up the stairs just before the innkeeper closed and locked the doors for the night.

While the man downstairs was busy shuttering the windows, Max knocked lightly on Victoria's door. He heard her gasp of surprise from beyond and smiled to himself. If anyone had been able to see it, they would have noticed that it wasn't a kind smile.

He listened as she most likely rushed to find something to cover herself with. And then she was at the door, her ear pressed up against it. He could tell that much.

"Who is it?" She finally called out softly.

There was no answer. Instead, he lightly rapped again.

Victoria was a very smart woman on the Field. Max had always been awed by the skill with which she strategized her team's next moves – and was able to very accurately predict their opponents' moves as well. However, at the moment, she was not herself.

Perhaps it was the meal. Maybe it was her mad-dash run through the forest and fields beyond the Mare's shore. Or maybe it was Max's dark influence from beyond the door, where he sent a hard weariness coursing through his team leader's veins, forcing a befuddlement into her tired mind and willfully erasing any lick of sense she'd formerly possessed.

When she thoughtlessly opened the door to peek outside, he knew he'd been successful in his attempt to control her.

Victoria had wrapped the sheet from the bed around her otherwise naked form. Max almost lost control of his invisibility when his glacial gaze was met with the creamy skin of her shoulders and the long, lean leg that peeked out from between the two ends of the white coverlet she held so tightly in one fist.

She looked left and right, and not seeing anyone standing there, she sighed, rubbed her eyes with her free hand, and shut the door once more, slamming the bolt home with great, frustrated force.

"I must be losing it," she whispered to herself.

Max grinned.

Victoria strode to the bed and dropped the sheet. Max's body went rigid. Every muscle in his tall form flexed and his hands curled into fists. He forced one of them open and ran it through his hair, grasping a bunch of it at the roots because he had nothing else to hold on to.

She was breathtaking. The candle light caused her skin to glow like warmed honey and crushed gold as she bent over the bed and crawled across it to finally lay down on her stomach at its center. What Max wanted to do in that moment would have made her run from him if he carried it out. It would have shocked and terrified her and he would lose her. But he could barely breathe.

She had neglected to pull the sheet back over her body. She was completely exposed, entirely vulnerable, and impossibly enticing.

There was no hope for it. He could not bear not to touch her. So, with a strong wave of his power, he sent her mind reeling into unconsciousness, forcing her body to follow. When he heard her breathing slow, he knew she was so deeply asleep that it would take more than a touch to wake her.

He strode to the bed and solidified, his body once more taking form. And then he gazed down at his sleeping leader and the blue of his eyes was nearly white in its hard and cold desire.

He knelt until his face was near hers, that cold gaze trailing over her closed lids, their long lashes, her small nose, and her full, red lips.

His own breathing was changing then. Becoming ragged.

She trusted him. This beauty before him, so helpless to defend herself – she trusted him. She always had.

Max forced his eyes shut and bared his teeth. Need was turning to pain within him, his fists clenched so tight now that his short nails were carving red moons into his palms.

Finally, he opened his eyes again and uncurled his fingers so that he could brush a long, golden lock of her thick hair from her lovely face. He tucked it gently behind her ear and then stood. He moved around the bed, his gaze never leaving her long, lean form. And then he shrugged off his jacket and un-strapped the sword from his back. He set them both to the side – again, without taking his eyes off of Victoria.

And then he knelt on the mattress and carefully laid down beside her. Once he was settled, he drew her body to him, his hands caressing her skin as he slid them over her tiny waist and spanned them across her stomach.

Her body relaxed into his with blissful perfection and Max's eyes once more closed. He breathed in the clean scent of her hair and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head. This much, he could do. This much, he would be able to explain in the morning.

It was enough. *For now* – it was enough.

His last act for the night was to telekinesis the blanket from the floor to the bed, covering them both in its light warmth. And then he pulled her more tightly to him, as if he could not get close enough. Her bare back was so warm against his hard chest. He stifled his moan and tamped his desire.

After nearly an hour, he was able to join her in sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

A sound. Distant and muffled.

Victoria felt cold. But there was material all around her. She could feel the weight of it over her body and there was no draft. Why was she cold?

A knocking. Now she knew it was what she had heard before.

She shivered and hugged further into her own body, remembering.... Vaguely. An inn. Someone was at the door to her room.

Something shifted beside her. She stilled, unsure. The smell of leather wafted to her. The sound of breathing; not hers.

Victoria's eyes flew open even as she remained motionless on the bed. Without turning, she took in everything that she could. The room, the edge of the bed and blankets – the thick arm draped over her body, its strong fingers pressed possessively against the flat plain of her stomach.

The knock came again, more prominent this time. "Red?" A deep voice, worried.

Victoria screamed. She had no time to consider it or try to stop it. The piercing sound bubbled up and out before she realized she was making it. She managed to jump from the bed, grasping the sheet to her, just as the door to her room came crashing inward.

Victoria ducked, her telekinetic power leaping to life in order to shield her crouching body from the many, wicked shards of wood that came flying into the room. And then she straightened, her wide eyes taking in the scene around her.

Max was on the bed, fully clothed, and he was rising in stunned slowness, his expression equal parts shock and guilt. Anders was racing through the ruined doorway, his tall, massive form nearly blurring with the speed at which he reached the mattress.

Max was on his feet a second too late. He had only come to fully face the intruder before Anders' fist was slamming into the side of his head with alarming force.

Max flew backward, his solid form cracking the timber in the wall behind him as he hit it with immense force and then crumbled to the floor beneath it. Unconscious.

Again, Victoria screamed, but she moved as well, barely managing to clutch the sheet to her naked body as she raced to kneel before her fallen captain.

"No! I know him!" She shouted, her voice pitched too high, the words coming too fast. Her head felt light, as if it were separating from her body. She was so confused.

"Get *back*, little one!" Anders bellowed as he grasped Victoria's upper arm and dragged her away from Max's unconscious form.

She roughly jerked away from him and returned to kneel beside the Red captain. "No! Please!" She pleaded. She didn't know what was happening. She couldn't comprehend how Max had come to be sleeping in her bed.

She had never had a man in her bed before.

There had never been time to get to know anyone well enough. And she wasn't like the Gamers on the Field that took their pleasure with one another for different reasons. There was an emptiness inside of her soul, as well as her body. And until she could find a man to fill them both, she kept her bed to herself.

So, she didn't understand.

Had Max touched her? Done anything to her?

"Are you all right?" Anders asked.

She looked up at him, her breathing coming too quick, nausea roiling in her belly. Was she all right? She had no idea. How would she know?

At that, Anders shook his head. Once. “You would know, Red. Trust me.” He knelt beside her, his dark, keen eyes shifting from Victoria to Max and back. “If you’re not feeling it, then he did nothing but sleep at your side.”

Victoria may have been innocent in the sexual ways between a man and a woman, but she was not so naïve that she failed to understand what he meant by that. *So, I would feel it.... Even afterwards.*

Her blush was back. And her head felt as though it was lifting clean off of her body.

The floor tilted, the walls bowed, and Victoria was falling. Anders’ arms felt like bands of steel on her numb body as he kept her from hitting the floor.

“Sit down.” He ordered.

She heard him as if from far away, but her body was being lowered onto the bed then, and because she’d learned how to stave off a faint on the Field, Victoria instinctively lowered her head, placing it near her knees so that the blood could return to her brain.

“Just breathe, little one.”

“You knocked out my captain,” she breathed.

“You screamed,” Anders defended, softly. “And I came in to find a fully clothed man in your bed.” She glanced up at him through the long locks of her hair that hung on either side of her face. His conciliatory expression turned playful then. “He’ll be all right. And do you always sleep in the nude, little one?”

Having her head between her legs and a sheet that barely managed to hide her body wasn’t helping her dizzy spell. *Nothing* would as long as Anders and his rumbling, sensual innuendoes were around.

“Okay, so he’s out for the time being and I’m safe. Now could you please leave so that I can have some privacy?”

At that, Anders was silent a moment. Then he changed the subject. “How do you know him?” He gestured with his head to Max’s unmoving form.

“He’s my captain,” she answered, without thinking. And then she swallowed hard.

Crap.

“Your captain?” He was incredulous. “You’re some kind of soldier?”

Victoria closed her eyes and tried to think. Her head was beginning to hurt in this position and the dizziness wasn’t too bad any more, so she straightened and looked up at her would-be savior.

“Anders, this is all too –”

Max stirred, his lips parting to elicit a soft, strangled moan of pain. He grimaced and raised his hand to the side of his face, his eyes still closed. Already, a deep red bruise was blossoming across his left cheekbone and that eye seemed a bit puffy. He pushed himself into a seated position and opened his eyes.

He took in Victoria, seated on the edge of the bed.

And Anders, standing directly over her.

Victoria knew what he would do a half-second before he did it. His injury forgotten, the Red captain was on his feet, his sword taken from the floor where he had fallen beside it. He raised the sword as he lunged forward and Victoria barely had the time to stand.

“Stop!” She bellowed, holding her hand, palm-out toward him to stay his action.

She allowed her light leader power to lace her words, and Max was hit with a soft wall of heat and thick, telekinetic air. It held him, briefly, causing his expression to go from furious to *uncertain* and furious.

“Max, Anders is a friend. He thought you had ill intentions toward me.”

Max opened his mouth to speak, but Victoria beat him to the punch.

“*Don’t* talk!” She ordered. “The gods know you have a lot of explaining to do, but I won’t hear it until I’ve at least had a chance to dress.”

Victoria blinked, at once confused by her own words. *Gods?* She thought, surprised by the unfamiliar notion. *What the hell are those?*

“Victoria, you don’t-”

“Captain Blood, get out of my room and get downstairs to wait for me and that’s an order!” She commanded, leaving no room in her tone for argument. Max dropped his sword arm and swallowed his retort.

Victoria turned to Anders. “And the same order goes for you as well!” She added, truly wanting the men to simply be gone for the moment. She needed space. Privacy. Time to damn well *think!*

She watched Anders and, instead of the incensed or enraged look she’d expected from him, he simply smiled. And then he gestured toward the door piercing Max with his dark gaze. It was an “after you” kind of look.

Max took the hint. He gingerly touched the side of his face, reminding Victoria that she needed to heal him. But not now. Later.

The men made their way to the door – what was left of it – and after one last side-long glance at her from each of them, they turned the corner and disappeared out of sight.

Victoria ran to the bed and dropped the sheet. She could see the bundle of clothes left outside of the ruined door and recognized them as the same manner of clothing the villagers would wear. Anders had obviously brought them for her – as he’d said he would.

But it was pointless to change into them now. Max was dressed in a downtime uniform. And they’d just destroyed public property. It wasn’t like they were going to leave this place unnoticed.

And Victor was out there. Somewhere. Most likely very close by.

There was no time to mess with something new and, perhaps, uncomfortable. Victoria bent and lifted her clothes from the floor. She pulled on her under garments, then her pants and t-shirt, and was fumbling with her jacket when the air seemed to shift around her. A light draft of cold air brushed past her face, causing several strands of her golden hair to tickle her cheek.

Victoria froze.

“Well, I must admit, that was worth the wait,” came a low, accented voice from the other side of the room.

Victoria spun to face him, but this time, he was anticipating her every move.

In one fluid motion, Victor Black solidified from where he’d been invisible, leaning against the wall, and then rushed her. Victoria’s eyes widened, but the attack she’d rapidly planned fell short as his gloved hands encircled her wrists, grasping her tight. They spun, slicing through the air with inhuman, blurred speed, until he slammed her up against the wall, pinning her beneath him.

Victoria gasped and grimaced as she was trapped between Black’s tall, hard body, and the panels of polished wood behind her. She could barely breathe, and every time she did manage to inhale, she caught the scent of his leather and the smell of the masculine soap he used to bathe. It was a heady, dizzying combination. She shuddered beneath him as he effectively restrained her wrists above her head and leaned into her so that his words whispered across her lips.

“Blood is an idiot,” he told her in his wicked, perfect intonation. “Eight bloody hours in bed with you and he never touched you.” He laughed a soft, but harsh laugh. “You’re lucky it wasn’t me, luv.”

Victoria gazed up into that cold green gaze and was lost in the overwhelming power of him. Her mind swam. Her heart beat rapid-fire. Her breath hitched and caught and released in shallow, ragged streams.

How had this happened? How had she suddenly wound up alone with her enemy, his strong body pressed so desperately against hers? And why in the world wasn't she doing something about it?

Set him on fire...

Black shook his head. "Tsk, tsk. Such vicious thoughts, Victoria. They are unbecoming for one such as you."

Victoria's heart hammered against her rib cage.

"I..."

He smiled, his gaze smoldering, and waited for her to continue.

"I could scream," she told him. She tried to swallow. Failed; and tried again. "And they would come running."

Victor didn't say anything to that. His glittering emerald gaze slipped from her own eyes to her soft, full red lips. She bit down on her bottom lip, as if aware that he was watching. And she felt every muscle in his tall, taut body go taut with need.

Need... She felt the word. Knew the sensation.

What's wrong with me....

"Give in to me, Victoria," he let his gaze settle once more into hers and she felt the weight of it there. Hot and cold. Searing her. She was sure he could see into her soul.

"Would it be so bad?" He asked. His eyes flicked to her lips again and then back. There was something in his expression that she hadn't seen there before. There was lust. That, she had learned to recognize in his jade green eyes. But there was also a kind of anguish. New, and raw.

She could feel his hardness, too. It was Black's craven longing that bore so solidly into her hip bone, unrelenting, demanding, rigid as a rock.

Does it hurt.... The thought wafted through her mind. And she realized that she didn't want Victor to hurt. And she didn't know why.

He was wreaking havoc on her mind. On her body. She had to get away from him – before he drove her mad.

He laughed again, as soft and harsh as he had before, and Victoria closed her eyes, trying not to whimper. She was almost sorry that she had, for Victor's next words were spoken ever so slightly against her mouth – his lips brushing across hers.

“What happens now, luv?”

She had no answer for that. She could do so many things right now. She could meld into the wall behind her, telekinesis something into his head, set him on fire.... She had recourse to flee from the Gray leader, and hence, she was the king on the chessboard, cornered, but not quite checkmated yet. She was not defeated – the game between them would not be over – until she had no channel of escape.

However, though she had the means to get away from him, none of her powers would answer her. Not right now. They wouldn't answer because she couldn't summon the will to call them to her.

And she was shaking.

But so was he. She felt the slight tremor there, beneath the rip-cord tightness of the body that imprisoned hers.

A part of her wanted to make that tremor go away. Soothe him.

It was insane.

He was insane. She had to remind herself of that.

He wants to overthrow Game Control! She screamed at herself.

Black's look darkened. His grip on her wrists tightened to the point of pain. And yet, it was a different kind of pain. The pain of being captured – ensnared – of losing control to someone you trusted.

Trust? *No*, she thought. *No! How can I think that!* The world that made sense was spinning away from her ever faster.

“*Answer* me, Victoria.” Black demanded, the brush of his lips against hers like tiny electric shocks that hardened her nipples and sent rivulets of confusing sensation through her abdomen.

“What happens now?”

“Let me go,” she pleaded, nearly sobbing.

“*Never.*” The word was a whispered promise, spoken between clenched teeth.

“*Please...*”

She never finished her sentence. Victor's lips claimed hers in a kiss that blasted the thought from her brain in a whiplash of hard, uncoiling need. A pleasure like pain ripped through her stomach, melting her and making her weak. Moisture pooled between her legs, staining her underwear, making them stick to her opening.

She wanted – *something*. She didn't know what it was, but the need for it felt like a yawning, awakening craziness inside of her body. She was going mad. He was making her mad!

He must have been. He must have been using his dark leader power.

Because she kissed him back.

And he groaned against her mouth, his grip on her wrists letting up just a touch as his tongue made it past her teeth to explore the depths of her. She let him, welcomed him in, allowed him to claim her through that kiss.

Her first.

She never could have imagined that such a thing would feel as it did. It was too good. Too much. It actually *hurt*, this new pleasure – and she, the healer, had no idea how to make that hurt go away.

I can make it go away... she heard his voice in her head. *One night, sweet Victoria. Give me one night and I'll show you.*

Oh, Gods! She thought, frantically, witlessly. She tried to close her legs, her body squirming beneath his, but he held her fast and would offer no reprieve.

His kiss only deepened and she, in turn, moaned against him. The heat inside of her was spreading like wild fire, threatening to burn her up.

Get away! Her mind screamed. She tried to pull away. Or, she thought she did. But, instead, she remained where she was, even as his gloved hands finally released her wrists to slowly trail down her arms to the sides of her breasts.

She left her hands where they were, pinned to the wall by some inexplicable need for her to give in.

He brushed his thumbs slowly over the taut swell of her breasts until they slid over the painfully taut nubs of her nipples. She gasped and shuddered and he pulled away, reluctantly letting go of her mouth so that he could peer down into her golden eyes once more.

Give in to me.

His hands ran back up her arms to encircle her wrists possessively. She remained where she was, allowing him to claim the hold as if she didn't want to get away.

As if she wanted him to win.

No!

Game Control!

With that thought, a hard realization came thudding into her consciousness, dropping over her mind and body like a heavy black shroud.

Her eyes widened. She began to shake more violently. “Let me go,” she repeated, this time meaning it.

As if he sensed the sudden change in her, Victor’s grip tightened around her wrists with exacting force. She jerked against him, trying to rip free.

And Black’s gaze hardened into green ice.

At the very moment when she knew he was releasing a tendril of his weakening power, Victoria released her own – melting the wall behind her into an insubstantial plane of nothingness so that she could drop through it and into whatever lay beyond.

“No!” Victor had a split second to decide to let her go or risk being trapped in a re-solidifying wall. He wisely chose to let her go.

Victoria slipped, soundlessly, through the rippling planks of wood and realized, too late, that there was no room beyond her own.

There was nothing but open air – and a two-story drop onto a hard-packed street below.

Chapter Fourteen

She was going to hit the ground. And she couldn't right herself; she wouldn't land on her feet. She would land on her back. It might knock her out. It might kill her. If it didn't, it would hurt – *really bad*.

Either way, Black would have time to get to her. And if she was alive but unconscious, he would win. She would wake up back inside the Field.

In his bed.

All of this, Victoria contemplated as the wind whipped past her on her short journey to the packed soil below. She closed her eyes, wishing again that she could fly. Wishing that telekinesis could stop a person's fall. But it couldn't. It had never worked that way.

And then the air rushed from her lungs in a hard, sudden, *whoosh* and she heard something snap. She couldn't tell what, exactly, it was. Her body was instantly numb. She laid on the ground, her vision blurred to an unrecognizable extent, and waited for the pain to come.

It came.

My leg... she thought, frantically. She couldn't move it. With shaking arms, she slowly pushed herself up onto her hands and turned on the ground. *Oh gods, it hurts!* The pain rushed over her ten-fold, the way pain does when it wants to be felt – noticed – paid attention to.

She looked down to find it broken. *Not again*. It was just like before. It was just like when she and Andromeda had been playing in their father's study and she'd climbed the library ladder. The bone had come completely out of her leg that night. She could still see it – the jagged, white edge, the blood, the torn muscle and tissue.

Bile rose in Victoria's throat as the strange memory took over, her pain setting it free from where it had been suppressed so long ago.

* * * *

“Nooo!!!” Victor pushed off of the wall that Victoria had just slipped through and moved to the window adjacent to it.

Down below, Victoria lay on the hard packed ground, her right leg twisted beneath her at a painful angle. From this distance, Victor could just make out the flash of white mid-way through her calf – and the blood that seemed to baptize the ground all around her. It was spreading too quickly. The break was a compound fracture. She’d never been wounded so badly in a Game before.

And it was his fault. There hadn’t been enough time to attempt a time stop. Which was horribly ironic. And telekinesis had never been able to stop a falling body. For some strange reason, it just didn’t work that way.

Oh gods... he thought, as she stirred slowly, gradually coming out of the initial shock of her impact. She was clearly dazed and most likely didn’t even know how badly she’d been hurt. If she didn’t heal herself soon, she would lose consciousness from blood loss. And she was the only one among them with the ability to heal. If she passed out, there would be no one remaining to do it. She would bleed to death.

No, please no.... Victor reared back and, with the elbow of his leather jacket, he smashed out the glass of the second-story window. It wasn’t large enough for a human to fit through. But he didn’t always have to be a human.

Below, the giant of a man with blonde hair was racing toward Victoria. He had called himself Anders, but Black wasn’t a fool; he knew that wasn’t his real name. The man was a liar. There was much more to him than he was letting on. Victor had tried to read his thoughts as he’d watched him sit with Victoria last night over dinner. He had failed.

There was even more of a wall around that man's mind than there now seemed to be around Maxwell Blood's.

Black watched Anders skid to a stop and kneel beside Victoria. Sudden and desperate, hard jealousy caused Victor's world to flash the color of shallow, green arctic ice as the shards of glass from the shattered window rained down on them below. Anders shielded Victoria's small body from the sharp pieces and then, when they'd settled, he looked up. When Anders saw Victor gazing back down at him, something very strange flickered in the depths his brown eyes.

"Captain Blood!" the man bellowed.

Victor's eerie, glowing gaze narrowed as he stepped back from the window. With a drawing of his power, he concentrated on an alternate shape – another being – and then transformed into a large black bird with feathers the same iridescent blue-black sheen as Victor's hair. The giant bird's wings flapped once, hard, against his sudden lack of legs.

In his new form, he shot through the window and then drew his wings in tight, diving toward the sprawled, broken form of the woman he loved.

Wind whipped past him for the short distance and space of time it took to reach the ground. As he did so, he reclaimed his human form and dropped to the dirt on his black boots, landing beside Victoria, across from Anders.

Anders was not a normal human; Black knew this. He was not surprised when the giant man quickly stood to face him as Black retook his own form and solidified beside Victoria. He'd been expecting it.

And so it was with one clean, hard, over-powered thrust of his dark telekinesis that he managed to ruthlessly shove the large man away from Victoria's body, sending him flying twenty yards down the street.

Anders hit the ground hard and rolled. Victor watched him for a moment and then turned back to Victoria. He knelt beside her.

She was trying to push herself up and, from the sound of it, trying *desperately* not to cry. From pain or fear, he wasn't sure. It didn't matter. Victor wanted to pull her into his arms, give her some of his strength, give her anything and do anything to make this horrible mess disappear. At that very moment, he would have traded his *soul* for the ability to turn back time instead of freeze it.

But he never had a chance to touch her, much less help her in any way, because, at that moment, Maxwell Blood came sprinting around the corner down the street, his long sword drawn, his ice blue eyes glowing with the kind of magical heat that once and for all proved he was no mere team captain.

Victor's green glare hardened and his white teeth bared in what had effectively become hatred. He no longer wanted to defeat the duplicitous men who surrounded Victoria Red. He wanted to kill them. All of them.

And he would start with Maxwell Blood.

* * * *

Victoria couldn't keep track of what was happening around her. There was too much pain. And now, joining that pain, was nausea. She felt dizzy, light-headed. Her clothes were damp. She knew what it all meant, but her brain did not want to accept the truth. She was shoving it away, stubbornly refusing to deal with reality.

She heard Anders call for Max. At least, she thought it was Anders. And then Anders was gone and someone else was beside her. If the wave of cold fury that washed over her was an accurate indication, it was Victor.

But then he, too, was gone. And all that remained was the pain.

You're going to die, Rose. There was a voice in her head. It sounded like her own. But only just. *You're going to pass out and then bleed to death if you don't sit up and heal your leg **right now.***

She was right. She was going to die.

With effort that she was fairly certain bordered on the kind of strength it would take to move a mountain, Victoria sat up. Her world went fuzzy and muffled. Her vision tunneled. But, unfortunately, not enough to block out the red. There was so much blood.

The nausea that had been steadily growing inside of her finally reared its head and rose on all fours, roaring at her with a vengeance. Victoria swallowed hard, forming a wall in her throat to block the bile that so stubbornly tried to escape.

No, Rose! Don't think about the blood! Concentrate, sis. Heal the wound. There was the voice again, only this time, it sounded a little less like her – and a little more like someone else. But...who? She was so confused. Could barely think straight. Could barely think of *anything* but the horrible, horrible pain.

*Concentrate, damn it! Hold your hand out, Rose! See the leg whole again. See it whole! Do it **now!***

Victoria did what the voice told her to do. She held her hand out over her leg and, without looking, she tried to imagine it as it was before. As it should be. She imagined herself as healthy, whole, mended and perfect. She saw the blood in her veins and not on the ground.

But it wasn't working the way it normally did. She'd never tried to heal such a serious wound on her own body before. The agony was mucking things up. She couldn't put what blood she'd lost back inside of herself. She mended the bone, un-tore the muscle, and re-created her leg, down the molecules of skin that smoothed out her golden flesh. But the blood was gone – soaked into the ground beneath her. The energy was already sapped and couldn't be salvaged.

She felt so tired.

Victoria forced herself forward and found her hands and knees. She lifted her now-mended leg and tried to get it beneath her. But there was so little strength to call upon. The ground had turned to crimson clay beneath her. It caused the dirt to stick to her uniform in red-brick clumps. It stained the other knee of her pants.

And the nausea was back.

“Red.”

Victoria looked up from her position and, with Anders’ help, managed to sit back on her heels. It was as far as she could go.

“I lost too much blood,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said. From behind him, waves of cold washed over them both in coming and going tides. The sound of crackling fury emanated through the air. Someone grunted in pain. Something sounded as if it snapped. And then someone roared and the icy crackling began all over again.

“What’s going on?” she asked, softly. She simply couldn’t get any force behind her words.

“Your captain and the other are fighting.”

She frowned, tamped down another stubborn wave of nausea, and asked, “how?”

“Cold magic. They’re both quite powerful. You have to get out of here.”

“Both of them?” Max was using dark leader abilities?

He always was cold to the touch...

And how had he gotten into her room? How had he made his way into her bed last night? It made sense. And it made no sense at all.

She was so, *so* confused.

“I don’t understand.” She whispered.

“You will.”

“But –” There was a sound of flesh ripping. Someone screamed in pain.

“No but’s, little one,” Anders’ voice sliced through the chaos of horrors around them, stealing her attention. “Take Brom. If either of these two can read your mind, they will be able to find you as long as you know where you’re going.” He helped her stand, placing one strong arm beneath both of hers to hold her up.

There was another horrible sound, wet and disturbing. Someone grunted and hit the ground. And then there was more cold crackling. The temperature was dropping steadily. Victoria could see her breath now.

“Brom knows where to go. He’ll head out of town and then, once he thinks he’s gone far enough, he’ll head home. I won’t tell you where that is so that they can’t follow you. But you’ll be safe with him ‘til you get there.”

Anders cupped her face in his free hand and forced her to look at him. Distractedly, she noticed that when he breathed, there was no cloud of frost before his lips.

“Are you hearing me, Red?” He asked her, his expression starkly concerned. She could understand his reservations. If her eyes looked as wide as they felt, and her pallor was as pale as she thought it probably was, then she was the very picture of near-death, dawning hysteria.

But she nodded. The truth was, she did follow what he was saying so far. She was flabbergasted by her life at that moment, but, as luck would have it, still capable of comprehending reason. The rest of this was a fucked up mess that made no sense.

She would take what she could get.

And then Brom was suddenly there beside them – all shining and black and larger than life. Anders picked her up, placing her in the leather seat on the horse. She felt unsure from this perch,

which seemed so high above the ground. And when Brom moved beneath her, she was sure the world was falling out from under her body.

“Easy now,” Anders told her, steadying her with a strong hand on her waist. Victoria closed her eyes, got her bearings, and re-opened them again.

Anders handed her the reins. “Just stay upright in the saddle; hold these and the horn with one hand, and wrap your other fist in his mane. He’ll pick up good speed, but as long as you don’t let go, you’ll be fine.”

“Anders, I’m too dizzy. I lost too much blood. I don’t think I can hold on,” she told him, trying to make him understand.

But Anders nodded, once. “I know, lass. This will help.” With that, he placed the palm of his hand against her chest. She gasped, inhaling sharply as her skin grew warm beneath the uniform she wore. The warmth quickly spread out from his contact point, until, within short seconds, it had enveloped her entire body.

As it reached her fingers and toes, Victoria closed her eyes once more. She couldn’t help it. It felt good. *Very* good. It was like a fire that didn’t burn. It felt like being wrapped in a warm blanket after getting caught in the rain. Like hot cocoa on a sore throat or the hearth’s flames on a winter’s night....

“Now get going,” he finished, at last, removing his hand. Victoria opened her eyes and gazed down at him. Only now – now that she could see without the blur of pain and blood loss – did she notice the tiny red-orange flames leaping to life in the depths of his brown eyes.

And by the time she did, it was too late.

Anders slapped the stallion on the back and Brom took off down the street. Victoria held on for dear life as, behind her, cold fury met cold fury in desperate battle – and an unknown savior had just given her the fire in his blood.

* * * *

Captain Maxwell Blood watched from the corner of his eye as Victoria Red took off down the street on the back of a giant black stallion. He couldn't go after her. Game Control had been right to fear Victor Black.

The dark leader had, indeed, become too powerful.

Max was bleeding from several mind-wounds on his body. His bicep was split from shoulder to elbow, his chest had been re-opened where Black had injured him previously, by the beach, and the palm of his hand was bleeding around his sword. His grip was becoming slippery and he wasn't certain how much longer he'd be able to hold on.

But it was the only real advantage he had over the other dark leader; it was the only tangible thing that separated them, so he clenched it tight in his fist and attacked with it while he could.

Neither opponent could read the others' mind. Neither could throw the other off using telekinesis. They were matched power for power, even though Victor Black was supposed to be four hundred years older than him.

Because in all honesty, Black was in fact, *not*.

Not at all.

Maxwell Blood was what Game Control referred to as the "ace up their sleeve." Several long and time-blurred centuries ago, Max had come to play on the Field as a dark team leader. As every other player was when brought inside the wall, he was wiped of his memories. He had no idea who his family had once been or where he had once lived or what he had once been like.

When you become a Gamer, it no longer mattered. That's what they told you. And, in the end, that was what you believed.

When Max helped his team win Game after Game and earned the nick name, "Maxwell the Bloody" or "Bloody Max," GC offered him a place in their ranks.

It was the offer of a lifetime – of *several* lifetimes. And as the centuries heaped upon the centuries past, and Bloody Max's powers grew, the former team leader climbed the ladder of ex-players in the GC's lines.

Until he became who and what he was today.

When young Rose Tyrnan had been taken from her home and brought onto the Field, it was a move that granted GC a massive boost of power and supplied the wall with the burst of energy it needed to continue working for another several hundred years. Rose was a gem of a born Gamer. Her power was immense; she had yet to even discover the talent she had, latent within herself.

Max had recognized this when viewing the results of her test. Hers - and her twin sister's.

Their parents had not wanted them to enter the Field. It was that way with some. There was distrust and, of course, there was the selfish envy that came with knowing a Gamer would live forever, and those being forced to let them go would not. But in the end, it didn't matter how the people of the outside sectors felt about it – the Gamers were always taken; and the Field was supplied with the force it needed to keep things as they were indefinitely.

However, with young Rose and her sister, Andromeda, something went horribly awry. The two girls were incredibly strong. They fought valiantly, intelligently, and desperately.

One of them didn't make it. Her life was lost in the struggle to get them beyond the wall. She died in her mother's arms as her sister was carried, kicking and screaming, to the transporter cube that would forever separate her from what remained of her family.

Wiping her mind had been an undertaking of disproportionate difficulty. Even strapped down and drugged up, she fought the procedure with every stubborn fiber of her tiny being. Max had watched the small girl scream and writhe as the machines whirled to life and, little by little, erased what she knew of her past.

He hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her. She was so small and so brave. She was so desperate and so tragically determined. It was a helpless, hopeless resistance on her part, but she never gave in. Not once.

Not until the very end – when the deed was done. And Game Control presented to him one golden-haired, golden-eyed Victoria Red, the new Red team leader.

She had smiled at him then. A beautiful, innocent, bright-eyed smile, and something inside of him suddenly sat up and struggled to breathe.

Game Control hadn't wanted to lose their new player, of course. They were already upset over the loss of her sister. They wanted to keep close tabs on Victoria and make certain that she grew to love and trust the Game and the Field it was played on. If she did, she wouldn't ask questions. She would never be tempted to wander.

GC knew how it worked. They'd been running the Game for millennia.

They could not allow her to go the way of her sister. Not under any circumstances.

And so, because he knew it should be done – and because something about her intrigued him – Max volunteered to go under cover and keep an eye on the pretty and powerful new Gamer that GC secretly referred to as “Red Rose.”

He changed his form, as all dark leaders were able to do, taking on the body of a pre-teen boy and joining her team as the new Red captain.

They grew close, he and Victoria. He came to truly care about her.

And now she was running from him.

This had gone too far. It was getting out of hand. She was never supposed to leave the Field in the first place; he'd failed in that much. The damage might already be irreparable. It was time to nip this in the bud.

As Victor Black hurled yet another incredibly cold ball of energy at his opponent, Maxwell the Bloody dove for the ground and slipped into invisibility. But this time, just as Black was shielding himself with a wall of power that would block a return attack, no such attack was forthcoming.

Instead, there was only a dawning silence. A stunned, dust-settling, crackle-lingering kind of quiet that comes after a magical battle of these proportions.

And Victor Black, dark leader of the Gray team stood, finally, alone on the street of Ocanus. The town's people peeked tentatively through their windows and around the splinter-laden logs of buildings up and down the wide path. And what they saw was a solitary, tall figure in iced-over black, with hair the color of raven's wings and eyes the same brilliant, impossible green of the sun's final flash before it sets on the horizon for good.

A breeze picked up and kicked a few dried leaves down the road. They skittered, caught a strand of errant cold electricity, crackled a few times, and then skittered some more.

The figure in black turned once, in place, his all-seeing gaze burning an icy path into everything it saw.

And then he, too, vanished into thin air.

Chapter Fifteen

“This isn’t good, Blood.”

“No, sir.” Max stayed where he was, standing easy, his hands open at his sides, as his superior paced slowly across the room. He kept his eyes trained on the man’s tall, broad form, and tried very hard not to let his own anger seep out to any detectable level. The Game Lord was upset enough as it was.

“If anyone on the Field possesses the ability to upset the balance we’ve fought so hard and so long to maintain, it’s Victor Black and Victoria Red.” The Game Lord stopped, ran a hand through his thick gray mane of hair, and sighed heavily. “Three thousand years, I’ve kept the wall working, Blood. Three thousand fucking years. And now....” He shook his head, his eyes shutting momentarily. “Now it’s a few short hours away from crumbling to bits. And all because you couldn’t keep Red Rose where she belonged.”

Max had no reply for that. The Game Lord was right. Max was only lucky that he’d been keeping enough of a close watch on her that he’d noticed she was practicing at night without her Game Band. When he saw that she was doing this, he’d begun to suspect that she might one day soon leave the Field. And he’d had that special bottle of sleeping pills created for her. Each capsule contained a tracking device that, once swallowed, would find its way into her blood stream.

Without that, he never would have found her.

“She’ll be the death of us, Blood.”

“It isn’t Victoria, sir. It’s Black. He is the one who instigated this.”

“It doesn’t matter. The longer Red stays beyond the boundaries of the Field, the more memories she’ll regain. And if she recalls enough....” He stopped and fixed Max with a stare the

color of wet slate. “She would have the backing of almost any Gamer on the Field. She’s charismatic and capable. People fear Black. But they love Victoria Red. I don’t think I need to remind you what will happen if too many Gamers realize the Game they’ve been playing all along is a farce, and attempt to venture beyond the wall.”

“No sir.”

The Game Lord began pacing again. “Personally, I’d rather not be forced to witness, first hand, any kind of re-awakening of the Old Ones and their self-professed ranking in the world, Blood. We would be the first to go.”

Max had to agree with that. There would be vengeance on the deities’ minds. Their power had been stolen. Their champions, used. The wall sapped their strength and fed it to a few chosen mortals, giving immortality to those inside the wall even as it shortened the life span of those in the outside sectors by half. Max doubted that this was going over well with the old gods. At the moment, the deities could do nothing to stop it. But if the wall stopped functioning, that would change.

“Fix this, Blood. Get Black and the Red Rose back inside the wall before everything falls apart.”

“I need a dozen men, Arthur One, and supplies.” Max said.

At this, the Game Lord stopped once more in his pacing and looked up at Max. He frowned. “So many?”

“Black has grown immensely strong,” Max explained, calmly. “And Victoria is gaining friends.”

The Game Lord’s frown deepened. “Red’s new-found human friends are of no consequence to me.” He paused, considering something. “But Black is. I was right about him, it would seem.”

“You were.” Max was not about to elaborate that point by admitting that, in his battle with the Gray team leader on the streets of Ocanus, Black had managed to seriously wound him several times and yet had come away from the fight without a single scratch on his own body. Despite the fact that Max had been wielding a sword.

He also didn’t feel it was overly important to point out that he didn’t think Victoria’s new-found friend was necessarily human. It was best, in the realm of Game Control, to play your cards close to your chest until you had something more than hunches with which to go on.

“Then do what you must. And just in case Black decides to come back inside the wall for whatever reason, post guards at the transporter cubes.” The Game Lord’s jaw muscles tensed and his gray eyes darkened. “If it comes down to a fight inside the wall, try to get him to the rehabilitation center without doing any permanent damage to him. And speaking of that, since you requested him, I should tell you that Arthur One is *in* rehabilitation, at the moment. He should be finished within a few hours.”

Max’s brow knit at that piece of information, but he didn’t bother asking about it. “I’ll post the guards.” He nodded.

“And make certain you take no more than a dozen men with you when you leave the Field. We don’t want to unwittingly upset the balance ourselves by dragging an army into the outside sectors just to bring back two Gamers.”

“Understood.” Max turned to leave.

“One more thing, Blood.”

He stopped, looked over his shoulder, and waited.

“I want them alive.” Their eyes met; blue on gray. “Especially Rose. Do I make myself clear?”

Max's gaze glittered. "Perfectly." He waited a moment, and then, with a single nod before he left, he added, "sir."

* * * *

Something had been bothering Victor ever since his meeting with Blood on the shore of the Mare. The captain of the Red team had told him that he knew where to find Victoria.

How, exactly?

He wasn't able to follow her by reading her mind. Victor was sure of that, at least. No matter what the lay person might believe, a dark leader's telepathic powers were only so strong, and distance was its greatest weakness. Within sheer seconds of her mad-dash flee from the shore, Victoria had been too far away for either of them to track by following her thoughts.

Yet, somehow, the captain had located his team leader. Victor had, in turn, found them both by tracking Blood, himself, all the way to the tavern in Ocanus.

So, how did Max find Victoria?

Victor was willing to bet just about everything he had that Blood had located her by using a tracking device, despite the fact that such devices were impossible to attach to Game and downtime uniforms. The uniforms had been designed that way, in order to make Game play fair.

Yet, it was the logical explanation.

There had been a tickle of a concern in the back of his head since the night he'd sent Victoria that *dream*. She'd been sleeping so deeply, it had been difficult to infiltrate her unconscious mind enough to make her feel what he'd wanted her to feel. It was *too* deep a sleep - unnatural, even.

That kind of sleep was a *drugged* sleep, and as far as he knew, Victoria was not the kind to make regular use of the Medical Research Unit and its various remedies.

She didn't need to. She was a light leader and, therefore, a healer.

Which begged the question, why had she been drugged that night?

If Victor's gut feeling was correct, then Maxwell Blood had given her that medication under the guise of trying to ease her sleep – so that the tracking devices he'd planted inside would find their way into her body and lead him to her should she ever try to escape the Field.

Bloody hell, he thought, as he ran a hand through his jet-black hair and warily eyed the transporter cube in front of him through an intense green gaze.

Whether he was right or wrong didn't actually matter, in the end. Whatever means Max had used to track Victoria down had come from someone and something higher up than any team captain should have access to. It was an understatement to say that Blood was not who he pretended to be; and it was clear to Victor that the man no longer had his team leader's best interests at heart. Obviously, Blood was no mere captain.

At the very least, he was a very capable and experienced dark leader. Victor had never fought one more powerful. Why he had hidden this fact from Victoria for the past fifteen years and what vile plans he now had for her were both frustrating mysteries.

At the very worst, Maxwell Blood was working for Game Control.

In which case, he was after Victoria for all of the wrong reasons. And the war that Black had hoped to one day wage against a crooked and evil government entity had, in fact, already begun.

Either way, Blood would be able to track Victoria again in no time and Victor needed help. He wasn't stupid. He knew this was no longer a Game of one-on-one. The rules had changed and the stakes were too high.

John Storm was his best man, his closest friend, and one hell of a fighter. Victor was certain that Storm would be more than willing to join forces with his team leader. The man had been itching to take on Game Control for a *very* long time.

Jeannine Cure was the head Foster in the MRU. She was in charge of all of the comings and goings in the medical facility and had authority over every doctor and nurse within its walls. Like

Black, Jeannine had long had her suspicions about the true nature of the wall and the Game that they all worked so hard to keep up. Cure's boyfriend was one of the men who worked under the Arthurs in the Technical Research Facility. Jonathan was a bright man who kept a low profile and, as a result, saw and heard a lot of what happened within the TRF.

Jonathan could help Victor track Victoria using the same technology that Blood was using, whatever that happened to be. Cure was sure to have a medical ace up her sleeve that could be put to good use getting rid of a hand full of Blood's men, at the very least. And Storm was always a good man to have on your side when going up against an accomplished enemy.

They would all be a boon to Black right now.

The problem, at this point, was *getting* to them, and, in fact, getting back inside the wall, altogether.

It was certain to be a grave undertaking. If Victor was right about Maxwell Blood working for Game Control, then he was sure to have called out the troops by now. They would be guarding the cubes on the other side.

Victor eyed the transporter before him with wary determination. He knew that once he got inside and pressed a button, he would be sending himself head-long into some sort of ambush.

Gods, I'm gonna get killed....

Victor frowned. What was a god? He remembered, now, hearing that term inside of Victoria's head when he'd had her up against the wall of her room at the tavern in Ocanus. He'd also used it, himself, after she'd fallen....

Victor shook his head once, as if to clear it. Being outside of the wall was messing with everyone.

He pushed the strangeness to the back of his mind, and concentrated on the task at hand.

This was the same transporter cube that Victoria had nearly drowned in when she'd arrived outside of the wall. But she hadn't had the advantage of a dark leader's powers. For it was no longer immersed beneath twelve fathoms of ocean water. It now rested on a thick plane of rime, well above the surface of the Mare, where Victor had raised it on a hastily-formed glacier of dark leader ice.

He was not going to drown attempting to use it. He was just going to have to blast his way back out again once he reached the other side.

Victor took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. He could feel his eyes glowing, cold and bright. He had no choice in this.

It was now or never.

So be it, he thought. He was going to get to Victoria. He was going to save her from whatever the duplicitous Red captain had planned for her, at whatever the cost. If that cost was a thousand other human lives, then he would gladly pay it. For Victoria?

So be it.

* * * *

Max thought carefully on what he was about to do. He was alone in the transporter cube, having given his men the order to prepare and wait for him at the TGB.

There was something he wanted to try before he left the Field once more, and besides, Arthur One was still in rehabilitation. For what, he had no idea, but it wasn't important. Rehabilitation was necessary some times. It was not his concern.

In any case, the delay offered Max just enough time. What he had planned might make all of the difference in the world when it came to retrieving Victoria and bringing her back inside of the wall. He didn't want to hurt her. He would, if he had to. He would send weakness through her

beautiful body, subjugate the amazing mind in her gorgeous head, if it came down to it. But he truly didn't want to.

And the idea he now had might allow him to get to her without resorting to her pain.

With practiced ease, Max slid back into his role as team captain, placed the impassive mask of collaboration across his handsome face, and punched in the code that would take him to the Red tower.

The transporter whirled to life, blurring the cube around him in that impossible way it always did. Within seconds, he had arrived and the doors were sliding open once more.

Max stepped out into the Red tower's main meeting room and looked around. It was empty, at the moment, but there were sounds coming from one of the rooms adjoining it; the chinking of glasses toasting one another, and then female laughter.

April and Ty.

If they were together and drinking, then they were undoubtedly alone. Which meant that Simon knew to give them their privacy for the evening.

Max tamped down his disappointment. He would have liked to have the Red team's resident genius on his side, but there was no time to go searching for him where he was most likely sequestered in the TGB's gigantic, many-leveled library.

Ty and April would have to do.

"Ty! April!" He called, taking the tone of a team captain who was once more all-business and in charge.

The laughter from the room beyond stopped at once and, within a few short moments, the two team players had risen from wherever they'd been seated and were making their way around the corner.

Ty was busily re-buttoning his downtime uniform jacket, which had been opened to reveal the expanse of dark brown skin and trained muscle beneath. April was straightening her under-shirt. Her shoulder-length shock of red hair was slightly mussed.

Max tried not to let his impatience show. Instead, he wore the worried expression he wanted them to see and strode forward to meet them half way. “Victoria’s in danger. Black has her beyond the wall and he’s done something to her mind. She no longer knows who she is and won’t listen to reason. We have to help her.”

Ty blinked, his brow furrowing with confusion and alarm. April’s jaw dropped open. It was a good ten seconds before either of them were able to speak.

Then Ty shook his head quickly, once, and held up his hand, palm-out. “Hold up. What are you saying, man?”

“I didn’t learn of it until this morning, but apparently Victor Black challenged Victoria to a private Game,” Max explained, in as calm a tone as possible. He allowed some of the real anger he felt to edge his words in order to lend to the credibility of the story he was feeding them.

“In doing so, he lured her beyond the wall and then, somehow, screwed up her mind. You know how dark leaders are. And he’s the worst of them.” He made a face, then, to show his “distaste,” and it was mirrored by the other two with perfect predictability.

“No kidding,” April agreed. “He *is* the worst.” Something in her expression glossed over for a moment and she shrugged. “He’s hot, but he’s bad.” Ty shot her a jealous look, but she missed it because she was looking back up at Max. “What did he do to Victoria, exactly?” She asked. Max could read her mind as easily as if he were reading a children’s book. She was concerned and confused. And beginning to feel antsy.

Perfect.

“I don’t know,” he lied. “But she’s suddenly convinced that the entire Game isn’t really necessary and that Game Control is evil and that the wall should be torn down. She won’t come back with me,” he shook his head, sighing in frustration. “She actually *ran* from me.” He ran his hand through his brown hair and paced away from them in a show of agitated aggravation.

They were buying the performance.

Max could read that Ty was getting as uneasy and apprehensive as April was. Victoria’s team was very loyal. Suddenly, it occurred to Max that he should be grateful that Simon was not there, after all. Simon Roon was very, *very* smart and, of all of them, he might have actually questioned what Max was saying.

Maybe things were looking up for him.

“We have to go after her,” Ty said, his jaw set with determination.

“Agreed,” April added. She squared her shoulders. “We need to find Simon. He can figure out what we should do first.”

Idiots, Max thought. They’re idiots. They’re not even asking me how I managed to get beyond the wall, myself. This is too easy.

“There’s no time,” Max told them as he turned away and strode across the room toward the transporter cube. “We need to head out now. Victoria’s out there alone with Black.” He glanced over his shoulder as he pressed the open button on the control console. “The longer we wait, the more time he has to do whatever it is he’s planning to do with her.” He used a bit of his dark leader power then, letting the words sink into their minds in an insipid, iniquitous way. He filled their heads with dark images, helping their apprehension along.

April was at his side in an instant, her pallor having gone decidedly pale.

Ty was behind her. “How do you know all of this?” the man asked.

Max blinked. He hadn't been expecting that. Maybe they weren't as idiotic as he'd pegged them to be.

"Were you outside of the wall, too?" April asked, then, adding to Max's surprise.

He covered quickly, though. "Yes. I was," he answered, plainly. The transporter doors slid open and he stepped inside. "This morning, a friend told me he'd seen Victoria and Black talking yesterday. I tried to find her and couldn't. Her Game band was in her quarters and I got worried." He paused then and raised his brows at them. "You getting in?"

They jumped a little and realized that they'd been standing outside of the cube, listening to what he had to say. They hurriedly stepped into the transporter and the doors slid shut behind them.

Max continued. "I saw one of the Arthurs at lunch and he asked to speak with me. In confidence, he told me that his controls had registered an energy spike for one of the transporter codes that took a cube to the outside sectors. He had heard that I was searching for Victoria. And, apparently, no one can find Black either. He'd put two and two together and thought I should know."

Ty whistled low. Max read his thoughts. He was thinking that those circumstances were incredibly lucky. And he was wondering how much time they had. How bad things already were.

April was thinking along the same lines.

He'd fooled them once again. Max hid the smile he felt forming on his lips and, instead, punched in the same code that had taken him beyond the wall earlier. It wasn't the code Victoria had been forced to use, of course. Because, unlike Victoria, Max had access to any code he wanted. He didn't have to appear in the outside sectors seventy feet under water. It was part and parcel to holding rank of second in command at Game Control.

"Where are we going now?" April asked next.

“I’m dropping you two off outside the wall. Then I’m heading back to the TGB. I’ve got some friends who are willing to help us. We’ll also need some supplies, but the three of us together are too easy to recognize, so I’ll go alone. Then I’ll meet back with you in Sector 3.” He stepped back from the console and took a deep breath, as if steadying his nerves and contemplating the task they were about to undertake. “I don’t doubt that Black will have his own little regiment of minions to fall back on if things start to go wrong for him. We’ll need all of the help we can get.”

Ty cleared his throat. He was looking at the floor of the cube. He ran his hand over his bald head and said, “How are we going to keep this under GC’s radar?”

Max stared at him. In the Gamer’s mind, he was ready to fight to save his leader, if he had to. But he was afraid of Game Control. He didn’t want the government to find out that Victoria had ventured beyond the wall. He didn’t want her to be punished. And he didn’t want to be punished for going after her.

Max couldn’t blame him.

“You don’t need to worry about Game Control,” he calmly assured him, again using his dark leader ability to push his lie home.

We already know.

Chapter Sixteen

Victoria felt strange. As Brom trotted along, things began to look familiar to her. It wasn't the kind of familiarity that one would get after having *just* been somewhere. It was the kind that rests in the back of the mind, asleep and silent, until that whiff of a certain scent or that breeze that feels a certain way – or that face that feels like you've seen it in a dream.

That was what she felt now, as the horse paced through a wilderness that Victoria did not *quite* know. Not quite.

But almost.

There were crumbling buildings out here. Stone structures that must have fallen hundreds – if not thousands – of years ago. They looked like weathered, beaten skeletons of something she might have once walked through. They resembled the worn-out remains of a place that she might have once celebrated a birthday in.

With a cake?

And candles....

There were clusters of these buildings, here and there. Brom moved steadily, and she wasn't used to the plod of a horse's gait, so she held on tight. But her eyes were anywhere but on the back of the horse.

Those golden eyes took in the emptiness and the hollowness of the landscape, and saw what felt like a *once-was-ness*. There was no other way to describe it. She had never seen anything like this before.

Within the wall, everything was new. It was clean and shiny and the Arthurs and their teams worked on keeping everything running in perfect condition, all the time.

But not here. Not this. This was a world that had taken its last breaths long ago. What was the last conversation held within its walls? Who was the last to leave? And why?

How does a *place* – die?

Brom stopped beside an ancient-looking fountain. A statue had been erected here; placed atop what once were a school of carved fish. The statue's features were destroyed, as if smashed with a sledge hammer. Its arms were missing. It was a female figure in a long skirt and beneath the hem of the stone skirt was a word. Victoria blinked. She could almost make it out....

There was a shifting sound to Victoria's right. Jerked from her reveries, she spun in the saddle on top of Brom, her gold gaze searching the shadows between two skeleton buildings.

"Who's there!"

The scuffling-shuffling sound came again.

A twig broke. And a woman stepped hesitantly into the light.

Victoria blinked. The woman looked different. Strange. Her face was deeply lined, her eyes a faded color, lined with red. Her body was hunched, as if she were carrying a great weight on her back. But there was nothing there; nothing that Victoria could see.

No one looked like that on the Field.

The woman approached slowly, cautiously. She appeared even more surprised than Victoria. In fact – she looked so pale, so stunned, Victoria thought the woman might be ill. That she would, perhaps, faint. Surely, only a horrible sickness could cause a person to become so withered?

"Who are you?" Victoria asked, wary and a little afraid. What if this was Black? What if it was him in some impossible, unrecognizable form? Would he do this just to confuse her?

But there was no cold here. No feeling of power radiating off of the stranger. There was only the small woman and this old, echo of a place.

The woman stopped in her approach and blinked, her lined brow furrowed in confusion. In – *disbelief*.

“Meeda?” The woman asked, then. Her voice was the sound the leaves made in the Fall when they skittered across the landscape. “Is that you?” She took a tentative, small step forward and gave a tiny shake of her bowed head. Gray hair wisped about her face. “Can it really be?” She whispered.

“I’m sorry....” Victoria muttered. As if sensing her unease, Brom took a few wary steps back.

But something tickled at the back of Victoria’s mind. The woman watched her from below, a pained expression on her furrowed face. And something was yawning awake inside of Victoria. It stirred, uncomfortable and disconcerting. She felt misplaced; disoriented. “I think you have the wrong...” *person*? Her voice trailed off.

The strange woman stopped then, and straightened. Her expression went from disbelieving and a little frightened to wide-eyed and amazed. And then her pale, prosaic eyes were shiny with hastily-built, unshed tears.

She inhaled sharply, her withered hand covering her mouth in wonder. “Oh gods...” her voice scratched. “Rose!” It cracked and she sobbed. “Oh my dear Thor, you’ve come home! Rose, my sweet Rose!”

The woman moved forward then.

And, all at once, Victoria *remembered*.

The world tumbled toward her as quickly as her memories did. She was unconscious when she hit the ground.

* * * *

“You were right.”

“Of course I was. You think I threw my eye into that blasted well for nothing?”

Loki glanced over at Baldur, who always caught the sharp edge of his father’s temper since Thor had been away.

The blonde-haired Baldur took it with easy grace, though, letting the All Father’s harsh tone slide right over him as if his skin were armor. Which wasn’t far off.

Odin stood from his throne and began pacing. Outside, in the human world, storms were building in response.

A young goddess with golden hair stepped forward from the shadows along one wall of the great hall. “All Father, may I see my sister?”

Odin stopped and turned to face her. His expression softened a little, but he shook his head. “No, Andromeda. I knew you would ask, child. But it isn’t possible.”

“Why not?” The woman asked. She had been very young when she’d died. And Ullr had brought her here to mature into the goddess she was born to be.

Loki’s gaze smoldered when it met hers across the room. They had been lovers ever since her arrival, despite the fact that he was the god of fire – and she was the champion of Ullr, the god of ice.

Odin saw their exchange and sighed deeply. Loki’s gaze cut to him, as did the woman’s. Odin turned his back on Loki and gently grasped the young goddess by her upper arms. “Because it would only frighten and distract her. War is brewing, Andromeda. This has been a long time coming; *nothing* must interfere now that the tide is at last turning.”

He let go of her and turned to face Loki. The kindness in his face dropped and his *mood* was back. Just like that. “I don’t need to ask you, since I already know everything, but I’ll ask anyway, because it fucking amuses me. How *is* your young champion holding up now that she’s remembering where she came from?”

Loki managed not to smile. He would never admit as much to the All Father, but he actually *liked* Odin when he was like this. It was the fire in him, he guessed. “She fainted dead away and is still sleeping. I’m keeping her under until I can get back down there to explain things to her.”

“Yes, she trusts you.” Odin paused. “Or, Anders, anyway. Good.” Odin smiled and strode back across the room toward his throne. “Wise decision, Loki. You take after me more than my own oaf of a son does.”

To that, Loki said nothing. Though he couldn’t have agreed more.

“Speaking of Thor, where is he right now?” Odin asked as he re-claimed his throne.

“He’s waiting for Victor Black to ‘recruit’ him against Maxwell Blood and Game Control.” Loki said.

Thousands of years ago, the human world below had been much different than it was now. In the beginning, the old gods chose champions from among the humans and imbued those special few with god-like powers. The humans were to use these abilities to do good in the world.

It was Baldur’s idea, of course. Everything nice and fluffy always *was* Baldur’s idea.

Regardless, however, the idea worked. Humans became more intelligent, lived longer, were kinder toward one another, and society advanced at a rapid pace. At least, it was rapid for the gods, who lived forever.

Unfortunately, one day, Odin foretold that a man would be born to the world who would change the fate of the gods and the people of their world for ages to come.

And that man *was* born. He was a highly intelligent and charismatic man filled with the fear of death and an envy of the gods. It proved to be a truly dangerous combination, for the man managed to gather about him some of the most brilliant minds of his highly developed world – and they created the wall.

The technology was both simple and complex. It was a magnet, of sorts; a homing beacon for power. It used the very power of the gods against them. Once a champion was trapped inside, the wall fed off of his or her magic and amplified the vitality of everything within its circumference while sapping the same from everything without. Humans inside of the wall could live forever. Those outside lived half as long as they once did. As a result, their society faltered. Technology fell by the way-side in exchange for time spent on family, on reflection, and on making the most of what few years they did have.

Once the Game Lord had the wall built to his specifications and satisfaction, he killed the men who built it to keep its secret safe.

Then, little by little, he either lured or abducted more of the gods' champions to his "Game." The Game, he created as a guise, a reason for the wall to remain standing and for Game Control to take what it wanted from the outside sectors.

Over time, the powerful genes the gods had embedded in their chosen humans died out. Only a few were born any more, and they were shadows of the champions before them. As a result, the wall grew weak and those inside of it very slowly aged.

Though he was still strong, the Game Lord was not the young man he once was. The wall needed light and dark leaders to work, and leaders no longer seemed to exist.

An exception was Victor Black, a champion of Ullr.

Another, four hundred years later, was Rose Tyrnan, Loki's champion. Odin foretold both of their births – and of their eventual joining. It was to be the gods' salvation.

Humans – saving gods....

Rose had been born the twin sister to another champion of Ullr; one Game Control would have labeled a dark leader. But Andromeda Tyrnan did not survive Game Control's "collection." Only Rose did. And they were quick to wipe the mind of their precious new light leader.

For, it was well worth it for Game Control to have even half of the mighty duo. Rose's power was very great and it strengthened the wall, once more insuring it would continue to work for centuries to come.

When Victor Black, the first of the two who would save the gods, was born, Odin took action to make certain that what he had foreseen with his one all-seeing eye would truly come to happen. He sent Thor into the Field in the guise of a Gamer. Thor begrudgingly agreed, realizing that it was for the best, no matter how much of an overly-muscled dunce he was.

He chose a disguise that suited him well and played his part, fooling Game Control into accepting him onto the same team as Victor Black.

It was godly luck, indeed.

Once he was on the Playing Field, Thor became even weaker than he had been in Valhalla and far less powerful than the gods that waited for him there.

But he was strong enough.

For hundreds of years, he maintained his position, even coming to befriend Black as they played out their farce of a wretched *Game* and Thor awaited the female half of the prophecy that Odin had foretold.

Twenty-five years ago, she came.

Loki wasn't always overly fond of his brute of a step-brother, but he had to admit that the man had done a good job in planting the idea of rebellion into Victor Black's head.

And the idea to *accept* Black's challenge into Victoria Red's.

Of course, the only suggestion Thor had made to Victor's unconscious mind concerned overthrowing Game Control. The bit about Red having to spend a night in Black's bed was completely Victor's doing. Not that Loki could blame the man. After all, the fire god, himself, had been bedding Victoria's look-alike for years now.

“You’d better get back to it, Loki. Make sure those two get together without killing one another once they’ve both regained their memories.” Odin sat back in his throne, closed his one good eye, and sighed heavily. He looked tired, but it was deceptive. He was a fussy, cranky curmudgeon of a god, but he was a powerful one.

Or, at least, he would be once more. Just as soon as Rose Tyrnan and Victor Black melded their powers and released the gods from their weakness.

Loki chanced a glance at Andromeda and, as if she could feel the weight of his fiery gaze – which she most likely could – she glanced back. He smiled. It was a promise of a smile.

Pay him no heed, sweet one. I’ll take you to see your sister. Trust me.

Odin’s one eye flew open and he pinned the fire god with it. “What, you think that just because I’m sitting here with my damn eye shut, I can’t damn well see you?!” Odin shouted.

Loki’s expression froze. The other gods in the room grew very still.

“I can damn well *hear* you too, you know! For fuck’s sake, Loki, I’m the All Father! I know everything!” He shook his head and sighed again, sitting back once more. Instantly, the other gods relaxed as well.

“Oh, very well. Go to your sister, Andromeda. But try not to give our champion a damn heart attack.” He paused and then shrugged. “Not that you will. I would know if you were going to. But, no matter.” He closed his eye once more and seemed to rest, at last.

Andromeda turned wide, golden eyes on Loki and he held her gaze. He gave her a slow, reassuring smile.

Eventually, she smiled back. She was going to see her sister, after more than a decade. He could feel her excitement – her anxiety and anticipation – from across the room.

Come, my love. He sent the words into her mind. *Rose has been asleep long enough.*

* * * *

Victor stepped over the bodies, his black boots clearing the small pools of blood that collected beneath them. Four guards had been waiting for him. It wasn't enough. It was too easy.

There were sure to be more. But where?

Victor opened his mental feelers and searched for the signals of other minds.

Where are they.... The TGB was empty. Game Control must have cleared it out – sent everyone to their respective towers – when Maxwell Blood reported in. He could understand their concern. GC most likely wanted to lose as few people as possible in this “scuffle,” and Victor wasn't in the mood to go easy on anyone.

The bodies behind him as he turned and headed down another quiet corridor proved as much. This hall sectioned off Rooms 1 through 22. The lights were out further down the aisle.

And the Rooms were silent.

If Victor had been a light leader, he'd have been capable of producing a flame to light the way. But ice was a cold and dark boon and he was forced to make his way through a corridor as black as his name.

He stopped.

He sensed something just up ahead. And then another something.

Two minds, their thoughts slowly opening up to him. He recognized them at once, and his brow furrowed in confusion.

A burst of light suddenly lit up the corridor, temporarily blinding Victor.

“Well it's about damn time, Black,” John Storm drawled as Victor blinked the blurriness out of his vision.

“Storm?” Victor lowered his arm and found his team captain standing a few yards away. At his booted feet were half a dozen GC guards. In Storm's hand was the massive double-sided

hammer he always used in combat. “What the hell are you doing here?” Victor asked, softly. He was bewildered.

Grateful – but bewildered.

“Wow, you were right, Storm. That *was* easy.” Simon Roon, the Red team player, stood behind Storm. He adjusted the glasses he insisted on wearing, despite the fact that corrective surgery had long been available for poor eyesight. “Will they be okay?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Storm replied, kicking one of the fallen men with his boot. “MRU healers are on their way right now.” The gray-eyed man looked up at Victor, who was still too baffled to say anything. Storm being there was surprising enough. Storm having arrived before Victor did and taking out six guards on his own was doubly perplexing. But that he’d done all of this and, at the same time, seemed to have befriended the Red team genius, was positively mystifying.

“You look a tad sick, Black.” Storm was smiling. The gray in his eyes flashed as if lightning had struck in their depths. The man was all too happy when he bashed peoples’ heads in. And he was bloody good at it. There was something unnatural about it.

Victor looked from him to Simon and back again. He straightened. He didn’t bother asking Storm how the man had known to find Victor there at that time. He assumed the fact that GC had cleared the Team Gathering Building and then posted guards all along it was enough of a tip-off for anyone with half a brain to catch on.

So, Victor let it go. “I take it you’re both in.”

Simon stood a little straighter himself, then. He pushed his glasses high up on his nose, his hazel eyes bright and intelligent behind the glass. “Storm told me what was going on. I’m on your side, Black. I haven’t trusted Game Control for some time.”

Victor considered him for a moment. His mind was clean. He was worried about his Team leader and about the implications of the Game, in general. He had some ideas of a conspiracy.... He'd been studying conspiracies of the past in books that Game Control had no idea were even in their TGB library.

And the bit about him not trusting GC was true. Victor had to admit that he'd read those thoughts in Simon's head more than once on the Field during their battles. During a few of their later contests, Roon had possessed a general notion that they were wasting their time fighting one another. But he'd kept it to himself.

And, because he was on the Red team, Victor never would have considered recruiting the man for his personal vendetta.

What's done is done, Black finally thought to himself.

He turned to Storm and nodded. "Very well. We need to get to the Medical Unit and then to the TRF. Blood's gone after Victoria and GC is backing him."

"Aye, the shit's hit the fan, hasn't it, then?" Storm laughed a hearty laugh and jammed the handle of his hammer back into its leather loop on his belt. "This is going to be fun!"

Chapter Seventeen

“There, there... Shhh.”

Victoria came awake with a start, the memories that flooded her mind feeling like a nest of bees within her head, swarming and pulsing and pounding in time with her heart. She was out of breath, covered in sweat. Confused.

Scared.

And there was that voice like Fall leaves scratching across a dry grass landscape. Victoria remembered the woman now. She opened her eyes and turned a terrified gold gaze on the shriveled old lady. She even knew who the woman was.

“Beth...” she whispered, her voice nearly as scratchy and dull as her old nanny’s voice had become.

Elizabeth smiled gently, showing that, at least, her teeth were still good. Her once-blue eyes were dull now, and rimmed with the red of shed tears. Her ancient form was quivering with emotion.

“Don’t fuss, my little Rose. Stay put, dear.” She touched a damp rag to Victoria’s forehead and brushed tangled, golden locks from her face. Victoria swallowed the dry lump that had formed in her throat. It went down grudgingly and Victoria coughed.

“Here. Drink.” Elizabeth put down the rag and picked up a metal goblet. Victoria smelled the faint scent of wine as the old woman lifted the glass to her lips.

She drank. She was too stunned – and too thirsty – not to.

She realized, as she had trouble getting the liquid into her mouth without spilling, that she, too, was trembling.

Badly.

She was shaking because of those bees. Those buzzing memories and the craziness they were making her feel.

I can't hold it all... she thought.

It's too much.

And then, suddenly, she was sobbing big – hard, wracking sobs. She *broke*, there in that bed, beneath the weight of the past, of her sister's death, of her mother's screams, of the pain that had wracked her body as the machines of Game Control relentlessly wiped her mind.

Elizabeth put down the goblet, sat back, and let her cry. She watched, silently, her own tears falling with the quiet grace that comes with age and serenity and the luxury of having the time to mourn.

It was okay, though. Because, Victoria screamed enough for the both of them.

She sat up in a rush and threw her covers aside, feeling as if they would smother her, knowing, only, that she needed to hurl something, that she needed to rip and rend and do anything – *anything* – that would quell the yawning, dawning pain inside of her. That pain stretched from her mind to her soul, ripping a deep and jagged chasm across her very *being*.

She saw her sister, her twin. She saw Andromeda, with the blood spilling from the side of her throat and the gold eyes that would never open again and the unnaturally still body that she knew was no longer breathing and that housed a heart no longer beating.

And, at once, Victoria wanted her *own* heart out of her body. She wanted it gone; it hurt too much. She threw back her head and howled at the ceiling of the small cottage, screamed at the heavens beyond, cried out against the agony that was claiming her, holding her fast in vicious, unforgiving claws.

"I could have healed her! If they would have let me go, I could have healed her!!!"

It went on forever.

Forever and ever.... And longer, still. She screamed until her throat was raw, her body dry of tears, her mind a strange blank.

And then the wailing stopped. And Elizabeth was holding her, rocking her back and forth, whispering softly into her hair.

“No, no, no, no.... No, Meeda, no, no.... Mama, mama, nooo....” At length, Victoria realized she was mumbling, murmuring, crying the same words over and over into Elizabeth’s tear-soaked dress.

Elizabeth smoothed her hair, rocked her some more, and allowed the anguish to leak away as it was meant to do.

It was a long, empathy-laden while before Victoria was at last able to pull away from her nanny and look once more into her old and weary eyes. It didn’t hurt any less. Not really. But Victoria felt tired and empty and for now, that would have to do.

“My sweet child,” Elizabeth said, as she tenderly brushed the tears from Victoria’s cheeks with her wrinkled thumbs. “I never thought I would see you again. I am afraid I am already dead. And this is a dream.”

Victoria let out a harsh, pain-filled, sob-like laugh that cracked because she had little voice left. She shook her head. “Me too, Beth. Me too....”

* * * *

When Max stepped out of the transporter cube with a dozen men behind him, Ty was not expecting the company. He and April automatically backed up. It was instinct. Ty had his crossbow in his hand in record time, and April drew her short sword a mere second later.

“What the —” Ty blinked at Max, his gaze shooting from the GC guards to his captain in stark confusion.

Max held up his hands, placatingly. “Easy, Ty. GC granted us the temporary help because Victoria is as precious to them as she is to us.” He turned slightly and nodded to the men behind him, who were staring at Ty and April with something between indifference and distaste. They were dressed in the gray and tan leather uniforms of Game Control, their swords still in their scabbards, their GC issue “Game” bands gleaming in gold and black metal on their wrists. “They know that Black has poisoned her mind and they don’t want to see any harm come to her. These guys are here to help if Black gets nasty.”

The GC guards differed slightly in hair and eye color, but because their hair cuts were all the same and the men were all the same approximate height, it gave the impression that they were carbon copies of one another.

A military unit comprised of many, but equaling one.

It was disconcerting. They vaguely reminded Ty of a collective of ants. Or worker bees. Mindless.

Drones.

“Okaaay...” he muttered, still unsure. His right hand continued to grip the crossbow tightly. It was loaded, as always. “So explain the Freak Geek.” He nodded toward the Arthur that stood directly beside Max, his white uniform *too* white, his pristine hair and nails and shoes *too* pristine. He looked like one of the robots they were always working on.

Ty didn’t like the Arthurs all that much. And he especially didn’t like Arthur One. They had history, in a manner of speaking. That is to say, Arthur One was a letch. And Ty wasn’t.

It was as simple as that.

But now, Arthur One simply blinked at him and cocked his head to one side. His expression was quite different from the usual smirk of aversion he wore when around Ty Murrey. In fact, it wasn’t a smirk at all.

Arthur One was giving him a look of puzzlement and uncertainty. He was staring at him, in all actuality, as if he didn't even know who Ty was.

Ty's brow knit and he blinked.

"He's been rehabilitated," Max said. Ty glanced at his captain. Max shrugged. "Don't ask me. I have no idea what that's all about. But whatever problem you two have with each other, you no longer have. We need his help and I expect you to let him do his job. Got it, Murrey?"

Max was back in captain mode again. And Ty automatically fell into rank. It was what he'd been trained to do. They were a tight troop, the Red team. They were as successful as they were because Victoria had taught them well. She was good at training a company of Gamers and she'd been given some of the best Gamers to work with.

So, Ty nodded once, respectfully, and said no more about it.

And then April put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. He glanced over at her, but she was looking at Max. "Where is Victoria?"

"She's been tracked to a small border town on the edge of Ocanus, which isn't far from here."

"How was she tracked?" April asked.

Max's blue gaze swiveled to her and pinned her to the spot. "It isn't important. It'll take us approximately twenty minutes to get there if we leave now." He looked at Ty again. "Murrey, I want you to take this and try to talk to her first. She doesn't trust me."

He handed Ty a small red device. It had a blinking green light on it and a single black button. "What is it?" He asked, turning it over in his hand. And then he looked up. "And why doesn't she trust you?"

"Like I said, she's been brainwashed by Black. She thinks I'm a dark leader, of all things." He focused on the device, then. "This is a base bomb. Get it near Victoria and press the button.

It'll knock her out for thirty seconds. Enough time for you to restrain her with these." He turned away from Ty and held his hand out to Arthur One.

The techie placed a set of leather bracelets in his hand. In turn, Max held them out to Ty.

"And what are those?" Ty asked, suddenly feeling a little overwhelmed by everything Blood was throwing at him at once.

"These are neutralizing bracelets. I believe you've heard of them referred to as 'saps.' Place them around Victoria's wrists and it will neutralize her powers long enough for us to get her back to GC headquarters."

Ty took the bracelets, if somewhat hesitantly, and placed them in the pocket of his uniform jacket. "Umm.... Is any of this stuff gonna hurt her? I mean," He glanced down at the base bomb again. "How does this thing work?"

"Victoria possesses a tracking device in her blood stream. This sends out a pulse signal that is answered by that device. The signal travels to her brain and puts her to sleep instantly. It won't hurt her." Max explained.

"Why does she have a tracking device in her blood stream?" April asked.

Ty was proud of her. That was exactly what he had been about to ask, too.

Again, Max's stark blue gaze found her, and then it narrowed. "As I've said, that isn't important right now. What is important is separating her from Victor Black and getting her back inside the wall before any more damage is done."

Ty took a deep breath and sighed. He placed the base bomb in his pocket. "What about Victor?"

At that, Ty could have sworn the blue tint in his captain's eyes grew ominously brighter.

Blood's powerful gaze narrowed. "Leave him to me."

* * * *

Even as Max led his makeshift retrieval team deeper into Sector 3, he wondered how much of her memory Victoria – *Rose Tyrnan* – had recovered. If she hadn't recalled much yet, then there might be a chance that he could talk to her. Convince her to come back to the Field with him.

But if she remembered *everything*... Then she might not trust him at all. She would put two and two together, realize that he had used dark leader abilities against Victor on the streets of Ocanus, and determine that he had been lying to her all along. She would know that he was not who he pretended to be – and that he was most likely working for Game Control.

Whom she would hate.

Horribly.

It was the reason behind the base bomb. Max didn't want to do anything that would scare her out of her current location so quickly that he couldn't keep up with her. He would send Ty and April in first to feel the place out. If she didn't remember anything, she would most likely agree to hear her teammates out, and she would still be wary of Victor Black.

Both of those were good things.

If she remembered her sister's death, however, then she would instantly resist anything Ty could tell her. And he would have to use the bomb.

And Max would have to move fast.

The Game Lord didn't want anything happening to his precious Red Rose.

And, in the end – deep down, where it truly mattered – neither did Max.

Not any more.

* * * *

Jeannine Cure punched in the code on the console that would seal the Medical Research Unit behind her. It was empty now that GC had ordered its evacuation. She was supposed to have

gone with the others, but when the order had come through, she stayed behind – because she had known it had something to do with Black.

She could tell things like that. She'd always had feelings – hunches – about things. It made her a good doctor. What machines couldn't detect, she would get a gut feeling about. And she'd never been wrong.

So when Game Control had ordered the first evacuation of the Field in Cure's long tenure as head physician, she *knew*. She knew it was Victor and that the time to take action had finally come.

For many years, Jeannine had harbored doubts about the intentions of Game Control. Patients were often sent to her after having their memories erased or after “rehabilitation.” Often, they were in pain. Sometimes, there was minor brain damage. There were bruises on wrists, and cuts and scrapes in various places on the body. She knew what they were. She was a doctor and not at all an idiot. They were signs of struggle.

Jeannine couldn't recall her own adoption into the Gaming family; it had occurred too many years ago for her to remember. But in the hundreds of years since, she had seen too much not to wonder.

And there had always been that gut feeling of hers to go along with it.

Victor Black was a dark leader and a dangerous man. He seldom had to come into the MRU, as he was powerful enough to keep from getting hurt on the Playing Field all that often. But over the years, Cure had gone from one of the many, many women in the Field who were both attracted to him and terrified of him – to Black's friend and confidante. She no longer thought of him as “the Field's darkest player.” He was dark, yes.

But he wasn't all bad. In fact, there was a lot of good in him. She was sure of it.

She wouldn't be able to prove it if anyone had asked her to. It was just another gut feeling she had. And she always went with her gut.

During one of his infrequent visits to the MRU, Victor Black had inadvertently read Jeannine's mind. She'd been angry as hell at him for doing it – for invading her privacy in such a manner. But he'd quickly begged forgiveness, insisting that it was hard for him to shut it off after being on the Field for too long.

She didn't know whether to believe him at the time. And, in truth, she *still* didn't know whether he'd been telling the truth that day.

What was done was done, however. She had been thinking that Game Control was hiding something. She'd been going over the patient docket in her mind – two memory wipes, one rehabilitation. Three cases with signs of struggle and pain.

When Victor then, suddenly, told her that he agreed with her, she had stared at him with wide eyes.

But, she believed him. In *that*, she believed him unequivocally.

That was years ago.

Now, Dr. Cure turned away from the double doors and faced the small group waiting for her in the hall. She took a deep breath and met a pair of intense, green eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Victor nodded. Once.

Damn, he's hot. Jeannine mentally shook her head at her vagrant thoughts. She may have known Black for centuries, but she was pretty sure she'd never get over how gorgeous he was.

"All right." She pulled a few things out of the deep pockets of her lab coat and held them up for everyone to see. "Here's what I've got. If you're right and Red is carrying a tracking device, then this right here will cause it to become inert and, because the tracker is most likely a bio-

device, it will dissipate and be processed by her body.” She handed a small black pouch to Victor and he opened it. Inside was a single capsule. “You’ll have to get her to ingest it. That’s the down-side.”

Victor nodded. “Shouldn’t be too difficult,” he quipped. “I’ll just invite her to tea.” He pocketed the pouch and shot Jeannine a skeptical look.

She smiled and went on.

“This is for the guards we’ll undoubtedly come across. It’s a variant of the anti-nausea gas we used on patients years ago.” Nausea was one of the few things healers couldn’t do much about unless it was a direct effect of poisoning because nausea was usually a secondary symptom of something innocuous but unpleasant. “It always made them very sleepy. I conducted a few experiments on extending and strengthening these effects – and concentrating the gas so that it could be placed in something combustible.”

She held up a tiny glass capsule for the others to see.

“In other words, we smash this on the ground and the bad guys go to sleep,” Simon said, nodding at the container.

Jeannine smiled. “Basically, yes. Except it will work on good guys, too, so stand away when you break it.” She handed the glass pill to Simon, who seemed the most eager to take it. “On the upside, if it does get you, you won’t be nauseated when you wake up.”

“How many will it take out?” Storm asked. Dr. Cure had heard his rumbling voice only a few times since she’d met him, but each time, he reminded her of thunder.

“Half a dozen at most. One at the very least.” She nodded at Simon. “Aim well.”

He nodded back.

“These are regenerators. They’re incredibly difficult to make, as they require light leader power to alter some of the molecular development of the drugs incorporated. Hence, I only have a few. One for each of us was all I could manage.”

“What’ll it do?” Storm asked, eyeing the hand-full of small red button-like tablets in Jeannine’s hand.

“Cure what ails you, Mr. Storm.” She smiled and handed one to each of them. “Barring dismemberment, that is. I can only do so much.”

“It’s enough. Thank you, Jeannine.” Victor nodded and smiled at her. It was an uncharacteristically warm smile, coming from what some of the women in the MRU called “the god of ice.” It made his eyes light up like green magic and melted everything in Jeannine’s body from her neck down.

She smiled back. Naturally.

“Right then, let’s get goin’.” Storm pocketed his regenerator and fingered his hammer.

“Where is Jonathan?” Victor asked, referring to Jeannine’s long-time lover. Jonathan Thatcher worked under the Arthurs in the Technical Research Facility. He was the one that Victor was counting on to help him get to Victoria. And she could understand the urgency in his tone.

They were up against Maxwell the Bloody on this.

“He’s waiting for us in a cubby.” ‘Cubby’ was her term for a “hiding space.” She used them now and again to pilfer components for experiments she was conducting; sometimes it was better to conduct them in private. As it had been for the sleep gas.

“Right. Let’s get going.” Victor gestured for her to lead the way.

Chapter Eighteen

“Now may I see her?”

Loki turned to look at Andromeda. She was so lovely, gazing up at him with her gold orbs, even now, bright with unshed tears. Her expression bore such earnest, such yearning, that it stoked the flames within him. And for a god of fire, that was saying something.

“It’s nearly time, my love. Give her a few moments more. You’ve had years to mourn; she’s had seconds.”

Andromeda turned away and looked at the ground. She bit her lip and her form began to glow with emotion. Loki recognized her sentiments as a sharp mixture of frustration and anger and keen eagerness.

She had no idea how her sister felt. Andromeda had never had to suffer the loss of a loved one; she’d been the one killed, herself. Loki understood that she missed her twin with a true fierceness. But she would never know the pain that Rose Tyrnan felt at that moment. It was easier to die.

From beyond the walls of the cabin that separated them, Loki could hear her sister sobbing. He could hear the old maid, Elizabeth, speaking to her in hushed tones as she tried to soothe and comfort her.

It was a few minutes before this passed and a more subdued conversation could be heard. They were talking about Rose’s necklace. A locket; one of a pair. Andromeda had worn the other. Loki remembered that now. The young goddess had died with it on.

Now they were speaking of a compass.

“It’s time, love.”

Andromeda's head jerked up, her gold eyes now glowing, not unlike those of a light or dark leader. Which, he supposed, made sense. It's what she would have become, had she lived.

"She's ready." He took her hand and led her into the cottage.

* * * *

"It has two directions," Victoria sniffed, wiped her nose on the small rag Elizabeth had given her, and went on. "I've never understood it. It always points in one of the four directions on a map – and either up or down."

Elizabeth took the compass in old, ginger hands, and gazed down at it in wonder.

"Your sister had one just like it," she said, softly. An already scratchy voice cracked under the weight of her memories. "Hers would help her find you when you wandered off into the forest alone." She laughed, then, and it was an ancient, wonderful, emotional sound. She shook her head slowly, her fingertips tracing the edges of the golden compass. "Yours told you where she was when you cheated at hide and seek." She laughed some more, softly, contagiously. Then she sighed. "They point to one another, Rose." She looked up then, and cupped Victoria's cheek in her withered hand. "Do you remember, child?"

Victoria closed her eyes as Elizabeth wiped away the wetness that was still staining her cheek. She nodded. She remembered everything now. She remembered enough, even, to know that the necklace she now wore was not hers. It was Andromeda's. They'd traded that morning, hoping to confuse their parents about who was who.

They were so young. They never would have imagined that the day would end as it had. With one of them stolen. And the other dead.

"I found it under my bed in my quarters in the Red tower," Victoria whispered. "I don't know how it got there. But ever since – it has pointed either up or down."

Elizabeth seemed to consider that for a moment. She gazed down at the golden sphere and frowned. Then she gave a slight, crooked and bony shrug, and handed the compass back to Victoria with shaking fingers. “I know not what it means, little one. But it is now pointing toward the door.”

Victoria took the compass from her old nanny and stared down at it. Elizabeth was right. The strange arrow that had long plagued her with its confusing tendency to either point toward the heavens or gesture toward the earth was now very clearly aimed at the front door to the cottage.

She lowered the compass and stared, instead, at the front door.

Within a few heart beats, the door opened. Elizabeth’s eyes widened; she slowly stood. Victoria’s first instinct was to shield and safeguard her old nanny. She had been a team leader long enough for her protective tendencies to come rushing to the fore at the introduction of a new contingency.

Such as strangers coming into a home uninvited.

Victoria did not think about it. She was up and out of the bed in a flash, a ball of flame gathering in the palm of one hand, her telekinesis spinning, building, and waiting behind her glowing eyes.

But when the door opened to reveal Victoria’s look-alike, draped in white and gold garb, her long golden hair braided intricately, her expression one of cautious hope and her shimmering eyes filled with love – Victoria’s hand dropped to her side and the fire in her palm sputtered and went out.

* * * *

Loki faded into invisibility as his lover tentatively stepped over the threshold of her nanny’s home. He could feel her hesitation, her fear and her hope. But he was more worried about his

champion, at the moment. The shock of seeing her sister alive again after only having accepted her death might be too much for *anyone* to handle.

He would have to help her with this. Carefully, he crept into the home beside Andromeda, his eyes locked on Victoria Red's face. He watched her expressions change and read her mind. And, at the exact moment when the world and its reality would have proved too much weight for her spirit to bear, he lightened the load.

His power poured out of his body and into hers.

"Rose...." Andromeda said her sister's name, and her beautiful voice broke off into a sob. She clasped her hands tightly in front of her; he could see the white of her knuckles. "It's me. It's Andromeda."

Victoria Red – Rose Tyrnan – didn't want to trust what she was seeing. Loki could sense this easily. She was a smart girl. Dark leaders could change their forms. She had been under a lot of stress and might be imagining things. She might even be unconscious and dreaming. Or worse – she might be dead, forever stuck in some strange alternate reality or a loop of what might have been. And so, when her instinct was to doubt her sister's presence there, Loki forced her to move past it. They didn't have the time to doubt.

Not now.

"Oh.... My...."

Fuck. He'd forgotten about the old woman. She would have a fit, for sure. And if the whites of her too-large eyes were any indication, it was already happening.

Elizabeth was trembling madly beside the bed, just behind Victoria's protective stance.

"Meeda.... It can't be. No – no.... I saw you...." Her voice fell away into silence, and all that remained was the persistent shaking of her head. The unrelenting physical denial of what she was seeing. Hearing.

The gods were not as powerful as they once were. In fact, that was an understatement. The Game Lord's wretched wall had done more damage than any of them would be willing to admit. As a result, Loki had only so much strength. He could protect his champion from the shock of seeing her dead sister walk through the door. He could even protect the old woman. But to do both would leave him more sapped than he wanted to be. There was danger on the way.

Evil was snaking through the forest and over the hills. The wolf would be at the door in a matter of minutes. He wanted to be able to fight it off, if need be.

And, so he had a choice. Save Elizabeth now or let her go and conserve his strength.

In the next instant, Victoria Red made his decision for him. As if sensing her nanny's distress, she turned and – as the old woman fell forward – she caught her up in her outstretched arms.

“Beth!” Both sisters cried, at once. Andromeda moved forward then, as if still alive, and rushed to her maid's side.

“Help me get her on the bed,” Victoria told her sister. Andromeda didn't hesitate before taking Elizabeth's feet. Together, they lifted the old woman and laid her gently over the blanket on the mattress.

Victoria then leaned forward, her hand hovering palm-down over Elizabeth's unconscious features. He could sense her power hasten down her arm and flash out of her hand. She was making sure that her nanny would be okay.

She would. She was asleep; the shock having proved too much to bear. But nothing more serious than that.

Victoria lowered her hand and, very, very slowly, turned to face her sister.

“Am I dreaming?” She asked, softly.

Andromeda looked steadily into eyes that mirrored her own. She shook her head. “No. It is me, Rose. Ullr took me to Valhalla when I was killed.” Then, very gradually, so as not to frighten her sister, she raised her own hand and cupped Victoria’s cheek. “Odin has allowed me to see you again.”

Loki looked on as Victoria Red’s lovely face reflected the torn emotions within her. And in the next magical, miraculous moment, he watched as the sisters moved forward at once, grasping each other in a hug that not a million men, in an eon of years could have separated.

* * * *

Maxwell’s thoughts were as dark as his powers as he led his group on the trail through the forest on the way to Ocanus’s out-laying villages.

In the centuries that he had worked for Game Control, no mission had been as vital as this one. No Player had ever been as important as Victoria Red. If he couldn’t manage to get her back inside the wall....

It was all that mattered. Everything else could be dealt with later.

He was tempted to simply take her; to force his will upon her, bind her, and whisk her back to the transporter cube before anything else could go wrong. No matter what she thought of him, it could be erased. She was bound for rehabilitation anyway. What did he stand to lose?

His head hurt.

He stood to lose everything. Everything he had spent the last fifteen years building up with Victoria could go spinning wildly away. Gone forever.

She trusted him. She confided in him – even if it didn’t happen until she’d already put her life in danger. In short, she had become a friend.

And he knew that she wouldn’t be averse to being more. He’d read her mind enough times to know that she was attracted to him. How many times had he been forced to tamp down his desire

while close to her so that he didn't blow his cover? It was so hard not to let her know how he felt. It was so, so hard not to kiss her when he knew *she* wanted to kiss *him*.

Nearly impossible.

It took every ounce of strength for him to fight with his own needs in favor of winning Victoria's faith. It had been a lot of work. He didn't want to blow it all now.

Instead, he would send Ty ahead and hope for the best.

And if that failed, he would use every power he possessed, barring out-and-out wounding, to get Victoria back. It was essential that he not fail in this. The Game Lord wasn't the only one who stood to lose a lot if Max did not succeed.

Max would lose *everything*.

* * * *

Victor pulled back from where he had been crouching in the bushes beside the trail. Blood hadn't seen him. He hadn't sensed him. The Red captain severely underestimated Victor.

And that was a good thing.

Jonathan Thatcher managed to locate Victoria's signal in record time. He also managed to determine which transporter cube and location Maxwell Blood and his band had utilized and transported to.

Victor, Storm, and Simon had to face several more contingencies of guards on their way to the same transporter, but these were handled with incredible, relentless efficiency. Storm commented that he'd never seen Black so determined.

He was probably right. Victor had never stood to lose so much.

Once they'd zipped to the same location that Max had exited to, they began to *run*. That was one thing about the Gray and Red teams. Everyone on them was in excellent shape. They could run a long way and they could run very fast.

Game Control's guards, on the other hand, would be confined to walking at a quick pace. This gave Victor and his men a distinct advantage.

As they moved in, Victor concentrated on erecting a wall around his consciousness so that Blood could not detect him. It was clear that Maxwell the Bloody was a dark leader, though Victor wondered how long he had actually been on the Field.

He was too powerful to be as young as he appeared. And the name – Bloody Max – lent one to believe that it had to be earned. Did a mere fifteen years on the Field merit such a designation?

Victor crept back toward his waiting companions and pinched the bridge of his nose. Thinking about Maxwell Blood was giving him a headache. There was too much fuzziness around the figure for Black's liking. There was too much that Victor didn't know and couldn't figure out and wasn't remembering.

Remembering....

Bloody hell.... Victor stopped in his tracks and ran a shaky hand through his thick, raven hair. A realization had just struck him and it was beyond cruel in its harshness.

I've been rehabilitated.

He almost swayed there, in the hollow shadows of the trees that loomed so high overhead. His heart raced painfully. He broke out in a sweat.

And knew it to be true.

How many times? When? What had happened during his tenure on the Field that he was not recalling? Not *allowed* to recall?

Bloody sons of bitches. They had altered his mind, invaded his thoughts, *destroyed* a part of who he was! In fact – the gods only *knew* what and who he was, because who he was may have been different before than it was now.

Fuck! His thoughts seethed now, the insight more certain, and more painful for that certainty.

They would pay for what they'd done to him. They would pay for what they had done to *all* of the Gamers on the Field. They had taken his very identity and forced him into subservient labor. And for what?

For a Game that he was fairly certain did not need to exist.

It's fake. It's a sham. It was created by the Game Lord to.... Victor blinked. His head was spinning. It was really beginning to hurt now. He felt slightly dizzy.

Gods, not now! He thought, even as he felt a little sick and his hand found support against a tree.

"Black!" Victor looked up to find Storm and Roon rushing toward him, their expressions concerned. "What ails ya, man?" Storm asked, his gravelly voice booming through the darkness of the shade trees.

"I don't know," Victor whispered. He could put no more force behind his words. He felt too dizzy. Too ill.

A sham.... He has to keep the Gamers inside the wall. Stealing their strength – their power.... 'You're one of the strongest, Black,' A voice was echoing through the recesses of his mind. It was a memory, once lost, but now regained. *'So you'll understand that we need to do this. Can't have you causing a fuss. Don't worry, Victor,'* the voice now whispered. The Game Lord was lowering his lips to speak into Victor's ear. He couldn't move. He was strapped down. *'It'll all be over before you know it.'*

Laughter. And then the pain.

"Black!" Storm's voice boomed again, this time closer. Black felt himself falling. He felt strong hands on him, strong arms trying to lift him. "Help me get 'im up, lad!"

He had no control over the memories now. They rushed at him, one after another, hard and fast and painful, like the lashes of a whip. Each left a mark that bled and stung and would most likely scar.

Victor found himself on his back, his ice-green eyes gazing up into the stormy gray orbs of his team captain. And suddenly, he knew that John Storm was no ordinary Player.

He knew it like he knew everything else. It was a memory. And a revelation.

“Thor,” he said, his deep voice a mere murmur.

“Aye, lad. Rest easy. I’ll make it right.” Thor put took the hammer out of his belt and set it to the side, and Simon Roon watched him with an expression of wonder and exultant pride.

“I knew it!” Simon whispered, ecstatic excitement lacing his tone.

“Hush, boy. I need ta concentrate.” Thor put his left hand over Victor’s forehead and his right hand over his heart. “You’re Ullr’s champion, and that one’s got issues, he does,” Thor mumbled, as he closed his eyes. “But I think I can help, none the less. With the pain of remembering, at least.” He nodded, as if to himself, and then his hands began to glow.

Victor closed his eyes and let the warmth pour over him. It felt similar to being touched by Victoria Red. Warm and healing.

My captain is a god, his thoughts solidified, no longer flitting, no longer spinning. His heart beat slowed. His breathing deepened. He found his consciousness coming into focus.

When Thor removed his hands, Victor opened his eyes and pinned him with a glowing but somewhat reproachful green-eyed gaze. “When were you planning on telling me... *again*?” Victor asked. His voice was back, his accent deep, his memories and mind fully intact.

“Hell, boy, I’ve done told you twice already. These damn rehabilitation things get old, ya know. No matter,” Thor said as he stood once more and offered his hand to Victor.

Black took it, coming to his booted feet.

“I knew you’d come to find out eventually.” Thor finished, his smile grim but true.

Victor looked at his old comrade and shook his head. “Enough is enough, my friend.” Game Control had gone too far. Too many times. “This ends tonight.”

Chapter Nineteen

Humans are so certain in their convictions. They have little sayings for the nuances of life that they are confidently assured of. Such as, “Life isn’t fair.” And, “You’re only young once.” And, Loki’s favorite, “If something can go wrong, it will.”

Perhaps the most foolish belief humans harbor is that certain memories will last a lifetime. Old mothers and fathers turn to their children over holiday meals and pints of mead and laugh, “You’ll look back on this years from now, son. This is one of those things you’ll always remember.”

Even the most precious moments can be wiped out with no more than a touch of evil. One trip inside the wall would kill a decade of Winter Solstice gatherings. It was powerful enough to quell the love a mother had for her child.

Or a sister for her twin.

Humans don’t know everything. It didn’t take a god to realize that. But it took a god to admit it. To this day, Odin forbade the gods from creating the kinds of “snippets of wisdom” that the humans quipped day in and out.... “What goes around comes around.” *Decidedly untrue*, Loki thought, *though a nice enough sentiment*. “The early bird gets the worm.” *Ridiculous. Stay up late and eat in the dark and you’ll be fat by mid-year*. “Nobody’s perfect.”

As he gazed at the gorgeous, talented, and powerful twin sisters before him, Loki would attest wholeheartedly to *that* statement’s blatant falsehood.

Right now, he stood, still invisible, still watching his champion and his lover embrace in the memory of love that had been taken from them – and then restored. He was a god of chaos, and so, naturally, though he was taken aback by the sheer beauty of the sight, his mind did wander. He liked to think.

It was natural for him.

However, as he watched, he heard the *others* coming, and he was not so absent-minded that this did not take precedence over his other meandering thoughts. Their gaining nearness was an unconscious sound, made by the mental signature of a dark leader and his followers.

The strange thing was, there were *two* groups of people coming toward them. Not one.

Loki considered the situation. Rose Tyrnan was dealing with her sister's death and re-birth, the re-attainment of her memories, and with seeing her nanny again, all in the course of a few short minutes.

Maxwell Blood and his men would be upon them shortly.

And, though Loki could be wrong about this, he was fairly certain that Victor Black and his crew were hot on Blood's tail. If he was reading the signature correctly, the highly agitated and barely-contained, storm-like energy traveling alongside the second dark leader was none other than Thor. Which would mean that the second dark leader was undeniably Victor Black. Thor's best friend.

Within minutes, nearly twenty very angry and inhumanly powerful people would be gathering outside this small cottage, with one mutual goal and a deadly willingness to do anything in order to attain it.

Off hand, Loki wondered whether he could do anything to stop it.

He wondered whether he should even try.

After all, Odin knew everything. Surely, he had seen the upcoming confrontation. He must know the outcome. Maybe Loki was supposed to let it happen. Or, maybe it wouldn't happen the way it was supposed to unless he intervened.

Inwardly, he sighed. That was the thing he hated about the All Father. Becoming a literal know-it-all had turned a once genial god who loved nothing more than bashing other gods' heads

in and drinking boat-loads of mead into one hell of a recluse. He shared nothing. He never let on about what he knew.

He was very good at what he did. He ought to be. He'd had to pluck out his own eye and hang by the neck from a tree for a short eternity to win his knowledge. At that, the invisible Loki made a face. *He can have the bloody knowledge*, he thought, disgusted.

I'll just damn well do what I'll do.

He quietly left the cabin through the still-open door, and once outside, he re-materialized into a form that Victoria Red would recognize.

Then he gently knocked on the door.

He sensed the sisters separate and peeked around the corner. "Might I come in?"

Andromeda smiled warmly, the expression lighting the gold in her eyes like flecks of solidified honey. And Loki's gut clenched. His body heated. He concentrated on keeping his cover and on hiding the flames that so badly wanted to burn in his own fire-god eyes.

"My love. Come in." Andromeda said.

"You know him?" Victoria asked.

"Of course. You do too. Just try to remember. You prayed to him every night when you were a child, Rose. Before you were taken."

Anders – Loki – could have sighed out loud with relief. Andromeda was going to let him off of the hook. Allow him to be who he really was. She was going to break the news to her sister so that he could drop the act and spare his power.

He could have kissed her for her consideration and her honesty. She was everything in a goddess that he was not in a god.

Victoria looked from her sister to Loki, her brow furrowed, her own golden eyes twinkling with confusion. "I prayed to Anders?"

Andromeda laughed. “No, sis! You prayed to Loki!”

Loki slowly let his form shift, and, as Anders’ long blonde hair became long and red, and his tall, strong form became even taller and stronger, and his clothes melded into the white and red fire-emblem leather garb of the god of flame, Victoria’s eyes widened. Her pallor paled. Her full pink lips parted in silent, muted awe.

She was his champion; the best he had ever known. And so it was with ease that he read her thoughts, even as scattered and shocked as they were. She wasn’t certain whether to kneel or stay standing. Or turn tail and run.

He had to laugh softly at that fleeting impulse. And he had to admit the surge of pride that he felt when her next impulse was to throw a fire ball at him and see whether he truly was who he pretended to be.

But he could sense *them* out there now.

Though he wanted to explain everything to Rose Tyrnan, who had faithfully turned to him in her solitude, his mightiest – and tiniest – champion.... Their time was up.

Maxwell the Bloody was stepping through the last of the underbrush lining the clearing around Elizabeth’s cottage. His men were right behind him.

Loki smiled gently at Victoria as one emotion after another chased each other across her beautiful face. He said nothing.

He waited.

And fate didn’t disappoint.

* * * *

Victoria wondered why she wasn’t positive that she was dreaming. Any sane individual would have relegated the events of the last ten or twenty minutes to a highly emotional night time reverie. Or something like that.

But, for some reason, as she stood there and watched Anders' broad figure transform into the very likeness of the god she had long worshipped – the god who had given her the light leader powers she possessed – she was certain that she was *not* dreaming. She knew it was all real. And she wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

“Victoria!”

And then, it no longer mattered. Because fate had introduced yet another contingency into this crazy, improbable, topsy-turvy state of affairs that her life had all-too-hastily become.

Ty Murrey's voice was easily recognizable. He was hollering at her from across the clearing outside. His words seemed to slice harshly through the silence that had shrouded the interior of the small, cozy home.

Victoria blinked, her gaze cutting to the window behind Loki's towering and somewhat disconcerting form.

“Boss, it's us! We need to talk! Please don't blast us into oblivion!” Murrey called out to her and then fell silent. He was obviously waiting for a reply.

Victoria gave herself a little shake. She closed her eyes, trying desperately to get a grip on the situation. She needed to take control. She needed to deal with it all – with *everything*.

One step at a time, she mentally whispered.

She opened her eyes again to find that Loki was watching her with keen interest. Small flames danced in the pupils of his gold and brown eyes. It was unsettling being watched so closely by someone whose gaze was literally on fire.

She looked away. First things first. She needed to go outside and talk with her Team mates. How had they gotten past Game Control? And the Arthurs? She needed to find out how they had managed to make their way to the other side of the wall... and whether or not, in the end, they would be willing to help her tear it down.

* * * *

Max watched from the shade of an overhanging willow. His men waited, hidden by the underbrush behind him. Every power he possessed was loaded into the forefront of his thoughts. He didn't know if this was going to work and would have given it slim chances, had someone out-and-out asked him. But his heart thudded with rare hope when Victoria's breathtaking form appeared in the doorway to the cabin.

She was falling for it.

And then Black was there, appearing out of thin air, directly behind her.

Max couldn't move fast enough to warn her. Black had his arms around her and was pinning her to him before she could blink. One hand slipped effortlessly over her mouth and the other arm trapped both of her own against her body. She was immobile and could not even call out to the inhabitants of the cabin for help.

And the worst part about it was that Victor Black's ice-green gaze was locked on Max the whole time.

* * * *

Victor had wanted to just kill him and be done with it. It would have been so easy to rip a huge chunk out of the man's throat with his dark powers and let him bleed to death right there beneath that tree where he watched Victoria coming out of the cottage.

But as they'd been running after Max and his team, Thor had asked him not to kill Blood. Despite everything the man had done, Thor had some plan for the other dark leader, and it didn't involve Black bleeding him to death or turning him into a human icicle.

Fine.

He wasn't happy with it, but so long as Maxwell the Bloody came nowhere near Victoria – ever again – he would let him live and leave him to the gods.

Now, Victoria struggled in his grasp, and he could read her thoughts racing. She wanted to melt him to the spot or slam the nearest wagon wheel into his head, and she was wishing, wholeheartedly, that she possessed even half of the dark leader powers he did so that she could stop time and force him into a coma.

She was as feisty as ever, and it filled Victor with a swell of pride at how she continued to fight him. But her mind felt different, as well. It felt restored. She remembered.

Everything.

A few yards away, Ty Murrey and April Rose stood side-by-side, unsure of what to do. They wanted their Team leader, but she was literally in the hands of their sworn enemy. Training taught them not to make any sudden moves.

So, they didn't. They watched him, in silence, waiting to see what he would do next.

In turn, Black kept his own eyes locked on Maxwell Blood, who was invisible to everyone but him and was now quietly stepping out of the shadows and into the clearing to face him.

Victor quickly decided to take full advantage of the fact that Victoria was now aware of what Game Control truly was.

"We need to talk, Victoria." He whispered in her ear. She bucked in his grip, attempting to say something from behind the hand he held tightly over her mouth. He held her fast and continued. "I know what you're thinking. I know you're afraid, but I'm not here to hurt you, and you *must* realize that or you would have simmered me in my uniform by now."

That gave her pause. She gradually stopped struggling and considered his words. He shamelessly read her thoughts. She knew that he was right. She wanted to go up against Game Control as badly as he did. She had no reason, any longer, to fight Victor.

She was just such a born fighter, it came naturally to her. And instinct was very difficult to overrule.

“Hear me out, luv. That’s all I ask.” He considered letting her go, then. She was coming around and he was fairly certain she wouldn’t try to run. Not that he couldn’t catch her if she did. The point was, as long as he was holding her, her Team mates remained where they were and posed no real risk.

But the moment he let her go, they would try something. He’d been alive long enough to know that full well.

So, he loosened his grip a little and removed his hand from her mouth. But he still held on. “We need to stop Game Control and you know it. They killed your sister and they will continue to kill innocent people for as long as we let them.”

He watched as Maxwell Blood slowly paced toward them. Victor wasn’t certain what had changed that allowed him to see his opponent through the shield of invisibility. But something had. Pity it couldn’t also gain him access to Blood’s mind.

Max’s blue eyes were burning like sapphire fire. Victor could feel the cold fury coming off of the other dark leader in stifling waves. He had no idea what the man was planning to do. Victor couldn’t get past the fake, planted surface thoughts in the man’s head to read his intentions.

Now that his hand was removed from Victoria’s lips, he could hear the soft sound of her ragged, uneven breathing. He chanced a quick glance down, his gaze flicking to the side of her face. He noted the long, thick lashes that rested, momentarily against her cheek. The soft, clear peach-colored skin, the full red pout of her now freed lips.

And then he was watching Blood again. And Max’s fury had grown.

Victoria swallowed, cleared her throat, and tried a few words. “What, exactly, do you think we can do, Black?” She asked, softly.

It was getting hard for him to think. Danger was all around them and he was finding it increasingly difficult to pay attention to anything but the feel of her long, lithe body against his, the sound of her breathing, the heat from her form as his grip tightened of its own accord.

“Come with me to Game Control headquarters. Together, we can take out the Game Lord. Once he goes, they’ll all go.”

“Don’t listen to him, boss. He’s messing with your mind. He’s planting thoughts there that aren’t yours,” Ty told her, from where he stood, immobile, several yards away.

April gripped his shoulder and nodded her agreement. “He’s right, Victoria. Max told us all about it.”

“Did he, now?” Victor asked, his tone practically dripping acid. He lowered his head, his gaze coming at Max through the tops of his emerald glowing eyes. “I just bet he did,” he whispered.

Max smiled. It was the secret, knowing smile of someone who had an ace or two up his sleeve. Victor’s grip unconsciously tightened once more on his beautiful captive.

Where was Thor? The son of a bitch-god had disappeared when Victor had taken invisible and slipped through the clearing to surprise Victoria.

Victor could certainly use his help now. And Simon? Where the hell was *he*?

“You know the truth in your heart, Victoria.” Black didn’t want to hurt her. But if he had to weaken her, or even put her to sleep in order to force that pill that Cure had given him down her throat, he would. He would do anything to keep Blood from getting to her and wiping her mind again.

And speaking of Blood....

“It was no trick of mine that they killed your sister, Victoria. Was it?” He lowered his lips to her ear to speak, as he released her with his right hand and allowed the cold of his power to

gather in his palm. If he coated Blood with the ice, he would become visible to everyone. And then Victoria would realize the man's duplicity.

It wouldn't hurt.

As if sensing what he was about to do, Max's eyes widened – almost imperceptibly. And then he was diving for the ground as Victor pulled his arm back and hurled the ball of cold that he'd collected.

Victor Black was the champion of Ullr, the god of ice. But Ullr was also the god of the hunt. Determining what an opponent was going to do before they did it was one of the things a hunter needed to be able to do.

And Victor was the best.

So, when Bloody Max dove for the ground to avoid being hit by the swirling, whirling ball of frigid air that Victor hurled toward him, he calculated that Max would do exactly that.

And the ice hit him head-on, coating his entire form with an electric chill so glacially bitter, it forced his skin to become temporarily blue. Everyone could see it, because Max's invisibility dropped in the assault.

Victor watched as the dark leader lay, stunned, on the ground several yards away. Then he turned his gaze to the woman in his arms. She was staring at her Team captain with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"Max?" She didn't understand why he had been invisible. Shouldn't only dark leaders be capable of such a thing? She was also remembering that Anders – Loki – had told her that Max and Victor were fighting with cold powers on the streets of Ocanus. She was confused.

But she was beginning to put two and two together and come up with deception.

Which was the point.

“Now do you believe me, luv?” Victor asked, softly. He released his hold on her, and she did not try to pull away. She blinked, her gaze still locked on Max’s slowly recovering form.

And then Ty Murrey pressed the button on a small device in his hand. Victor felt the surge of power that shot from it, like a stiff, electrically charged wind. Whatever it was, it hit Victoria full-force.

She swooned, and Victor caught her up in his strong arms, lifting her as her eyelids closed and she slumped into unconsciousness.

He scanned her mind. Her thoughts were blank. There was only silence and darkness. It was like a sleep of death.

Victor’s fingers curled tightly around her and he pulled her in close. Fear coursed through him as it never had before. Fear and rage and a need for vengeance. His brightly glowing green gaze found Ty Murrey, looking somewhat unsure, but desperate.

“What did you do to her?” He asked, his voice merely more than a whisper, but his words laced with a kind of magic that instantly raised goose bumps on Murrey’s dark flesh.

“I- I don’t know. It’s not supposed to hurt her!” He stammered.

Blood was up on his knees by that time. “The saps, Ty! Get them on her!”

Ty jumped a little in place and looked warily from his captain to his opponent. Black could easily read his thoughts. He knew that his job was to follow orders. But he wasn’t so sure about them any more. And, besides, Victoria was in Black’s hands. Getting to her would put him in a grave amount of danger. He could tell. He could tell because of the “weird-ass” way Victor’s eyes were glowing.

“Come near her, Murrey, and I will open up every pore in your body until it is leaking blood.” Black promised. He didn’t scream it. He didn’t even raise his voice. He didn’t have to.

“Give them to me!” Blood demanded, then, and Victor felt another surge of power make its way across the clearing. This time, from Blood to his Team mate.

Murrey immediately pulled the leather bracelets from his belt, where they had been attached, and tossed them to his captain.

Maxwell Blood regained his feet. His teeth were bared.

Not much time.... His thoughts were just barely discernible, floating free on the unprotected surface of his mind. They were slightly out of check due to the captain’s rising emotions.

Victor Black stared at him, then, in that moment of resolution, and he knew that Maxwell Blood would stop at nothing to get Victoria back. It was something they had in common.

Very gently, Victor lowered her to the ground, never taking his eyes off of Blood’s furious form. And then he straightened.

“Come and get her, Blood.”

It was all the challenge Max needed.

Chapter Twenty

Loki turned to Odin and gave him a *look*.

“Have we let this go on long enough?” His champion was now unconscious and Black and Blood were about to go head to head over her. Odin had appeared behind Loki in the small cottage, along with Ullr and Thor, immediately after Rose Tyrnan had decided to go outside and meet with her Team mates. He could have stopped her if he’d wanted to – if he’d been allowed to. He knew full well what was really going on, after all.

But Odin had told him to let things play out as they would, as much as possible.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to keep your dick in your pants on this; that’s why I came, Loki. For shit’s sake, those aren’t kids out there. They don’t need to be nursed.”

Loki blinked at the All Father. When he was in a mood, he was really in a *mood*.

“My champion is *asleep*,” Loki insisted, trying to keep the fire out of his tone. “Don’t tell me that’s all part of the plan.”

“*Svarte, din teiting, Loki.*” Odin swore softly, closed his eyes and shook his head, using his large fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You must let them do as much as they can on their own. Save what strength you have for when it is truly needed.”

“But this is *our* fight – and the humans are fighting it!” Thor interjected, his storm-gray eyes shooting lightning sparks.

Odin shot him a weary glance and sighed. “Because a fight *concerns* you does not make it *yours*, Thor. Likewise, many battles that may *not* concern you *are* yours to fight.”

“Oh, *fuck*,” Ullr sighed loudly, “he’s speaking in riddles again.” The powerful god of winter and the hunt ran a hand through his pitch black hair and shook his head. He was a handsome god.

Dark and swarthy, tall and strong, with eyes that shifted from the coldest blue to the clearest glacial green at a moment's notice.

Loki glanced nervously in Andromeda's direction. And, just as he'd feared, she was watching Ullr. Not that he could blame her. He was beautiful in that dangerous way women seemed to *love* so damned much.

Plus, she was his champion. She carried ice magic in her veins, could control the cold, create winter, read minds, and vanish like the final snow on a spring morning. Ullr had given her the power she possessed and he was the one who had brought her here to live among them.

Loki would thank Ullr for that any day. Right before he stabbed him in the back.

Loki's gaze narrowed on Andromeda, his teeth clenched as he hungrily took her in. At length, he noted, with some reluctance, the distinct lack of a blush on her perfect cheeks. He took in the fact that she didn't fidget and her eyelashes did not flutter. And he had to admit to himself that, perhaps, she wasn't attracted to Ullr. She was, in all fairness, most likely just grateful to him.

That was all.

Still....

Loki's jaw tensed. He pulled his red-hot gaze back to Odin. "How much longer?"

"Not much," Odin replied, simply. Then he straightened, his long white hair and beard shimmering in the shafts of late afternoon sunlight that shot through the parted curtains at the window. "In fact, *now* will do."

* * * *

Simon was fairly sure that if Thor hadn't given him a smidgeon of his godly strength before he had disappeared to meet with the other gods, he would be having a panic attack right now. He

was used to fighting well enough. But it was the kind of fighting that allowed strategy sessions and pitted you against no more than four or five opponents. And there were always rules.

This was different.

Oh, was this ever different.

This involved gods. Guards. Innocent people. And an utter lack of rules, altogether.

Whereas, on the Field, even a mortal wound would be healed at once by a light leader, no matter which side of the Game you were on, here and now, he could very well die.

Permanently.

And he didn't like the sound of that. Because, though he would die a hero and in battle, Valhalla was not exactly a giant library. It was a giant hall made for eating and fighting and fucking and then dying and doing it all again the next morning.

Simon wanted books. He wanted knowledge.

How the hell does Odin manage in that mess? He wondered to himself. The All Father knew *everything*. Knowledge was precious to him. How could he stand to be surrounded with chaos and fire and ice?

In a frustrated fit of habit, Simon ran a hand through his sandy-blond hair and then straightened his glasses. It was time to pull his mind back into the present and concentrate. Focus.

That's not exactly easy right now, he thought as he very slowly looked around. He was surrounded by Game Control's guards. Of course, they didn't know he was there. They were watching Max, out in the clearing, as he was just now getting back on his feet. They didn't see Simon – and as long as Simon was very, very quiet, they didn't hear him either, despite the fact that he could have reached out and touched any one of them.

Thor had unceremoniously dumped him in the midst of his enemy so that he would get a better shot at them with the anti-nausea-sleep gas.

But he'd warned him that the invisibility wouldn't last long. The gods were trying to conserve their strength for their upcoming battle with the Game Lord.

Okay, Simon thought, forcing his concentration back to the task at hand. *Run through it again*. He shoved his hand into the pocket of his downtime uniform jacket and pulled out two pills; one glass, the other a bio-degradable capsule.

He glanced at the glass container. *The anti-nausea sleep pill will take out half the guards. If I do it right. Then I need to get to Ty and April and convince them that Max isn't on our side any more. If they don't believe me, Ty will clobber me*. He looked at the pill in his other hand. *That's what the regenerator is for*.

But if Ty *did* believe him, then the plan was for the three of them to work together to take out the remainder of the guards while Thor and Loki went after Maxwell Blood.

He took a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh. *Right*, he thought. *Got it*. He nodded to himself. *I can do this*.

And as Blood then charged Victor Black in an all-out attack, Simon added, *there's no time like the present*.

* * * *

Ty did not, at all, understand what he was seeing. How had Max become invisible? Why was Black being so gentle and protective with Victoria? And what was that stuff that Black had said about Game Control killing her sister?

Beside him, April felt as confused as he did. But, she found the strength to speak first, as she was always the one to gain her head before he did in a fight.

"This isn't right, Ty. Something is wrong. Something is *off*." Her gaze was quickly, nervously flitting from Victoria's unconscious form in Black's arms to Max, who was pulling himself to his feet after catching the bracelets that Ty had thrown to him.

“Max isn’t.... He isn’t *himself*,” she finished, almost whispering her last words.

And then she was letting go of Ty’s arm and inching forward as Victor knelt and gently – almost lovingly – laid Victoria on the ground in front of him.

Victor’s green eyes swiveled to April and pinned her to the spot. April stopped in her tracks, instantly unsure. She could feel him scour her mind, then. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

But it didn’t hurt. And he didn’t lay waste to it, as she’d always thought he might one day do. Instead, he swept through it, as if searching for something. And then, when he’d obviously found what it was he wanted, his presence lifted a little, still there in her consciousness, but unobtrusive. As if he was waiting.

His green eyes glittered as he watched her.

I – I just want to see her. I just want to know she’s okay, April mentally pleaded.

Several yards beyond her, Ty stayed where he was. One thing he’d learned on the Field was that women were more readily trusted than men. If April could get to Victoria and make sure she wasn’t dead – that Max’s device hadn’t actually harmed her, then that was good enough. He highly doubted Victor Black would hurt April. In fact, in every fight the Red team had ever waged against the Gray, Black had refrained from using the darker of his powers on the women. He’d never made them bleed. He had never tossed them about with his telekinesis.

It was strange, but Ty hadn’t really noticed that until now. He frowned and blinked. How could he have missed it? Victor Black, it would seem, had a soft spot for the more delicate players. He was gentler with them. Was it just Ty’s imagination? Or did Black never truly harm the Red team? Not really.

Not unless it came to Maxwell Blood.

Those two went at it nearly every time, however. Head to head, boot to boot. As if it were personal.

Like they did now.

April yelped in surprise when Max suddenly charged at Victor and Black stepped over Victoria's unconscious form, striding forward to meet him half way.

Lightning struck somewhere near by, and thunder rolled toward them.

"Stay out of the way, April!" Ty yelled as he rushed forward and grabbed her arm, pulling her to the side.

Bodies lined with cold magic slammed into one another and a shockwave of chilled air rode out through the clearing, rushing over both Ty and April with biting force. They crouched low as their bodies were instantly covered in rime, their lips blued, their hair dangling with icicles. As they breathed their ragged breaths, clouds of fog erupted before their lips.

Thunder rolled again, this time closer, and the air felt thick with mounting electricity.

April and Ty both shivered violently and glanced up.

Ominous dark clouds were gathering. They were swirling, eddying inward, building with ferocious speed. A bitter wind picked up, gathered the leaves that had fallen in the clearing and then caked them with ice. They went spinning end over end as they spiraled upward, along with frozen pebbles and swirling dust, toward the mounting cyclone above them.

The building roar of the storm drowned out the sound of struggle below. Fat flakes of snow began to descend from the whirling darkness, coating their uniforms and preventing either Black or Blood from using invisibility to gain the upper hand.

Ty spun around to face the forest line when loud male shouts reverberated off of the cottage walls, barely audible over the gaining snarl of the gale. Simon Roon was stumbling into the clearing, seven Game Control guards hot on his tail. His bow was still slung uselessly over his

shoulder, his arrows still piled, untouched, in the quiver on his back. He ran mad-dash from the underbrush and headed straight toward a now very surprised Ty and April.

“Heelp!” He bellowed.

That was Simon. Not one to mince words or waste time with details.

And because he had trained with his companions as long as he had, they didn’t hesitate to come to his aid. Suddenly, it didn’t matter that the very people they would be rescuing him from were the same men with which they had, only moments ago, been on the same side.

Ty jerked the crossbow off of his shoulder and April pulled her sword. From where they stood, side by side, they could see the whites of Simon’s eyes.

The guards were nearly upon them.

* * * *

Wind and hail lashed at the windows, rattling them in their panes. The weathered thatch on the roof scratched and peeled and threatened to come away from its bindings as the storm continued to build in strength.

Odin turned away from the other gods and opened the cottage door. The wind whipped into the home, extinguishing the lanterns that had been lit and violently ruffling the pages of a book that had been set out on the dining table.

The gods ignored this. One by one, they left the small house, an unconscious Elizabeth still resting peacefully on the bed in the dark and upset room behind them.

Once outside, Loki bent beside the fallen body of his champion and gently lifted her into his arms. Andromeda stood beside him, her expression starkly concerned.

Across the clearing, Ty Murrey, April Rose and Simon Roon were in hand-to-hand combat with several GC guards. They were losing. The guards possessed arm bracers that they termed Game Bands. Those bands issued steady streams of strength, agility, and strategy-enabling

intelligence into the bodies of those who wore them. They amplified what abilities the men already possessed and gave them a substantial advantage over their opponents.

When April Rose took a sword blade from her shoulder to her hip bone and dropped to the ground in her own building pool of blood, Odin raised his hand, palm-out. Light gathered in his palm – and was reflected on the silvery sheen surfaces of each Game Band on the arms of the guards across the clearing.

There was a brief flash of light, an answering peal of thunder -

And the Game Bands were gone.

Thor watched his father using his magic and he began to worry. The gods had become weak over the centuries; the Game Lord's wall having drained them nearly to the point of mortality. What strength they did possess any longer, most of them used, solely, to keep themselves alive.

And for emergencies.

But Odin never could stand to watch the innocent suffer. So, Thor wasn't surprised to see him use his power in this manner; he just wondered how much it had drained the All Father. Whether it was all part of fate's plan or not, Thor wasn't sure. Would his father attempt to alter this course at all?

Again, he didn't know.

What he did know was that one of his comrades at heart was now down with a mortal wound. And the rest were in dire straits. He pulled his hammer from his belt and raised it to the heavens. A bolt of lightning coursed through the sky, striking the hammer on its head and lighting it with the brilliance of a million torches.

The accompanying thunder clash went off like a bomb, and everyone in the clearing ducked under the weight of the giant sound, their hands or sword-arms over their ears, their eyes temporarily shut tight against whatever it was that had created the blast.

The two dark leaders, Blood and Black, alone, seemed to have been able to ignore the crash of sound brought on by Thor's lightning bolt. Their struggle was too grim.

Thor took in the situation as quickly as he could. Everything seemed to be happening at once. The struggle between the guards, now devoid of their Game Band advantages, and the two remaining standing members of the Red team intensified. Andromeda was draping a necklace around her unconscious sister's neck as Loki silently held her. Odin was stepping back, his one good eye calmly taking everything in as the storm began to make the worn down buildings creak and moan on their foundations.

Victor Black landed a solid punch that sent Maxwell Blood stumbling back several feet just as another lightning bolt found a nearby tree and rent it in two. Again, thunder pounded the earth with terrifying resonance, but the fighters were adjusting.

And Blood recovered quickly, straightening to face Black once more.

Thor watched as Ullr raced forward then, coming up behind Blood to place his hand against the dark leader's broad back. That hand began to glow and Bloody Max froze in place, his ice blue eyes open wide.

Across from him, Victor Black wiped his bleeding lip on the back of his hand, breathing heavily as he watched his champion god doing something unknown to his opponent – who also happened to be Ullr's champion.

His green eyes were filled with questions. But before Ullr could answer any of those questions in any manner, another bolt of lightning sliced through the air. This time, however, it cracked open and divided, tributaries of white-hot energy slicing through the air in the clearing like the searing tentacles of an electric monster. Each tentacle struck a god.

And each god stopped what he or she was doing and reared back in sudden, unexpected pain.

Loki dropped to his knees, unable to keep his legs beneath him under the strange onslaught. He somehow managed to lay his champion down before his body began to shimmer, flashing in and out of existence as if he were nothing more than a fading early morning dream.

It hurt, too. Thor could attest to that because his body was doing the same. Even his hammer, famed in its power, began to flicker. It felt as if he were tearing the air around him, and its jagged edges sliced and cut with every ebb and flow of existence his form made.

Within a few short seconds, Thor, too, was on his knees.

His storm gray eyes mirrored the turmoil of the clearing around him as he looked up, searching out the source of the unnatural bolt of lightning.

The Game Lord stood alone at the center of the clearing.

A small black box was held between his hands, and within this semi-transparent black box swirled a vortex of ghostly gray and white force. The wind whipped through the Game Lord's thick gray hair, but he stood still and calm and erect, tall and strong, unaffected by the chaos surrounding him. It was from the box in his hands that the wicked tentacle-lightning poured forth and sapped the remaining strength of the very gods.

* * * *

Victoria moaned low and rolled to her side. The world seemed to be spinning around her, turning end over end, painfully loud and blindingly bright. She shut her eyes tight against its snarling invasiveness and tried to shield her face from a wind both bitter cold and electric-hot.

Someone called her name.

She recognized her sister's voice, but it sounded far away. Victoria pushed herself up onto one arm and opened her eyes, blinking to avoid the dust and ice swirling madly around her.

Through the haze of dancing debris, she saw Andromeda, draped in white and gold, her once braided hair now free and whipping around her face in a frenzy. Her form flickered in and out,

like the bulb of a dying light or a battery nearly drained of power. Beside her, Loki's kneeling form did the same. They were a mere foot away, and yet they seemed untouchable.

Andromeda's eyes pleaded with her silently, her poignant expression bringing back memories too painful to bear.

"What's happening?!" Victoria tried to scream, tried to call out, but she was still weakened by whatever had hit her. Whatever had drained her. And, instead, she whispered. And the sound was lost in the gale.

It's up to you now, Rose. But I will always be with you....

Victoria reached out, but her sister was already gone. After a final shimmer, her beautiful form faded entirely from sight, leaving Victoria alone on the front step of Elizabeth's small cottage.

She swallowed a pain-wracked sob and tried to get her legs beneath her.

"Don't bother, sweet heart."

Victoria looked up, gasping and inadvertently inhaling dust particles and snow flakes as the Game Lord was suddenly standing above her, his tall form looming, a shadow emerging from the snow storm.

Before she could react, he was crouching beside her. With one hand, he held a strange black box that crackled and popped with remnant electricity. With his other hand, he reached out and grasped her wrist.

She tried to pull away, warmth and fire automatically gathering in her palms so that she could use them as weapons.

The Game Lord's slate colored eyes bore through her, the expression on his hard face one of warning. His grip on her wrist tightened painfully.

“Now!” He barked an order, his eyes never leaving hers, and a Game Control guard was there beside him, kneeling next to her.

Victoria ripped her gaze free to peer anxiously at the guard. In his hand were two leather neutralizing bracelets. Victoria’s eyes widened and she reeled back, attempting to release what heat she had already gathered into the tiny space between herself and the guard.

It didn’t work. The Game Lord held her fast and the guard simply lunged forward, grasping her other wrist even as the fire she created singed his hands and forearms. He gritted his teeth against the burns that he sustained through the leather of his uniform as his gloved hands quickly got to work.

In a few short and helpless moments, the wretched saps were on her wrists and Victoria felt the instant drain of her light leader abilities.

* * * *

Victor watched as the gods fell to their knees beneath the strange new onslaught of the draining magic in the Game Lord’s hands. It happened so fast. The course of milliseconds and no more.

Ullr was the last to fall to his knees. When he did, Maxwell Blood turned slowly in place and pinned his champion god with a bewildered expression. What Ullr had done to him, Victor had no idea. But he wasn’t going to waste his time dwelling on it. Blood’s temporary distraction afforded him the brief respite he needed to check on Victoria.

To make sure she was all right.

He looked up and peered through the swirling snow flakes and wind-blown dirt, searching for her sleeping form.

Instead, he found her struggling against a pair of metal manacles that had been fastened over what appeared to be neutralizing bracelets. She was being lifted to her feet, her upper arms

trapped in the Game Lord's strong and victorious vise-like grips. On either side of her stood two other Game Control guards.

"Nooo!" Victor turned and started forward, a furious rush of adrenaline spurring his body once more into combat mode.

He meant to run to her, to rip her from the Game Lord's grasp, and to freeze the fucking guards into human popsicles. He meant to telekinetically rip a hole in the Game Lord's throat and then send him into a bloody coma that he would never come out of. Stuff that. He would rip his throat out with his bear hands.

This is what he wanted to do. This is what went through his mind as his body prepared to take on a sudden burst of blurring speed.

But he never managed to take even a single step.

Because Maxwell Blood's sword slid easily between the ribs in Victor's broad back, sliced cleanly through his strong, muscled form, and then exited, silently and fatally, through his chest.

Victor managed to look down in time to catch the glint of metal as several snowflakes landed on the blade and slowly melted.

And then Bloody Max was pulling the blade back out.

And Victor was falling to his knees.

Chapter Twenty-one

There was the sound of a woman's scream. It seemed to take forever to die, and it felt as if it came through barriers of time and distance. Far away. Untouchable.

Victor's blood pounded in his ears, a rush and *shoosh* of dawning reality.

"Did you really think I would let you keep this up, Black?"

Victor heard the words, muffled as they were, and processed them as he fell. His knees hit the frozen earth and droplets of blood splattered across the rime that coated the hard ground. He knew they were his. There were so *many*...

"You've been trouble since the day you were brought to the Field." Muted footfalls as Blood's boots slowly paced around Victor's kneeling form.

Victor looked up, his green eyes no longer glowing. He blinked against the falling snow. Maxwell Blood smiled down at him.

"You don't deserve her, Black," Max said. He shook his head slowly, once, side to side. "She's more precious than you can imagine."

Victor noticed the blood at the side of Max's mouth, more under his nose, and a deep cut at the corner of his slightly swollen left eye.

I put up a fight... Victor thought, vaguely. *At least I die in battle.*

Maxwell pulled his gaze off of Victor and nonchalantly perused the blood-smeared blade of his sword. "I've thought about doing this for years. But Victoria has always had a thing for you. Even when she was thinking of me – I could hear her thinking about you." He made a face then, as if the thought disgusted him. Then he sighed. "She would have healed you."

Max glanced over his shoulder, toward something that Victor could not see, and a cruel smile graced his lips. "That won't be happening today."

He turned back to face Black and Victor could barely look up at him. There was a yawning pain in his chest; a spreading emptiness. Something was very wrong. Things were messed up inside of him. He could feel it, sense it, know it as the nauseating truth. Blood's blade had wreaked havoc on his body.

"But just to make sure," Max said.

Victor felt the words, more than heard them. A death sentence, both literal and figurative. And then Max's sword was plunging once more through his chest, the impact jolting and slicing. He heard it go in, louder than any sound anywhere around him.

Blood twisted the blade as it exited through Black's back and Victor heard muscle and tendon pop and tear.

...this is it... he thought.

Max then yanked his weapon out of Victor's broken body and took a step back. Victor saw the ground coming up at him. He raised his arms, barely managing to catch himself as he fell forward.

The captain of the Red team said nothing further. Victor felt him leave; waning footfalls and a receding shadow.

And then he closed his eyes.

* * * *

Victoria watched, wide-eyed and numb, as Max thrust his long sword into Victor's back. She could barely believe what she was seeing. It shocked her to the core, slowing her reaction. She hadn't been able to warn him. Astonishment left her no time.

She heard a woman scream and realized, only at length, that it was her own voice piercing the wretched distance between herself and Victor Black.

"Give her to me," she heard the Game Lord bark at his men.

She realized that she was struggling fiercely, her only desire to race to Black and heal him. She tried to call out to her captain, to order him to stop – to beg him to stand down. But, the Game Lord's arms wrapped around her, his gloved hand covering her mouth.

When Victor fell to his knees and Max slowly paced around him, dread unlike any other crept through Victoria's shaking body. And when he pulled his sword arm back to strike again, Victoria couldn't turn away. She was held too tight.

So, she closed her eyes instead, a miserable sob trapped in her throat, wracking her body with grief. It didn't help. Her imagination filled in the blanks.

And when Max's sword pierced Victor's heart, Victoria knew.

No... she thought. No, no, no... This isn't happening.

Why she cared so deeply, she had no idea. Yet it honestly felt as if Max had plunged that sword, not into Victor's heart – but her own. She was breaking inside. Emptying out.

She was bleeding into her soul and she was fairly sure she would drown.

The Game Lord bent to place his lips beside her ear. "It hurts now, but you'll soon forget all about it, sweet heart. Trust me." He whispered, and then straightened again. She felt him turn to the guards beside her. "Leave the others."

He then released her, uncovering her mouth and moving to her side to take hold of her upper arm. She didn't even wince when his grip became bruisingly tight. She didn't care; she could barely feel the pain. Her golden eyes searched for Victor, but the guards beside her partially blocked her view.

All she could make out were bits of movement, two men in black, one falling forward into what looked like a spreading pool of blood.

She felt too numb to cry, then. Dazed, confused, dead inside.

The Game Lord hauled her beside him, his strong embrace dragging her easily toward a trail that had been carved through the forest at the clearing's edge. His men surrounded her. Half a dozen of them, at the least.

They took the trail and strode hurriedly, purposefully, through the woods as the storm that had raged behind them quickly died down.

I'll always be with you, Rose...

Victoria blinked, her unshed tears released to roll down her cheeks. They came to an abrupt halt as the trail stopped at the doors to a transporter cube. It was impossible. The cube shouldn't be there.

But that wasn't what gave Victoria pause. The voice in her head hadn't been her own.

I'm here...

It faded away again, but now Victoria recognized it for what it was. Her twin sister. Andromeda was speaking to her telepathically.

* * * *

Simon kept his eyes shut. Even when lightning tore up the world around him, he kept them shut. Even as his Team leader let out a piercing, mind-blowing scream, he kept them shut. Even when the guard who had dealt him the dizzying blow followed up with a swift, hard kick to Simon's unprotected gut, he forced his facial features to relax into a mask of unconsciousness – and kept his damn eyes shut.

He had to.

There was no other way out of this nightmare. In his closed fist, he held the regenerator. It was the key to their salvation.

And he knew there were at least two more out there – somewhere in that mess of a clearing that was now a blood-baptized battle field.

Dr. Jeannine Cure had given one to Simon and another to Victor – and a third to Thor, who, at the time, had been pretending to be human.

What had Thor done with his pill before the Game Lord showed up?

Did the regenerator disappear along with the god?

Simon was desperately hoping that it hadn't. Because he was going to need it.

April was mortally wounded. He'd watched as a guard had choked her with one hand and plunged his dagger into her abdomen with his other. Ty was unconscious beneath a blow he'd sustained to the head.

And Simon was fairly sure that Victor was either dead – or very nearly so.

Any healing that Victoria could have doled out was put on ice. The Game Lord had taken her; Simon didn't have to witness that much to know it as true. He'd come into the clearing with that magic black box of his and killed the gods.

Or sent them away.

Either way, it had allowed him to get to Victoria, and if the silence that now dawned over the clearing was any indication, she was no longer anywhere near by, and neither were the GC guards that Simon hadn't been able to put to sleep and that Ty and April hadn't been able to wound or kill.

That meant that it was up to Simon, alone, to see this right.

He remained where he was, laying on the ground as if unconscious, until the storm above him died down enough that he could make out any other sounds in the clearing.

When there were none forthcoming and he was certain that the guards were gone, he slowly opened his eyes.

He sat up.

“Oh, *hell...*” he muttered as he slowly took in the carnage of the landscape. Three regenerators weren’t going to be enough.

* * * *

The transporter doors opened, and the Game Lord stepped inside, pulling Victoria along with him.

She hadn’t known he’d been there with them, but the next to step into the transporter cube was Maxwell Blood.

Victoria looked up at him through vision blurred with tears. He was still holding his sword. It was covered in blood.

Victor’s blood.

“I won’t apologize, Victoria,” Max spoke softly as the other guards piled into the transporter cube after them. The Game Lord held her fast, pulling her back against his chest as Max slid his sword back into its scabbard and continued. “There was no helping it, this time. He was irredeemable.” He paused, taking a deep breath, his gaze moving over her face before he went on. “It needed to be done.”

His bright blue eyes flashed like the hottest fire, despite the waves of cold she felt rolling off of him.

“I suppose you hate me now.” He stated it simply, without real emotion. It was only a slightly remorseful avowal of fact. Nothing more.

Victoria could not even answer him. There was a knot in her throat. And her voice had been stolen by misery. Instead, she looked away, shutting her eyes against him. More tears rolled, unchecked, down her face.

“Not to worry, captain,” The Game Lord spoke then, his tone as light as his grip was hard. “She won’t hate you for long.”

And then he bent slightly to speak once more in Victoria's ear. "I bet you're wondering what happened back there." He paused, allowing her to process his words. "What happened to your sister. And the others."

She didn't answer. She kept her eyes shut tight and felt the weight of the saps around her wrists – and the manacles over those.

"This here is a computer, of sorts." He lifted the black box. She could feel him holding it aloft and knew he wanted her to look. But she didn't have to. And she wouldn't give him the pleasure.

He went on, regardless. "It is a remote access memory device that will hold a certain amount of power – in any form. At the moment, it contains both light and dark power, drained from a light and dark leader that were no longer of use to me."

Now Victoria did look. She couldn't help it. The very idea that someone's life force had been drained – and placed into an object – was so repulsive, it drew her attention as any real horror would.

The Game Lord smiled down at her. "The light energy allowed me to break down and reform the molecules of a transporter cube – and relocate it here." He turned the black box slightly in his hand and looked down at it. "The dark energy allowed me to temporarily rid myself of the nuisance of those wretched gods."

He sighed and Victoria swallowed.

He turned his gray gaze back to her and she looked up at him. "It's useless to me now, of course. Completely used up."

He dropped the black box and it clamored to the floor of the cube. Without looking away from her, he then turned slightly and pressed a few buttons on the console beside him. The walls

of the transporter began to blur. “Unlike you, Rose Tyrnan. *You*, my dear, have centuries upon centuries of use left within you.”

* * * *

“Come on, come on....” Simon lifted Victor’s head and lowered his cheek to his lips. No breath. What good was a regenerator pill going to do him if the man wasn’t even breathing? Breathing came first. Swallowing was most certainly secondary.

He could break it open. Dump the powder into the dark leader’s mouth....

But if he wasn’t breathing or swallowing, then, again, the powder would just sit there uselessly on Victor’s tongue.

His heart is still beating... he thought, as he noticed that Victor’s blood continued to pump, though feebly, to stain the earth beneath them. As broken and torn as it was, it continued to beat.

That amazed Simon.

And it also gave him an idea.

If the man’s heart was beating, then his blood was traveling through his veins. Blood was the transport system of the body.

With that thought, Simon lowered Victor’s head into his lap, took the regenerator capsule between his fingers, and then placed those fingers over the deeper and more ghastly of Victor’s wounds.

Odin, please let this work, he thought.

Then he snapped the capsule open, revealing a wealth of white, crystalline powder that shimmered in the faint wafts of sunlight spearing through the departing thunder clouds overhead.

With a second whispered prayer, just to be sure, Simon lowered the capsule halves to Victor’s wound and dumped the powder onto the gash. He did so carefully and precisely, making certain that the power-laden dust found its way cleanly into the deep, oozing cut.

When both sides of the capsule were empty, Simon sat back and let out the breath he'd been holding.

Then he waited.

And waited.

He expected the wound to slowly mend shut again. He thought, maybe, Victor would open his eyes and gasp for breath and stop bleeding.

But nothing happened.

Until, finally, and without warning, it *did*.

The flash of red-orange light was blinding in its intensity. Simon jerked back, shielding his eyes from the sudden illumination. He felt a swell of heat rush over him, a shock wave of sorts, with Victor's body at its epicenter.

When the heat subsided, Simon heard coughing. He lowered his arm to find Victor slowly pushing up on his side, spitting a mouth-full of blood onto the already soaked ground.

"Fuck me, that bloody well hurt," Black mumbled, and then once more wiped his mouth on the leather sleeve of his uniform.

"Black!" Simon rushed to his feet, so shocked and so relieved at the same time, he wasn't quite sure what to do next.

Victor looked up at him and pinned him with a no-nonsense green-eyed gaze. "Where is Victoria?"

* * * *

"Strap her to the chair," The Game Lord gave the order as he moved to the other side of the rehabilitation room, and began to peruse the controls on the operations console.

Victoria screamed and fought, kicked and jerked, struggling violently against the guards that dragged her fighting form toward the massive leather recliner at the center of the room. It was

outfitted with metal cuffs where arms and legs would be securely locked down, and above the chair hovered the *Needle*.

The Needle was the pin-point device that would emit a ray of light and sound so finite, it sliced through the scalp and skull and brain without bringing harm to anything around it. But it hurt.

It hurt like nothing else in the world. And that pain did not stay localized. It traveled across the body, bringing agony to every living nerve ending until, usually, the victim passed out beneath its relentless onslaught.

At which point, the needle silently did its job. Erasing real memories.

And planting false ones.

It was literally the last place on earth that Victoria wanted to sit. In that chair. And she fought with every fiber of her being, all the while forcing herself to tamp down her desire to out-and-out beg the Game Lord to reconsider his actions.

She wanted to plead with him.

But she knew it would do no good. And if she was going to go down, she was taking her pride with her.

“Give her something for the pain,” Max said, then.

Victoria’s wide eyes cut to him. He met them with his glowing blue gaze. There was something in his expression that hadn’t been there only moments before.

What was it?

In her fear, she possessed neither faculty nor patience to try to decipher what it might be. She was too terrified. The guards managed to take off her manacles, letting them drop to the floor. They then shoved the saps on her wrists higher up on her arms and lifted her into the chair, four

of them having to wrestle her struggling body into place. Once she was held down, they moved her arms and legs into the open metal bindings.

The metal cuffs slid shut over her limbs, closing to a nearly painful tightness. She knew it was useless, but she pulled against her restraints anyway. She was rewarded for her efforts with two near-gashes in the flesh of her wrists, and two bruised ankles.

“I intend to,” the Game Lord replied to Max’s request. Victoria watched as he turned around to face them once more, a syringe held aloft in one gloved hand.

She swallowed hard, barely managing to work past her ragged breathing and her racing pulse. She felt dizzy.

This isn’t happening... her mind insisted. None of this is happening.

She couldn’t save herself, and no one else was going to save her. Her Team had been beaten.

Victor was dead....

Even the gods had abandoned her.

Tears ran, yet again, down her cheeks and her golden eyes began to glow, despite the saps that were still wrapped tightly around her forearms.

“Now, now, sweet heart. Don’t cry. This is only a harmless pain killer. Perhaps a bit of sedative as well.” The Game Lord approached her and Victoria shrank into the leather chair. He smiled and nodded once to one of the guards. The guard came forward and produced a blade.

Victoria’s pulse kicked up a notch, thudding painfully inside her chest.

The guard placed the blade to the leather of her uniform jacket and proceeded to slice the jacket off of her body. He was quick and efficient and the blade must have been impossibly sharp to do what it did.

Despite her terror, Victoria was remotely impressed.

The guard pulled the jacket completely free, revealing the tight t-shirt Victoria wore, and the taut flesh of her now exposed arms. Then the Game Lord stepped forward, closing the distance between them. He leaned down and placed the syringe's needle to the inside of Victoria's arm. She winced and tried to shrink away, but was unable to move.

The Game Lord gave her a slightly reproachful look. "It'll make you feel better, Rose." He told her, his slate-gray eyes glittering with triumph and promise. "I'll even give it a few moments to kick in before we begin."

With that, he drove the needle into her vein and Victoria responded with a sharp intake of breath. As he depressed the syringe, she felt the drug burn through her arm – at first.

And then a pleasant numbness followed. It was warm, and almost instantly calming.

The Game Lord emptied the entire syringe's contents into her body and then gently pulled it back out.

Victoria couldn't help it when she relaxed against the chair, letting her head fall back against the leather head rest. The drug was coursing freely through her system now, and it honestly felt good.

Very good.

"That's it," the Game Lord gently lauded.

Rose, don't surrender. Don't give in.

There was that voice again. Victoria blinked, almost lazily. Her arms and legs relaxed into their bindings, her breathing slowed. Her heart beat settled into a more normal rhythm.

Rose! I'm here. Remember who you are. I won't let you forget....

Warmth blanketed Victoria's body, wrapping around her like a fleece blanket, dark and binding. She closed her eyes. She couldn't have fought it if she wanted to. And she didn't want to.

“It isn’t strong enough to kill all of the pain,” the Game Lord was saying. “I can’t give her any more without risking injury. However, it’ll take the edge off.”

There was no reply to that; none that Victoria heard, anyway. There was just the numbing, pleasant warmth – and a strange cold spot that rested just over her heart. She didn’t understand that. But she also didn’t care.

Not even when it became so cold, it almost burned, even as the rest of her body slumped into submission.

Distantly, she felt someone take her hand. She slowly – oh, so slowly – opened her eyes.

Max was crouching beside the chair, his hand interwoven with hers. She gazed, sedately, into his blue eyes and vaguely recognized that strange expression. Again.

There it was. What did it mean?

It didn’t matter. Not any more.

Because the Game Lord flipped a switch on the control console and the Needle whirled to disturbing life.

* * * *

Max’s mind was spinning as he began to pull his sword out of his opponent’s body for the second time. He couldn’t believe he had finally done it. He’d been wanting to kill Victor Black ever since he’d caught the man watching Victoria during their first battle, ten years ago. He’d known, then. He’d known full well that Victor would take to her – like a moth to a flame. He knew that the Gray leader would pursue her when she was older.

He’d wanted to reveal himself to the dark leader and warn him to stay away. But the Game Lord had forbidden it. No amount of petty jealousy, he’d said, was worth risking his cover. He needed to keep Victoria on the right path. And that was it.

So Max had let him go.

Until now.

Max yanked the rest of the blade free and watched as Victor slumped forward. It should have felt better than it did. It should have given him more pleasure to finally destroy the man that Gamers termed the “Ice God.” There had never been a more worthy opponent than Victor Black. He was a man, in fact, impossible to defeat in fair combat.

Max had been forced to attack him from behind.

Still, what was done was done and Max was sure that he should have felt more of a sense of completion as Victor Black’s blood coated the frozen ground. Instead, however, Victoria’s scream echoed in his ears.

And he felt strange.

He’d felt a little strange, in fact, ever since Ullr had touched him.

Max straightened and stepped back. He looked up, tearing his gaze from his fallen opponent. The Game Lord was dragging Victoria across the clearing, toward the trail that would undoubtedly lead to a reassembled transporter cube.

It was time to go.

He caught up with them easily enough. And Victoria wouldn’t look at him. She couldn’t stand the sight of him. That much was easy enough to see. Max put away his sword and the Game Lord sent them on their way.

As the transporter cube whirled and blurred through time and space, Max’s head began to swim. It felt fuzzy, suddenly. As if he’d been poisoned or something.

He wondered if he needed a brief trip to the MRU. But he didn’t want to leave Victoria’s side. Not when she was headed for immediate rehabilitation.

He wanted to be there when it happened. When she woke up.

... the way the Game Lord was there when I woke up....

Max blinked. He shook his head, firmly, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. His head was beginning to ache.

Voices floated through his mind. He couldn't make out the sentences, but there were words, here and there.... *Arthur.... My idea.... Serve me now....*

Max winced as a sharp pain stabbed behind his right eye. He looked up, wondering whether the Game Lord had noticed his sudden distress.

But he didn't. The Game Lord was too busy watching Victoria. His gray gaze was intense as it peered down at her silently crying profile. He looked at her with hunger. With determination. With lust.

Who wouldn't? Max asked himself. *She's beautiful.*

You thought you could hand me a job and boss me around and just expect me to turn over my creations?

Max blinked, his eyes widening as the words began to form sentences in his mind. A voice was ringing out in his head. And he realized, with silent trepidation, that it was a memory.

My memory....

*Oh no, Maxwell. You have done your part. You tore down the armies that stood against you. You became Bloody Max. Congratulations, the voice laughed. Taunted. Now it's my turn. The wall was my design, after all. Your idea, Max. **My** creation.*

I should be Game Lord.

Not you.

Max's breath caught in his throat. The blood drained from his face. He was remembering now. *Something*. But it was bits and pieces. And the conversation made no sense. Who had it even been with?

And why had the memory been repressed in the first place?

“Strap her to the chair,” the Game Lord commanded. The GC guards immediately got to work following their instructions. Victoria fought valiantly, but it did no good.

It hit Max, then, that she was going to be rehabilitated. It really *hit* him. She was going to forget all about him. All about everything they had done in the last fifteen years. And it was going to hurt. He didn’t want her to forget. He didn’t want her to suffer. Suddenly, it was imperative that he not let her suffer!

“Give her something for the pain.”

...I would give you something for the pain, Max, but your body is too strong. It wouldn’t do much good. It was the Game Lord talking in his head. The Game Lord in his memory – speaking to him. *And besides*, his remembered voice continued, *I’m sort of looking forward to hearing you scream....*

The guards managed to get Victoria strapped down to her chair and the Game Lord turned around with a syringe in his hand. “I intend to.” He approached the chair and smiled at Victoria. “Now, now, sweet heart. Don’t cry. This is only a harmless pain killer. Perhaps a bit of sedative as well.”

The Game Lord then nodded toward one of his guards. The man came forward and produced a Lazer blade, a knife with a metal blade so sharp, it had the precision of a laser.

He quickly cut Victoria’s downtime jacket off of her slim body and pulled the leather away.

“It’ll make you feel better, Rose. I’ll even give it a few moments to kick in before we begin.” He plunged the needle into her arm and Victoria’s eye lids slammed shut. She gasped at the sudden sharp stab of pain and a strange uneasiness unwrapped itself inside of Max’s stomach.

....You can’t do this! Let me up, Arthur!.... Max closed his eyes, then, as the Game Lord drugged up his Team leader and more memories unfolded in his confused, heated brain.... *Too*

late, Max. We did it, you know. We built the wall. The gods are dying. Your idea worked. There was laughter and Max saw his face now. Clear as day.

The first Arthur.

*But you made a fatal error, Maxwell the Bloody. You trusted a geek. **Never** trust a genius to give you something greater than he can give himself.*

Max remembered the pain of the Needle. His struggles had been useless in the chair. No matter what he did, no matter what he said, Arthur continued with his plan. He had tricked Max into the chair.

And erased his memories.

The pain had been unbearable. He'd blacked out short seconds after it had begun.

And he'd woken up believing that he was Maxwell the Bloody – not the conqueror, not the man who had envisioned the wall and appointed a genius named Arthur to figure out how to build it. But Maxwell the Bloody, the Game Lord's second in command.

Arthur had won. He'd become the Game Lord. He'd run the Game for three thousand years, even doing so with Maxwell Blood's unsuspecting and unending support.

He'd won then.

And he was about to win again.

Was there anything that Max could do to stop him?

He knelt then, beside the rehabilitation chair, and took Victoria's hand. It was warm and soft. She slowly rolled her head to one side and opened her eyes, gazing out at him with glowing golden orbs, half sheltered by heavy, lids.

His pulse raced. His felt sick. Angry. Furious. Terrified.

The room was filled with Game Banded GC guards. The Game Lord – Arthur Zero – was starting up the machine.

And Max had killed Victor Black – the one man who might have stood a chance against the Game Lord and his small army.

Above them, the Needle whirred to life. It began spinning as it descended and Victoria chanced a glance up. She whimpered softly, but the bulb behind the needle flashed, emitting a pulse of mesmerizing light.

Victoria stopped moving, her gaze transfixed.

Max slowly released her hand and stood. He felt the weight of his sword in its scabbard on his belt. He noted the location of every GC guard in the room. There were eleven of them. More just outside the door. Even more further down the hall.

But if he took out Arthur.... Would the others follow?

Slowly, very slowly, he reached for the grip of his weapon.

And the Game Lord's steely gaze cut to him, pinning him to the spot. "I wondered whether your trip outside the wall would cause you to remember, Max." The Game Lord's voice was low, his tone calm.

And just as he nodded at the guards that had somehow positioned themselves around Max, Victoria began to scream.

* * * *

The pain was gentle at first. A buzzing coldness that was sort of there, but sort of not. And then it grew and intensified and no amount of pain killer in her system could have hidden her from the sensation.

Her back arched in the leather chair and her scream pierced the air of the rehabilitation room. All around her, chaos had erupted, but it was a secondary reality to her. First and foremost was the agony in her head.

I'm here, Rose. Use the power you have within yourself! My power!

The cold on her chest also intensified, becoming a freezing impression that would not be ignored. It seared into her breast bone, icing over the skin, and Victoria was able to focus on it. Just barely. But enough.

Help me! She screamed, knowing now that the cold was coming from a necklace, and that the necklace in question was her sister's. A piece of Andromeda was inside of it. It was the magic that had always tied the lockets together.

What do I do! Her fevered brain screamed.

Concentrate, Rose. Use the dark leader abilities you possess within you!

Andromeda was right. Victoria had already sensed them there once. When she'd been able to read Victor's mind.

Because Andromeda was Ullr's champion, and because she and her sister were twins, they shared each other's talents, to some degree. And now Victoria wore not only her own locket, but her sister's as well.

Those talents were intensified.

But enough to override the saps on her wrists?

I can't do it....

The Needle came closer and the sudden shooting pain in Victoria's head temporarily distracted her. She felt like vomiting. Nausea roiled through her, the pain a steady, constant, throbbing force that threatened to overwhelm her.

You wear the bracelets, Rose, not me! Use my power! Freeze the shackles, Rose. Break them!

Victoria tried to concentrate. She tried so, so hard – she really did. But it was nearly impossible. Very nearly.

Just, not *quite*.

She imagined the steel band around her right wrist freezing. She imagined it icing over in blue-white rime. She imagined its molecules crystallizing and its basic building-block materials becoming brittle. Delicate.

She imagined this with every ounce of will power she possessed.

And then, when she finally felt the cold of the manacle bite into her right wrist, she gave it a yank. It shattered. Victoria instantly reached up and yanked the sap off of her upper left wrist. Then she moved her right wrist in front of her left fingers and allowed them to do the same.

Within fractions of a second, she was free of the neutralizing bracelets. Without wasting any time, she focused her telekinetic power on the Needle above her. It stopped spinning. It crackled, and wires of electricity inside fizzled and popped. It began rumbling as the motor inside of it started to die.

She glanced back down in time to see the spectacle of Max and several GC guards in furious combat. Max removed his hand from one of the guard's chests, and the man fell to his knees as his body began to creak with ice and crack beneath the weight of his descent.

But, at the same time, another guard came up behind Max and managed to wrap something leather around his thick throat. The Game Lord stepped back. Max's eyelids temporarily closed and the sword slipped from his right hand.

Victoria realized that the leather belt the guard held was none other than a neutralizing collar, much the same design as the saps that had been forced upon her.

The Game Lord spun away from Max and the guard then and his gray gaze locked on her. "Stop her!" He bellowed. He rushed forward, attempting to grasp hold of her left arm, but she swatted at the air between them as if she were swatting at a fly, and his tall, broad form went sailing backward into the control console behind him.

A GC guard rushed her right side and she sat up to face him, her golden eyes glowing like mini-suns, her straight, white teeth bared. With no more than a thought, she set his hair on fire and shoved him into the wall at his back.

He screamed in alarm and began flailing madly.

Victoria concentrated on the shackles at her ankles. They came away and she leapt to her feet. Another thought and the door to the rehabilitation room swung open, crashing against the wall behind it.

Victoria ran through, not caring about the mess of a fight she left behind her. All she could think about was getting away. All she wanted was *escape*.

So, it was with a good deal of surprise that she easily dealt with the guards in the hall by knocking them viciously into each other, and then rounded a corner with blurring speed only to slam into another tall, hard body.

She stumbled backward, temporarily stunned. A pair of strong, gloved hands grasped her arms, holding her steady.

She blinked and looked up.

Glacial green eyes gazed back down at her.

“You all right, then, luv?” Victor asked, the hint of a smile curling his lips.

She blinked again, finding herself at a sudden and very real loss for words. But he didn’t give her the time to reply, anyway, as he was then shoving her roughly behind him, shielding her with his black-clad body.

She peeked around him, too shocked to do anything else.

The Game Lord stood at the end of the hall, another transparent black box held tightly between his gloved hands.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Game Lord smiled at them both, and his gray eyes flickered to something just over their shoulders.

Victor whirled in time to find four Game-Banded guards closing in on them.

With near vicious strength, Victor shoved Victoria out of the way. She hit the opposite wall and grasped it to steady herself. And then they were upon him, two of them holding neutralizing bracelets, two of them empty-handed.

But Victor never gave them a chance to get anywhere near his wrists. For some reason, he spared his powers – perhaps for the Game Lord, who watched steadily from the other end of the hall – and dealt with the guards using his bare hands. That he could fight at all after having fought Maxwell Blood on the streets of Ocanus and then in the clearing outside of town was amazing enough. That he could do so after having been mortally wounded – twice – was impossibly impressive.

Victoria couldn't help but stand there and watch. He was beautiful, in a dark and almost paranormal kind of way. It was like watching a wolf take down his prey. She'd done that a few times in the outskirts of the Field, in between Games. She liked the wolves.

And now she knew why.

They reminded her of Black.

He moved with unnatural grace; a tall, strong form in head to toe black leather, his hair the same color as his uniform, his green eyes flashing like emeralds as he crushed the windpipe of one guard, broke the neck of another, and then dislocated the shoulder and shattered a knee on the third. The fourth guard stepped back, trying to get away after seeing what Black had done to his companions.

But Victor could move very, very fast. And the fourth guard never stood a chance.

When it was over, a few seconds later, two sets of neutralizing bracelets lay, unused, on the floor. And four injured guards were either lying unconscious or dead, or slowly crawling away.

Victor straightened and turned, his glowing green eyes finding Victoria and locking on as if she were a beacon. She swallowed hard at the intensity in that gaze. There were promises there. So many promises.

She shivered at the sheer amount of adrenaline she could sense coursing through his veins. And at the immense power he wielded. He was, indeed, the “ice god,” the infamous Gray leader, and it was no mystery to her why men whispered his name in closed quarters. And women dreamed of him in the darkest hours of night.

To think that Victor Black wanted her – and, apparently, *only* her – as badly as he did was almost a compliment. A scary, thrilling kind of compliment.

One that made her feel weak, even now. Even here. In the midst of the biggest battle of their lives.

Slowly – very slowly – Victor peeled his gaze from her and pinned it to the Game Lord. The Game Lord smiled an indulgent and appreciative kind of smile and honestly appeared that he would have even applauded Victor’s “performance,” if his hands hadn’t been holding that black box.

“You really are the best, Black. So good to see you’re still with us,” he said. His gray eyes glittered to a nearly maniacal extent. “I’ll take two rehabilitated Gamers over one any day.” Victoria strode toward Victor and tried to stand beside him, but his gloved hand shot out, grasping her arm and pulling her back behind him once more.

“If you come quietly,” the Game Lord continued, speaking almost conversationally, “I won’t have to blast you into a coma first.”

“I think you’re bluffing,” Victor stated, his accent coming through loud and clear.

Victoria turned as the sound of footfalls rang out behind her. She prepared to use her powers, believing that more guards were hurriedly on their way.

But, instead, Simon, April and Ty were running down the hall toward them. She raised her hand, signaling for them to stay back.

Ty caught the signal and raised his arms at his sides, halting the others behind him. They came up short, but when they saw the bodies on the floor and passed the injured guards still crawling slowly away, they gripped their weapons tightly in their hands and both Ty and Simon raised their bows toward the Game Lord. Each was loaded and ready to fire.

The Game Lord ignored them. Instead, he addressed Victor’s accusation.

“I can see why you would believe that,” the powerful, gray-haired man shrugged. “After all, I’ve already used one black box today. How many could I possibly have created over the last three thousand years? Am I right?” He cocked his head to one side, his gray eyes looking from Victor to Victoria.

His gaze narrowed meaningfully and Victoria felt a new wave of apprehension wash over her. He was right. He would be a fool to only possess one. Especially when they proved to be so useful.

“Victoria, run.” Victor told her.

She blinked. “What?”

“You heard me. Get out of here now.”

The Game Lord’s smile turned cruel. He lifted the box and it began to crackle with electricity.

But Victoria wasn’t about to leave Victor. Not again. Not now that he was alive and she had a second chance. “No way,” she whispered, straightening behind him. “We go down together.”

She could feel a spike of energy come from him, then. He was angry. She could feel it like ice upon her skin.

For the love of Thor, Victoria, get the bloody hell out of here!

No.

Her reply was simple. And strong. She began to pull her power forward, setting it before herself like a fire wall.

I'm here, too, Rose. Take whatever you need from me.

Victoria closed her eyes as the familiar voice swirled through her mind. Her sister was offering up her power, from whatever temporary place she had been banished to. Victoria didn't hesitate in using it. A strange sort of steam began to coalesce on the floor around her. A circle where hot met cold. She felt stronger than she had ever felt before. Even the drug still coursing through her system failed to bend her concentration. It merely relaxed her, took away the fear, made her braver. Which made her more dangerous.

As if he could sense this change in her, Victor turned slightly and glanced at her over his broad shoulder. Gold eyes met green.

"I'll give you one last chance, Rose." The Game Lord called their attention once more. The box in his hands was crackling with more urgency now. "Think of it, Tyrnan," he continued. "You'll be with your Team again. You'll live forever. You'll be happy." The Game Lord glanced at Victor, something strange flickering in his gaze.

"Not that I need remind you of this, luv," Victor told her, his tone quiet as he spoke to her without taking his eyes off of the Game Lord. "But don't listen to him. He plans to make you his wife. He wants to implant the memory in your mind."

"Oh, *hell* no," Ty muttered from behind her.

Victoria's body shook with a cold chill at Victor's words. He must have been reading the Game Lord's mind. She didn't want to think about what else he might have read in there. No doubt, he was editing his thoughts for her sake.

"The old gods are all but dead, Black. But the wall still needs champions. If not by birth right, then by birth, alone." The Game Lord explained, calmly. His gaze smoldered as he stared at Victoria, and now she recognized the lust there in those slate-gray depths. "You would create beautiful children, Rose." His eyes reflected an inner hunger. "And powerful."

Victor's anger shot up several, final notches. Without warning, he released a stream of cold energy, no doubt meaning to freeze the Game Lord from the inside out.

At the same time, both Simon and Ty released their arrows.

But the arrows came to a bizarre, magical halt several feet from their target. They hovered there, in the air – and then dropped like rocks to the floor.

Likewise, Victor's cold stream seemed to bounce off of the Game Lord. But the wall to his right caked over with crawling, crackling rime. A muscle in Victor's jaw ticked. He waved his hand; Victoria recognized the attempt at telekinesis. But the Game Lord stayed put, once more completely unaffected.

The wall to his left cracked open, a two-foot long gash, rent several inches deep, as if from an incredible impact. Plaster crumbled to the floor and dust escaped in a small cloud.

"Very nice, Black. But you can do better than that."

Victoria took a step back when the weakness and sleep magic was the next to be released. She could feel its iniquitous influence, tempting even her hyper-alarmed state to give in and rest. She took another step back, fully expecting the Game Lord to feel *something* this time.

But he didn't. The box, however, seemed to have grown brighter in his hands. Even larger.

“Victor, stop.” Victoria told him, moving forward once more to gently grasp his elbow. “It’s only making him stronger.”

The Game Lord’s eyes glittered. With merriment? Pride? Whatever it was, it wasn’t good, and when it settled once more on Victoria’s form, she could almost feel its weight.

“Yes, indeed,” he nearly whispered. “You are as intelligent as you are beautiful, Tyrnan. I believe you will warm my bed quite nicely.”

Victor’s entire body was rigid with pent-up rage. And, at that final challenge, he seemed to be able to take no more. He tore from her grasp and strode forward just as the black box in the Game Lord’s grasp grew more transparent. Victoria could now see a vortex spinning within it. She hadn’t witnessed the Game Lord using the black box the first time, on the clearing outside of Ocanus. She had been unconscious.

But now, she had a first-rate view, and what she saw – what she felt – terrified her. Her golden eyes began to glow, widening as, in another millisecond, the box opened up, lightning shooting from its core.

The first stream struck Victor in the chest, in nearly the same spot that she had seen Max’s sword pierce earlier. It was thick and white and larger than life. It hit him with the force of a hurricane. Victor rocked back, and Victoria found herself moving forward, not even of her own volition. She placed her hands at his back, wanting for all the world to be able to protect him from any more pain.

But the second stream from the black box hit her, knocking her back and away from Victor. Victoria could not process any coherent thought, in that moment, for she suddenly knew the pain of the gods.

It was white hot and utterly draining. She slumped immediately, falling to the floor, landing hard on her knees. She heard the impact more than felt it, because her entire body was on fire.

Victoria....

It was Victor's voice, in her head, barely audible over the maelstrom of blood through her ear drums. She could have sworn she heard her body cracking.

I'm so sorry, luv....

She felt his presence slip away from her. She knew the bulk of the box's evil was focused on him. The Game Lord was going to take him out first. Permanently, if need be. He posed too much of a threat.

And so Victor's essence quickly faded until she could no longer detect it there at all.

She tried to look up, but found herself on the floor, having to force even her eyelids to obey. She felt so heavy. As if she were made of lead and would even fall right through the marble tiles beneath her. She could not move her body – not at all. And the torment continued, draining one power after another. She could almost recognize them as they passed from her soul to the black box. Telekinesis first. Then fire. The mending molecular reconstruction. Her sister's powers faded as well. The ice melted. The cold became tepid. All sound within her mind ceased.

Her healing ability began to go –

And then there was a bellow of rage and an answering cry of surprise.

The lightning stopped. Though she could still hear it, its loud crackling and snapping impossible to ignore, it no longer pierced her core. The pain began to recede, dropping away like the sloughing of an acid-lined blanket.

Victoria pushed herself up, and then slumped forward, gasping for breath. A drop of blood fell to the floor and splattered. Then another.

She continued to sit up slowly and wiped the back of her hand across her nose, knowing full well it would come away covered in blood. She didn't care.

She looked up to find Victor's body on the ground ahead of her.

Not again....

Several yards away, Maxwell Blood and the Game Lord were locked in a mortal embrace. Max's sword was sunken into the Game Lord's belly and protruded, covered in red and shimmering with reflected lightning, from the other side. She saw Max give it a brutal twist, even as the black box in his opponent's clutched fists sent bolt after vicious bolt of draining electricity into Max's strong body.

For Max, it didn't matter. He had been trained as a fighter. A Team captain. With or without his dark leader abilities, he was a champion. And his sword arm was as deadly as his mind.

Victoria found herself crawling forward until she knelt beside Victor. But her eyes were locked on her captain and his enemy. Their enemy.

Another twist and Max pulled the sword back out. And then, just as viciously, he thrust it back in.

The black box finally clamored to the marble floor.

The Game Lord would have fallen, but for the length of Max's blade holding him up. However, Max's own knees gave out then. And they both fell to the floor.

"Max...." Victoria found herself saying his name.

Forgive me, Victoria.

Max's head bowed in deathly weariness just as the Game Lord's eyes closed. Max removed his sword, yanking it out in one final, defiant show of strength. The Game Lord slumped forward and fell face-first onto the box he had dropped.

Victoria watched, speechless and stunned, as Max then looked up. Slowly.

His blue eyes were no longer glowing. But they were bright, none the less. Clear as the Mare on a summer morning.

Forgive me, his mind whispered again. It was a plea, soft but urgent. Her response was vital.

She swallowed hard and nodded. *I forgive you.* As she projected the words, she fought back a sob. Her vision blurred with tears and she let them fall.

He smiled then. It was a small smile, but it was enough.

As he fell, Victoria closed her eyes. She could not watch. She couldn't watch him fall for the last time. He'd been her captain. Her best friend. And despite everything, in the end, he had sacrificed himself to save her.

"Victoria," April placed her hand on Victoria's shoulder, jolting her to the moment. Victoria opened her eyes and gazed down at the Gray leader. She couldn't believe that in the space of seconds, she'd lost them both.

Gently, and with shaking fingers, Victoria brushed a lock of raven colored hair from Victor's forehead. Even in death, he was impossibly beautiful. She realized, then, that there were still two hours left in that little "Game" of theirs.

Another tear made its way down her cheek. She would have surrendered to him willingly.

He's not dead, Rose....

Victoria blinked. She hiccupped. *What?*

There was no reply, but that didn't stop Victoria from placing her hand over Victor's heart. She felt no heart beat. He wasn't breathing. There was nothing-

There. One single beat. Faint, but alive.

With a cry of alarm, Victoria placed both hands over his chest and furiously focused what remaining energy she had. It was the one power the box had failed to drain from her body. Her ability to heal.

She imagined Victor as he had been only moments before. Tall, strong, *intact*. She imagined him perfect. Because that was what he was. In all of his darkness and all of his dangerous glory.

He was perfect.

... you really think so, luv?

Victoria's eyes flew open. He still appeared to be asleep. But beneath her palms, she felt his heart beat kick again. Stronger this time. And again. Her own breathing became ragged, then, as hope and astonishment rushed, one after another, through her system.

And then she felt the rise and fall of his chest beneath her hands. It was strong and steady.

"Victor...." She glanced down at her hands, transfixed with his broad chest and the sign of life it afford her.

When she looked back up again, it was to find Victor gazing steadily at her. He smiled, flashing straight white teeth.

She went to move her hands from his chest then, suddenly self-conscious.

But his movement was lightning fast, and he had her wrist in his grasp before she could pull away. Her breath caught in her throat at the contact that felt like both fire and ice, even through the material of his black leather gloves.

Slowly, he sat up, his gaze never leaving hers.

And then he leaned forward, his green eyes glittering with nothing short of triumph as he came close enough that his next words whispered across her lips.

"Got you."

Epilogue

Twenty-four hours later....

“Tell me I don’t have to go through with this.” Victoria shook her hands out and then clenched them into fists once more. And then shook them out again. It was plainly obvious that she was nervous as hell.

On the couch across the room from her, April Rose laughed softly and shook her head. She sighed. “Well, you’ve got your powers back. You could always turn him into a fireball.” Then she frowned and mulled that over a bit. “Actually, that wouldn’t work on him, would it. You would just end up giving the both of you some sort of steam bath.” *Victor Black in a steam bath*, April thought. *Now, that I would pay to see....*

Victoria let out a frustrated, terrified, anxious breath and then buried her face in her hands. “I can’t do this! He’s....” She took a shaky breath and then made a helpless sound. “Gods, he’s just too good looking! I just can’t be *near* that man without... I don’t know!” She threw her hands up in the air. “Without feeling like he’s *melting* me or something!” She turned from the tall windows that looked from the Red Tower over the Playing Field below and began pacing.

April sat back in the couch and watched her. She could only imagine what must be going through her friend’s mind at that point. Over the last few years, things between the Red and Gray leader had become pretty intense. Victor seemed to look at her in that way that every other woman on the Field would have *killed* to have him look at *them*. He took every opportunity afforded him to corner her, to proposition her, to seduce her in that dark manner that only someone of his incredible stature could have pulled off.

In a way, April was jealous.

In a way. In other ways, she was relieved. She truly didn't think she could have handled it, herself, if Victor Black had fallen for her instead of Victoria Red. Red was stronger. She could take it. And she could give as well as she got.

Now, April wasn't sure whether she was an impartial observer or not; after all, Victoria was her Team leader, and one of her closest friends. But she couldn't deny that Victoria looked radiant tonight. There seemed to be some light glowing from underneath her skin. It was like someone had lit a candle behind a jar of honey. And her golden eyes were as bright as they could be without outright glowing, the way they did during battle.

Her hair was long and loose and wavy; impossibly shiny. It smelled like soap and cleanliness and lavender. April could smell it from across the room and even *she* wanted to run her hands through it.

However much Victor Black wanted her, it was plainly clear that Victoria wasn't immune to those kinds of feelings, herself. She wouldn't look so good if she didn't feel something for Black.

April shook her head. "Victoria, you're going to make yourself sick worrying like this. Just what exactly do you think is going to happen?"

Victoria stopped and pinned her friend with a wild-eyed stare. "I don't know! That's just it, April – I have no idea!" She straightened and continued to gaze steadily at April. And then, suddenly, she was striding across the room to sit down beside her and grasp her hands firmly in her own.

"April, tell me what it's like with you and Ty."

April's eyes widened and she yanked her hand out of Victoria's. "What?!"

"Tell me what happens! I mean, all I know is –" she broke off mid-sentence and blushed furiously.

April stared at her and, in that revelatory moment, and realized that the reason Victoria appeared so innocent... was because she *was* innocent.

She blinked and her gaze trailed down Victoria's neck to the satin red gown she wore. It had spaghetti straps that were held together with tiny, delicate clasps. Two small flicks of the wrist, and the dress would cascade down Victoria's body and wind up in a scarlet puddle at her feet. And Victor didn't even need to use his hands. He had his powers going for him.

She won't be innocent for long, April thought, imagining how Victor Black would make very short work of that dress.

"What?" Victoria asked, her expression now worried. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because, boss, you look like candy in that dress," Ty said as he and Simon rounded the corner to enter the meeting room from the hall. "And there aint no man alive who doesn't have a sweet tooth for that kind of treat."

"The dress was Simon's idea!" Victoria straightened on the couch, looking down at the shining red material that moved so smoothly against her skin.

"And I stick by my decision," Simon said as he took a seat opposite the girls while Ty went to stand beside April.

Ty laughed and ran a hand over his smooth head. "Hell, I stand by it too, Roon."

With that, Victoria shot them each a dirty look and then stood to continue her pacing. "What time is it, April?"

* * * *

"Twenty after eight," Thor replied, less than a minute after the last time Victor had asked him. "If you like, I can make time go a little faster."

Victor shot him a look. “You’ve done that once already,” he smiled. “And don’t think I don’t appreciate it. But you may be doing harm elsewhere, don’t you think?”

Thor shrugged. “I’ll blame it on Loki.”

Thor watched as Victor Black turned once more to gaze through the tall windows that looked out over the Playing Field below. The Gray Tower afforded them a view of what looked like the entire world, from up here. It was nothing compared to the view one would get in Valhalla.

But it wasn’t bad.

Victor’s back was straight, his mood dark and quiet in that way that it normally got just before a fight. Focused and determined. A touch withdrawn.

“She’s an amazing woman, Victoria Red,” Thor ventured softly. In the massive clean-up that had taken place after the wall had come down, twenty or so hours earlier, Victoria Red had shared with her sister, in passing, that she wished to be called by the name she readily recognized, even if it wasn’t her birth right.

And so the other from inside the wall had followed, keeping their Game-given names. Everyone seemed to be okay with that.

Victor was quiet for a moment. Thor couldn’t see his expression as he seemed to think about Thor’s words.

But then, very softly, he said, “Yes. She is.”

Ah, Thor thought. That was felt – not said.

“You’ve fallen for her, then.”

And, again, there was a pause.

“Yes.”

Thor nodded to himself. This was good. This was very good.

When Simon Roon had figured out how to reverse the effect of the black boxes that had drained both Victor Black and Victoria Red, and nearly destroyed the gods altogether, Odin had rewarded the mortal with a promise that he would one day join the All Father in Valhalla – as an apprentice.

Loki wanted to bring Victoria Red to Valhalla when she died. And Ullr wanted to bring Victor. At this point, nearly every major champion that had fed the wall from inside the Field was earning their place amongst the gods.

It would make it so much easier on them all if Victor and Victoria were wed. Thor could just see the fights that would start in the hall over Victoria, in particular. She was a stunningly beautiful woman. He almost rolled his eyes at the thought. The warriors would kill each other a million times over for one chance at touching her.

However they would at least think twice about going near her if she were not only a goddess – but her *husband* was also a god.

“She’s all I’ve thought of since her arrival here, fifteen years ago, Thor. Every night, I’ve dreamt of her.”

Thor digested this. *Every night?*

That would be the work of the fates, for sure. These two were meant to be together; there was no denying it now.

“I’m...” Victor ran a fast hand through his thick black hair and then pressed his palms to the glass, his teeth clenched behind closed lips. Finally, he spoke again. “I need her. Fucking hell, Thor, I’m *obsessed* with her.” He shook his head, almost furiously. “One bloody night isn’t enough. What if I don’t want it to end. What if...”

He broke off. Thor waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, Thor nodded. He understood. “You’re afraid you won’t be able to control yourself. That you won’t be able to go easy on ‘er.”

Victor turned to face him and even though Thor was in his true form now – a seven-foot tall blonde haired man with muscles the size of transporter cubes, he was yet impressed with the image that Victor Black presented.

He looked like Ullr. A dark and brooding and incredibly handsome man; tall and broad and powerful.

Makes sense, Thor thought to himself. *I know who Black's mother slept with the night he was conceived....*

"I don't want to hurt her." Victor whispered. His stark green eyes pleaded with the god – his best friend. "But I don't want to let her go."

Thor studied the man's expression. It was hungry. Blatantly impatient.

That was understandable, too. It had been too long for him. Black had been denied what he wanted more than *any* man would be able to stand, and he wasn't just any man. He was part god. He had the *appetite* of a god to go with it. All he wanted was Victoria. Thor was well aware that, though Black had taken bedmates aplenty, no other woman had ever satisfied him. Not enough. Not the way she would.

It couldn't have been easy for him; especially knowing that Victoria Red was as attracted to him as he was to her.

Thor smiled. "Do you love her?" He finally asked.

Victor froze. He seemed taken aback, suddenly. He straightened and blinked. Comprehension dawned on him in a nearly visible manner.

His expression hardened into one of stark, steadfast resolve.

"Yes," he said. "Gods, I do," he fairly breathed.

“Then you won’t hurt ‘er, Black. An’ you won’t lose her. Besides,” Thor laughed then, an image of Victoria Red and her fucking *fire* floating through his mind. “The lass can damn well take care of herself.”

* * * *

It had been a long day. An *historical* day.

Once the Game Lord was defeated, Simon had gotten to work on the black boxes. He was the only one among them, at that point, who was really of any use. The Game Lord had drained Victoria of every ability but one. And healing Victor had finished that off. She had had nothing left.

She’d never felt so weak. So tired.

Victor was alive, thanks to her. And, with the way he’d grabbed her and proclaimed his triumph, he was quick to show Victoria that both his memory and his willpower were well intact. However, the box had drained him of his dark leader abilities, as well, and so it was up to Simon, the resident genius, to determine how to get them all back out again.

Victoria had wanted to bring Max back too.

Her healing ability was drained, but Dr. Cure was there, gathering with her MRU staff. Victoria begged Jeannine to do something.

However, unlike the draining force it had exerted upon both Black and Red – with Max, the black box had simply *destroyed* him. It had burned him from the inside out.

Dr. Cure told her that Max’s body looked as if it had been struck by lightning. And, in essence, that was what had happened. When Max attacked the Game Lord, Arthur had attacked back.

They’d played for keeps. And they’d both lost.

Once word of the Game Lord's death made it to each of the Towers, the Gamers of the Field came out of their respective quarters and gathered in the TGB. To the best of their abilities, Victoria and Victor explained to them what had transpired.

It went better than Victoria thought it was going to. Of course, it didn't hurt that the gods were there to back them up. Seeing Thor in all of his gigantic blonde glory was enough to make many Gamers instant believers.

And when Odin showed up as well, pretty much all of the remaining skepticism flew out the window.

The Arthurs had, for the most part, pitched in to help take down the wall. To them, it didn't matter who was in charge, as long as they were allowed to tinker with the technology.

And they were very good at what they did. So, it took all of two hours and seventeen minutes for the wall to come down. So to speak. It didn't actually *go* anywhere. It just became inoperative.

As a result....

Every Gamer on the Field began to feel a little strange.

Older. Wiser. No one looked any different on the outside. But, where they had, in a way, taken their lives for granted only moments before, they were suddenly struck with a kind of – *knowledge*. They were presented, in that moment, with a realization of their impermanence.

No one met on the battle Field that day. Instead, the kitchens were emptied of ice cream and even the training rooms were turned into game rooms, dance halls, and makeshift bars.

Gamers were partying. As if there were no tomorrow. And, maybe to them, there *wasn't* a tomorrow. At least – not as many tomorrows as they'd once believed.

As far as the humans outside of the wall were concerned, the moment the Game Lord was dead, Jeannine Cure and her staff mobilized and set out to try to figure out how to reverse the

rapid aging process that had debilitated the outside sectors. It didn't take long for them to confirm that once the wall was down, the population would indeed begin to age at a slower rate.

And so it went. In the course of twenty-four hours, the world was changed.

Victoria was a very young woman. She hadn't been around when the wall had gone up three thousand years ago. Perhaps the switch that had taken place on that day long ago had occurred just as quickly as it had today.

It was strange to think how easily things could change.

And it was just as strange to think that, even when everything else in the universe had been altered or transformed, there were some things that remained stubbornly the same.

Like lust.

Victoria was alone now in her private quarters. She was standing on the balcony that jutted out over the space of fifty stories. The night breeze sent her long golden hair sailing and painted her red gown to the slim, graceful lines of her body.

It was coming up on nine o'clock, and any moment now, Victor Black would be stepping through the transporter doors that opened up into the living room behind her.

She gazed out over the vast expanse of Field and wall and sectors that made up her world and, as she had done many times before, she wished that she could fly. The ability to fly had long been rumored as one of the powers a light leader might wield. Yet, she had never earned it. And she knew of no one else who had, either.

But if she could fly....

She would step off of the balcony and let the wind carry her over the lights, the noises, the villages and the sea. She could escape then. And she wanted to escape; *oh*, how she wanted to run away. *Fly* away.

Because there were two evils in the world. One was never getting what you wanted.

And the other was getting it, after all.

There was no denying that she wanted Victor Black. But the man terrified her. He was six and a half feet of black-clad muscle that seemed to positively tower over her. He was a maelstrom of power encased in a hard body. And then there were those lips of his that smiled at her with just a hint of cruelty. And that hair that looked like raven's wings and made her want to run her hands through it – and then quickly pull away.

And those eyes....

Those stark green eyes that took everything in. *Everything*. He missed nothing. He was smart, Victor Black. How could she not fear him? Never trust a perceptive, intellectual man. Especially one that looked like a god.

“Fly away,” she whispered to the wind.

She closed her eyes, imagining what it would feel like to lift off of the marble of the balcony below her, how cold the air would feel if it were carrying her five hundred feet above the ground, and how bright the world would seem if she were to open her eyes on it from the height of the heavens.

As she stood there with her eyes closed, the wind picked up around her and Victoria smiled. It helped feed her the imagery in her head. She lifted her arms at her sides and relished in the feel of the hard, chilled air wrapping around her as if it were pulling her into an embrace.

And then she opened her eyes and looked down.

Her eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. And then it broke free and she screamed.

* * * *

Victor's head snapped up. Had he heard something?

Out of habit, he looked around the transporter cube. He was alone, of course. But could have sworn that he'd heard someone scream.

As his heartbeat sped up, he closed his eyes and reached out with his mind.

There.

They were a mass of frantic thoughts, jumbled and senseless. But he knew whose they were, all the same; the signature was hot and sensuous, even as its owner was.

Victoria.... The transporter cube came to a stop and he hurriedly punched the doors open. Even as he strode out into the living room of her private quarters, he could sense that she was no longer there.

He could smell the shampoo she had used, but she was gone. The windows to the balcony were open. He moved toward them and, with his heart in his throat and his brow breaking out in a sweat, he stepped out onto the platform.

And looked down.

There was no way in hell he would be able to see her body if she was down there, in that mess of light and dark. And it didn't matter, anyway – because he could still hear her thoughts. She was still alive.

But where?

He looked up as a stream of relatively clear words echoed in his mind.

...fly...my god...believe I'm doing it...to escape...alone.

Victor straightened. His green eyes began to glow, even as he lowered his head and peered at the darkness ahead of him through a glare so enraged, so livid, the hand rail of the balcony began to ice over.

No, he thought. No. She would *not* run from him. She wouldn't dare.

We had a deal.

* * * *

Victoria's heart hammered so painfully, she was certain she was going to have a heart attack. It would get tired and stop any minute now.

If it didn't, it was sure to break through her rib cage and fly away, itself.

The world spun below her. It blurred behind the tears that had built in her wind-blown eyes. And yet, despite the terror of her looming mortality, Victoria could not deny that she was happy.

I can fly, she thought, her smile ear to ear even as tears streamed down her cheeks. *I'm flying! I'm really flying!!!*

A cloud floated through her legs – and she through it. Moisture drenched her red gown and she didn't care. She felt no cold. She shivered, numb from her fingertips to her toes, and she was incapable of paying it any attention. This was a dream come true.

She'd left the earth behind.

My god, she thought. *My god, I'm flying.... I can't believe I'm doing it!*

You always had it in you, Rose, her sister told her.

Victoria laughed out loud, the sound caught up by the night and whipped away from her. She'd always wanted this. Had always yearned for this one ability – above the others.

I did it. I managed to escape the ground, the world, the reality down there.

Up here, there was only her. Nothing could get her up here.

She was alone. *I'm alone*, she thought. *Alone with Andromeda, with Mom and Dad, with the gods that created me.*

Rain dampened her hair and coated her flesh. The night grew long. The altitude was exciting, but unforgiving; the chill in the air hardened her nipples beneath the red dress and forced her muscles to tighten. It was arduous.

It might have been forever, or maybe only the course of an hour. But eventually, Victoria grew weary and knew she had to come back down again.

Up ahead, a plateau painted itself purple in the moonlight.

Victoria imagined herself landing, easily, softly, at the center of the clearing.

She landed just as she wanted. Her thigh-high red boots touched down with the gentlest of impacts. But in the solitude that presented itself, Victoria realized several things at once.

She was cold and growing colder.

And she was lost.

* * * *

“I’ve got her.” Victor’s head snapped up. He looked at the screen over the head of the Arthur seated in front of him.

“Where is that?” He asked, his tone urgent but subdued. He refused to lose his temper here, amidst these people. He was saving that for Victoria.

“About sixteen miles Northwest, still inside the wall.”

Victor stood and stared at the blinking light on the screen. He had never given Victoria the pill that would have deactivated her tracking device. And he was eternally grateful for that now.

“I want a transporter cube set to that location,” he told Arthur Twelve. “Is it possible?”

Arthur Twelve thought it over for a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he stared, unseeing, at the screen. Then he nodded. “Yeah, but it’ll take me about an hour or so. Maybe a little longer.”

Victor took a deep breath, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. “Get to work.”

* * * *

Victoria turned slowly in place and gazed into the flames of the campfires she had created. They were all around her, surrounding her in a circle of light. They kept her warm. For the most

part. There was still the chill that came with knowing she was completely lost. Her compass, and even her locket, were both back in her quarters in the Red Tower.

She tried to call out with her mind. But there was no answer.

She was too far away from anyone.

For some strange reason, even her sister was silent.

The fires might lead someone to me, she thought, almost helplessly. And then she sat down in the center of the circle – and waited.

* * * *

Victor stepped out of the transporter cube and into a forest. Up ahead, through the spaces in the trees, fires burned.

A million thoughts were chasing each other through his head at that moment. His anger simmered, both unresolved and barely tamed. His need for her rode him hard, a hunger un-sated that had driven him for years and begged for an end so near he could almost touch it.

But stronger than either of these was the searing fear he'd felt, since he'd first stepped out onto that balcony, that she might be hurt.

Injured, stolen, sick – anything.

He needed to know that she was all right.

And then he would find out why she ran from him. *Why?* He knew she desired him; he'd read those thoughts there. He'd seen the look in the depths of those golden orbs. He was no fool.

What was she afraid of?

He would make her tell him. He would make her understand that he meant her no harm. That he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. And he would make sure, by Thor, that she never ran away again.

Up ahead, the campfires crackled, beckoning him forward. He stepped out onto the plateau of the forested mountain and saw here there, asleep, at the center of her circle of fire.

By the gods....

She took his breath away. Literally, took his breath away.

He stood there, unable to breathe, and gazed down at the woman he loved. Her golden hair fanned out in long, silken waves around her body. Her chest rose and fell in slow, even breaths. And that dress.... *All Father, give me strength!* He thought, helplessly, as his green eyes caressed the length of her.

The gown was damp and clung to her body like a second skin. It was a deep, scarlet red with a slit that exposed the top of her thigh-high boot, and the creamy taut flesh above it. Her shoulders were bared by spaghetti straps that had fallen, most likely, long ago. And her firm, perfect breasts were outlined so enticingly, Victor physically ached with the need to expose them. Touch them.

Taste them.

Slowly, steadily, Victor paced into the clearing, his boots softly crunching nature's gravel beneath him.

Victoria stirred, but didn't waken.

When he reached her side, he lowered himself to one knee, his eyes memorizing the lines of her face. And then he took a deep breath and let it out through his nose.

"Victoria."

* * * *

Victoria's eyelids fluttered open. Everything was a blur of light and shadow, moving in orange and red and black streaks. She blinked hard.

And made out the shape of a black boot.

Confusion was her first reaction. *Where am I? What is this?*

And then her memories came flooding back to her. The Game. Victor winning. The dress.
The balcony.

The flight.

With a start, she sat up and found herself face to face with the very man she both wanted to see least of all – and more than anything.

“Luv.” He greeted, calmly. Too calmly.

Her heart raced. She wondered if he could hear it, because she certainly could. It drummed in her ears like the ceremonial music of some impending sacrifice.

“Victor,” she breathed.

He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. *Those* were cold. Green and shut off and all but frozen. She shivered.

Victor looked down at her bare shoulders and seemed to snap out of something.

Immediately, he was taking off his black leather jacket and draping it over her slim form.

She sat there, at first, unsure of what to do. Why was he being so calm? Why wasn’t he yelling at her for breaking their arrangement? No, she hadn’t *meant* to, but he wouldn’t know that. He wouldn’t know that she hadn’t run away on purpose. So, why was he trying to keep her warm? Why was he being so kind--

“Put it on, Victoria.”

Victoria blinked at the gentle but reprimanding tone of his deep, sexy voice. She slowly straightened and slipped her slim arms into the sleeves of the heavy garment. It was ridiculously large on her, but she was instantly grateful for its warmth.

Victor’s long-sleeved black shirt clung to the rather large and defined muscles in his arms, outlining them to perfection. Victoria couldn’t help but let her eyes skirt over his upper body as

she finished straightening his jacket over her, and she only realized what she was doing when he offered her his hand, breaking her concentration.

She looked down and swallowed.

Here it comes, she thought. I've gone back on my word. It's going to be a fight now. And I'm alone with him, out here in the middle of nowhere and I'm going to lose.

Slowly, tentatively, she took his offered hand. Victor's fingers closed over hers, cool and dry, and he stood, helping her to her feet as he did so.

"So you can fly now, can you?" he asked softly. It was almost a whisper.

Victoria raised her head and gazed up at him uncertainly. She couldn't quite read the expression on his handsome face. The light of the campfires cast shadows across his features, lending him an air of mystery that did nothing to settle her nerves.

"Yes," she told him. "Apparently so." In that moment, she decided that she wasn't going to apologize. It wasn't her fault that her power had chosen just that night to finally reveal itself. She was happy to have it.

And there was a part of her – a stubborn, perhaps masochistic part of her – that wanted to defy him. To fight him.

Even if just a little.

Victor smiled, then, and this time it did reach his eyes. He shook his head. "Tsk, ts, sweet Victoria. You're already in enough trouble, don't you think?" He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them. He had yet to let go of her hand.

With his other, he gently brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheekbone.

She closed her eyes and shivered. She couldn't help it. The touch was nearly electric; the tension was coiling hot and low in her belly and her mind was growing blank.

All she could see were Victor's eyes. All she could smell was the gel he used in his shower, the light scent of cologne he must have put on a few hours ago....

All she could hear was that deep, accented voice as he lowered his lips to her ear.

"You have no need to fear me, Victoria."

She almost moaned when he gently placed his lips against her ear lobe, kissing it tenderly.

He was the ice god.

And yet, she wanted to melt into him.

It made no sense. It was wonderful and terrifying and thrilling and she was fairly sure that her undergarments were damp now.

But it made no sense.

He'd had to track her down. It couldn't have been easy. Why wasn't he mad at her?

He laughed then, low and soft, the sound of it caressing her neck and sending shivers down her long, lean body.

"You forget, luv," he told her, as his hand found one of the clasps on the straps of her dress.

"I can read your mind." He moved slightly and the clasp came undone. She felt it drop beneath his jacket over her shoulders, sliding like scarlet rain down her skin to expose her left breast.

She gasped as the night air teased at her sensitive flesh. She blushed beneath the weight of what was happening. Her legs felt weak.

This isn't real, she thought, frantically. She was dizzy and on fire. Caught up in everything that was Victor Black.

But when his hand cupped the exposed breast and his thumb inched closer to the bud at its center, she knew damned well that it was, in fact, real. This was no dream. Her dreams had never felt like this.

When the second clasp on her gown broke away and the dress effortlessly cascaded down her body to pool at her feet, Victoria's legs very nearly gave out.

Victor held her up easily, one strong arm circling her tiny waist, the other slipping up underneath the jacket she wore. She didn't need it now, she knew. She was burning up, in every possible way. And it looked as if Victor knew it, too, for he slid his jacket off of her shoulders without pretense, at last baring her body to his stark green eyes.

Gods! Her mind screamed. I can't do this!

"Shhh, luv." He curled a finger beneath her chin and forced her to look at him. "Trust me." She was trapped there, in that penetrating gaze, as his mind entered hers. With the friendly invasion came an infusion of calm that neared weakness. It was like the drug the Game Lord had given her. She felt slightly more steady when he lowered his mouth to hers and claimed her lips in another kiss.

It was the second kiss Victor Black had ever given her; the second kiss she had ever had in her entire life.

It instantly drained her of all resistance. She opened to him and could not stop the moan that sounded against his lips. As if in answer, his fingers gently encircled her throat, his thumb brushing the pulse that beat there.

A night breeze, half cold and half warmed by the smoke of her campfires, caressed the wetness that had gathered between her legs. The sensation whipped at her consciousness, making her yearn for something she didn't understand. She groaned and her stomach clenched.

Whatever it was, she needed it fiercely.

She was trembling now, as Victor lowered them both to the ground. He never allowed her to break the kiss, he tasted her, explored her, drank her in as if he were a man in the desert, and she, his single source of life.

With the power of his mind, he laid her dress and his jacket out flat on the ground just before his strong arms laid her down on top of them.

Victoria sensed all of this, knew what he was doing, even as she knew nothing at all. She was an instrument in his hands and could only *feel* and *respond* as he expertly played her body and soul.

Slowly, she reclined before him, his strong arm at her back forcing her to arch against him as he followed her down. And then he broke the kiss, gradually pulling away enough that he could once more gaze down at her.

Victoria recognized the absolute, raw hunger there, in the emerald green slashes beneath his half-closed lids, and she knew she was done for. There was no turning back now.

* * * *

Forgive me, he thought, to no one and to nature, itself, as he gazed down at the most stunning creature the gods had ever created. Because he knew that he was about to take it as his own. To ravage and use and claim.

And nothing on earth would have been able to stop him.

Victoria's golden eyes were glowing. It must have been his kiss that had lit the fire behind them. Her golden skin was covered in a thin sheen of moisture and shimmered beneath his scrutiny.

He sat back and took her in.

She shivered as his eyes skated over her beautiful face, down her neck, across her perfect breasts and down... down....

Her long legs were bent at the knees – and very slightly parted.

He was shaking now as his hands found the creamy expanse of her inner thighs. He curled his fingers under her knees and moved to kneel between them, parting them further.

She resisted, just a little, suddenly self conscious.

And Victor looked up again, caught her gaze, and held it. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to shove her legs apart, rip his pants open, and thrust into her then and there. He could see her wetness glistening, inviting him to her innermost parts. He could hear her breathing, ragged and wanton. He could read her thoughts, scattered and heated to a maddening degree.

But she was innocent.

And so, he waited.

For her – he waited.

Trust me, Victoria. I won't harm you. He sent the words into her mind, lacing them with a sense of calm, and then waited.

But his body was as hard as rock. Sweat had broken out along his brow and every muscle he possessed was flexed taut with the effort it took to hold himself back. Just when he didn't think he could stay himself any longer, she relaxed beneath him, allowing him to move her legs.

She opened to him and when he bent over her and claimed one of her nipples with his mouth, she cried out, surprised and shaking, arching her back against him of her own volition.

He instantly wrapped his strong arm around her waist once more, holding her to him as he licked and then sucked – and then bit down – and she cried out once more.

Her hands were suddenly in his hair, combing through his thick locks and the sensation was so personal, so sweet and innocent and pure, Victor nearly lost his mind. He looked up at her from where he was, bent over her supple, perfect body, and stamped the image of her – red parted lips, half-closed lids, and golden hair wild and free – on his mind for all eternity.

No longer content to simply hold her, Victor cupped her right breast with his free hand, and let go of her waist to trail his other hand down over the sharp swell of her hip bone to her inner

thigh. When his fingers lightly brushed her moist opening and she inhaled sharply beneath him, he gritted his teeth, the fire within him well and truly stoked.

Instantly, she was squirming, her expression at once equal parts uncertainty and white hot lust. He didn't disappoint. As gently as he could, as slowly as he was able, given the desire coursing through him, he parted her lips and pressed inward.

"Victor!" Victoria writhed and then arched hard against him, attempting to get away from a sensation that was most assuredly too much for her. It was new and it was sharp and he imagined it was mind blowing.

But he wouldn't let up. A second finger joined the first and Victoria's body bucked beneath him. As she inhaled to cry out again, Victor covered her mouth with his, silencing the sound of his name on her lips.

And then he could take no more. Finally, he withdrew his fingers and tore open the buttons on the front of his pants, releasing himself at last.

As he moved into position, Victor's free hand once more found her slender throat and encircled it. He broke the kiss and held himself above her, his breathing as ragged as her own.

"Victoria, listen to me," he hissed across her lips, feeling her sweet breath caress his as she took in quick little breaths of desperate pleasure.

She looked at him, but her gaze was unfocused with lust.

This was too important. He needed her to understand what was about to happen. So, he tried again, placing the slightest amount of pressure on the grip he held around her neck.

It helped a little.

She arched against him, the sensation heightening her bewildered sense of pleasure. But she was also instinctively aware of the inherent danger of her position, and her eyes found his and locked on.

“Victoria, I need you to trust me completely, luv.” He kissed her as gently as he could, and then went on. “This will hurt – only for a moment. It’s only natural, understand?” He breathed the words across her mouth and she nodded.

He combed her thoughts. She was lost in his touch, befuddled by the sensations he was awakening within her. Whether she fully understood or not, it couldn’t be helped. This was it.

Victor’s arm was a steel band at her back, holding her in place. His gaze bored into hers; he didn’t hesitate to use a touch of his dark leader power to hold her fast. And when she felt him there, at the moist opening she so deliciously bared to him, she shuddered and froze beneath him.

Steadily and relentlessly, he guided himself in.

Victoria’s breath quickened to a near frantic degree. Finally, she managed to pull her gaze from his and her eyes shut tight. She moaned low and long as he sank deeper and deeper inside of her. Her hands flew to his still-clothed chest, her nails digging deep, as if searching for purchase.

He ignored the pain; he barely noticed it. His world consisted, in that moment, of nothing but pleasure. Victoria surrounded him in every possible manner. He could smell her, hear her, feel her, taste her. His sense of pleasure was so heightened, he honestly felt he might die.

She was so, so tight. So incredibly hot. She was Loki’s champion, borne of fire, and it felt as if there was one lit around him in that moment, licking at him, clenching him... he wanted to spend then and there.

But he refused to finish this without giving Victoria even the tiniest taste of the bliss that she so easily gave to him.

He had been alive a very, very long time. Victor Black had taken many women to his bed. And over the years, he had learned a thing or two.

So, when his fingers found that small, hard nub, so swollen with desire at her core, he knew what to do with it.

As he worked, he once more entered Victoria's mind. When he did, it was as if he had stepped out of his world and into an inferno. A whirlwind of desire swirled and eddied around him.

...More... he heard her mind whisper.

...Gods...take me....

She was a vessel of need, of hunger, and all she wanted in that moment was him.

...Victor, please....

She needed to ask only once. With the sexual knowledge of centuries, Victor pushed her, taking her as he knew she wanted to be taken. She was so responsive, so innocent in her need, so trusting in the way she opened up to him, it was nothing short of torture to force himself to hold out long enough for her to climax.

As he moved against her, thrusting harder and deeper, claiming her with less mercy and more desperation, his teeth marked her breasts and his hands found those most sensitive parts of her body and wreaked havoc on them.

When she began to come, he sensed it in her thoughts. He felt her tighten around him, heard the change in her breathing.

And he could hold back no longer.

She screamed when he emptied himself inside of her. He joined her, his back arching, his green eyes glowing as he roared into the heavens.

She clenched and unclenched, milking him for all he was worth and his orgasm seemed to go on forever.

Forever....

He could have died just then and not cared.

When, at last, he felt the final remnants of his climax ebb away, he relaxed and gazed down at the goddess in his arms. Her breathing was ragged, yet, and a sheen of sweat had coated her body, making her shine like some supernatural being in the moonlight.

Beautiful. Gods, she's so beautiful.

Thank you, she said, speaking the words almost effortlessly into his mind. He blinked and she smiled. *Makes me want to do it again*, she continued.

Another Game? She ventured, then, and her expression became impish.

Victor's eyes flashed dangerously. He growled and, in the space of a millisecond, he had both of her wrists pinned to the ground above her head.

You won't get far, luv. He promised, his perfect white teeth flashing in a predatory grin.

Promises, promises, she countered.

Victor Black stared down at the woman he would damn well make his wife.

Victoria Red gazed back at him. Every bit his equal. Every bit worth the words he was about to say.

"I love you, Victoria."

Victoria's smile broadened. "I just bet you do," she replied – and then squealed as Victor bent over her and bit down on her nipple once again.

Her squeal became a moan....

And the campfires burned on.