



A STEAMY HAREM NOVEL

HIS RULE

IAN SNOW

His Rule
A Steamy Harem Novel

Ian Snow

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In other words, come on. Don't be a dick.

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Chained Joy

This novel contains: MF, MFF, cheating, anal, gangbang, spanking, rough (consensual) sex, and a take on the gangster/billionaire archetype. The action scenes contain some violence that might not be for all readers, particularly if you're used to my sweeter romances.

When you need help, when you are at your most desperate, he's the man they tell you to come see. Whatever the favor is, so long as it doesn't hurt his kingdom, he'll give it to you. Money. Power. Fame. But help comes with one rule - he owns you. Heart, mind, and soul, whatever he wants from you, it's his. Break that rule and you'll be ground into the asphalt of Vineport, broken, humiliated, and worst of all, forgotten.

You are nothing to him. He is your everything.

* * *

Spencer watched the party from the bar. More than a few people knew him well enough to steer clear, leaving just the occasional tipsy middle-aged woman approaching him from time to time, hoping to pick up on what they perceived to be another donor, and one without a date. These he shut down quickly and quietly. He had eyes for only one woman that night.

Joy Crowley stood arm-in-arm with her husband Michael at the head of the wide office. Sheathed in a sea-green strapless dress, the former actress turned activist and philanthropist drew every eye in the room, even more so than her husband, the man of the hour. She cut a stunning figure, her tits pushed high and proud, her lean figure sweeping down to hips that begged to be clutched while she rode a cock. It was the million-dollar face that held Spencer's interest. She was painted to the nines, beautiful, dark, riding a fine edge between slutty and glamorous. That was by Spencer's request. Even her husband seemed in awe of his wife's looks that evening.

All the desks and chairs had been shoved aside for the party, the last of the big fundraisers before the election. Michael Crowley's campaign scratched at the bottom of the coffers for even this paltry attempt at maintaining good cheer. They couldn't afford a proper venue so they were holding it at the campaign headquarters, pretending that it was as much a

thank you for the volunteers and staff as it was a desperate play to attract a last-minute shark or two.

The place reeked of sweat and mixed perfumes and colognes. Spencer could pick out the staff and volunteers from the donors by the rumpled nature of their suits and dresses. This was not a crowd given much time to rest. The competition was pulling away in the numbers thanks to relentless ad campaigns driven by donors who craved the status quo of the current mayor. Michael Crowley was an outsider, though far from the good ol' grassroots common man persona he put on for the public, that beloved trick of the underfunded.

Outside of his obligation to Joy, Spencer had no stake in the game. The mayor was a figurehead position. The real power was in the city council, advisory boards, and commissions, and he owned all of those. But Joy and Michael Crowley believed in the power that would come from him becoming the city's masthead, and that was enough to push Joy into Spencer's arms.

He finished off his Manhattan – easy on the vermouth, heavy on the bourbon, and fuck your cherries – and started for the stairwell to Michael Crowley's upstairs office. The glass-walled room was darkened by blinds and off-limits to the partygoers. Two men in drab suits stood at either side of the stairwell. They gave Spencer the death stare as he approached.

"No one's allowed up," one of them said.

Spencer turned away from the guards. Joy's blistering brown eyes latched onto him. He didn't wave, didn't nod, didn't even acknowledge her aside from that look. She knew the bill was due.

Joy pulled apart from her husband and leaned in to whisper a few things to another guy in a suit, the head of Michael's security. He tapped a headset hooked onto his ear, spoke, and a moment later, one of the guards at the stairwell said grudgingly, "All right, you're good."

Spencer headed upstairs, digging out a key to Michael's office. He let himself in. The throne room was spacious, woodsy around the base of the windows, and cozier than he expected out of a temp office. The desk was covered in neat piles of paperwork, the usual office detritus, and a laptop. He set everything to the side, keeping it neat. Then he headed to the windows, cracking the blinds just far enough that he could see down into the party.

"How does this work?" Joy asked from the door.

Spencer turned. She was alone, and walked to him with exaggerated purpose. Her eyes were furious and dark, and he couldn't wait to see them as he stuck his cock deep in her throat. So he didn't. Spencer unzipped, and Joy glanced down.

"When you blow me, I'll make a call and it will be taken care of."

"And then we're done."

"No," he said patiently. "We're never done. That's what you signed up for. If I decide to call you at one in the morning to come and fuck you in your own bed, you'll open the door for me with a smile. If I decide to take your ass on the subway, you'll be lubed up and ready for me. Speaking of..."

"It's in there," she muttered, shifting subconsciously.

"Good girl."

"I am not your girl. I'm no one's girl."

"Yes, you are, if you really want this done. I did not come to you. You came to me. I'm not going to make you if you say no. I'm not a monster. You can walk away and this won't happen. I won't lift a finger against you or your husband because I won't have to. His campaign will crash and burn without my help. But you agreed to my terms," Spencer said, heat finally entering his voice. "You, Joy, are whatever the fuck I decide you are. You are mine after you say yes. My good girl. My slut. My cock-gobbling come bucket. Your pussy, your ass, and your mouth are the only things you have to offer that interest me. Do you understand me? You are not my equal. Get that thought out of your head. If you say yes, you exist now for my pleasure until I release you from your contract." He gestured at the window and the smiling man at the podium below. "So do you want it done, or not?"

Joy held his gaze, furious, but finally she looked down at her husband. "Yes," she whispered.

"Then get down on your knees and prove it to me."

She glared at Spencer, but knelt. His pants came down to his knees, and she did the rest of the work for him, tugging at his silk boxers. Her eyes burned into his as she gripped his length, not looking at the size of him first. Startled, she glanced down, then back up, her throat working. Then, without a word, Joy Crowley, Spencer's newest painted slut, squeezed his dick hard enough to draw a grunt from him and sucked his tip into her warm wet mouth.

Neither of them held a thing back. This was solely about Spencer's pleasure. They both wanted him to get off as fast as possible. With one hand, he gripped the back of Joy's head, liking the crispness of the product in her short-cropped black hair. He guided her all way down to his root, hardening in her luscious mouth. As she bathed the base of his cock with her tongue, he pulled his cell phone from one of his suit jacket's interior pockets. Joy pulled off him with a slurp and bobbed her head right back down as he dialed a coded contact named on the phone simply as K.

The other man picked up. He said nothing, only sighed. Spencer said simply, "Do it now."

"You son of a bitch," the other man said.

Spencer hung up. There was no question the other man would obey. If the mayor didn't, the tapes would be released, and one of Spencer's people would be waiting in his home to help guide Michael Crowley's competition into a drug-induced sleep he'd never wake up from. Why, he'd be so heart-broken and shocked about his highly illegal sex tapes, it seemed he just gave up on life itself.

It didn't come to that. It rarely ever did. But among the many lessons Spencer's father taught him was to never deliver an empty threat. If the man didn't come through, Spencer would see him dead and humiliated. In politics, he wasn't sure which was worse.

Spencer put the phone away. "It's done," he said.

Joy stared up at him, drew a deep, shaky breath through her nose, and slammed down on his cock. "Urk!" she gasped around every inch of him. He withdrew and shoved his cock right back home, fucking her face with hard, short thrusts. He wanted to come before the news hit. Then he could watch the show below as he fingerfucked Joy and made her come. It was one thing to dominate her and make her see how she would be treated the rest of however long he wanted her. It was another to show her the pleasure of staying by his side. That was a lesson he learned all on his own. There was a difference between bending people and breaking them, and Spencer was well versed in both. Break Joy, and she might get ideas about her loyalty to her husband and ways she could get out of her contract, maybe violently. Bend her, and she was his to control.

Once she found out how good he was, he wagered Joy would last three months before a divorce, and three months and one day before she was begging to be his top slut in the Tower.

One of her dress's cups spilled down across her slim pink nipple as she deepthroated him time and time again. He would come all over those tits many times, he promised himself, but this first load was for her face. She was his to mark now. But what did surprise him was the hand falling away from his cock and sliding into a slit along her thigh. She stroked her sex as she sucked him, and Spencer chuckled darkly. He overestimated her loyalty.

"You're getting off on this. Being used."

She breathed harder, glaring up at him as he hilted his cock in her mouth over and over.

"Do you know what I'm going to do next? I'm going to pull out of you and come across your face. You're not to touch a drop of it. I want you to keep it there while we watch what's about to happen."

"Mmmmmf," she moaned around him.

"When I'm ready again, I'm going to fuck you. And then I'm going to take your ass, Joy. Have you ever let another man do that to you?"

Her breaths through her nose were hard, jagged. She shook her head slightly, as much as she could, and he barely needed to do the work now. She sucked him down, holding him deep, as frantic with her mouth as she was her fingers.

"I'm going to come, Joy. Tell me how much you want it."

She pulled off him with a gasp. "I want it," she moaned. "You fucking bastard, come on my face."

Spencer gripped his cock and jacked it hard. She closed her eyes and he grunted as he started to come. Streaks shot across her forehead, her chin, her cheeks. Some of it landed across her ruby-red lips and she couldn't help a flick of her tongue, swallowing him down. He grabbed her under a shoulder and pulled her to her feet. They hurried to one of the windows and he bent her over a table so she could watch below. Her fingers slipped back underneath her dress and he lifted it from the back, taking in the sight of her flimsy black panties over her butt plug. He gripped the panties and ripped them away so he could take over the finger fucking.

As she strummed her clit and he shoved three rough fingers into Joy's messy, wet cunt, Michael's chief of staff received a phone call down on the ground level below. He stepped away from the podium. Like a wave, almost all the press in attendance pulled their phones too. A sea of calls had come in, the news hitting them all at once.

"Michael," Joy whimpered, bucking back against Spencer's hand.

“He’s not the name you want to say, is it?” Spencer asked.

“N-no.”

“What is?”

“Sp-Spencer.” She shivered. “Harder.”

The chief-of-staff looked over at Michael Crowley, eyes bulging. He pumped his fist in midair and the press started buzzing. As Michael listened to the chief-of-staff, Spencer pulled the butt plug from his wife and tossed it onto the table beside her. He teased her asshole with his thumb as he fingered her harder and harder. She thrust back at him, ass high in the air. The room filled with the scent of their sex, and Spencer wasn’t even close to being done.

Michael said into the mic, “Where’s Joy? She should be here for this.” He sounded stunned. Bubbling with excitement. But Joy was, at that moment, riding her first orgasm of the night, Spencer’s free hand across her mouth as she quivered on his fingers.

“Is it true?” someone from the press shouted.

“Apparently so!” Michael said, unbelieving. “Ladies and gentlemen, we just heard that Mayor Dolan has announced...” He paused and shook his head as Spencer dropped to his knees behind Joy and tongued her slick, quivering pussy. “Mayor Dolan has announced health problems are going to cause him to drop out of the election.”

A roar of disbelief and cheers, and Joy arched her back, her eyes wide as Spencer slipped his fingers back into her pussy, pumping her hard as he ate her out. Tears rolled down her come-streaked face, not from her betrayal, but the pleasure.

“Now, let’s emphasize here our thoughts first and foremost are with Bentley and his family, and whatever the circumstances are-”

“Oh God oh God oh God,” Joy whimpered, her eyes squeezing shut.

“-we wish him a full, healthy recovery and nothing but the best.”

One of Joy’s feet came up and stamped down, snapping the heel. She nearly fell sideways with another hard orgasm, her head dipping. Spencer pulled back and stood up, grabbing her again and guiding her to Michael’s desk. He turned her around and gripped the dress by the top of the slit, yanking it up so hard it tore. Joy didn’t notice. She grabbed at Spencer’s hardening cock again, frantic to get it in her cunt. He pushed her back against the desk and spread her thighs wide before he plunged into her folds.

“Fuck!” she yelped as he sheathed himself to the balls. Joy leaned back, knees rising. Spencer leaned down and sucked her exposed tit into his mouth, biting at the nipple hard enough to leave indentations of his teeth. Then he slid upwards, biting her shoulder too, marking her where anyone could and would see. He eased back and slammed into her pussy.

“F-f-fuuuck!”

“You’re mine now, Joy,” he snarled against her neck. He pumped his cock in and out of her, hard, fast thrusts that would have made the desk hammer on the floor if it hadn’t been thickly carpeted.

Over the speaker, they heard, “Really, folks, I can’t thank you enough for your support and your dedication to our efforts. When Joy and I set out on this journey-”

“I’m sorry, Michael, I’m sorry,” Joy whimpered, her pussy squelching every time Spencer fucked deep into her.

“-this certainly wasn’t the way we would want to win, and of course, it’s not over until Election Day, but still, this is... it’s overwhelming. It’s amazing. I promise you this. We will fight to bring the level of dignity and honor you deserve-”

Spencer grinned and rammed his cock deep one more time. Joy looked up at him, panting out, “What? Keep fucking me.”

“I will.” He jerked out of her and stood back. “Turn over. It’s time for me to take your ass.”

She tried to glare. It was the last real act of Joy Crowley’s defiance to Spencer. But he owned her the moment he knew she wanted to be defiled. She pushed herself up and turned around, ass thrust out again as Spencer dug in his pants for a slim bottle. He came up with it and she murmured, “I could say no.”

“Then do it,” Spencer said, coating two fingers. “I won’t take you against your will. But say no and our deal ends.” He drizzled more lube around Joy’s most forbidden, untouched spot. “You and I both know what I have on your husband. You can have your ounce of power and be one of my sluts. Or you can say no, your husband goes to prison, and you live with the humiliation. And worse of all...” He guided his cock to her asshole, and she stiffened, her breaths coming hard and sharp through her nose. “You will never be fucked by me again.”

Michael, again through the speaker. “I’ll be right back. Thank you all, and I’m so proud and ecstatic to be your next mayor!”

Cheers erupted. Spencer pressed against Joy's bud, and leaned down to whisper, "What's it going to be, Joy? He'll be on his way soon. Do I fuck your ass?"

Her shoulders rose and fell. She looked behind her, the rage no longer there. Instead, from her smeared red lips fell one word. "Yes."

Spencer sank into her. She was tight, but like he told her to do, she'd been using toys all that week to prepare for this. Inch by inch he sank into her untouched ass, admiring the way his cock disappeared between those million-dollar-a-movie cheeks. He reached underneath her with the hand that hadn't been inside her, and toyed with her clit, strumming it as hard and fast as he saw her do. Joy went wild. She gave a short, hard thrust back, taking him one last half-inch before she jerked away again. Her head nearly dropped to the desk as Spencer began to thrust back and forth into her ass, a slow pace completely at odds with how he was playing with her pussy.

"Where is she? Upstairs?"

"Showtime," Spencer murmured to Joy.

"Uhhhnnn," she whimpered. "Fuck... my ass..."

The man of the hour called out, "Joy? Hey, where are you?"

She was, at that moment, joining her hand to Spencer's, then slipping lower, teasing her own folds as he rubbed her clit in hard circles she'd never forget to her dying day. Spencer's ass flexed back and forth as he drove his cock into hers. He didn't bother looking up as the door swung open.

"Oh my God, Joy? What the hell are you doing to her?"

Spencer drove his cock his deepest yet into Joy's ass, and asked, "Joy, honey, what am I doing to you?"

"Unnnngh, fuck, fuck, Micha... sorry... so good, nnnn, it's so good," she whispered, one of her eyes closing as she blushed hard.

"Nothing she doesn't want done to her," Spencer said, finally looking up and winking.

Michael gaped at them both. "Joy?" he squeaked out.

"Do you know who I am?" Spencer asked as Michael circled the room, keeping his distance, his eyes huge.

"You asshole," Michael breathed.

"Well, yes, that's definitely true," Spencer said, and spanked Joy's ass, hard. She yelped and thrust back even harder at him.

"Nnn, fuck, right there, de-deep in my ass."

"Joy," Spencer said, and spanked her again. "Joy!"

“Wha?”

“Who am I?”

She blushed hard. “Spencer For... For...”

“No,” Michael whispered.

“Foreman!” Joy gasped out. She convulsed again, her orgasm this time a slow, exhausted thing. She drooped hard against the desk, ass quivering. Spencer jerked out of her and jacked the base of his cock with one hand while he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the other.

“So you do know who I am?” Spencer asked Michael.

“What did you do?” Michael asked Joy, coming close.

“Don’t,” Spencer warned him. “I will break your jaw if you touch her through the duration of her contract, in anger or any other way. I don’t even want you holding her fucking hand. She’s mine.”

He released, his cock jettisoning come all over Joy’s backside. She mewled and reached back to touch it, to play with it.

“She made a deal with me,” Spencer said. “Any time I want her, I will use her. In return, the election’s yours.”

“Goddamn, this was you?” Michael asked.

“Of course it was,” Spencer snapped. “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“I did it for us,” Joy whimpered. She came around the desk, limping on her broken shoe. She was stunning in her debauchery, her mask of makeup ruined by Spencer’s come, her dress torn, her breast still bare, Spencer’s teeth marking her for his. Spencer wanted her again, but to stick around for much longer was going to cause more trouble than it was worth. Joy would come to him far sooner than his original estimate of three months. Fuck, if she lasted a couple weeks, he’d be surprised. Though he had nothing but disdain for the office itself, the thought of fucking the mayor’s wife in front of the denizens of the Tower did have its darkly amusing appeal.

The two guards stormed into the room, and the smaller of the two gasped, “Holy shit.”

“Get out!” Michael screeched.

“But...”

“Out!”

The guards stumbled away muttering to each other. Joy licked her lips as Spencer came to her and lifted her chin with two fingers. “Who owns you? Pussy, mouth, and ass?”

“You do,” she whispered. She looked at her husband, shuddered once, and then back at Spencer before nodding. “Whatever you want. Whenever you want.”

“Like hell,” Michael said, his face so white Spencer thought he might faint. “I’ll... I’ll... I’ll...”

Spencer picked up his pants and pulled them up. “Mr. Mayor, you’re not going to do shit to stop her. I just handed you the keys to your dream job. And hey, the position has a long and storied history of sending its occupant to the governor’s seat.” Spencer zipped up and walked to Michael, his smile disappearing. “But you’re going to accept our contract because the deal wasn’t with you. It was with Joy. I didn’t force her. She agreed to the terms twice. When I want her, she’s mine. And do you know the real reason why you’re going to do nothing about it or come after me in any way?”

Michael watched his wife slide a finger through the drying come on her cheek and swallow it down, not meeting either his gaze or Spencer’s. The mayor-to-be reached a hand out, then let it fall to his side again as he gave Spencer a venomous glare. “Why?”

“Because you know who I am. What I can do. Someday, you’re going to want a favor too. And I’ll deliver, Michael.” Spencer headed for the door. “Congratulations again. Enjoy the party.”

A Deep Cut

Sylvain Pelletier ran his fingers along the guitar case like he was exploring a woman for the first time. Given his long, storied history of trying to find the instrument to add to his collection, that wasn't exactly a surprise.

The guitar inside held no particular value to Spencer, but when Sylvain unsnapped the cracked case and pulled it out, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head. He tapped the wood with his knuckles. "Spruce," he said, then tapped another spot, nodding. "Mahogany." He turned the guitar in his hands and pulled out a phone. After browsing through his photographs, he held the phone against the grain of the backside of the guitar, cross-examining the marks left on the one he held against the ones in his collection. "The paperwork?"

Spencer opened a file and held up two certificates of authenticity, signed by the most reputable experts he could find. A third sheet held the contact information for the two experts. Sylvain nodded absently and spun the guitar again. He tuned it with deft, expert fingers, and Spencer waited, bored and wishing the man would get on with it. Sylvain loved his fucking theatrics. It was why they were in Spencer's limo, to make Sylvain feel special. That, and for the extra space it provided in case this went bad. The limo wasn't a stretch job – in fact, Spencer owned SUVs longer than the car – but there was enough room that six people could face each other comfortably in the back. Right now it was just the two of them as Spencer's driver and bodyguard Gallo took them along a long loop of the outskirts of the city along frontage roads.

Stealing the guitar had been so simple Spencer thought it might have been an ambush. The owner's pricey security system was negated by the fact that he had a tendency to leave a window open facing seaside to take in the fresh salty air and the stunning views. Spencer climbed the cliffs beside the house at midnight, enjoying himself. Rock climbing was not a venture he often got to take part in. Then it was a simple matter of easing his ladder against the house, slipping inside the window, and snatching the guitar from its shelf on the first floor. The only real hard part was getting both it and the

ladder back down the cliffs until Spencer realized with a hand to his forehead that he was filthy rich and could buy plenty more ladders.

“He called all his guitars by a different lover’s name,” Sylvain said. His French-Canadian accent wasn’t so thick as he played it up to be, another affectation of his Spencer detested. He wore a baby blue peacoat, a black silk shirt, and skinny slacks so tight that when he got in Spencer was surprised they didn’t tear in the ass. The worst offenses to Spencer’s eyes were the yellow scarf and matching flat cap. No man, gay, straight, or otherwise, should wear a yellow scarf and a flat cap – or flat caps in general. Women, women could wear whatever the hell they want and probably still find a way to make it look sexy and fun. Men might as well wear banana peels on top of their heads as wear a flat cap. Spencer wanted to chuck both the hat and the scarf out the window, followed by the man formerly wearing them.

Instead, he listened.

“This... this baby was Julia,” Sylvain continued. He strummed the keys and started to play, still watching Spencer out of the corner of his eye. “Griffin Dockery’s last dance. El Paso. Just another show, supposed to be.” The tune turned to something out of a spaghetti Western, something Spencer vaguely recognized as a showdown theme to some movie or another. Cultural references were not his strongest suit. “His girlfriend drove all the way from Louisiana to watch. And to do something... darker. Griffin walked in on his bandmates in one of their hotel rooms, all of them with their dicks in her. In a rage, he destroyed their equipment but decided the show was going to go on anyways. He went on stage alone. There was a mic, three acoustic guitars-” Sylvain patted Julia on her black-and-white diamond-patterned rump “-and maybe eighty or ninety people in attendance. Eighty people who came to see a no-name band and instead got one of the most intense performances of all time.”

Spencer leaned forward, but Sylvain held up a finger. “He played. And he didn’t quit. A half hour set turned into an hour. An hour turned to two. He played so long he bloodied his fingers. His own songs, his band’s, covers in every genre, anything anybody called out that he knew, he played. And at two in the morning, without a drug in his system, Griffin Dockery had the stroke that eventually killed him. Still on stage. Cradling his Julia.” Sylvain stopped playing and grinned. “I have the other two guitars. This completes the set.”

Spencer snatched the guitar from the other man's hands and settled back. "You will when Mina True's contract is null and void."

"Mina," Sylvain said, closing his eyes and shivering pleasantly. He opened them again and licked his lips with a lewd, overexaggerated gesture. "So sweet. So innocent. My pure white sugar. Have you fucked her yet, Mr. Foreman?"

Spencer smiled tightly. "When my lawyer gives me the call that her contract has been signed over to me, you get the guitar. Not a moment before then."

The music producer took up his phone again and texted someone. His grin widened, and Spencer knew he wasn't going to last out the day without punching this smug shithead. "We'll be good in a few minutes," he said, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

"Where should we drop you?" Spencer asked, pressing the button for the window divider. It slid down.

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere," Sylvain said. "My people will be joining us right about... now."

Spencer tensed. "What?"

"Spencer," Gallo said from the front. His voice was smoky and almost boyish. Anyone who assumed that meant something negative about his capabilities was an idiot. "Two SUVs, coming up on us fast."

Spencer didn't hesitate. Sylvain opened his mouth again, no doubt to crow about something, but Spencer never let him speak. He brought the neck of the guitar up and into the soft meat under Sylvain's chin, not much of a hit, but it threw the other man off long enough to give Spencer time to lean forward and readjust, snapping a forearm into Sylvain's nose, shattering the bone.

A rev of a motor. One of the SUVs raced around the limo, and Spencer roared, "Ram the dumb fucks."

"You got it," Gallo said. Spencer couldn't see the man give his Rottweiler grin, but he could hear it in Gallo's words. The SUVs were trying to force them to stop, no doubt so they could take the guitar and free their boss at gunpoint before killing Spencer and Gallo all at once. What they didn't know was how well reinforced the limousine was. The car was basically a bulletproof battering ram with a beautiful shell.

They hit the SUV going forty. The collision rocked the two men in the back, and Sylvain got in a few short rights to Spencer's head. The man

might have played at being tough but he had the punch of a three-year old. Spencer dipped his head and smashed it against Sylvain's broken nose. The other man screeched and arched upright. Spencer twisted with him, something hard beside them both snapping with their weight. The neck of the guitar.

Bullets pinged off the back of the car and Sylvain bellowed, "You fucking idiots! I'm still in the car!"

"It's bulletproof, asshole," Spencer growled, and lashed upwards with a wicked left that left Sylvain sprawled backwards, staring up at the roof. Out, or close enough, but Spencer wasn't going to take chances, and his blood was up. He sat up and ripped the steel strings from the broken remains of the guitar. Sylvain gurgled at him and waved a hand weakly in his direction. Spencer had no trouble twisting the producer around and wrapping the strings around his throat. Sylvain flailed outward, doing nothing but rolling the window down. He stared out at the passing world, clutching at the steel cutting lines into his neck.

"Urrk," he gasped. As his final word, it was pretty unremarkable.

It wasn't choking that killed Sylvain. The wires cutting into his carotid did that just fine. Spencer held them in place for another thirty seconds as the blood pooled on the floorboards, and only let go when one of the SUVs, badly dented but still rolling, slowed and pulled along the open window. Spencer dropped as bullets pinged off the door and into the interior. A ricochet caught his leg but it was barely a sting. He reached up and hit the button for the window, his fingers slick with Sylvain's blood. It rolled up and Gallo told him to get up and buckle in. Good advice. Spencer listened and dropped into the middle seat, yanking the belt around his waist. A moment later Gallo hit the brakes and kissed the SUV's rear tire. The driver of the other vehicle was no pro and didn't realize what Gallo was doing until he steered more sharply into the SUV. The maneuver spun the other vehicle to the left, and too late, the driver tried to correct right before he smashed sideways into the back end of a utility truck. At that speed, the driver and his passenger were either dead or wishing they were.

Spencer looked behind them. The other SUV chugged along, its front end pretty banged up but still giving chase. He undid his seatbelt and leaned across to smash the unlock button on the door beside Sylvain's face.

"What are you doing?" Gallo asked.

"Without their paycheck, there's no reason to keep coming after us."

Spencer shoved open the limo door. He thought for a moment he'd need to wedge it open somehow but Sylvain took care of that for him, one of his arms spilling out and his hand skipping along the pavement. Even as light as he'd been, Sylvain was dead weight, and pushing him out the door was no easy task. Spencer finally managed it by getting between the man's legs and somersaulting him out the door. The limo bumped up and over him, and the SUV squealed to a stop. Spencer slammed the door shut, huffing and getting back up into the middle seat.

"Any more of them?" he asked.

"Not that I see. But we're going to have other company."

Spencer nodded. He pulled out his phone. Nora Zell, chief of his security team apart from Gallo himself, picked up immediately. "Hello, Mr. Foreman. What can I do for you?"

"I need people at Mina True's house ready for repercussions. I'll also need Anastasia ready for Gallo and myself."

Nora didn't ask questions or try to pry as to why he would need their lead fixer. Instead, she asked, "Do we need to move Mina?"

"I don't think they'll come for her, but in case they do, let's keep her there and draw them out. I'll move her to the Tower myself when we're done."

"Understood. Anything else?"

"Have my pillows nice and fluffed for me."

She snickered. "Will do."

"Spencer," Gallo said from the front seat. "Cops."

"I need to go," Spencer said.

"She'll be taken care of," Nora said, and hung up.

Spencer leaned back as Gallo began to slow. Gallo carried a sidearm, one he was licensed for. That would be the only weapon in the car the cops would find in the limited time the limo would be in their position. If they had a day or two and the equipment to strip it down, they'd find a pistol in a hidden locked compartment in the rear, but that was about it.

Both men were so well-practiced at this Spencer didn't need to walk Gallo through what he should and shouldn't say. They parked and rolled down the windows. The key was keeping their hands visible – Gallo's high on the steering wheel, Spencer's on his knees. The cops behind them pulled in at an angle, not getting out until they had backup. That came just a minute later, another car whipping around a corner and cutting off the limo

from the front. Then the roaring and the noise began, meant to disorient them, throw them off. Spencer and Gallo stepped out when told, keeping their hands where told, kneeling when told. They were cuffed, patted down, and shoved into separate cars. As his passed by Gallo's, Spencer winked at the other man.

This was always fun.

* * *

"You can burn the suit when we're done," Spencer said, pulling on the jumpsuit. "Even if I could get it dry cleaned, that blood's not coming out."

"Keep talking, asshole," the cop said.

Spencer didn't, but he did finish dressing. He didn't realize at first why his leg stung until he realized technically he'd been shot. No one seemed too bothered by it, so he ignored it too. At least it wasn't bad enough they were calling for the EMTs. When he was cuffed again and walked out, Gallo was standing at a desk getting his fingerprints scanned. A new bruise discolored his cheek. Spencer grimaced, and Gallo caught it.

"When I was getting my mugshot, I asked the pretty one if she wanted to take some private pictures with me later. Heck of a punch to her," he said cheerfully.

The hard lines of Spencer's frown tugged upwards. At least a dozen cops watched them warily, as though they might've hidden guns somewhere on their persons despite the very thorough and exploratory searches. Spencer's voice carried throughout the room as he turned to look at each and every one of them.

"When my prints come back, you're going to realize who I am. I'll keep things secret until then for the fun of it, but when you do find out, you'll realize what a mistake this was. I will pay the first one of you to come and look after us in our cells ten grand."

"Might not want to announce it when you try to bribe a cop," one of them said, and the place erupted in laughter. Spencer grinned too. Why not?

Gallo finished up the fingerprinting and was led downstairs to his temporary quarters. Spencer went through the same process, the cop doing the scanning smirking at him the entire time.

Downstairs were the cells. Gallo nodded to him from one of them. Spencer's new roomie for the moment looked to be an addict coming down off a massive high. He sat on a metal bench built into the wall, shaking and bobbing back and forth, muttering under his breath. A buzz, and the door

slid open. The cop with Spencer shoved him inside, and Spencer waited obediently with his hands by the cell doors for the cuffs to come off.

“What’s your bet on how long it takes before one of them comes down?” Gallo called.

“Twenty minutes.”

“They’re using a good scanner. I’ll say five.”

“You think?” Spencer asked, chewing on that.

“Bet you a steak on it.”

“Steeaaaak,” the addict mumbled.

Spencer considered the wager. “All right, but it’s whoever’s closest, none of that ‘you overbid’ crap you tried to pull last time.”

“Side bet of lobster mac and cheese on when Anastasia shows?”

Spencer chuckled. “You’re hungry.”

“I am.”

“All right... an hour for Anastasia.”

“I’ll say... hour and a half.”

“You have more faith in a police scanner than her?” Spencer shook his head. Already he began counting the seconds in the back of his mind. Another trick his father drilled into him. He could keep time in his head as precise as a clock. Seconds mattered, especially on a job.

He stood near the wall, zoning out. His life was full of empty spaces of time like this, waiting for the machinery he set in motion to finish a revolution. He could either let it drive him crazy or he could learn to quiet his own mind in those moments and meditate. He chose the latter. His distraction of choice, then and always, were the women at the Tower. He flicked through mental images, trying to decide which one – or ones – he’d fuck when he came back.

Something thunked and creaked in the stairwell. The door. Gallo said unnecessarily, “Time.”

“Seven minutes, thirty seven seconds. You get your steak.”

“Told you.”

A big-bellied bald cop with yellowing teeth came down with a padded folding chair in hand. Judging from the angry buzz upstairs when the door had opened, folks weren’t happy about his decision to take Spencer up on his offer.

The cop ignored Gallo and came to Spencer’s cell. He looked down and away, ashamed of the thing he was about to do, and mumbled, “You

make deals, right? That's your reputation? I don't want the ten thousand. I need something else."

"What?" Spencer asked.

"I have a little girl. She's... she's not so good-looking, you know? She gets bullied. We're trying to get her in a better school. Just a foot in the door."

"Okay, I can do that," Spencer said. "You got a card?"

"Yeah." The cop dug in his wallet and handed over a plain business card with his name and contact information. He'd already written his personal phone number on there too.

"I'll be in touch. In the meantime, my man is hungry." Spencer turned and asked the junkie, "Hey, you hungry too?"

The junkie looked up, mashing his lips together. He nodded, then returned to staring at the floor.

"Got something upstairs?"

The cop – Jim – said, "Be right back. Coffee? Water? Anything else?"

"Gallo?" Spencer asked.

"I'd take a coffee," Gallo said.

"Coffee all around. Going to be a late night."

Jim went above and beyond, bringing down a bag of cold fast food that Gallo and the junkie split, as well as a half-full box of pastries and a big travel mug full of coffee and three cardboard cups. With nothing else to do and no interest in the food, Spencer asked him about his daughter, getting an idea whether she belonged in a more artistic or academic school. They weren't empty questions, either. He learned at the start of his empire the value in remembering the little things about his employees and the community around his businesses. A simple question like, "How's Diane?" made a person feel valued and wanted even within an organization like Spencer's. He would not make these arrangements himself for Jim's daughter, but if he ever ran across the cop again, he'd make sure to ask how she was settling into her new school. It never hurt to have another contact among the cops.

There was nothing much to do after that but wait on Anastasia. Gallo did some light exercises while Spencer spent his time ignoring the junkie mumbling to himself. He wondered idly if anyone was going after Mina True now that Sylvain was dead, or if anyone but the music producer would care. The beautiful singer came to him two weeks ago, asking for help

getting out of her brutal contract with Pelletier. She was a relative nobody, with some small stage experience and a couple years performing with a showtunes theater troupe in Vegas. Their star attraction, but that wasn't saying much. There she met Sylvain Pelletier. The victim of naivety, she believed his honeyed words that he would make her a star recording artist in Vineport. Instead, she filled in as a ringer for Pelletier's bigger acts when they couldn't hit a note, or when they were too spaced out to perform without someone backing their gyrating asses on stage.

The money she made was just above the poverty line, another way for Pelletier to keep her locked down and incapable of escaping. He provided her with a house, a tiny thing out in the suburbs, and a driver came by every day to pick her up. Mina True was as much a prisoner as anyone in the jail Spencer currently occupied, and that was just what she told him when she asked for his help. He was sure there were other things Sylvain subjected her to, darker things. This wasn't the first time he heard Sylvain Pelletier's name and it was never cast in a positive light, unless people were talking about the music he made. Spencer felt zero remorse over killing him. The world was better without Sylvain.

And how many people, he wondered with faint amusement, would think the exact same thing when it was his time? Scores more than Pelletier, that was certain. Spencer's enemies would probably have an orgy on his grave. Shit, he should leave it in his will to have casks of wine brought to his funeral for the express purpose.

He was grinning about that idea when the doors to the stairs opened again and Anastasia's sharp voice reached them.

"So get me the goddamn address for the goddamn impound. How do you not understand that this never happened?"

Jim rose to his feet, and caught Spencer's eye. "My girl... please."

"I'm a man of my word, Jim. And if you get fired over this, we can find a job for you."

"Okay," he said weakly.

"Who are you?" Anastasia snapped.

Jim introduced himself as Anastasia came into view from Spencer's cell. She was dressed in black slacks, high heels that added at least two inches to her already long legs, and a plunging white blouse. Her face was girlish, round and with huge eyes that looked far sweeter than her actual disposition. Gorgeous, every inch of her, which was why Spencer chose to

keep working with her as opposed to the other bland government agents under his thumb.

An older man stood behind her, looking pissed about all this. Judging from his uniform he must be the police captain, or at least someone of some authority. Anastasia whirled on him, and growled, "Well? Get them out."

The captain grunted something under his breath. Spencer snapped his fingers, and Anastasia stepped to his cell. He reached out and pulled her in for a hungry, long kiss. He liked that she'd never broken. Anastasia was his to fuck and control, but she wasn't part of the Tower or one of his regulars. She was a special treat, and he was hungry.

"Before we get out of here, I'm fucking you," he told her.

"Not in a goddamn cell, Spencer."

"If I wanted it here, I'd take it here." He slipped a hand into her blouse as best he could manage and pinched her nipple. "But no. Upstairs. I want them to hear it."

"Ugh," the special agent said, but her cheeks bloomed. Like some of Spencer's favorites, Anastasia liked to be used. A thought crossed his mind of getting her and Joy together. It had been a few weeks since he checked in on the mayor's wife. Maybe he'd get them together with a few associates and let his friends go to town on the pair. Spencer's engine was already going, but that brought him to near hardness, and when the doors buzzed open, he hurried out, grabbing Anastasia by the arm and tugging her behind him up the stairs.

To Gallo as he passed, Spencer said, "I'll be fifteen minutes."

Gallo snickered, and followed them. The whole bullpen, so smug earlier, now stared in their direction balefully. A couple of Anastasia's people, both in suits, rode a desk nearby, talking with the pretty cop that had slugged Gallo earlier.

Spencer snapped at a passing cop, "Bathrooms."

"Hey, fuck you."

Jim tapped Spencer's shoulder and pointed across the room to a short hallway. "Down there."

They walked through the bullpen, Anastasia hurrying behind Spencer as fast as she could in her high heels. Spencer leaned into the men's room, grunted with displeasure, and poked his head into the women's. Much better.

Someone said, "Hey, you can't-"

Spencer could, and he did. He tugged Anastasia to the long sink countertop inside. She unzipped her pants and dropped them just far enough that he could get to her sweet, thin-lipped pussy. He pulled at the sides of her plunging neckline, freeing her tiny breasts. Pasties over her nipples kept them from showing through the fabric. He peeled them off and tossed them towards the garbage can.

Cops outside muttered and snapped at each other about their special guests while Anastasia's agents told them exactly what they could do with their concerns. Spencer didn't care, and by proxy, neither did Anastasia. When their working relationship started, she offered up her body as a means to sweeten a deal with Spencer, to keep him from revealing information he had about a particularly dark party attended by a swath of powerful people whose downfall would snap a lot of foundations of democracy. Nowadays, Anastasia lusted after their infrequent hookups as often as Spencer did.

She sat up on the countertop and spread her hips. Spencer reached down and ran a thumb along the strip of trimmed blonde hair before rubbing her clit. Anastasia reached up and let her hair go from the short ponytail she kept it in. She gripped the back of his head and pulled him to her, kissing him hard.

His fingers drove down along her pussy lips. The hornet nest of cops outside grew only louder and Anastasia chuckled against Spencer's lips. "I love when you're an asshole."

"Am I ever not?"

"Good point."

He teased her until she was wet enough to take him. Spencer fucked her right there on the countertop. She twisted to one side, her legs pressed together as he slammed into her, staring down at her tiny shapely ass. The sideways angle put pressure right against her spot and despite the awkwardness of the position, pleasure flooded her. When a cop pushed open the door and poked her head inside, Anastasia stared at her with half-lidded eyes. Her hand rose to her mouth and she sucked two fingers down, cheeks flaming at the cop's disgusted expression.

Spencer ignored all of that and eventually yanked his cock out of Anastasia's tight folds. He pulled her off the counter and spun her around so her ass was thrust out and she rested on her elbows. With a grunt, he punched his cock back into her pussy, balls slapping against her skin with every hard thrust.

Anastasia pulled her fingers from her mouth and whimpered, “Spencer...” She came with a sharp forward push, her walls gripping him, releasing, gripping him. As wave after wave coursed through her she balled up her fists, her red-painted nails digging into her palms, and she came and came.

Spencer wasn’t long after. He had his fun showing off what he could get away with to the cops, and now he needed to finish the day’s business before he retreated to the Tower and slept for, oh, a couple weeks. He sheathed himself deep a few more times, enjoying Anastasia’s tightness as always, and finally stilled, his cock spurting, spurting, spurting. She dribbled him when he pulled out, his come running down her hips as she reached for a paper towel.

“Leave it,” he said mildly as he did up his own pants. “Let them smell it on you when you walk by.”

“Pig,” she said, but there was an adoring note to her voice. She glanced down at her well used pussy and grinned. “You were pretty pent up.”

“Yeah, well, killing Pelletier felt pretty good.”

“Pelletier and at least one of the others.” He raised an eyebrow as Anastasia zipped up her pants. “No seatbelts when they hit the truck. The passenger died on impact, the other guy had a collapsed lung. Doesn’t look good.”

“Fuck them. Who’d he hire?”

“We need more time to be sure, but four streeters, looks like. No one connected.”

“Good,” Spencer said, tugging Anastasia’s blouse back into place and nodding.

They headed out through the bullpen. The cops stared at Anastasia, whose nipples were now firmly visible through the fabric. She ignored them. Spencer too. Jim and the captain were gone, and he assumed the bellowing coming from one of the offices was probably related to that. He collected his suit and changed, grimacing at the caked blood. He didn’t bother with most the buttons or the jacket. Nora would have seen to it they had a new vehicle and clothes outside.

In the sunshine, Gallo waited on the sidewalk. He’d already changed into a fresh white suit with a blue checked shirt underneath. Anastasia and her people split in their bland government vehicles while Spencer hopped into the backseat of a slightly more ostentatious SUV trimmed in chrome. A

suit hung from one of the windows and he changed into it while Gallo pulled out of the parking lot.

“Ms. True’s?” he asked.

“Yes,” Spencer said.

“Don’t think I forgot about that steak.”

* * *

Mina True’s house brought to mind one of those ecofriendly tiny abodes, just without the charm. A lone, sickly elm in the yard leaned towards the road, as if begging to be plucked from its misery. The grass was at least well-trimmed, though the sidewalk out front was little more than gravel.

A Yukon and a Charger sat at the curb. Gallo slowed and the Charger pulled away from the curb, the driver’s window coming down and a hand going out, giving the peace symbol. That was a signal – no one had come for Mina. Gallo pulled in and stopped, and Spencer hopped out, glancing in every direction. If someone was coming for him and not Mina, this would be where they’d know he was exposed. But the surrounding streets were mostly silent, save for the usual suburbia background noise of traffic and kids shouting.

Gallo got out to speak to the people in the Yukon while Spencer headed for Mina’s concrete steps. She would have been told not to look out the curtain, and he was pleased to see she didn’t. He opened her screen door and knocked. The wooden door was so flimsy he could feel the panel flex.

“Mina, it’s Spencer.”

A few thumps from inside and then the click of the lock turning. She opened up.

Mina had what he considered a Southern flair to her beauty. Her reddish-brown hair was big and blown out, her makeup heavy and emphasizing her full lips and soulful eyes. Though she wore simple jeans and a tee shirt, there was no hiding the drool-worthy curves underneath.

But it was her voice that threw him the last time Spencer talked to her, and it was Mina’s voice now that drove every thought from his brain save the need to possess this woman. It was full, breathy, and high. Pelletier might have been a fucking idiot, but he had a well-trained ear for talent, and it wasn’t hard to imagine Mina singing with a voice like fine jewelry, glittering and beautiful.

“Mr. Foreman,” she said, stepping back and gesturing inside. “No one would tell me what’s going on. They only told me to pack up my necessities. Did he sign? Am I...?” Her voice trembled, and she shut the door behind him as he came inside. “Am I free from him?”

They stood in the middle of the tiny living room. Her peony perfume left him feeling dizzy, despite having just come in Anastasia twenty minutes ago. He wanted Mina, and he wanted her right then and there. But the tremble in her voice stopped him. It wasn’t out of fear of him, but out of the desperate hope that her long nightmare was over. She might know Spencer’s reputation but she didn’t yet understand. He might not be an abuser like Pelletier, but he was a monster of a different breed, and Mina deserved to know that right away.

“He’s dead,” Spencer said, his voice free of any emotion, cold and calm. “He tried to ambush me and I killed him for it.”

He expected horror or shock. Instead, Mina closed her eyes and whispered, “Oh, thank God.”

She melted. Her tears came hard and fast, her whole body shaking with them. Spencer waited them out, watching as she sank into a checked armchair, the fabric thin and torn in several spots. She sobbed into her hands, rocking back and forth. There was a box of tissues on the kitchen counter. He fetched it and brought it to her, still silent.

She was a long while like that, long enough that Gallo came in, worried. Spencer gestured at a chair and his bodyguard sat, hands between his knees. “No one’s come for her,” he said quietly. “But this place...”

“Yeah,” Spencer said. “The wolf wouldn’t even need to blow to knock that door down. He’d just have to wait for a stiff breeze.” To Mina, he said, “We need to move you. Like we talked about, you’re going to come live at the Tower.”

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes with the tissues. “It’s okay. I remember our deal. I am... going to be one of your pets for as long as you want me.”

Spencer hesitated. It was only for a second, and internally, he roared at himself not to say it. He ignored the voice. “Mina. I’m... open to renegotiating this one time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think anyone is going to come for you for Pelletier’s death. Come work at the Tower for three months, just to be sure, and then we’ll...

put you somewhere. Without any of the sexual obligations.”

She stared up at him. Her makeup ran some in a mess he loved. He wanted those darkened eyes staring up at him while Mina sucked his cock. He felt himself stirring and couldn't hide it. He expected Mina to agree. To take the deal and stay as far away from him as humanly possible. Instead, she reached up, and with rock-steady hands, she pulled the button open on his pants.

“That wasn't our deal,” she whispered.

“I don't make this offer often,” Spencer said. “Take it. You won't owe me.”

She pushed off the chair and knelt in front of him. Gallo stood up and headed for the door. Spencer's lips parted as Mina slipped down his pants and his boxers.

“I feel terrible about being happy someone's dead, but the things he did, what he put me through...” Mina said, “I want to be yours, until you tell me no more.” She hesitated, her mouth right next to his cock. “Should I not? Is it me you don't want?”

Spencer reached down. Oh, this one was going to be trouble. Every alarm in him went off all at once. But instead of listening to his own common sense, he stroked her cheek. Mina smiled up at him tentatively and earnestly, and gripped his cock to bring her lips down on it.

The Tower

“The security seems so extreme,” Mina said.

Her companion Natasha swallowed a sip of iced chai latte as she contemplated that. She was a stunning woman with long, silky bleach blonde hair she wore in a complicated braid that hung nearly to her tightly sculpted ass. Her knee length skirt had a slit that ran to her waist, exposing no hint of panties. Her shimmery blue tank was almost tame in comparison. She was all kinds of fit, with sleek, well-muscled calves and no thigh gap to speak of. Mina liked her thin, blue-rimmed glasses. They softened Natasha’s sharp facial features.

They sat at a tiny table outside a coffee and pastry shop on the first floor of the Tower, surrounded by potted greenery. The gurgle of a gorgeous stone ornate koi fountain nearby and the light filtering through the skylights gave the gallery the feel of the outdoors, even if they were surrounded on all sides by steel and glass. The exterior of the building might have looked severe and dark, but inside, it was cheerful and beautiful with its plentiful greenery, tasteful sculptures, and garish hanging lights that seemed as carefully picked as the sculptures.

The publicly accessible first two floors of the Tower were devoted to shops, restaurants, bars, and even a movie theater. Mina saw no children or child-focused stores. This was strictly an adults-only playground, it seemed. Almost everyone who walked in the front doors of the building had to go through a security center, including metal detectors. A finer trickle of people coming in and out were let through after they handed over an ID and their names were run through a computer.

“Well, it’s Spencer’s building,” Natasha said. She shrugged. “If I was him I’d be paranoid too.”

Mina blinked. “What do you mean, it’s his building?”

She knew, of course, that Spencer lived there. After she blew him at her house the day before, he brought Mina here with her lone suitcase. They went straight to his condo near the top of the Tower. She barely got a look at the gray and taupe walls and the sparse furnishings before Spencer was on her, pushing her back past a huge L-shaped living room, a staircase, a

sleek kitchen, and onto a bed in a wide-open area fronted on three sides by two-story windows overlooking Vineport.

There, Spencer fucked Mina twice. The sex was amazing for her. Spencer walked the fine edge between hard sex and rough sex, keeping it to the former, making Mina come as he fucked her from behind, then again with her underneath him, half-twisted and clutching at her own hair as he filled her with fast, sure strokes. Once he came the second time, he called Natasha to come fetch Mina and bring her to a gorgeous, ultra-modern condo on the fourth floor where she slept nearly twelve hours, hand against her pussy. Maybe it was the amazing sex, maybe it was the relief from being free of Sylvain, but it was the best kind of sweet, dreamless sleep where she barely moved and didn't wake once. The bed was just stiff enough, with pillows that hugged her neck and head and whispered to her that morning to never leave.

When she did wake and get out of bed, she found a note on a small table by the door with Natasha's name, phone number, and the floor she could be found on. Whenever Mina was ready, she was to come talk to Natasha to get an idea of what was to be expected to her. That scared Mina some, especially after Sylvain, but when she dressed and met Natasha, the other woman greeted her warmly and offered up breakfast first.

"Oh, you didn't know," Natasha said. She gestured at the shops around them. "Spencer owns this whole building. The condos, the shops... I think he even owns the car parks across the street, now that I think about it."

"All of it?" Mina asked, shocked. "Who is he?"

"He is..." Natasha tore her kale scone in half. "Hm."

"If I'm prying too much..."

Natasha chuckled and nibbled on her scone. "No. Not at all. There's a lot to encompass with that question so I'm trying to figure out how best to answer it. You know Spencer is the deal maker. That's how you came here, yes?" Mina nodded. "Same for me. Same for all his women and the people he does business with."

"You're dating him too?" Mina asked, heart sinking. There was no way she could compete with this gorgeous woman.

Natasha settled her scone down and her smile cracked. "You need to get that idea out of your head. None of us are dating him. Spencer owns us. He may choose to fuck you four times a week for the next six months. He might ignore you until he's reminded you exist, then send you out of the

Tower forever to make space for the next woman. We don't throw ourselves at him. He comes to us, and we obey. That's what we agreed to."

Mina bit her lip and nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just don't come into this with illusions he's going to run off with you or that you'll be the one he falls in love with like it's some fairy tale. If you give him your heart, he'll carve it up and eat it. I've seen him do it a dozen times. Now. Back to your question. Besides being our landlord and our sexual master, Spencer is a businessman. He's a big investor in a few food and tech companies, and that's where most his money comes from now. But originally..." Natasha grinned and lowered her voice like they were sharing a secret. "...well, the story is that his father was an art thief. When he died, Spencer inherited everything and began to sell it off little by little, enough to make him hundreds of millions."

"Wow," Mina breathed. "Is that true?"

"I don't know. It's something he doesn't talk about. But we get a lot of other criminals in here. Some of them, they knew his father. They say he was the best in the world. Gallo, Spencer's bodyguard, apparently worked with him too."

They finished off their scones and sipped their tea before Mina spoke again. "So you said something in your note about what it is I'm supposed to do here. What did you have in mind?"

"There are a few possibilities but Spencer wants to try you out at the Cepheus Lounge. You're a singer, right?"

"I was. I think that's over now," Mina said. She filled in Natasha on her life, about her mother pressing her into show business at seventeen and living on the road doing small theater and shows. About finding work in Vegas and then meeting Sylvain Pelletier, and how she wound up in Vineport and eventually the Tower.

Halfway through the telling, Natasha took Mina's hands in hers, and by the end of it, she was shaking her head. "That son of a bitch."

"I hate that it had to come to that, but I think if it hadn't, Sylvain would have never let me go. I think... I think he would have hurt me eventually in ways I couldn't recover from."

"I know the type," Natasha said.

"What about you? How did you come here?"

"I wanted to own my own gym. But I had no capital and my business degree was going to keep me in debt until I was nearly fifty. I came to him

looking for money, and instead he offered me my own space here at the Tower and a healthy salary. Instead of twenty-five years of debt, I'll have my loans paid off in five, and after that, Spencer says I'm free to come or go, if I want to set up somewhere else. I doubt I will. I mean, this place, we make money hand over fist. Which reminds me, you're one of his, and that's going to afford you a lot of freebies in the Tower. You can use the gym, eat at any of the restaurants, go to the theater, whatever. You can't walk into one of the stores and wipe them out, but you'll have a line of credit at all the clothing places here and across the city. He'll want you to dress nice, so you'll want to ditch everything that isn't attractive. I'm supposed to be your mentor here, so to speak, so I'll show you around."

"Thank you. Do my hours go towards paying my credit or anything?"

"Oh, honey, no. The credit's yours. You'll have a prepaid card with a pretty healthy amount on it for other expenses across the city, but Spencer likes to have his girls frequent his businesses if we can. It's good advertising, beautiful women streaming in and out of his shops. Let's see, what else? There are a few requirements. He wants you to be comfortable being you, but he does like candy on his arm. You stay in good shape. Don't starve yourself or get bulimic, that'll have him tossing you out of the Tower in a heartbeat. You'll want to keep up with haircuts, waxing, the works. Treat yourself to a mani-pedi whenever you like. No tattoos without clearing it first. How are your teeth?" Mina gave her a nervous smile baring them, and Natasha smiled back. "Great. He's got contacts everywhere in the medical field, good ones. Doctors, dentists, anything you might need. I'll text you a pecking order list, but if it's not related to your job, you'll want to come to me or a woman here named Ona Flores. Consider her our madame. She makes all of Spencer's, mm, nighttime arrangements and handles any personal disputes between us girls."

"Oh gosh. This is so much to take in," Mina said, laughing softly.

"Don't sweat it. It's pretty simple. When Spencer Foreman wants you to do something, you come running. Otherwise you work at your job, exercise, eat right, and have fun. But... Mina, you need to know some things. It's not easy sometimes."

"How do you mean?"

"Spencer is not always going to want you for himself. He might call upon you to sleep with one of his associates, or to be used in different ways. He's not a good man, but those people... they might be worse. He won't

allow anyone to rape you and if anyone should ever try, you go right to him or Nora Zell, the head of security. But at some point here, you will be asked to do something beyond your comfort zone. And if you say no to Spencer about anything, you become persona non grata. He will have you kicked out, and anything that happens afterwards, he won't care." Natasha folded her lip between her teeth and stared at her drink. "It happens pretty often."

"Should I be scared?" Mina asked.

Natasha stared into her eyes. "Yes. Maybe the Tower seems safe, but this is a dangerous world. And if you're with him--"

"You're a target," Spencer said, making them both jump. He approached them from behind one of the tall potted plants. Dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt and matching black slacks, he made Mina's heart want to stop. His features were a fine line between boyish and rugged, with dark, calm eyes and a hard chin. He moved like a dancer, but was built like steel. And oh God, the heights he brought her to last night. Mina shivered thinking about it and hoped he'd pull her away for another session.

"Spencer, I--" Natasha started.

"Don't. You were right to warn her." He looked Mina up and down and frowned.

"We haven't had a chance to get her new clothes yet," Natasha said hastily.

"Hm. And the clinic? The Cepheus? Have you talked to her about that? Taken her to see Lazar?"

Natasha shook her head. "I was getting to it."

"It was my fault," Mina said. "I had so many questions and she was being a good hostess, so please, if she's in trouble--"

"If she's in trouble, that's between me and her," Spencer snapped. He glanced over at a group of men in suits watching the exchange from a distance, and sighed, "Take Mina to the clinic, show her where she'll be working, and get her ready for the fights tonight."

"Yes sir," Natasha said quietly.

"Mina, I'll want you in something sexy, but it shouldn't be elegant, not tonight. Natasha will understand what I mean, but if her duties devolve into another hour spent gossiping, you will both have your asses striped in full view of everyone in the Tower. Natasha, is that an empty threat?"

"No sir," she whispered.

“What did I tell you to beg me for afterwards? What did I do to you with dozens of people watching?”

Natasha looked up, her cheeks red. “You fucked my ass. Sir.”

Spencer took her chin in his hand. “That’s right.” He slid his hand down and squeezed her breast right there in full view of everyone. Mina drew in a sharp breath, and he focused on her. “Mina, if I pulled my cock out right now, I would expect you to suck it. Me touching her breast like this is as tame a gesture as it gets here. Do you understand what you are to me?”

“Yes,” Mina said. She looked up too, her cheeks just as rosy as Natasha’s. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. See you tonight, then.”

* * *

Natasha was sullen throughout the rest of the morning. As they rode together in a chauffeured car to a medical clinic, she barely spoke more than a handful of words. Mina knew on an instinctual level Natasha blamed her for Spencer’s harsh words, and chose to remain quiet herself, even if she still burned with a thousand questions.

The private clinic was a gorgeous building, but the parking lot was designed for privacy and security. A massive stone wall topped in electrified fencing was made even more severe by the entrance gate, manned by a tall, burly man with a sour expression. Inside, the place screamed money, with a gorgeous circular aquarium at the center of the lobby and a nurse to greet them. There was no receptionist that Mina saw.

After they took down her medical history and the name of her previous doctor, Mina was put through a battery of tests, including a blood draw, urine sample, x-rays, and an ultrasound. The doctor she saw, a pleasant woman with an English accent, told Mina they’d be in touch with the results.

When the doctor walked them out, Mina asked, confused, “Do I owe anything? I don’t think you even asked for insurance.”

The doctor laughed, squeezed her arm, and told her none of that was necessary now. Such a strange new world.

Back again to the Tower. The clothing available in the stores there were far fancier, sexier, and fun than anywhere Mina had been able to shop before all this. She saw the price tag on a floral lace babydoll and put it

hastily back. Natasha saw this and sighed. "It's all pricy. You don't need to worry about that."

"I don't want to get you in any more trouble."

Natasha gave Mina a look like she was the dumbest woman in the world. "You're not. We talked about this. We need to get you out of those clothes. He really will paddle us right in front of everyone if we don't hurry this up." Her look softened a hair, and she added, "Look, Mina, you don't need to buy a bunch right now. Get a few days' worth of lingerie and clothes. When you get your feet under you, come back down and take your time when you're not working at the Cepheus or wherever."

"Okay," Mina said. "The fights, he said something sexy but not beautiful?"

"That's right. That's Spencer's way of saying he wants you to slut it up a bit. He has a habit of showing off his new girls. The fights will be at Kiste Stadium and he's probably going to take you up to the skyboxes. You've got kind of a hot Southern belle thing going on with that hair and your makeup so I'm thinking something a little bit sizzle, a little bit trailer park."

Mina wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult, but it did give her a great idea. She saw some booty shorts on the way in, ridiculously over the top ones with some spangles and flair to them. She hurried back to the display and picked out a red pair trimmed in glittery blue. "Like this?"

"Sure," Natasha said, checking out again.

Along with the shorts, Mina bought a pair of crop tops that would come up to her underboob, a week's worth of underthings, and a slinky nightgown. It would all be brought up to her condo, the clerk said, and again, Mina felt like a fish out of water.

At the next store, she bought and changed into a short, classy black dress that left her bouncing with every step. To this she added a pair of sexy heeled sandals. She also picked out a couple more dresses and outfits for later in the week, as well as some heels, flats, and a few accessories.

"What about work?" she asked Natasha. "Do I need anything special for my job?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure what, exactly. Come on, we'll go talk to the manager and you can figure it out from there."

Natasha brought her to the Cepheus next, a lounge on the second floor. The place was gorgeous, though so dark she could hardly tell. The walls were a rich burgundy, the floors stained, ornate wood tiles. A few people

drank in vast, comfy booths. There were no regular tables, chairs, or even stools at the bar, just those booths. At the far end of the lounge was an oval stage with a mic stand, ringed by gold-edged curtains and ropes. A grand piano sat next to the stage, unused at the moment.

The bar itself was manned by a tall, slim man with spiky black hair and a long, oiled goatee. His silk shirt gleamed under the lounge's dim lights. He approached with a smile. "Please, tell me this is the singer I heard would be joining us."

Natasha gave him a tight smile. "Mina True, this is Lazar Wilde."

"A pleasure!" he said, eyes lighting up. He collected Mina's hands and kissed them each with light, overemphasized "mwahs." She laughed and Natasha looked even more sour.

"I need to go. If it doesn't work out, Lazar, have her talk to Tom or Sandi on the first floor. She needs to find somewhere to fit in before the day's done."

Lazar rolled his eyes and bobbed like a bobblehead. "Can you read music?"

"Of course!" Mina said.

Natasha hurried away, and none too softly under her breath, she repeated the words Mina just said. Mina winced, and Lazar gave her a sympathetic smile. "She is jealous, my beautiful bird. She does not get to work with me!"

Mina laughed again. Lazar cleared his throat and without any warning he sang and held a note. Mina, surprised, didn't know what he was doing at first, until he pointed at her and rolled his finger. She cleared her throat and matched the note as best she could. His grin widened even further and he finished with a flourish of his hand.

"Oh yes!" he exclaimed. "I already have a good feeling."

"I could be dreadful," Mina said as he led her towards the piano.

"Not as dreadful as my last pair of singers," he said, shuddering. "They couldn't come close to my range." He leaned in and whispered theatrically. "And I have no range. Lazar is a world-famous piano player, but sadly, not a singer. Let's try to entertain our customers. If they clap and cheer, you get the job. If they chase you from the building, we will see about making a bartender out of you instead."

They talked songs for a while, mostly getting a feel for what the other knew. Lazar was delighted at her knowledge of showtunes, and struck up a

cheerful, plonking piratey song. Mina joined right in, and immediately she knew this was the place for her. She remembered being a teenager singing this very song and dancing in her pajamas, before her mom forced the traveling life on her, before the string of hopes and failures on stage, before trying to find any work in Vegas, before the nightmare days with Sylvain.

For the first time in years, Mina sang for the pure joy of singing. Maybe Spencer and his people would be worse masters than Sylvain had been. Maybe this would all end in misery and pain.

But for now, she could sing.

* * *

That evening, Ona Flores came for Mina when it was time to go to the fights. In white pants with knotted slits up and down her thighs and a matching top exposing a bare line of her tummy and cleavage, she made a hell of a first impression as one of the sultriest, most attractive women Mina met all day.

She studied Mina head to toe, taking in the crop top, the short leather jacket with only one low button done, the booty shorts, and the high-heeled sandals. "Perfection."

"Is the makeup too over the top?"

"Not tonight, no." Ona held out a hand and Mina shook. "You trimmed and were bleached today?"

"Yes," Mina said, blushing. Bleaching had been a new experience for her.

"Very good," Ona said. "Come on, then."

She walked Mina to the elevator and pulled a keycard from her purse. After swiping it, she pressed a button for the basement. She explained that was the private parking garage for Spencer and some of the most necessary staff.

The elevator opened to two rows of stunning cars and vehicles in a massive concrete garage. At another access elevator much further down from the private lift were rows of identical SUVs and vans. Another space marked out by yellow lines was devoted to what she assumed were staff cars, still nice but nowhere near the beautiful arrangement before her.

Spencer and his bodyguard Gallo waited near a sleek, carbon black Mercedes coupe that screamed speed and style. "All yours," Ona said cheerfully as they approached. "Anything else you might need from me, sir?"

“Wear that outfit to dinner with me Saturday night,” Spencer said.

Ona winked and kissed his cheek. She turned to Mina and brushed her arm. “Have fun,” she murmured.

“Thank you,” Mina said. “It was very nice to meet you.”

That took Ona by surprise for some reason, and she glanced back at Spencer, an eyebrow arched. He said and did nothing, just watched with indifference. Ona turned back to Mina and said, “You too.”

Spencer looked Mina up and down and nodded. Gallo opened her door for her and she slid in. as Spencer did the same on the other side. The bodyguard headed for an Audi sedan. Spencer waited for him to pull out and followed him.

“This is a beautiful car,” Mina said.

“Mm.”

“Do I call you sir, Mr. Foreman, or something else?” Mina asked, pressing herself into a corner of the car and looking at him.

“In private, Spencer or sir is fine,” he said. “Did the clinic talk to you about birth control?”

A fist of panic hit her gut. “No. But I’m on the shot, it should be good for another month.”

Spencer’s eyes flicked towards her as they headed up a ramp to a guard station. The big metal doors beyond were shuttered, but opened as the two cars approached. “You don’t have to worry about it with me. I had a vasectomy a few years ago. But if I ask you to be with someone else, they are to wear a condom. Always. If they try to press it and I’m not there, talk to Ona or Nora Zell. She’s the head of security. You’ll find her office on the second floor.”

“Okay,” she said, thinking about him coming inside her, about not even giving it a second thought when it happened. “About Natasha. It really wasn’t her fault this morning. I asked her about you, and the Tower. I’m sure we would have been much faster if I hadn’t.”

“How I discipline anyone in debt to me is my business. And do not confuse her gossip as friendliness. Natasha is interested in Natasha, and that’s about it.”

Mina felt like her hand had just been slapped, and stayed quiet while they drove through the darkening streets. She loved the downtown districts at night. On the busier thoroughfares, the city installed tall, ornate streetlamps that glowed like tiny fires in the sky. Their light flickered over

the car. It was hypnotic and her eyes slipped closed. Spencer turned on the radio. The news squawked out and he listened wordlessly as Mina counted down the streets in her head without looking, then thought about what businesses would be where if she were to open her eyes. The downtown hot dog place, with vegetarian dogs she loved would be out her window right now, but that was cheating. She could smell it as they pulled to a stop at a red. In another block would be... hm, a bank building, but she couldn't remember which one. Another few blocks on, Tate's Books, the name on a sign curved like the handle of a coffee mug. She smiled at that.

"You're smiling," Spencer said.

Mina opened her eyes, pleased to see she was only half a block off her guesses. "Yes. Sorry."

"You do not need to apologize for it. I was curious why."

Though his focus was on the road and he wouldn't see, she nodded. "I was playing a game, guessing where I was with my eyes closed. I was pretty close." A lull, and she felt the need to keep going, on the verge of babbling. "I didn't get a lot of days off to myself, but sometimes, when I did, I'd ride a bus here and walk for hours window shopping and listening to the street musicians." He stayed silent. "I guess I must have walked by your building a few times but I never thought about going in. I didn't realize there was so much inside there. It's beautiful. It all is, I guess. The building. The condo. Just... everything." Spencer still said nothing, and Mina folded her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry. I'm talking too."

"You apologize too much," he said, his voice harsh.

"Yes," Mina whispered. "I guess I do."

They eventually made a turn, then another. They circled around the stadium, avoiding the packed public parking, and pulled up behind Gallo at a gated entrance at the back-end of the big building. They were waved through and Gallo and Spencer pulled into empty spots beside an audacious supercar of some sort. There were twenty or thirty other gorgeous cars under the bright lighting.

Gallo held open Mina's door for her again, and she gave him a nervous smile. "Thank you. Going to spoil a girl."

He chuckled, but when Spencer gave him a look, his smile disappeared. Spencer came around and looped his arm through Mina's. A man in a suit and a woman in a white shirt and blue slacks opened a pair of big metal

doors for them as they approached. The woman purred, “Mr. Foreman, glad to have you back with us, as always.”

“Thank you, Loretta, Eamon,” Spencer said brusquely, and they swept on by. Inside, they could hear the din of the crowd waiting for the fights about to start. They headed down a short concrete hallway decorated in wall-sized posters of famed sports stars and fighters from the area, and another person in a suit gestured with a smile to the elevator banks waiting for them.

As they rode up, Spencer said to Mina, “You’re going to tend to me. We’re going to see a man named Isiah. He is not to touch you without my say-so. That’s a universal rule. Apart from my other girls, if anyone tries, tell me.”

“Okay, Spencer,” she said.

“Here or anywhere public away from the Tower, it’s sir,” he reminded her.

“Yes sir. So-” Mina caught herself before she said sorry again.

The doors opened to a long, curved hallway looking in on a party. A beautiful black woman with her hair pulled back in a headband paraded around in a pink latex skirt and a matching tube top. One man stood behind a tiki bar, smiling rapidly as he shook a cocktail and poured it. The rest of the room was dedicated to TVs and seating, with huge, plush couches and two walls of monitors overlooking the stadium at every angle and at every level. The far side held more seating on what looked like an enclosed glass balcony. A man in silhouette stood there, a drink in hand.

That man turned as Gallo led the way into the skybox. He was immensely fat, maybe four hundred pounds, but he had the hair of a Hollywood actor, sharply cut, precisely styled. He might have been handsome if he shaved the weight off. “Spencer!” he rumbled. “Five minutes until the preshow fights.”

“Isiah,” Spencer said, smiling. It didn’t touch his eyes. He finally let go of Mina’s arm and strode forward to shake the big man’s hand. Isiah slapped his back and turned towards Mina. Drool might have rolled out of the corner of his mouth if he stared any harder.

“She’s a treat,” he said.

“Mm. Mina, this is Isiah Duffy, our host for the evening. Isiah, Mina True.”

“A pleasure,” Isiah said, his eyes locked on Mina’s booty shorts.

“Nice to meet you,” Mina said, trying her best not to feel creeped out.

Gallo headed for a corner, watching the room with an impassive expression. Isiah and Spencer launched into a discussion about the upcoming fights. The woman in latex collected her drink from the bartender, strutted over on ridiculously high heels, and stuck out a hand capped in long nails painted with bright swirls. “Jordan.”

“Mina.”

“You’re his newest?”

Mina smiled. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m his girlfriend,” Jordan said, gesturing at Isiah.

“And my biggest pain in the ass,” Isiah said. He didn’t sound like he was joking.

Jordan gave him a smile with a lot of teeth before returning her attention to Mina. “Drink?”

“Oh, um...” Mina glanced at Spencer. He nodded slightly, and returned to the betting sheet in Isiah’s hand. “Yes, I could go for one.”

“Excellent. Isiah, a beer?”

Isiah nodded. Following her new acquaintance’s example, Mina came to Spencer. “Would you like a drink, Sp... sir?”

“A Manhattan,” he said absently. “Gunther knows how I like them.”

The bartender pulled down bottles of vermouth and bourbon, but no cherries. He poured two fingers worth of the bourbon into a tumbler with a large round ice cube, added a splash of vermouth, and said cheerfully, “And fuck the cherries.”

Mina giggled and brought Spencer his glass. He pulled her to her at the edge of the skybox and palmed her ass, right there in front of Isiah. She grinned at him, and said, “Good luck with your betting tonight, sir.”

Isiah asked, “Know anything about MMA?”

“No, sir,” Mina said.

“The violence too much?”

“No, sir. We didn’t have satellite growing up. My momma invested everything into my acting and my singing.” Mina hesitated, thinking how to phrase the next part. “And I never had much time for TV the last few years.” A lie, but a harmless one. When she came down with strep, Sylvain smashed her last TV with a crowbar, claiming she was just being lazy and watching it all day. He told her it would be her arm next if she didn’t come into the studio the next day and sing her heart out. The only thing that saved

her voice – and very likely her life – was Sylvain making a last-minute decision to go off on a bender with friends in Mexico.

Isiah said, “Well, we’re just about to begin. Jordan, food.”

As a hard rap beat pounded through the arena below, Spencer sipped his cocktail and kept Mina close with that hand on her ass. The crowd was on their feet, cheering as a slim man in red shorts surrounded by trainers walked down an aisle, thumping his chest and roaring at everyone around him. Spencer slid behind Mina and wrapped one arm around her waist, nuzzling her neck with his lips.

“The smaller men will go first in the preshow,” he murmured.

“Who are you betting on?”

“Neither of us think he has a chance,” Spencer said, pointing at the man just entering the ring. “So the other fighter.”

“I’d give you six to one odds,” Isiah said, but he didn’t sound hopeful. Spencer snorted and didn’t bother replying to that.

Jordan rejoined them with a plate of appetizers for her man. He sprawled out on an armchair and pulled her onto his lap, careful not to study Spencer as he did. Isiah was obviously trying to one up him, and Jordan gave Mina a quick roll of her eyes when Isiah was distracted by some kind of pulled meat on a bite of cracker. Mina smiled back.

The prefight introductions lasted longer than the fight itself. Spencer and Isiah’s man in yellow trunks came blistering out of his corner. The other fighter in red tried a couple kicks, but they bounced off the other man’s leg ineffectually. His next right went way too wide and Mina gasped as the man in yellow whipped a fist into the other man’s eye. He connected with a pair of lefts too but it was that right that ended things. The other man stumbled back, and like a tiger on wounded meat, the man in yellow grappled him to the ground and dropped a series of vicious rights and lefts before the ref called it less than a minute after the fight started.

“Is it always that fast?” Mina asked.

“No,” Spencer said. “The pre-show’s mostly amateurs. Most the pros will go at least a round or two.”

“The hungriest and the meanest will try to make it fast,” Isiah said through a mouthful of food. “And the smart ones will wait it out and find an opening. Spency-boy doesn’t agree.”

“The best of them realize the fight doesn’t matter, it’s about their career and their legacy,” Spencer said mildly. “And the smartest never even step

foot in the ring at all.”

Isiah laughed, spitting out crumbs everywhere. “True.”

The other two fights went the distance, the men clutching at each other on the mat, only occasionally breaking out of what looked to be stalemates. The bets sat at one and one as the main card fighters were introduced over the stadium’s speakers. Spencer kept himself to the single Manhattan, and eventually told Mina she should eat if she was hungry. She was, but she liked being close to him like this and stayed where she was until he patted her ass and told her to bring him some food. She did, picking out a variety, not knowing what he liked. When she came back, he was seated, and gestured at his hip. Mina sat on his hip, and without being told, she brought a bite of food to his lips. He ate the bite, and she twisted to kiss and lick his neck.

Isiah watched with naked interest. “I want to change our bet.”

“What do you have in mind?” Spencer asked, hardening under Mina’s hip. She wiggled slowly on him, drawing a pleased grunt from him even as his eyes flicked back towards the fighters about to square off below.

“I win, I get her for a week. You win, you get Jordan.”

“You already owe me five hundred thousand,” Spencer said. “Besides, I don’t bet my people. Not even for a week.”

Mina ground harder against his cock. “Sir?”

“What?”

“You think you can win?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m okay with it. I trust you,” she whispered.

Spencer stared at her, his expression unreadable. Isiah looked on, his tongue flicking out to lick up a dollop of sauce on his lip. “I think she wants a taste of me. How about it?” he asked.

The fight below started, and Spencer said finally, “I’ll make a bet, but not with you. Jordan. Same deal.”

Jordan twisted to grin at Spencer. “She’d be mine for a week?” He nodded. “Oooh. I like that. Mina, honey, you ever been with a woman before?”

“Uh huh,” Mina said, blushing hard. “I had to a few times for my old boss. He liked to keep some of his singers, mm, happy.” She looked over at Jordan, smiling faintly. “It was one of the things I didn’t mind about working for him.”

Isiah grabbed a handful of Jordan's hair and pulled her face down next to his. "Don't fucking lose."

"Touch any of my women like that and I'll break every one of your goddamn fingers," Spencer said, as calmly as if he were reading a newspaper.

"She isn't yours yet." Isiah leaned over and added, "And I'd like to see you try."

"I ain't yours either, you fat pig. I'm no one's property," Jordan said, pushing up off him. Isiah reached out to snatch her back and she smacked his hand. "One way or another, we're done here."

"Fuck this," Isiah said, starting to stand.

Spencer slid his hands up into Mina's jacket. She got the idea and worked the sleeves loose. To Isiah, he said, "We still have the cash bet going. Stick around or it's a forfeit, and I add another two hundred thousand to the debt."

Veins in Isiah's forehead looked ready to burst, but he crashed back down, muttering, "It's never a dull night with you."

Spencer helped Mina slip her jacket off. She got up to drape it across the back of a chair, and along the way back to her man, pulled Jordan with her. Spencer eyed them both, but didn't say a word as Mina patted one of his knees. Jordan sat down on him, legs on either side of his, her panty-clad pussy right against the fabric of his slacks. Mina took the other knee. It left him no room to watch the fights, but Spencer didn't seem to care.

Mina couldn't help herself. The idea of being someone's chip in a night of high-stakes gambling held a powerful sway over her. To be used, to be someone's so completely they could order her to do anything... it made her shiver. This wasn't like with Sylvain. Sylvain was always trying to establish dominance. Spencer... he simply *was* dominant. There was no need within him to prove himself. He had the cock, the money, the brains. He had this game won the moment they walked through the door. Mina knew it, and it turned her on so much.

Spencer owned her. And she loved it.

She ground her pussy against Spencer's leg through the fabric of her shorts and his slacks. His hands rested on each woman's hip. He was content to watch for the moment, his eyes flicking back occasionally to a screen in the corner to keep an eye on the fight below. Mina didn't know who his fighter was, nor did she care. Her gaze was locked on Jordan as the

beautiful black woman began her own grind on Spencer. She was more infatuated with the fight than Spencer or Mina, but found time every now and again to look over at Mina.

The bell dinged for the end of the first round, and Jordan leaned over. Mina got the idea and moved in too, her lips brushing against the other woman's. Their kisses may have started off demure and shy, but soon their tongues danced in a show for Spencer. The fighters below crashed together again, and Mina reached for Spencer's cock through his pants. His prick stiffened under her touch, and she worked the zipper down. With his help, his pants and boxers came down far enough that Mina could grip him and stroke him as she rocked harder and harder on his leg. The fabric of her flimsy panties rubbed her just right, and she was getting so wet for him.

His big, rough hand came up to palm the side of her breast. Spencer tugged her crop top up, revealing one of her full breasts. Isiah stared, his look somewhere in between lust and anger. Jordan watched too, her lips spreading wide in a smile until a cacophony down below drew her attention.

She shot to her feet, bellowing, "No, no, work your arm, you... shit!"

Spencer squeezed Mina's breast, not caring what was happening below. She stroked his cock, rocking harder and harder on him, eyes closed as she lost herself to her pleasure. The other side of her top came up. Jordan returned again, looking down at the two of them, her lips parted.

"You're up one," she said, dropping back down onto Spencer's lap and circling his cock with her small hand until he helped her with her top too. Then he took and guided her hand to Mina's shorts. Jordan slid her fingers in.

"Oh," Mina gasped when Jordan brushed her clit. She rocked harder on Spencer's lap as the next fighters came down to the ring, one to a southern hip-hop song, the other to hard rock. By the time the second main fight started, Mina was rocketing towards an orgasm, her eyes squeezed shut. Jordan's fingers on her clit were so well practiced, so precise. She couldn't even get herself off this quickly.

Spencer squeezed her breast again. He wasn't gentle and Mina didn't want him to be. "Yes, like that," she whimpered.

Beside them, Isiah stared. "You have to let me at least get a blowjob from her."

"As deep in as you are with me, I don't have to do shit," Spencer said.

Jordan glanced over at her ex-boyfriend and smirked. “You’re getting off on this, aren’t you?”

“Fuck you,” Isiah said, but it wasn’t very defiant. Mina looked too and giggled. His pants were down around his knees and though she couldn’t see his actual cock, his arm was definitely shifting up and down.

“I’m sir’s,” Mina moaned, grinding her wet pussy harder on her man. The intensity of the moment, the danger of if this went poorly, that she could belong to another person, they sent a roar of heat through her. But she knew better than that. Spencer was going to win. Her head tossed back as the bell for a break rang. “I’m Spencer’s, I’m Spencer’s, I’m...”

Her orgasm started in her spine. That had never happened to her before, one so powerful it radiated from her very core, but that’s what it did, making her arch her back and fall against her man as her pussy clenched. She went wordless, driving up and down his leg. He gripped her under her waist to keep her from falling, and her breath exploded from her.

“Ahhh, ahhhh, ohhh, sir!”

Dinging, furious dinging. Mina wasn’t even aware the second round had started, and barely registered that it was ending. Jordan stood again, this time twisting and pulling Mina up too. Her eyelids were still fluttering as Jordan cursed and laughed, giving Spencer a shake of her head. “You win.”

She kissed Mina hard, her hands all over Mina’s ass. The booty shorts came down, then her panties. Where her shoes had gone, Mina had no idea. Spencer shoved forward to the edge of the chair, and Jordan guided Mina to her knees beside one of his knees before she dropped to the other side. Mina finally came out of her orgasmic haze in time to watch Jordan suck Spencer’s cock into her mouth.

“Mine for a week,” he growled.

“Mmf!” Jordan murmured, driving down onto his cock with her first suck.

A surge of pride welled up in Mina. Jordan could take a lot of Spencer, but not nearly as much as she could. She kissed Jordan’s shoulder and stroked her back, watching Spencer out of the corner of her eye. He watched her too, his placid eyes now gleaming like a wolf in the darkness. His attention went back to Jordan. He palmed the back of her head and drove her deeper still, his other hand falling from his chin. He curled a finger at Mina and she rose. His arm wrapped around her ass and he pulled her to the side of the chair so he could suck on one of her big nipples.

Mina cupped her own sex, unable to help herself. Gunther watched them from the bar, mouth agape. Isiah panted with lust, his whole body rippling as he jerked himself faster and faster. He wouldn't be long, but Spencer, Spencer could go forever. And in the corner, Gallo watched the whole room, impassive, always like a statue. Mina blushed and looked away.

"Unnngh, fuck!" Isiah moaned, and he must have finished because his arm stopped moving. He stared at Mina's bared tits. She covered the one Spencer wasn't sucking with her free hand, but Spencer pulled it away.

"He's leaving now," Spencer said. "No need to be shy."

"Go to hell," Isiah said.

Spencer turned to look at him, the wolf in him still in full display. "You have one of two options. You pay me what you owe, and I mean right the fuck now. Or you give up the warehouse on Winthrop."

"North or south end?" Isiah asked, cautious.

"The docks. Jordan, get up here," Spencer said. The woman popped off his cock and shot up to her feet. Spencer turned her around and settled her down onto his prick, her ass to him. Mina moaned as she heard the squelch of his cock buried deep in Jordan's pussy.

"That's worth at least a million one," Isiah said.

"Nnng.... full..." Jordan whimpered. She rocked on his dick, swaying her ass like she was twerking in slow motion.

Spencer ignored her. "Bullshit. The foundation's crumbling and you bribed the inspectors to look the other way about it. I'll need to sink at least two hundred grand into repairs, not to mention sort out the parking mess you made."

Jordan rocked faster. He reached around and cupped her tits, squeezing and pinching the nipples hard enough to make her gasp. Mina strolled around them and spread their knees wide. Jordan gave her a hungry stare as Mina dropped before her and Spencer. They watched each other as Mina took her first lick of where Jordan's skin met Spencer's, and it almost immediately set the other woman off.

The men had stopped talking too, watching this. "You got me over a barrel," Isiah finally grumbled.

"I'll take cash otherwise," Spencer said drily.

Isiah surprised Mina with a wheezy laugh. He stood up, and she saw with some dark amusement just how small his cock was. "Fine. I'll talk to

the lawyers.”

“And if you come after Jordan for this...” Spencer warned.

“Fuck me, Spencer, I’m a real estate shark, not a gangster like you.”

Isiah sighed and did up his belt. “You have my word. Jordan, I’ll have your things brought to your place. Keep the car.”

“Uh huh,” Jordan breathed, and Mina wasn’t sure if it was because of Isiah’s words or the fact that she’d resumed licking Jordan’s pussy.

“See you in two weeks?” Isiah asked Spencer.

“Count on it. I want this skybox next.”

“Not likely. Lock up when you’re done,” Isiah said. He and Gunther headed out the door, and Gallo followed them, standing in the hallway, arms crossed.

Spencer’s hands dropped to Jordan’s waist, and he started to fuck back up at her as she rocked hard on him. Mina gripped his knees and licked what she could, happy, warm. The crowd below roared and thundered but they no longer cared about the fights, if any of them ever did. Spencer spread Jordan so wide, and she was a mess from the moment the others left the room, crying out.

“Ahh, ahhhh, ah, fuck me harder fuck me harder...”

Spencer pulled her back, simultaneously lifting his hips up off the chair. He pounded up into Jordan’s pussy, holding her tight against him. Her ass and his hips slapped together in a hard rhythm that left Mina ready again, her pussy aching for Spencer to take her too.

“Oh fuck, nnngh,” Jordan moaned, “Mina, keep licking me, lick my cunt, lick my clit, fuck, fuck, FUCK!”

She thrust up and slammed back down, her fingernails digging deep into the chair’s arms before her orgasm relented. Spencer jerked upwards, lifting Jordan with him. Mina scrambled backwards, staring up them both, playing with her pussy as his cock slipped free of the other woman.

He turned Jordan around again and pushed her backwards until her ass rested up against the glass overlooking the stadium. His hands slid behind her thighs and he lifted her up, his cock going right to her entrance again. Mina stood beside them, her ass to the glass too, still playing with herself as she watched. Spencer stared at her with pure fire in his eyes as he started to fuck Jordan against the glass with hard, vicious thrusts. Mina leaned in and kissed him. He grabbed the back of her head with one hand and clutched her to him, their tongues clashing, his bourbon-rich breath filling her lungs.

Mina melted for him, her fingers driving deep inside herself in frantic need to come again as he fucked Jordan even harder. The other woman was gone, lost to pleasure and the sensations that wouldn't quit. Mina knew how that went. She'd been in that position last night, when Spencer took her from behind, driving her back and forth as she cried his name. Jordan's knees rose, her feet rocking, her eyes squeezed shut. She came again with a breathless cry, and still Spencer took her, his cock plunging in and out with wet slurps. Her juices slickened the glass behind her ass, making for a lewd backdrop.

Mina kissed Spencer again, her hand roaming his bared muscular bottom. He dropped Jordan's legs down without warning and the other woman fell on her ass against the glass, panting, her chin against her chest. Spencer spun Mina so her ass thrust out and her cheek and breasts smashed against the glass. She cried out as his cock filled her in one thrust. She didn't care how hard he fucked her, just that he was, and despite the force of his thrusts, she pushed back against him, needing him even deeper, needing every inch of that wonderful cock inside her, spreading her, filling her.

"Yes yes yes," Mina gasped, "fuck me, come on, fuck me hard..."

"This pussy is so goddamn tight," Spencer growled, fucking into her again and again.

"All for y-you, sir, eh-every inch of me." Her face contorted with pleasure and her fingernails dug hard into her palms. The hammering he gave her, the cool glass against her cheek, the panting of Jordan as she tried to recover, all of it was so much. The butterflies started early in Mina's stomach again.

Their words devolved into moans from Mina and grunts from him. Spencer used her and she loved it. Her knees started to weaken and shake as she neared her crest. She couldn't hold on for much longer, but Spencer seemed to sense this and grabbed her arms. He gripped them as he pulled back just far enough her face and breasts no longer rested against the glass. With her body bend in a perfect L, he fucked her again. Mina's full hair fell across her bouncing breasts, and in the glass, she saw a faint reflection of herself, mouth open wide with lust as she bounced back and forth. Spencer saw too.

"You like that?" he growled. "Like watching yourself be fucked?"

"Yesss!" Mina howled.

“I’ve got a room full of mirrors in the Tower,” he said. “We can fuck in there and you can watch yourself come and come and come again.”

“Ungh, oh God, fuck, yes, want to watch your big... ungh, cock inside me...”

Her mirror self jerked backwards, breasts jutting out. Spencer’s balls slapped against her ass and she loved it, loved being used like this. Sylvain would have already come by now but Spencer was mad for his women’s pleasure. He fucked Mina hard but it was never with a loss of control. He went exactly the pace she needed, and the butterflies exploded upwards and throughout her body, lifting her up, making her fly. Her pleasure rocketed through her as she gritted her teeth, staring into that other self, at Spencer’s hard smile as she came on his cock.

Jordan. Jordan was there, holding her up, listening to something Spencer was saying. Mina barely noticed as she was turned around. Jordan helped her to her knees and finally she understood as they leaned in together, cheek to cheek, Spencer’s big dick right in front of them. The two women gripped it with a hand apiece and helped him end this, their heads twisting at the last, lips coming together as he came across them, rope after rope after rope.

Mina only really snapped out of it when Jordan helped her dress again. Her shorts were wet with her earlier orgasm but there was no helping that. The two women clung together as Spencer headed behind the bar for the bourbon and a bottle of top shelf rum.

Together the trio left the skybox, and Spencer handed the rum to Gallo as they waited for the elevator.

“Good fights?” Gallo asked mildly.

“Eh, good enough,” Spencer replied, absolutely serene as he palmed both women’s asses.

Lost Signal

Hard rain reminded Spencer of his last minutes with his father. It was impossible to get in to visit Burt in the no-name hellhole the government stuck him in, so Spencer had to bring him out. Back then, Spencer was living by himself in a single-room apartment near the prison. Gallo and the rest of his father's closest associates checked in on him occasionally but Spencer knew how the world worked, even as young as he was. Later, he would need Gallo's help in some dark and bloody tasks, but at that time, all Spencer was focused on was his father's freedom.

In the end, no one could give him that. But the warden, a hulking ex-military asshole, could give Spencer half an hour – for two and a half million dollars.

It was a bargain. Spencer contacted one of his father's fences – now his fence, he guessed – and sold two of the least-valuable paintings. The cash filled a small suitcase. He thought it would be bigger, like it would fill the back end of an armored truck.

Half an hour. That was all Spencer and Burt had together. The warden gave Spencer an EMT's outfit. An ambulance met him in a parking garage, and Spencer sat in the back all the way to the prison. They were going to escort his father to a hospital for observation, with a detour to a parking structure where Spencer could talk to Burt alone. Spencer thought it was all a show, that his father would be fine. But instead of the gruff middle-aged man who went in six months before because of a stupid mistake his son made, the man toted out by the real EMTs was frail, gray, and fading fast from the pneumonia that would kill him less than two weeks later.

The prison kept Burt in a room without heat, without a blanket, trying to force the location of all the stolen works from his lifetime as a crook out of him. Instead they went too far in the opposite direction. The two million was the warden's attempt at cashing out on something of Burt Foreman's reputation.

For that, Spencer would, one day, drown the warden in concrete.

But that was later, and in the half hour Spencer had with his father, he tried first to tell him how sorry he was before Burt cut him off and told him he was forgiven. As rain hammered on the roof of the ambulance, even with

his lungs forcing him to wheeze out the words in between coughing fits, Burt brought Spencer in close and gave him instructions. In that time, Spencer's future widened and a new kingdom was born. There was no "I love you" at the end. There never had been between the two. Burt Foreman always showed his love for his son in another way – by preparing him. He knew Spencer wasn't ever going to walk a straight line, and instead of trying to convince him otherwise, he taught his son everything he knew. Taught him to be better.

Now, Spencer honored that every day. Maybe not the way his father lived, not even remotely. Burt loved one woman and one woman only, while Spencer loved no one. But in his kingdom, Spencer reached heights his father would have only ever dreamed of. He owned whole corporations, an entire fortified skyscraper, armies. He made more in minutes than most people made in lifetimes. He was nearly untouchable, but not so stupid as to believe he really was.

He watched the rain from his chair in the boardroom of one of his offices downtown. It was one of the more aesthetically pleasing of the bunch. Glass walls were broken up on the outside by vertical slats that gave the building the appearance of being a giant window covered in blinds and laid sideways.

The greenery outside was well kept too, with semi-circles of shrubs oscillating outward like pieces of a maze. In any piece of property he owned, Spencer liked the groundskeepers to grow orchids, roses, peonies, and dahlias. Only the dahlias really mattered to him. They had been his mother's favorite.. At this office, the flowers were grouped together in a pattern reminiscent of volleyball panels. The grounds were beautiful enough that, on occasion, a would-be groom would propose out there.

This office was where Spencer conducted the bulk of his legitimate business. Six men and four women occupied the rest of the chairs, all of them with laptops or tablets in front of them, some with assistants hovering at the fringes of the room. The scents of two kinds of rich, citrusy peaberry coffee filled the room, and every person there, including Spencer, had a mug of both. One was a name brand, the other came from a small, up-and-coming grower they were contemplating buying.

"I can't taste the difference," Antwone Tipton said, sounding mildly fascinated. The head of shipping for Spencer's companies, he was an extremely well-traveled man.

“Me either,” Louise Washington said. The assistant CFO was filling in for her boss Connie, out sick, and Spencer was glad for it. Connie was something of a kiss-ass. Louise was about as straight a shooter as he’d ever met.

The others in the room, heads of the marketing and sales departments agreed. Alfonso Ruiz, the young lead on their foray into the realm of selling quality coffee, said tentatively at the other end of the table, “Mr. Foreman, sir? Your thoughts?”

“The Tanzanian’s darker but I see your point. The difference in quality is negligible,” Spencer said, swinging back around to look the slender man in the eyes. Ruiz was always so nervous around him. Spencer couldn’t blame him, not really. Of the people in the boardroom, only he had seen what Spencer could really do when a potential client tried to grab a secretary’s ass. Spencer broke three of the man’s fingers in rapid succession before throwing him halfway down a flight of stairs. When it came to the women of his personal life, Spencer would touch or use them however and wherever he wanted, but when it came to his employees, no one got handsy with them. Not even him.

More agreement, and Ruiz looked relieved. “With a longer growing season and easier access to shipping lanes, we can slash prices and undercut the competition.”

“It makes sense,” Antwone said. “What’s the projected crop yield?”

Spencer caught a flurry of motion outside the office. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, someone rushed to speak to Gallo. Gallo folded his arms and listened for a minute, then nodded and turned for the door into the boardroom.

Trouble.

Gallo walked calmly through the room, ignoring the eyes on him as Ruiz and Antwone tried to keep up the conversation. When he neared Spencer, Gallo leaned down and murmured, “The ISP’s been hit.”

Spencer nodded, and stood. Ruiz fell silent, looking about ready to piss himself. “I’m going to have to bow out. Ruiz, you have my support on this.”

The tension melted out of the man and he grinned. “Thank you, sir. I think it’ll be a great addition to our brand. I’ll have a, ah, a gift basket of the rest of the blends sent to you.”

“That’ll be fine,” Spencer said, already following Gallo back through the room.

Out in the hallway, Gallo started speaking immediately, “No one was hurt. Two men came in, one of them held a gun on the crew, the other smashed the place up, including the server room. Malena’s got the place locked down and everyone’s still on site.”

“Good.”

They headed down to the building’s private parking garage. Two of the security team stood by one of Spencer’s luxury SUVs, and opened the door for them on approach. There was no sense in having Gallo race across the city, but Spencer had a hard time not gritting his teeth at every red light. Sadly, no matter his money or his influence, he couldn’t speed up traffic. It would have been faster to have a helicopter sent for him, he complained, and Gallo snorted his agreement.

They finally arrived at the modest, unmarked square building that served as the headquarters for Spencer’s shadow Internet service provider. The setup was interesting, to say the least, though Spencer was hazy on its details. Through backdoors written into legitimate ISP software, a small team of black hat programmers were able to provide Internet service at a stupidly low price to customers across the city. They deliberately kept the numbers low so as to not attract attention. The real backbone to the setup was the added pack-ins like innocuous-looking gaming software with backdoors to access the dark web, or even more popular, access to Spencer’s network of camgirls and his porn studio’s films, all of which were a cut above what a person might find for free. It wasn’t nearly the moneymaker that Spencer’s legitimate businesses brought in, but it wasn’t supposed to be. Malware in the software they installed on their clients’ computers gave Malena’s crew the real treasure trove – information.

With just a few clicks, a person’s entire digital life could be accessed through the software. For most their regular clientele, this meant personal data acquisition, which could then be used for credit cards, fake IDs, and burner phones, among many other uses. For the handful of elite stupid enough to sign on, this meant a feed of personal information and vices, fed straight to Spencer at his request.

For someone to have hit the ISP like this, that was beyond coincidental. The office was listed as a private IT support group – not exactly a stretch of the truth, since Malena’s people were the personal computer gurus to a

small chunk of Spencer's businesses. No one would have reason to go in there and smash it up unless they knew exactly what the place was.

Malena greeted them at the door. A tall, hourglass-figured woman with French-Italian looks that left her with naturally honey-tanned skin and raven black hair that fell down to her ass, she seemed anything but the cliched geek, especially in her white sheath dress. Memories of her riding him, cupping those big breasts, rose in Spencer's mind. When Malena was beholden to him and not just a regular employee, he had to force himself away from her. Her body was a drug.

Even the stress of the moment couldn't stop her eyes from crinkling. "Spencer, I didn't you'd be coming yourself."

"Good to see you, Malena," he said, wrapping an arm around her lower back and kissing her none too chastely. Several of the guys watching from further inside elbowed each other, but they ignored them.

They pulled apart, and Malena said, "I'm just sorry it's under these circumstances." Spencer grunted at that.

Gallo ventured further in, taking stock of everything. The building was dominated by the large central room where all the programmers worked, save Malena, who had her own office deeper inside. The cubicles were spacious and comfortable, but several of the dividers had been knocked down by the intruders and a few monitors sat on a long folding table, bearing the marks of having been smashed or hit with something.

"I'll start getting everyone's stories," Gallo said. Spencer nodded and his bodyguard made a circular motion at the building's conference room. Everyone else started to shuffle in there, the smartest ones looking even more terrified. Gallo had something of a reputation. They both did.

"Tell me what happened," Spencer said to Malena. "From your perspective."

She gestured at the front door. "We keep it locked. No one in who doesn't have a keycard, but we've got a few smokers. They go out pretty regularly. One of them, Daryl, headed out on his usual break and came back in with a guy holding a gun to his head."

"Any chance Daryl's in on it?"

Malena shook her head. "No."

"How do you know?"

"Because he pissed himself. You don't fake that kind of fear."

Made sense to Spencer, though the guy could have loaded up on water or caffeine beforehand to help sell it. Security footage in the building should clear that up. “Keep going.”

“One of them held a gun on us.”

“What kind?”

“Sorry?”

“What kind of gun?” Spencer asked.

“Um. Hm. I don’t know.”

“Semi-auto, revolver, shotgun?”

“Uh. Semi-auto. Some kind of pistol, I don’t know, Spencer.”

“What were they wearing?”

“Black, uh, hoodies, shirts, jeans. Hold on and I’ll show you.”

She started towards her office, and he followed. The room was typical Malena, as cool and conservative in her decorations as his condo. Her concession to flair was her computer, built into a custom case alongside a trio of monitors, one huge and curved, the other two smaller and stacked on swivel arms right on top of each other. She brought up the video camera footage, and played a video from the time of the attack. The angle was good, covering both the front door and the central room. While that one played, she brought up another video on one of the side monitors, this one of the server room.

“How’s the husband?” he asked.

“Out of the picture.”

“Hm.”

Same as so many married women that came to Spencer, her husband was Malena’s reason she needed a deal. A wannabe gangster, comedian, and rapper, Ron was awful at all three, and managed to land his ass in jail for selling guns. Malena, then a programmer for a legitimate ISP, brought Spencer a mouthwatering deal. She could give him access to the ISP’s back end, paving the way for their shadow business, and she’d be his sexual plaything for a month. In return he helped arrange her husband’s legal freedom. He agreed on the stipulation that the sex be extended to six months. That had angered her at first but she had no real choice and accepted the deal.

“Thanks so much for the ‘sorry to hear that,’” Malena said, a sharp note in her voice.

“I take it I had something to do with the breakup given how chipper you are?”

“Fuck you.”

Malena knew what was coming. Spencer saw it in the way she closed her eyes. He didn't disappoint. He placed a hand at the small of her back and bent her over, thrusting her ass out. Without hesitation, he jerked up the hem of her dress. No panties. He spanked her curvy ass, once, twice, five times, ten times. She whimpered at the first, a tiny reminder of how much she used to love this, how she would mouth off just to be used like this, and by the tenth, she was openly panting. He drove his fingers into her pussy and found her wet, but didn't give her the satisfaction of a finger-fucking.

When she turned on him, her cheeks burned red and her chest rose and fell. He gestured at the computer, and though her glare never receded, she turned her attention back to it.

She skipped forward in the footage until two figures burst into the building. Malena went back a few minutes, then let it play. There was no sound, so she acted as the narrator, her voice shaky and breathless.

“This is where Daryl goes out.” A beefy short guy got up from his desk on the video, peeling off a headset and talking to one of the other programmers as he stretched. He nodded, then headed for the door. When he came back in, a man gripped the programmer's hair, a gun pressed to his temple. Not a pro. A pro wouldn't have got that close. Interesting.

Despite the daylight, the intruders were dressed in all black, like this was out of some bad movie. Ski masks, sweaters, gloves, the works, all of it was black with the exception of their sneakers. Malena had been wrong about the jeans but Spencer couldn't blame her. The stress of the situation was bound to screw with a few of the details of her memory.

The one without a gun cradled a bat against his shoulder. They walked Daryl forward, shouting something. “Nobody move,” Malena said, emulating them. “Nobody gets shot. But if you lift one finger-” The gunman tapped the pistol against the terrified programmer's temple and Daryl pissed himself right there. Spencer would wait for Gallo's opinion, but it looked real enough.

The intruders herded everyone into a corner, the one with the bat kicking down some of the dividers to make a point about how fast he thought they should be moving. Malena came out of her office on the video, hands up, fury in her eyes. The guy with the gun strolled to her. She glared

up at him as he reached out to stroke her breast through the dress. Spencer tensed, his hand tightening into a fist. He'd kill this man for touching one of his like that, former or current.

On camera, Malena spoke two words he didn't need narrated, and spit at the guy's mask. The other one roared with laughter, and started smashing the place up. He didn't spend much time on the computers or the monitors, mostly swinging at everything near the huddled employees to scare them a bit. Then he asked Malena a question.

"He asked me..." She drew a deep breath, and let it out with a shudder as she paused the video to turn and look at Spencer. "He asked me for the card into the server room and the passcode."

"Your lives were being threatened. You made the right call."

"I'm still sorry. If this... needs retribution, put it on my head, not theirs. Not Daryl's."

"Unless someone here was involved, it won't. And if they were, that'll be between me and them. We'll reevaluate security conditions but I'm not about to lash out at your people for it."

She nodded, and started the video again. The guy with the bat walked her back into her office and came back out with a card between his gloved fingers. He swiped it through the server room's access panel and punched in the eight-digit code to enter.

"Code's still swapped out regularly?" Spencer asked.

"Mm hm," Malena said, watching herself come out of the office with tears in her eyes. Spencer laid a hand on her shoulder.

"He touch you in there?" he asked, his voice quieter.

"You're going to kill them anyways, so what's the point in a yes or no?"

Spencer's grip on her grew momentarily tighter before he let her go. "It'll decide if I make it quick or let them bleed out from a shot to the balls."

Malena let out a tired chuckle. "No. He didn't touch me."

"Good."

They swapped the feed to the server room, but there wasn't much useful there Spencer could see. The guy spent a few minutes smashing the place up, then walked out again. He said something – "let's go" – to the other man, and they left in a hurry. In the office feed, Malena rushed towards the door after them, fists clenched. She looked out into the parking

lot, turned back around, and surveyed the damage to the office. They started the feed over, this time from the perspective of the cameras outside, but there was little they could use. The sedan was a silver Chrysler 300, not exactly uncommon. Malena fast forwarded the footage to show the men coming back out, and they rushed the car but didn't do anything stupid like take their masks off. Malena ran out after them at the end, and flipped the vanished car the middle finger.

They stopped it there, and Spencer sat on the edge of her desk. "Catch their license plate?"

"A few letters." She told him, and he texted the letters to Anastasia.

"Hm. Anything else you can think of?"

Malena leaned back and tapped her lips with fingers she used to wrap around his cock like she was mad at it. "No."

"Could this be your husband?"

"Not those guys, no." She said the words, considered the possibility, then shook her head. "Ron would come after me, not you. He hates you, but he's terrified of you too. He's living out in Illinois now anyways."

Spencer nodded. "Anybody else you might think of?"

"A lot," she said. "I'll give you a list of the top candidates. We make a lot of enemies here."

"How long will it take for you to get the servers back up and running?"

"Everything's backed up offsite. Our customers won't see a hiccup. As for our servers, I've got most everything we need in storage, but the shelving units and some parts will take a few days, maybe a week."

"Anything I can do to speed that up?"

She shook her head. "The closest they'll come is from New York. Even with expedited shipping, it'll take a day or two."

"What if we flew out there?"

"Tonight?" Malena asked.

"Right now."

"Sure. I could contact a few stores and suppliers and ask them to stay open."

Spencer nodded, thinking about another reason to go out there, a small art gallery with a painting he wanted to acquire. "Good." He pushed off the desk. "And when we come back, you're staying at the Tower for the short term."

"I'm not letting you put a leash on me again."

“No leash this time, no contract. This is me looking out for my interests.”

“Wow, thanks,” Malena said.

He fixed her with a glare. “You really want to have this conversation? Do you know how many women I invite to stay in the Tower after their contract is up? I can count them on one hand. I did it when your original contract was up, and I’m doing it again now. That’s unprecedented.”

She looked away. “I’m not saying no.”

Spencer brought his fingers to her chin and made her look up at him. “Good,” he said, and leaned down to kiss her. Her lips parted, her breath soft against his lips, and he slid his tongue against hers, a greeting old and familiar to them both. Malena had been a favorite, no bones about that. His cock ached to be buried inside her again.

But her fingers pressed to his chest, and pushed him back. “Not here. Not with them around,” she said. “Please.”

He nodded. “Come on, then.”

* * *

Gallo stayed behind to finish interviewing all the employees. A call to Nora, and a new security detail was on its way to Spencer’s airfield along with a driver and bodyguard for him. Kiri, six feet of ropey muscle and bad dad jokes, pulled up in a silver SUV not long after.

“Forty minutes for the jet to be prepped, sir,” she said as she escorted them to the SUV, her well-trained eyes keeping an eye on everything and nothing all at once. Gallo once speculated that the only person in the Tower who could both outfight and outdrink him was Kiri. Spencer didn’t think he was wrong. Kiri was street tough, a self-taught fighter who wound up a top draw for an underground bare-fist fighting organization. A talent scout for a private security firm snatched her up. The firm was one of Spencer’s, and during her training, she drew Nora’s eye, and she, in turn, brought the young woman to Gallo’s attention. He trained her himself to be part of Spencer’s closest security detail.

“Good,” Spencer said. “The Tower first. I’ll want... mm... Mina True for the trip.” The songstress hadn’t been out of his mind since the fights a couple weeks ago. The woman was like catnip to him with her soft demeanor outside the bedroom and her wild submissive side in it. Plus she was one of the most astonishingly sexy women he’d ever met, and that was saying something. Her curves contrasted so well with that doe-eyed

innocence of her face. He hardened just thinking about her and Malena together.

But there was one more Spencer wanted to add to the mix, one he really ought to have checked in on since the sealing of their deal. When he thought about who would have hit him recently, two big names crept to mind – Isiah as a fuck-you for the real estate deal and taking Jordan from him, or Michael and Joy Crowley. He didn't think Isiah had the balls, but the Crowleys had both the means to hire thugs like this as well as the character to try and start something with Spencer.

“And call into the mayor's office. I'll want Joy Crowley too, but I want you to request it straight from Michael Crowley. Record the conversation. I'll want to hear it on the plane. They'll need clothes and toiletries.”

“Yes sir,” Kiri said. “And should I have some readied for you?”

“I'll tend to it at the Tower. We'll also need transportation in New York as well as a cargo truck. Make reservations for dinner at the Fate for my companions.”

“Anything else, sir?”

Malena was already going for his pants. Spencer grunted, “No, that should do it.”

“I'll take care of it.”

Spencer and Malena didn't make it out of the parking lot before she had him unzipped in the backseat of the SUV with the divider up. On her knees leaning over him, she was at the perfect position for him to pull the back of her dress up. That ass was unparalleled, and he kicked himself for not stopping by Malena's office to see it bounce back against him while he fucked her bent over her desk.

He almost told Kiri to head back to the shadow ISP's headquarters to do just that until Malena's lips enveloped his prick. Plenty of time to take her on the way to New York. And there. And back again.

“Fuck, you're going to look good eating Mina and Joy's pussies,” he grunted.

Her mouth swirled down on him all the way to the back of her throat. Malena had always been one of the best cocksuckers in his lineup. Then again, she'd always been amazing at every aspect, taking him as deep anally as anyone he'd ever fucked, nearly all the way to his balls. She could match him stroke for stroke when it came to good, hard sex, giving it as

good as she got it. Mina reminded him a lot of Malena in that regard. She seemed to genuinely love being used, and threw it right back in his face. That was always a surprise given her otherwise sweet nature. He'd yet to fuck her ass. He liked to savor that with some of his women, especially the gentle ones like her. Maybe he'd do that on this trip. Maybe...

Maybe Spencer was ignoring the top tier blowjob going on right now. He smirked to himself and shook his head slightly. Mina really was dangerous, the way she kept slipping into his thoughts. He'd have to be careful. Get too close to one of the women, it opened up a weakness his enemies could exploit.

Malena, seeking his attention, bobbed up and down his cock, each time with a theatrical, "Urk!" when she took him into her well-trained throat. He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her up off his cock. Her spittle made his first six inches shine.

"You missed this, didn't you? Being used?"

She sucked in a lungful of air and pulled free of Spencer to prove it, gobbling him back down, her fist at his base now, jacking what she couldn't take. His hand went to her ass again, then her pussy. This time, when he fingered her, she moaned around him, humping back as much as she could in the confines of the SUV.

Kiri came over the intercom. "Five minutes to the Tower."

Spencer didn't acknowledge her. Five minutes was far more than he'd need to get Malena off. She was already so wet. The only question in his mind was if he'd come first or her. With both of them on the clock, they used their oldest, favorite tricks. Spencer withdrew his hand, sucked his thumb to get it good and wet, and the next time he sunk his fingers into her pussy, he dipped his thumb into Malena's bud. She went wild, bucking hard back and forth against him, her breaths coming harder through her nose. The blowjob fell by the wayside as her lips popped off his prick.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, that's good, nnnngh, fuck!" she gasped before devouring him again, whimpering as he stroked her fast, his fingers making wet slurping noises as they seesawed in and out of her. His thumb pushed in and out only to the first knuckle, but it was enough to drive crazy. She threw her head back, staring at him as she started to shudder.

"Mine again," he growled.

"Yo-yours, mmmm, mmmmm, Spencer..."

She came just as they rounded a corner, nearly toppling into the floorboard. They were at the Tower, but Spencer still hadn't come yet. She drove back down on him, sucking only his first inch into her mouth, swirling and dipping her head up and down rapidly, teasing his sensitive underside with her tongue. Her hands worked his shaft. Down the SUV went into the parking garage. He was too close not to finish, so he thumbed the intercom and snarled, "Need a minute."

Mina was just coming out of the elevator with Ona Flores's assistant Kyrstel as they pulled to a stop. She was dressed in a silver mesh miniskirt, a matching plunging top, and white high heels. Her smile when she saw the SUV lit him up maybe as much as the blowjob. So sweet, so achingly honest.

"I'm close."

"Uh huh," Malena agreed fervently, still rocking as she sucked him off.

Kiri shut off the engine but didn't kill the power by opening the doors. He started thrusting up into Malena's mouth, right there, right there. He thought about what was to come, about the three gorgeous women on his flight fucking each other. Malena, the picture of sculpted perfection. Joy, the classic beauty, the slut he tamed after only one fuck session. Mina, the closest thing to purity a son of a bitch like Spencer would ever come across. All of them, on their knees, each of them taking turns doing just this. All of them, asses high as he fucked each of them in turn. All of them in his bed.

He came.

Malena swallowed him down and finally came up with another soft pop. "Jesus," she croaked. "We never lost a step."

"I'll be back down in ten minutes. Get yourself whatever you need from the stores for the trip." Spencer opened his door, followed a moment later by Kiri up front. Mina's smile never faded as she took in his unzipped pants and the woman stepping out the other side.

"Hello, sir," she said. "Welcome back home."

That nearly stopped him. *Welcome back home.*

Hell, but Spencer liked Mina True.

* * *

Mina and Malena waited with Kiri by the SUV while Spencer went up to his penthouse suite to gather some notes for his planned visit to the art gallery and fill in Nora on the break-in at the ISP. One of the cleaning staff came through and wiped down the seat, leaving it smelling like citrus.

Some minutes later, Kyrstel stepped off the elevator with Spencer, holding his leather clothing bag. When she loaded it in the back on top of Mina and Malena's things, he stopped to give her a kiss and a squeeze of the ass.

They headed to Joy Crowley's office. He sat up front while Malena and Mina talked quietly in the back, getting to know one another. The not-for-profit charity apparently didn't feel the need to scrimp in location, taking up a third floor overlooking a city park. She waited in a big gray Lincoln in the parking lot. When they pulled up beside her, she reached into the back and pulled up a duffel bag before stepping out. Joy didn't so much get in to the SUV as leap inside, slamming the door shut behind her before anyone could see how she'd dressed.

Spencer smiled a hard-edged smile. He left her instructions to dress slutty, and oh Lord, she had. The red minidress sheathed her tall frame, and the black hosiery was an excellent touch. She had touched up her makeup the way he liked it on her too, pancaked, emphasizing her eyes.

"The mayor's wife is about to wrap her lips around Spencer Foreman's cock," Malena said, smirking. "What would the newspapers think?"

"Fuck you, slut," Joy snapped.

"Tower business is Tower business," Spencer said mildly. He rolled a finger at Kiri and she drove on again.

Mina, in the middle of the two women, gave Joy a companionable smile. "Um, I'm Mina. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Mayor."

Joy rubbed her eyes. "I'm in hell."

* * *

The jet featured two cabins. Up front were six reclining leather seats. The two forward seats faced the middle pair and it was here Spencer, Kiri, Mina, Joy, and Malena settled while they took off.

Mina's big pretty eyes took in everything with a childlike wonder. "I've never been in a private plane before," she breathed. "It's always been coach. This is incredible."

"Don't try so hard, it makes you seem desperate," Joy said.

Spencer snapped, "Enough with the snark. That's ten spankings when we get in the air."

"Really doling them out today, huh?" Malena asked. At his glare, she raised her hands. "All right, I know, ten more."

Spencer eyed Mina. "Want to join the Mile High Spanking Club too, speak up, act out."

“No, sir.” She looked down at her knees and folded her hands in her lap. There was silence until the engines fired up, and then Mina said so quietly Spencer almost couldn’t hear her, “Well, on second thought, yes sir. I mean... Spencer.”

Try as he might not to smile, his lips threatened to tremble upward. Kiri straight up barked a laugh. When he looked in her direction and raised an eyebrow, she said serenely, “Sorry sir. Thinking of a joke. Sir.”

Spencer shifted his attention back to the three. “Malena, give Kiri the names and addresses of the shops we’ll be visiting. After we pick up the parts, the three of you will have some free time before you go to dinner. Travel together. No one goes anywhere without the others and Kiri. As far as dinner, I’ve taken the liberty of getting you a table at Fate. Mina, Joy, remember that you are here on my dime. I expect you to act at all times in my best interest.” He held Joy’s icy glare. “However you might feel about me.” To Malena, he said, “You might not be one of my live-ins anymore, but as one of my employees, I expect the same out of you.” When she nodded, he spoke to the three at large again. “If you have phones, give them up to Kiri when we land. I don’t want our location spilling onto social media when one of you decides to snap a selfie.”

“I’ll want to check in with my crew,” Malena said.

Spencer nodded. “And you can, on the plane. When I’m finished with the three of you.”

They settled back, waiting for the jet to finish its ascent. Joy glowered at Spencer the entire time, while Mina looked out the window with rapt attention as they crested above the thin wisps of clouds. She caught Spencer’s eye and smiled briefly before looking back out the window again. Malena plucked the day’s newspaper from the side pocket of her chair and browsed the headlines. She flew with Spencer a few times before and knew where all the in-flight entertainment was located – particularly the toys in the sleeping cabin, but also the small ten book library at the back of the passenger cabin, the laptops, and the screens hooked up to SSDs loaded with hundreds of movies and TV shows, not to mention hours and hours of footage of Spencer’s favorites from among his adult film branch.

He took a proffered business section from her and was reading it when the pilots finally announced they were leveling out and the estimated travel time was three hours. To Malena, Mira, and Joy, Spencer said, “Go get

yourselves ready for me. I want the three of you on the bed, asses up, ready for your punishments.”

Malena and Mina unbuckled. Joy followed only after a minute, a quiet act of defiance. But when she turned away, her back to him, she raised the hem of her minidress to show off the tops of her stockings and her matching panties. These she tugged down just far enough to show off a glittering plug. Without a word, she looked over her shoulder, her glare turning into something impish, and she tugged the dress back down before following the two other women.

Now that was interesting. If she was behind the attack, showing her subservient side would be a brilliant tactic. Or maybe Joy really did want to be his. No way to tell yet. For now, Spencer could do nothing with the reveal but think about it. He needed a better picture of who was responsible for the day’s attack before he acted.

Kiri watched, smirking, but said nothing. In a low voice that would not carry between the cabins, Spencer said, “Do you have the recording of your phone call with Michael?”

“Yes. I’ve emailed you the file. He was colorful.”

Spencer nodded. “Keep an eye on Joy. If she uses a phone on the flight, I want you there listening in.”

“You think she’s the one who hit you today?”

“Right now, let’s say she and Michael are people of interest.”

“Understood.”

“Get some rest. I’m only to be interrupted if Gallo comes up with something substantial on the ground.”

He left her there, already tugging off his jacket and his tie. In the sleeper cabin on the bed, three nude asses jutted up high. Mina giggled nervously on one end, and Malena hushed her with a kiss in the middle. Joy said nothing, but her cheeks were bright red and she watched the other two guardedly.

“Insubordination comes with a price,” Spencer said, and licked his palm. He lined up behind Malena’s juicy ass, lowered his hand to her cheek, raised it, and spanked her so hard the noise was like a gunshot in the small space. She yelped, but it was more for show than anything else. He knew she loved to be spanked. Even more. Cropped. Caned. Whipped. He had neither the room or the inclination to do any of that now, but there was a paddle on board. That, he fully intended on using.

“Attitude comes with a price,” he said, licking his palm again. This time, he spanked Joy, and she drew a deep, shuddering breath.

“Forgetting my title and your place in my organization comes with a price,” he said, and licked his palm a third time before lining it up to Mina’s ass. Both Joy and Malena watched with interest. He hesitated a split second, not really wanting to do this to the innocent Mina, who had faced down a devil in Sylvain Pelletier. But she wanted this, he reminded himself. Still, hard as he’d slapped the other two asses, he couldn’t help pulling Mina’s spank just enough that her crack was more of a smack.

He knelt next to the bed and opened up a chest. Inside were all his favorite toys when traveling, and from it, he pulled a leather paddle. Holes drilled into it gave it more of a sting. As he returned to the women, he realized his hesitation with Mina was weakness. Playing favorites, going gentle, that marked them for anyone looking to get to him where he was most vulnerable. It was why he surrounded himself in dozens of women, not just a few.

Spencer made her the first.

Mina wasn’t expecting the force of the first spank. He was no unkindler than he would be to any of the other women, but it was a firm crack across her deliciously curvy cheek. She hissed with it, rocking forward, instinctually moving away from the next swing.

“Stay still, or I give you five more,” he ordered, his voice going deadly calm. “You wanted this.”

“Y-yes sir,” she breathed, and cried out as he spanked her other cheek. The paddle left red welts interspersed with spaces where the holes were. He reached out and brushed the delicate skin with his thumb, growing hard, needing all of them.

Smack went the paddle against her other cheek again, and to Mina’s credit, she took it as best she could. When she got used to this, she would realize that relaxing her body was the best way to take it, but for now, she listened and stayed put. He doled out the rest of the spankings to her backside, alternating each paddling with a massage to her pussy lips. Pleasure with the pain was the point of this. Despite the stings, she grew wet, and Spencer grew even harder.

Joy next, and she fucking loved it. At his first spank, she looked over her shoulder, eyes alight. “Do you get off on this, sir?” the mayor’s wife spat.

“Yes,” Spencer said simply, and spanked her other cheek. He reached down to rub her pussy and found it even wetter than Mina’s. “And so do you, slut.”

She looked away and dropped her head. Ashamed? Maybe. But he thought he saw a flicker of a smile there too.

When he finished with her, Spencer undid his belt and kicked off his shoes. His cock was raging hard by that point and he needed to fuck someone. But not yet. Not until he’d paddled Miranda. She took her spanking well, a gasp escaping her each time the paddle came down. This was old hat to her – she was a mouthy one when she was under his thumb at the Tower, and he had to admit he loved to discipline her.

“Fuck,” she whimpered the fourth time Spencer brought down the paddle. Malena threw him a look over her shoulder, wanton, needing his cock. He brought the paddle up at the same time as he worked the button on his pants with his other hand, and brought it down with a final sharp crack across Malena’s shapely ass.

His pants and boxers dropped, and Spencer tossed aside the paddle, his face drawn in a grimace. He gripped Malena by her tender ass cheeks and speared his rock-hard cock into her soaking wet cunt.

“Ohhhh!” she cried out.

Still as welcoming as he remembered her being. Their bodies had meshed so well together. He pumped into her hard, hands still on her ass as he nearly drove Malena’s face into the mattress. When he jerked out of her, she let out a desperate whine, but Spencer ignored it. He brought his gleaming cock to Joy’s pussy next, this time very literally pushing her face down into the mattress as he pounded in and out of her. Then it was Mina’s turn. He hesitated staring at her bruised bottom, and despite knowing he shouldn’t play favorites, he also knew the temperature in the cabin was rising and no one was likely to notice a moment of kindness. He gripped Mina’s waist instead of her ass, careful not to plunge too deep inside her and brush up against the tender flesh.

She rocked back against him, her folds enveloping him as deep and tight as Malena. He took her hard and fast, more strokes than the other two women. Then he was out and shoving himself back into Malena in the middle again, reaching under her to cup and squeeze those magnificent tits. She thrust back at him, going wild for it, her dark hair spilling across her face.

The spankings left him on the verge of losing control. Joy and Mina watched over their shoulders as he fucked Malena, his teeth gritted, his eyes nearly closed. Joy reached a hand between her legs and started playing with herself. Mina leaned over and kissed Malena's shoulder as she was shoved back and forth with every hard pump of Spencer's cock.

"Oh fuck, Spencer," Malena gasped. "Spencer, oh, oh, ohhhh!"

Just minutes after he started fucking her she came, her ass twitching back and forth as she rode it out, dropping her head to the mattress and whimpering inaudible syllables. He yanked out of her and lined up behind Mina again. She cried out as he buried himself nearly to the balls in her, still careful not to brush her sore skin. With one hand on her waist and the other pulling back on her shoulder, he fucked her as hard and fast as he had Malena, their bodies squelching together with each thrust.

"Joy, have you ever been with a woman?" he asked

"No."

"Have you ever thought about it?"

Joy looked at Malena, then Mina. She shivered, and whispered, "Yes."

"Stay on your knees like that and move in front of Mina." He massaged Mina's ass with gentle strokes of his thumb. She tensed, but gave him a tentative smile over her shoulder. Brave woman.

Why didn't you escape when I gave you the chance?

He let the thought go and focused again. "She's one of the best pussy lickers in my Tower."

"Thank you, sir," Mina said.

"Malena, you're in front of Joy. On your back," Spencer said, pulling Mina back across the bed until she was off and bent over the mattress, leaning on her hands. He was still buried to nearly his balls inside her, loving the feel. Joy crawled backwards until her slick slit was close enough Mina could lick it.

"Oh," Joy whispered. It was a pleased sound, a surprised one. She looked back over her shoulder at Mina, blinking. Her mask of scorn and fury came off, replaced by something more contemplative. She rocked backwards as she turned her attention back to Malena.

The raven-haired woman spread her legs wide and bent her knees, sliding her finger up and down her pussy lips. Joy tentatively leaned down to lick her.

"Focus on my clit," Malena said.

Spencer cut off her next words as he thrust hard into Mina again. “No instructions. Joy is a smart woman. If she can’t figure out how to make you come with her tongue and her fingers, she’ll be blowing five of my associates in New York, and I guarantee they aren’t going to be as gentle as me.”

Joy rocked harder at his words, and not for the first time, Spencer wondered to himself if she was getting off being used by him or if it was an act. If it was, it was a good one.

He focused on Mina. Her pussy accepted him so greedily, her muscles flexing involuntarily against him every time he went deep, trying to keep him there. He intensified his pace, gripping her shoulder and fucking into her hard.

Malena watched him, her dark eyes lit with good humor. It had to sting, resting on her backside like that, but if it did, she gave no sign. Joy was doing her best trying to lick every inch of her pussy, and occasionally Malena looked down to coo at her when she hit a pleasure center just right. When Joy did something with her fingers Spencer couldn’t see, Malena’s smile slipped away and her focus remained on the black-haired former actress eating her out.

“Fuck, Joy, that’s good, baby, just like that...”

It was close to breaking Spencer’s order that Joy not be taught, but since it seemed entirely in the spur of the moment, he ignored it. Besides, Mina was beginning to lose control and demanded his attention. He reached under her, stroking her belly, her clit, and as he rubbed that magic button hard, Mina threw back her head and gasped, “Ohhh, oh God oh God oh God...”

She came with a nearly inaudible whimper, and Spencer pulled out of her. He leaned down next to her and slid two fingers under Mina’s chin as she rocked back and forth, still coming down. “You’re going to sit on Malena’s face now. Face Joy.”

She nodded and crawled on shaky hands and knees, stopping to drop low and twist Joy’s face towards her. She kissed the mayor’s wife and slid a hand down across her pussy. Joy moaned against Mina, and turned her head to look at Spencer.

“Spencer... sir... when this trip is done... may I come to the Tower sometimes to... to be with your other women?”

“You like this?” he asked. Joy nodded, blushing. “You’ll be allowed on my conditions.” Mina straddled Malena, watching the deal go down with parted lips as Malena began to lick her pussy. “First. You are the lowest rung on my companions’ ladder. You will be their subservient bitch. However they want to take you, however they want to use you, you will be theirs completely. This will always be recorded. I’ll want to see what they do to you.”

“Yes sir,” she whispered, dropping her lips back to Malena’s pussy.

“I wasn’t done. In New York, I’ll be buying you a collar. In public, you will always be wearing this. If I call you and demand you show me, you’ll have it on. Any dignity I’ve shown you regarding your social status is also over. You will be required to dress like a slut at my command, and I will use you wherever I please.”

Her tonguing of Malena grew more and more fervent, her hand going between her legs. Spencer got on the bed behind her. He shoved his cock into her, and Joy cried out, “Yes, yes, to all of it, yes, use me, make me your slutty bitch...”

Her face dropped back to Malena’s pussy, wild, ravenous for the other woman. Something had been set loose in Joy. She gripped the Malena’s legs and jerked them wide, hands wrapping around her thighs. As Spencer bounced her back and forth on his dick, Joy ate Malena with a passion he’d rarely seen equaled.

“Oh, oh fuck, that’s good,” Malena gasped against Mina’s pussy. Mina herself was speechless, staring down at Joy licking out the other woman.

Spencer grabbed a bottle of lube on the bed and as quick as he could, he slicked up three fingers. He teased Joy’s bud just long enough to get her ready for him and drilled his fingers in and out of her, matching the pace of his cock. She bucked hard back against him, never losing her focus, never losing her drive.

When he gave the order if Joy couldn’t make Malena come she’d have to blow some of his acquaintances, Spencer thought that the ISP head might fake one just to appease him and go easy on Joy. But the way her body was jumping in an oh-so-intimately familiar way, he knew the crest was real when it hit her.

“Fuck, unnngh, Joy, ungh!” she cried out against Mina’s pussy.

“Mina. On your back. Head towards me.”

Mina hurried to obey, her legs spread wide so she could play with herself. To her credit, her wince at being on her sore backside was a momentary flash. Spencer jerked out of Joy and moved her sideways so her pussy was just above Mina's face. Without being told, she dropped, grinding her wet folds against Mina's hungry, waiting mouth. Spencer added more lube to his cock, then pressed the tip to Joy's ass and plunged in.

"FuuUUUCK!" Joy screamed. "Fuck my ass, Master! Fuck my slutty ass! I'm sorry Michael but... it... feels... so... good"

Master? Spencer grinned to himself.

Malena was moving, flopping over and pushing herself upright onto her knees. She dropped to lick Mina's pussy again, staring up at Spencer plunging in and out of Joy Crowley's ass. Her amusement was gone, her precise makeup running. The sight, and Joy's tight ass around his cock, left him frenetic, pounding Joy, his muscles flexing, releasing.

Joy threw back her head, her voice leaving her for a solid ten, twenty seconds. She quivered, then gasped, "Oh, oh oh ohmyfuck, ohmyfuck, com... coming so fuck... nnnnngh!"

She fell forward, her words changing to panting. One hand reached out uselessly, patting the bedside, gripping the sheets. Spencer fucked her ass another minute, maybe two, until she could prop herself up on her elbows again, her whole body shaking with the effort. He jerked out of her and grunted, "All of you, on your knees in front of me."

Malena and Mina hurried to do it, but Joy couldn't. Very literally couldn't. There was no use barking orders at her. She was simply too exhausted. In the end, Mina and Malena propped her up, and Joy gave him a deliriously satisfied smile as he jerked his cock and came all over their faces, their tits.

Turbulence, and he dropped down into a seat, his naked ass slapping against the leather. Spencer needed to make sure, but one thought crossed his mind as he recovered, and his instincts were usually right.

Whoever hit him, it wasn't Joy Crowley.

* * *

The greatest misconception of Burt Foreman's life was one he didn't even create for himself, but a legend created for him by rampant speculation when he first showed up on the art scene – that he was a thief.

It was understandable that he developed something of a mystique about him. Foreman was a nobody until an art expert from Cambridge made the stunning announcement that a hitherto-unknown Caravaggio had been discovered, but that wasn't even the strangest part of the story. The expert had been kidnapped at gunpoint, masked, handcuffed, and driven at least an hour to a garage with white sheets over the windows so he couldn't see out. There, in the middle of the garage, was an easel and a painting. His masked kidnapper told him to assess the painting for its legitimacy. The work couldn't be done there, but if it was a forgery, it was of a mastery unseen in that day and age. When asked how much it would be worth on the market, the only answer the expert could give was in the tens of millions of dollars at the very least, and probably more if it went to auction.

The story was so insane as to be laughed off, but a year later, the Caravaggio surfaced again, this time at an underground auction house where it fetched seventy-two million dollars. Burt Foreman, under an assumed name, walked away with forty of that after paying off the auctioneer, and a legend's seed was planted.

Half a year later, a Mark Rothko abstract showed up in a similar auction. This time, the painting was a known quantity, stolen in transit a decade ago. Everyone thought the seller was the thief, and Burt never corrected them.

The truth only ever belonged to Burt, his great love, and his son.

Spencer emerged into the front cabin after Mina and Malena helped clean him with wipes and hot water from the washroom. They were working on Joy when he left them be.

Near the galley, Kiri slept in a chair facing the sleeper cabin, feet reclined. She was trained to wake and be ready at the metaphorical drop of a pin, so Spencer was pleased he made it to the galley and was dropping ice cubes into a crystal tumbler before she woke up with a start.

"Good morning," he said.

"May I speak freely?"

"Sure."

"Son of a bitch, I've never met anyone as quiet as you on your feet. It's spooky."

Spencer laughed, and grabbed another tumbler. Normally he wouldn't allow one of his security staff to drink while on duty, but they still had two

hours left to fly. Not much point in denying her the pleasure. He finished with his own whiskey soda and made Kiri a Tom Collins. When he brought it to her, she looked surprised.

“You remembered.”

“I try,” he said. “Any word from Gallo?”

“He grilled Malena’s people and is going through their personal histories, but his instinct is they didn’t help facilitate the break-in. Nora is having an additional camera installed with a better view of the street.”

“Good.” Spencer set up a workspace on a pair of interlocking tables, pulled one of the laptops from the seatbacks, and booted it up. While he waited, he sipped his cocktail. “You can go back to sleep.”

“I’ll be awake now. Care for something to eat?”

“Yes. I doubt I’ll have a chance later.”

She busied herself at the galley while he opened up the email program. Above a short list of new emails concerning Tower affairs that didn’t require in-person briefings was the recording of Kiri’s conversation with Michael Crowley.

He listened to it, then twice more. Michael was pissed at the way Kiri coolly informed him Joy’s presence would be needed for at least two days, but there was nothing irrational or out of character about that. No threats, no anything but a low-level furious acceptance. Nothing to use there. His name still remained on the board for whoever hit the ISP.

With a pen and a notepad, Spencer began to come up with an actual list. Right at the very top were Michael Crowley and Isiah. Then came names of everyone who knew about the ISP and where it was housed. This list was larger than he’d like, considering he hadn’t even yet begun to add Malena’s staff. There were the lawyers, the accountants, the fixers. Then there was Malena herself, and her husband, and the thin circle of insiders who had to know about these things in order to cook the books.

Realistically, of those names, about fifteen had the stones to come after him, and a few of them actually had throughout the years. Sometimes killing your enemies was less effective than muzzling them and breaking them to your will, but even a tamed dog bites from time to time. He had nothing to even speculate on at this point, no motive, no familiar traits. Whoever it was, unless they found the toughs responsible for smashing the place up, would probably remain concealed until they made a move again.

The Tower and the flight crews had standard protocols when Spencer didn't specify any food or a chef be brought on board. He didn't like reheated food, so this left a selection of cold cuts, salads, fruits, entrees, and sides. Kiri brought him a bowl of goi ga and a platter of cold cuts, cheeses, and fruits. He ate as he contemplated the list. No names stood out to him. Very few on the list were stupid enough to try to make a move against him, and those that were certainly wouldn't have pulled off an operation like this without making a mistake.

He ripped the sheet of paper from the pad, stuffed it into his pocket, and started the next bit of research. In a small, private gallery in Queens, a months-long series featured artists affected or based around the Vietnam War. One painting in particular was of interest to Spencer, that of a luscious, leafy plant with blue blooms and the barest hint of a mud-caked hand half open underneath on the ground, ants crawling across the fingers. A little on the nose for his own personal taste, but the oil painting was exquisitely detailed. It was part of a set of twelve painted by Craig Longmont, once a GI serving two tours in the war and who came home with a mind burning to recreate what he'd seen, good, bad, ugly, beautiful.

Longmont saw harsh backlash at first when the antiwar fever was still at its peak, and sold the twelve paintings for a tiny fraction of what they were actually worth. Over the years he saw more success with portraits, even being commissioned to paint a veteran senator. A couple years ago, cancer began to creep into the man's body. Though he was still fighting a good fight, Longmont was slowly dying and sought to get the Vietnam collection back. Most were in museums, some of whom were willing to make deals. Others belonged to private collectors who eventually caved in. But one piece had always eluded Craig Longmont's grasp. Belonging to a private donor, it was finally being wheeled out in public at the New York gallery, the first time it had been seen in years.

Spencer kept dossiers on galleries of interest, and that included the Lady of the Fine Moon Gallery. His people scouted it out for him, getting pictures, videos, and names of employees as current as three weeks ago. Not as current as he'd like, but he didn't think it would matter much. One man. That was all Spencer needed. He could steal the painting, or he could walk it out of there. While he was a much better thief than his father ever was, Spencer greatly preferred the latter.

Never bother with untying a Gordian knot when you can hack one, and never hack one when you can convince someone to untie it for you.

Writing things out always helped him commit them to memory, so he was taking down copious notes on Eytan Haenle, proprietor of the Lady of the Fine Moon, when Malena strolled into the cabin.

“The other two are asleep,” she said, not so much walking towards him as slinking. “They’re yummy.”

“Feel free to use Joy any time you’re in the Tower.”

“Hooray, a present.” She eyed the notepad curiously. “What are you working on?”

“A project for tonight. Something that needs my attention.”

“Eytan Haenle. Now that’s a name.”

Spencer grunted. “Not your concern, Malena.”

She raised her hands. “All right. Well, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to make my one phone call now, Mr. Warden.” He looked up, surprised into a snort of a laugh. She grinned, and leaned forward to kiss him. “It’s good to be yours again, Spencer.”

* * *

Spencer stuck around long enough to be bored by the details of the purchases Malena needed to make for the ISP. He told Kiri he’d be back at the condo early in the morning hours.

The sleek car belonged to one of his businesses there, a high-end executive model with an engine powerful enough to make sure the driver had constant wood. Perfect. He arrived at the gallery with an hour to spare. He found somewhere to park, walked a block back to the gallery, and stepped inside. The interior was elegant in a bland way, with faux soapstone floors covered in a light glaze, dark gray walls, white trim, and rows of lights nearly as thin as pens illuminating the paintings within.

The exhibited art was far more attractive, and Spencer found genuine enjoyment walking through at a snail’s pace. Once his father learned the value of the paintings he fell into, he studied art appreciation and history like a man obsessed – because he was, in a detached, professional way. When Spencer came to live with him, Burt taught him everything he knew. Spencer never had his father’s great love of art, but he could definitely appreciate it, value it, treasure it. The paintings in that gallery were great pieces, some even more than Craig Longmont’s. If this was a simple

robbery, there were three Spencer would have plucked from the walls before even eyeing the Longmont piece, but that was not why he was here.

The man in the tweed jacket, vest, and slacks, however, was.

Eytan Haenle wasn't exactly fat, but he definitely came close to busting a button or two on that vest. He spoke to one of the visitors in a low baritone, his smile only touching half his face. It didn't take long for the two to finish their discussion, and finally Haenle ambled over to Spencer, taking in his suit from toe to head before turning his attention to the painting Spencer was examining. "Isn't that piece something awe-inspiring?"

"It is," Spencer acknowledged, turning back to the landscape of la Drang Valley. There was no violence depicted in the scene, but there was something to the shades used that felt foreboding, desperate. "Tragic and beautiful."

"Mm. Eytan Hanele."

"Michael Smith."

They shook, and wandered to the next painting. "You're the director?" Spencer asked.

"I am."

"Did you have family that served? Why this exhibit?"

"Mm, no. My father was here at home, rattling the sabers for peace. Beside my love of art, I am something of a history buff. Self-proclaimed, of course," he said with a wink.

The guy was hitting on him. Oof. That was going to get awkward in about half an hour. "Of course," Spencer said.

"We talk so much about the other media of Vietnam. The movies, the books, the shows. But we so rarely discuss the artistic aspects, the nightmarish and the beautiful we hope to display here, through the eyes of the American soldiers who lived it."

"A good goal," Spencer said. "The painters, are any of them still around? I'm fascinated."

"Some," Eytan said. "Unfortunately, of course, the war was quite some time ago."

"Sure."

Eytan pointed out the living artists, skipping over Longmont's painting entirely. Spencer listened. The man was a natural storyteller, if a bit up his own ass. While there was still another patron, Spencer drew it out, asking

inane questions about the soldiers' roles in the war, about their lives now. Finally, the last man left with ten minutes to closing, and Eytan drew even closer to Spencer, clearly about to make his move.

Spencer ignored him and walked to Longmont's painting. "One last question, and then I know you need to lock up for the night."

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean the conversation has to end there. I'm thrilled to have met someone so enthusiastic."

Spencer smiled blandly. "Let's talk Craig Longmont, and why you didn't include him in the list of living painters."

Eytan's smile dropped immediately. "Who are you? Another lawyer?"

"Not exactly, but I am something of an arbiter and I'll be taking that painting from you."

"I'm calling the police."

"No. You're not. You're going to call a friend. Dale Higgins."

"Dale?" Eytan asked, blinking. "What does he have to do with this?"

"Nothing. He's a mutual acquaintance. Tell him Spencer Foreman is here warning you to take down the Longmont painting, package it up, and hand it over."

"I will not."

"I'm not here to make threats. I'm here to demonstrate a point. Your security system and cameras, they're Ocampo CMX. The panel's right there on the wall," Spencer said, gesturing with his thumb that way. "It's an okay system, but there's one fatal flaw, one they don't tell you about. You know how you can check the security feeds through the app in case the alarm goes off and you're not close by, then deactivate it with your PIN? Well, install the same app on any phone-" here, Spencer dug out his phone and Eytan flinched like it might be a gun "-and you can send the system a code, same as the one their highest-level technicians have access to in order to shut it down remotely in case the owner can't be reached. Only this one doesn't get logged into the system, and you get no phone call about it."

"That can't possibly be true," Eytan said.

"It is. It's cheap for a reason." Spencer tapped away at his phone and nodded at the security panel. The green light blinked, then turned to red. After another code, the red light turned to green. "What's your usual response time? A minute? Tell you what, I'll call your friend while we're waiting, and he can vouch for me."

Spencer dialed Higgins's number, preprogrammed into his phone on the plane. He waited, and Higgins picked up with a sigh. "Hello, Spencer. Want to tell your man he doesn't need to hold a knife on me?"

Spencer grinned. "Hello, Higgins. I'm here with your friend Eytan. Please tell him who I am."

"Burt Foreman's son."

Eytan didn't get it. Not at first. But after a few seconds, the words exploded out of him. "Oh my God."

"Thanks," Spencer said. "Let him go."

"Yes sir," his man said on the other end of the line, and Spencer hung up.

"I could have stolen the painting," Spencer said. "Even without that passcode I can rewire that panel in about half a minute. I could have shut down your system, weighted down the pressure panel, and taken Longmont's painting. Could have walked right out the door with it. But I wouldn't have been able to deliver this message in person."

"What mes-?"

Spencer hit him hard in the gut, doubling Eytan over and making him spit up a thin stream of what smelled like wine.

"The man is dying. Even if he wasn't, that painting belongs with him and you and the owner fucking know it. You were fleecing him, waiting until he was desperate enough to pay far more than it was worth. If I can break in here, I can break into your apartment, Eytan. The two bedroom on Northern." He helped the other man straighten up, tugging his jacket into place. "I like the wall of potted plants. That's a great touch."

"You can stop threatening me," Eytan said, sounding miserable. "Take it."

* * *

Elsewhere in the city, Malena watched Mina practically orgasm with every bite of her shrimp and lobster dumplings while Joy asked her hesitant questions about her singing career. Kiri, absorbed in her lamp chops, only grunted when Malena said she needed to use the bathroom.

She didn't.

Instead, she took a detour, and caught their server coming out of the kitchen. Quietly, she muttered, "I'll give you three hundred dollars right now to use your phone in the bathroom."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" the woman asked.

Malena seized on the opportunity. “Yes, but she sees cops coming, it’s going to get ugly. I know a detective. I need to call him, make sure this is handled the right way.”

It was complete nonsense, but people loved being saviors, and even more, they loved the potential of dangerous drama. The server looked around, pulled her phone from her pocket, and handed it over. “The passcode is six one zero five.”

“Got it.”

Malena ducked into the bathroom for real this time, peeked under the stalls, and saw no one’s shoes. She dialed a number from memory, and spoke quickly and quietly.

“We’re in New York. If we fly back to the same airfield, you and the others might be able to take him there.” She gave the address. “Don’t kill him, you fucking idiot. Or me.”

“What do you take me for?” her husband whined.

“A fucking idiot. Like I just said.”

She hung up, and when she came out, the server was hovering close by. Malena palmed her the phone, and said quietly but urgently, “We have to play it like nothing’s happening. He’s going to help us when we get back to the hotel.”

“Good luck. I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thanks,” Malena said. How she didn’t start snickering, she never knew.

The phone call ended up being for nothing. Her husband Ron, indeed a fucking idiot, waited all the next morning at a park just beyond the airfield, a hunting rifle in the trunk of his car and ready to call in Malena’s special friends to swoop in on the airstrip. But a family got nervous about the man sitting there doing nothing, and eventually a cop pulled in beside his car. Ron explained his wife was coming back on a flight, but he didn’t know when. It sounded flimsy even if it was the truth, and the cop told him to move it on and wait somewhere else.

* * *

They flew again in the late morning, but not to Vineport. A large, unmarked box rode in the passenger cabin with them. Mina and Malena eyed it, questions on their lips but remaining unspoken. Joy ignored it, mostly spending the flight fingering her new collar.

This flight was much shorter, only forty-five minutes, and they were greeted by one of Spencer's men in an SUV. Spencer told his traveling companions to stay with the plane, and rode with the painting in the SUV ten minutes away to a pleasantly bland two-story house in the suburbs.

Spencer told his escort to wait in the SUV and that he might be a while. The front door to the house opened, and out came a man maybe in his mid-twenties, a hard set to his face and a short, no-nonsense haircut. Ryan Longmont was the spitting image of his grandfather at a similar age.

"Is he here?" Spencer asked. "I'd like to speak to him in person."

The younger Longmont nodded, his jaw working back and forth. "Do you really have it, or are you here to shut us up?"

Spencer gave him a thin smile, and stepped to the back of the SUV. He opened the doors and pulled out the box. Ryan's hard gaze broke, and he blinked at it before helping Spencer pull it out.

"You'd better carry it," Spencer said. "I don't know the place. Be a shame to drop it now."

"Sir, I owe you an apology. It's been such a fight, and..."

"It's all right. Let's get it where it belongs."

They took the box inside. It smelled pleasant, like homemade bread, only sweeter, and it amused Spencer how long it took his mind to latch onto what it was. Cinnamon rolls. He hadn't smelled them freshly made since... well, since he was a child. The place was homey and well-kept, nicer on the inside than the outside. Several beautiful pieces of art hung on the walls, but none so remarkable as Craig Longmont's. A younger artist in the family? Perhaps the military wasn't the only way Ryan carried on after his grandfather.

They went up a flight of creaky wooden steps, Ryan feeling out each one carefully as though the layout of the house might change now that they had the work they fought so desperately to bring home. Spencer followed, mute. His father should have been the one making this trip, to see the collection complete. If Spencer was a superstitious man, he almost could have sworn he felt Burt's rough hands on his shoulders.

"He's in the study, reading," Ryan said.

Spencer nodded, and they stopped at the first door beyond a bathroom. Someone had marked out names and heights along the trim. Had Spencer's mother done this for him? He couldn't remember.

Ryan cleared his throat, knocked, and a deep, rich voice said, “Come in.”

Spencer opened the door for the young man and caught an eyeful of Craig Longmont seated in an armchair, a collection of short stories in hand. He stood up as Ryan came in first with the big box.

“Ryan? What’s going on?”

“Grandpa, this man... this is Spencer Foreman. He called me last night to tell me something... well, something unbelievable.”

“What?” the older Longmont asked. Then, almost as if he only just then noticed the box, he dropped the book beside the chair, standing on unsteady legs. “No.”

Spencer, still silent, helped Ryan with the box, holding it while the younger man undid the corners and slowly pulled out the painting in its frame. Craig Longmont’s hand shot to his chin, his mouth. Silent tears rolled down his cheeks as Ryan held up the long-lost painting.

The old man finally crept forward, his trembling fingers reaching out to brush the canvas. He looked at Spencer and choked out, “Thank you.”

Spencer nodded. “It’s a beautiful piece.”

“How did you convince them to let it go?”

“I’m a persuasive person.”

The old man chuckled and dabbed at his eyes with the edges of his sleeves. “You must be. We have some money, it’s not much, but...”

“No. I asked your grandson for a different fee.”

“What would that be?”

“I’d like to see the rest of the collection, and I’d like to have a word with you. Alone.”

Craig studied him, then turned to Ryan and nodded.

“I’ll put the painting in the other room,” the young man said.

His grandson hugged him, picked up the painting, then left them alone. Craig stepped towards a minibar in the corner, a small thing but stocked well. “You strike me as a bourbon or a whiskey type of man.”

“So long as it’s wet.”

The old man poured them both a couple fingers, and brought them to Spencer. He led the way out of the study and towards a master bedroom. “I don’t sleep up here. Too many memories. My wife.”

“I’m sorry,” Spencer said, meaning it.

“Me too. But it’s also the only room in the house big enough for all them, so...” Craig trailed off and pushed open the pair of doors into the bedroom. There, on easels, on the walls, and even one propped up on the bed, was the rest of the man’s Vietnam collection. Oils, all of them, and so exquisitely detailed it was if they were in the country. Spencer walked from painting to painting, silent, taking them in, committing them to memory. Finally he turned to Mr. Longmont, now seated on the edge of a stool.

“I’d like to make you an offer, Mr. Longmont. Or rather, a proposal.”

“I’m listening.”

“I doubt your grandson would. He seems a very traditional young man who takes after you.”

“For better and worse.”

Spencer smiled. “I suppose that’s the curse of all sons and fathers. Anyways, I’d like to be the first your family offers the collection to if they decide to sell after your death. The paintings would be displayed regularly in one of my own galleries, given a prominent spot, and I guarantee you they will never be better taken care of than with my people. Your family would be welcomed guests any time.” He named a figure, and the old man’s eyes widened.

“That’s... that’s far beyond what they’re worth, Mr. Foreman.”

“No. It’s not.” Spencer finally focused entirely on Craig Longmont and the real reason he was there. “I’m not going to say his real name for your sake and mine, but a long time ago, in a very bloody battle, there was a good killer. But not even the best killers see everything. You saved him from a sniper. He was shaken, badly shaken. You whacked him over the head, gave him a drink of water, and told him to keep fighting. It left something of an impression. Because of you, a lot of men came home who wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“I wish...” Craig studied one of the paintings, his eyes gone half the world away. “I wish I could remember.”

Spencer came to him and shook his hand. “I wouldn’t expect you to. Just know you made a difference, sir.”

Craig looked away, studying one of the paintings. He said nothing more, lost to time and memory, and Spencer left.

Headliner

The Cepheus lounge singer was gorgeous. Her long, reddish-brown locks came across one of her eyes, giving her a sultry, old-fashioned vibe. Her gown eschewed the sequins and vivaciousness of the same era and went for more of a modern boudoir look, black and lacy with cutouts teasing just enough of her breasts and stomach to leave every man in the Cepheus leaning forward and staring. The greens and blues of the stage lighting highlighted her in shimmering ocean-like waves.

Her soulful voice, rich and breathy, swelled out of her and caressed her listeners, but it was clear she was only singing for one man, her eyes locked on him across the bar, cheeks flushed as she raised a hand to her hair, her fingers dancing down across her face, her body. Spencer Foreman stared back, either not hearing the question Rhea asked him or ignoring it. He'd been doing plenty of both since Lazar, the Cepheus's owner and piano player, brought the lounge singer on stage with a scintillating introduction with the ivories. His head now hung low and his whole body rocked to the music he was making with the lovely vocalist.

Rhea sighed. She was getting nowhere with this. For weeks, she hung around the first two floors of the Tower, trying to convince Foreman every time she saw him to give her an interview. At first, his security team always blocked Rhea, but he seemed amused at her efforts and eventually allowed her to walk with him to the elevators or whatever business he was frequenting. He never answered any of her questions, never even acknowledged her besides a simple, "Let her through."

Rhea had been investigating Foreman on her own time for months now, assembling a meager dossier on the man some people across the city called the king of Vineport. She knew he did favors for people. That was an open secret. If a person interested him, anything they wanted, he'd grant them their wish if he could make it happen, and given Spencer's seemingly unending reach, he could work nothing short of miracles. Rumor was he was the one responsible for putting Michael Whiteclay in the mayor's office, but that was only the tip of the iceberg. Several council members acted none-so-subtly in ways that favored his businesses, creating industrial and housing districts that kept him the dominant economic force in

Vineport. His companies held a tightening grip in Los Angeles, Savannah, Freeport, and Tacoma, and those were the ones with a public face. So far, Rhea dug up at least six more companies she believed to belong to Foreman through tangential, hard-to-track connections. Unsurprisingly, some of those were run by big players within Vineport who were rumored to have received favors from Spencer in the past.

One rumor Rhea could verify herself was that he surrounded himself with beautiful women. In the days she spent trying to get his attention, she saw now less than twenty on his arm in various configurations – solo, in pairs, even once with a train of five blondes walking behind him. She didn't think she would have got his attention if she wasn't so leggy and perky. Her big, inquisitive eyes and sexy youthful face opened a lot of doors for Rhea, but unfortunately tended to end a lot of conversations prematurely when her interviewees realized she wasn't going to sleep with them.

Then there were the darker rumors about Spencer, the ones Rhea was really interested in. Rumors that the federal government wouldn't touch him. Rumors of bodies in his wake, of ruined lives and shattered families when someone broke a contract. Rumors that he controlled the drug trade in Vineport, the focus of her questions now.

"Let's talk about the warehouses you recently acquired," Rhea said, trying to draw Foreman's attention away from the lounge singer. She threw out something just to get his attention. "Is it true you've been using your economic reach in South America and further abroad to bring cocaine and heroin into the city?"

Well, her grab worked, and Spencer finally broke his gaze from the singer long enough to give Rhea a long-suffering look. "I've read your articles online. You're a better investigative reporter than that. Don't tell me you haven't found a way to sneak in there and see for yourself it's legitimate imports."

She had, in fact. "Then would you care to tell me if there's any truth to you controlling the drug trade in Vineport?"

"I'll tell you this much. I make enough legitimately that adding drugs on top of that would be a foolish move, considering the risk. Cocaine, heroin, meth, none of those things foster the kinds of environments that create employees I want running my businesses. If I was involved with drugs around the city, it would be to help constrict their reach. My

marijuana dispensaries aside, it makes no sense to dip my toes into something so volatile.”

Rhea scrambled to write that down in her own brand of shorthand. “What about the rumors of your other criminal dealings?”

“Such as?”

Foreman asked the question with a smile, spreading his arms wide on the backs of the booth. His attention wasn’t going to last long, Rhea bet.

“Like a high-speed chase through the city, culminating with the body of Sylvain Pelletier in the middle of the street and two dead in car crashes? Or how about the disappearance of Jessie Pena?”

The last one hit. If Rhea wasn’t so used to studying people, she wouldn’t have seen the minute changes. The tighter press of Foreman’s lips, the clouding of his eyes. It was gone in a flash, a better walling-off than she’d seen from just about anyone.

Talking with some of the people who worked for Foreman’s businesses around town drummed up that name, and even then, they would only talk about it away from their jobs. Jessie Pena was an up-and-comer in the business world, a well-liked man from a well-liked family. The story had its variations depending on who told it, but the common thread had Pena coming to Spencer soon for a favor after a bad investment. Spencer accepted, the terms of which were hotly debated, but what was known was that Pena broke his bond, and his entire family wound up dead because of it. Pena himself disappeared.

“And what about Pena?” When Rhea told him what she knew and suspected, Spencer shook his head. “You and your sources have it wrong.”

By that point, the lounge singer was finishing up her song, and Spencer started to rise. Rhea reached out and grabbed his arm. “Then tell me the real story.”

Spencer looked from the singer to Rhea, then back again. “If I tell you, you’ll have to watch me fuck her.”

“What?” Rhea asked.

“You heard me. I am going to take her, right now. Come with, if you want.”

“I won’t be one of the women in your Tower.”

“I didn’t say you’d have that opportunity,” he snapped. “This is about the information you want. Either watch me fuck her and I’ll give you this one story, or I tell security not to let you in the door any longer.”

“I don’t have to do anything but watch?” Rhea chewed on that. “Deal.”

Spencer moved, and she hurried out of the booth to follow. She imagined him taking the busty singer and hated herself for the flush of heat it caused. Rhea had a boyfriend, Kelso, and this felt dangerously close to cheating. But if all she had to do to get closer to Spencer was watch, then that was acceptable in her mind.

The singer saw him coming and murmured into the microphone, “Thank you, thank you. I have to step away, but you’ve been lovely.”

She handed over the microphone to the piano player. Spencer offered her his hand to guide her off the stage, and they walked together towards a back office. The singer gave Rhea a sweet smile, but her attention was almost solely Spencer’s to command.

Inside the back office was a small desk bookended by two couches along the wall. Spencer walked to the desk and turned around. The lounge singer unzipped him and fished his cock out without having to be told. Rhea blatantly stared at his big, hardening dick. There was no point in avoiding a look, not if she had to be dragged into this situation.

The singer glanced at her, blushing again, but returned her attention to Spencer when he ran a hand through her hair. She knelt, the dress stretching to its limits over her curvy ass and hips. Her hands wrapped around his cock’s base, and she dipped her head, swallowing his tip. His hand still on her head, Spencer began talking.

“Jessie Pena was one of my earliest partners here in Vineport. Not because he owed me one of my favors, but because I had top quality vegetables and fruits from my international farms to sell at near cost and he had a struggling chain of grocery stores that couldn’t afford to stay open. I took control of his businesses while retaining him as the CEO.”

The singer popped off him. “Sir?”

“Yes, Mina?”

“I have to sing again later. I’ll deepthroat you if you like but it would hurt my vocals.”

His lips twitched upward. “We can’t have that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She went back to sucking his tip, and he reflexively stroked her hair before refocusing on Rhea. “Now it is true Pena and I had a falling out. He had a gambling problem, one he could contain at first. But over time, as the grocery stores flourished, the success led him to gamble more and more and

he crumbled. Pena wound up coming to me begging to help him cover his debts, and I made him a counteroffer to help him through it with counseling. I was... naïve." He looked down at the singer, Mina, who looked back up at him with worshipful eyes as her head bobbed back and forth. "His addiction was far more severe than I expected. He refused the offer and sold the details of a meeting to one of my enemies. By that point, I was having Pena followed, and we sprang an ambush on the ambush."

Rhea wrote as fast as she could. "So what did you do to him?"

"Nothing. I didn't have time. The people he sold my information to retaliated first. First Pena's family, then him. Someone found him a few weeks later in the desert."

"Dead?"

"Let's not talk about that now," he said, nodding down at Mina. "On your feet, Mina."

She pulled back with a loud slurp and kissed his tip. He took her under the elbow and brought her to the couch, where he made her kneel on the cushions, ass out. He lifted up the back of her dress and plunged into her. Rhea watched his big cock slide in and out of Mina, and shivered. She wanted a closer look, but didn't dare move. She was afraid if she did, she'd want to join in.

"What happened to the people who killed Pena and his family?"

"Dead."

"By your people?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answers to."

Rhea blinked. She wasn't expecting him to be so forthright. "That's bold."

"Enough. I'm going to finish here, and then we'll talk more."

Foreman's taking of the singer fascinated Rhea. He was putting on a show, that much was certain, but not once did he look up at Rhea to gauge her reaction to anything. His eyes were locked on the ass of the gorgeous woman in front of him. He reached a hand under her, going between her legs and expertly stroking her clit and her pussy, making her drive back against him enthusiastically. It wasn't so much his rhythm or the joining of their flesh that Rhea watched, but Mina's face. It was pure bliss, her smile some distant, faraway thing. She would glance over her shoulder occasionally at Spencer, and whether he knew it or not, he would slow just

a fraction while he looked back. Once he even returned the smile before his wall went back up.

Mina's attention drifted towards Rhea, but it was a different smile she gave the reporter, a friendly one. Rhea found herself smiling back. It was hard not to.

Were his women prisoners? Rhea didn't know. She'd seen the face of Joy Crowley, the mayor's wife, as she came in and out of the Tower. She always glowered around anyone else, but when she was at Spencer's side or looking at him from across the gallery on the first two floors, it was with an adoration that seemed genuine. Rhea didn't know which part of the dichotomy was real. Either Joy Crowley hated Spencer Foreman and put on a hell of an act around him, or she enjoyed being one of his pets and put on a tough act away from him. Either way, it bore looking into if Rhea was going to finish this article.

In front of her, the brunette reached a hand out to steady herself on the back of the couch, her head falling to her chest. She moaned erratically, mostly Spencer's name. Her free hand joined his at her clit, and she looked aside at Rhea one more time. Rhea's lips parted. When did she draw so close? She didn't know, but she had. The show demanded she come closer, her eyes drawn to the dark outline of Mina's nipple through the black lace, the taut stomach, the swell of Mina's hips. Spencer's lips drew tight, his face stern with concentration and effort at holding back. He raised one leg and settled a leather shoe on the cushion, driving into Mina at a slight angle now as her back arched, her head tossing back.

"Right there, oh, oh Spencer," Mina cried out. Her fists balled up and she struck the couch cushions. It was hard to tell otherwise, but judging from the stuttering of her breath, she must have come, and Rhea wanted nothing so much as to plunge her fingers into her slacks and panties, to give herself the release she'd need after this. She restrained herself, but oh God, when she got to her car in the parking garage across the street, she was going to dig out her bullet vibe from her purse and reenact all of this in her mind as she let go.

Spencer wasn't finished. He pulled out of Mina and sat on the couch. She hurried on top of him and dropped, her pussy making a squishing sound that left both women chuckling. "He fills me up so much and I get so wet," she told Rhea, blushing hard.

“I guess so,” Rhea said, reaching out to brush the woman’s shoulder in camaraderie.

“Look, don’t touch,” Spencer said automatically.

He worked down the dress far enough one of Mina’s breasts spilled out. He took the nipple into his mouth, sucking as she rocked on him, hands behind her head and on her ass. Gangster though Spencer Foreman might be, he was still like a teenager when it came to tits, and Rhea didn’t hide her smile.

When he had his fill of his gorgeous singer’s breast, he pulled back and growled, “Now fuck me.”

Mina did, stopping her rocking and switching immediately to a hard bounce. It took Rhea’s breath away, the perfection of this woman, her ass rippling, her breasts bobbing with every hard slap of their skin. Mina rode him for long minutes, stopping only when she came twice more, her man’s hands squeezing her ass as she quivered on top of him, gasping his name.

Spencer’s lips drew tight, and he had to be close. He bounced Mina on top of him a few minutes more, her body nearly boneless in his arms. He stopped with a grunt, pulling the brunette down on him all the way to the balls. He kissed her, strangely gentle after all that, and she moaned against his mouth. When she rose up off him again, his thick cream drizzled out of her pussy.

Mina stepped away from him and pulled a fistful of tissues from a box on the desk. She cleaned up her man first, and then herself. To Rhea, she asked, “Did I miss any spots?”

“You’ve got a tiny stain on your hip, but I don’t think there’s any helping that.”

She pointed it out and Mina examined it before nodding. “It’s like sir marked me as his,” she said.

Spencer crooked a finger at her and she came to him for another gentle kiss. He squeezed her ass and gestured at the door. “Go.”

Mina did, and Spencer leaned back, lifting his butt and doing up his pants again. Rhea folded her arms. “Did you think that was going to impress me? Make me beg you to be next?”

“No. I was horny and I needed to get off. You being here was happenstance.”

“Are they all so subservient?”

She meant it as a flippant comment, but Spencer seriously considered it before answering. “No. Some are. They all call me sir in public, if they want to keep to the code of the contract. I won’t tolerate mouthiness. That leads to disciplining, which means some of them do become someone different, at least with me. But I like most my girls to maintain their identity within the realm of my fantasy.”

“Why are you so forthcoming about all this?”

“Nothing I’ve told you can be used as ammunition. No one will ever find the bodies of the people who went after Pena, and no prosecutor would go after me without that.”

“I’ve looked at your record. I don’t think any prosecutor’s going to go after you, period. Seems like nothing sticks to you.”

“Funny, isn’t it?”

“Mm. So you’d tell all this to any journalist who came asking?”

Spencer fixed her with an amused look. “No. Drink?”

“I’ll take whatever you’re having.”

He nodded, stood, and headed for the minibar in the corner. When he came back, he held a pair of crystal glasses. “Whiskey and bitters,” he said absently, and held hers out. Rhea took it, sipped, and sipped some more. Usually she wasn’t a whiskey fan but this was good stuff.

“That’s good.”

He grunted, and sipped his own.

“Why the favors?” she asked.

Spencer glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you do them for people? What’s the end goal? All accounts say that you take on a lot of them yourself.”

“That’s an exaggeration. Some of them, yes.”

“So... why? A demonstration of your talents?”

“That, and a combination of other factors. Sometimes boredom. Sometimes because I want to see a thing done right. Sometimes because the thing I want done isn’t something I want held over me. The more hands on a project, the more it spins out of control. My father taught me that.”

“Burt Foreman.”

She hoped her knowledge of the name would stagger him, but all he did was nod and say, “That’s right.”

“Tell me about him.”

Spencer sipped again, thought, and said, “Tell me what you know first.”

“Not much,” Rhea admitted. “He’s a name on the wind. An art thief, or an extremely good forger. But there is one oddity I came up with.”

“What?”

“After his arrest, there’s no record of a trial or his death. But everyone seems to assume he was imprisoned and died.”

“They’re right,” Spencer said, his voice going soft, cold. “When he was arrested, the judge ordered he be separated from other prisoners, allegedly for my father’s sake. Then they conveniently never held a trial for him. He died about seven months later and they dropped him in a hole without a marker.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they?’ The government?”

“Yes.”

“Where did they take him?”

“A private prison run by private military for the ones they want the world to forget.”

“Here? In the United States?”

“Ever heard of the CMU in Terre Haute?”

“I haven’t,” Rhea said, writing it down.

“Along with a couple other places, it’s where the government sticks people they want to disappear from the world. They run... ran... a minimal crew, with only a handful of prisoners. The buildings were kept decrepit on purpose, in order to create the illusion they needed funding to keep the doors open.”

“What do you mean, ran?”

“There’s not a brick of it that still exists. I bought the land and I razed the place to the fucking ground and pissed on the dirt that was left,” Spencer said. He seemed to realize he’d spoken too much, and shook his head, his voice calm again. “They killed my father in there. Not directly, but as good as. No heat, no glass in the windows. He developed pneumonia, and he died.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhea said. “Why would they do that?”

“They wanted information from him on the art he stole. Namely where they could find it.”

“Ah, the fabled vault.”

Now that surprised Spencer. He turned his head, an eyebrow raised. “Now who did you dig that up from?”

“A friend of yours, Isiah Duffy.” Rhea grinned. “He said if I talk to you about him, I should give you a hearty and healthy ‘go fuck yourself and let’s golf sometime.’ He also tried to grab my ass. He has a broken finger now for the trouble.”

Spencer ran a hand over his chin and shook his head. “Goddamn it, Isiah. Yes, the warden, the judge, and the man who arrested my father were all very interested in the location of a supposed vault where my father kept all his worldly goods. The whole idea is idiotic. Keeping all his valuables in one spot would be disastrous if it was found out.”

“So you’re denying there is one?”

“Emphatically.”

Someone knocked, and a tall, intimidating man with a thin face and a thick neck poked his head in. “Spencer. I need a minute.”

“Excuse me,” Spencer said to Rhea, and stood. He disappeared for a few minutes with the tall man. With nothing else to do, Rhea stood and went for the minibar, trying to remember the amounts of alcohol Foreman poured for that whiskey bitter. He came back, his lips pressed tight. “This has been a pleasure, but I’m afraid our time here is at an end.” He came to her at the minibar, pulled an identical, unopened bottle of whiskey from a cupboard, and offered it to her. “A gift, to help you keep up the strength to research that no-name prison.”

“I’m not going to wind up with a bullet if I do, will I?”

He smiled, a genuine thing that fell somewhere between sharkish and handsome. “If I did that to everyone who tried to dig up my family’s past, I’d be responsible for bullet shortages the world over.”

Spencer walked with Rhea, but before they left the lounge’s office, she stopped with a hand on the door. “And if I looked into your mother? We never talked about her.”

His walls slammed back into place, his smile and his eyes stony. “You wouldn’t be the first to try. Good luck.”

* * *

Spencer’s feet dangled into the stream. It felt good on the hot day, and he was hoping he could catch some fish for dinner. It was the best part about living up in the woods, he thought. His mother didn’t care for gutting and cleaning the small river trout so they never had fish until Spencer got curious and learned how to do it himself by looking it up on the library’s Internet.

He wondered sometimes why they didn't have Internet at the cabin, but his mom always laughed it off. She said all they needed was good books and the outdoors to keep them entertained, but Spencer thought that was crazy. There was so much out there on the Internet. Anything a person wanted to learn. And games! He had a friend, Emmanuelle, and they played games through the computer. Chess, mostly. They never actually met and that, he thought, was really cool. It was mysterious. He bet she was pretty. If you were pretty, you couldn't really show yourself off on the Internet. He didn't know much, but he knew that.

Life at the cabin wasn't too bad, though. He had his own tree fort, one the strange man who brought them supplies and money every few weeks helped him build one weekend. Spencer's mom always got really quiet and sweet around Burt, and sometimes, very rarely, he'd stay for a few days, sometimes even a week or two. When the strange man would disappear again, Spencer's mom wouldn't cry, but she'd look out the window or the door like she hoped he might come back.

They had board games, too, lots of games. And during the day, his mom would teach him school and he'd help her in the garden or go with her every great once in a while to town. Town was really far and they always got some odd looks when they went to the stores. His mom thought they might have to move soon, but Spencer didn't know why.

Though he loved his mom, he was nearly ten, and he grew listless. In town, he saw the other kids playing and sometimes his mom would let him join in, but they always treated him like a weirdo. They called him a hillbilly and a redneck, but Spencer looked up those words and he didn't think he or his mom were hillbillies or rednecks. They lived in the mountains, yeah, but they had pretty good teeth and whatever "sleeping with his family" meant, he hadn't slept in his mom's bed since he was, like, five.

They didn't like him for other reasons too. They didn't like how he talked. Spencer liked to learn and his mom said he was very advanced for his age. He guessed that meant his vocabulary was bigger than the other kids. There were other reasons he didn't get along. The boys didn't like him because he could outrun them and beat them up when they tried to fight him. Burt taught him how to fight, and Burt could beat up anyone, Spencer reckoned.

Burt taught him all sorts of cool things like that when he came around. Like how to climb rocks, how to camp out in the woods, how to survive if he didn't have anything with him. Sometimes his mom didn't like the lessons. Sometimes she cried, like when Burt took Spencer out so he could learn to shoot a .22. He had to help protect his mom when Burt couldn't be around, and since Burt was never around, that was pretty much always.

Spencer was thinking about Burt when his mother started calling for him. Her voice sounded funny, or else he might have waited for her to come looking for him. It was too nice a day not to be out in it, and he was tired of math lessons. But he knew his mother better than he knew himself, and she sounded... strained. Scared, maybe. He knew she was sick lately, even if she tried her best to hide it. Her coughing fits sometimes kept her awake all night, and she didn't have as much energy like she used to. He was scared but she told him she would be okay and he believed her.

He stood and headed for the cabin. It was nestled deep in the woods. You had to go on four or five different dirt roads to get there from the town, and by the time you did, you were dizzy from the switchbacks. Spencer could have walked it in his sleep, but one time he tried to tell a friend how to get there and they wound up so lost they thought Spencer was pranking them. His mom got really mad at that. They couldn't have visitors, she said.

She leaned on the deck balustrade, trying to smile. She used to be so pretty but now she was thin and worn out. Beads of sweat on her forehead scared him. So did her red cheeks and the way she panted without seeming to realize she was doing it.

"We need to go to town," she told him as he approached. "I need to go to the hospital." Just saying that much winded her, and Spencer rushed up to help her into one of the deck chairs, the big metal ones where his mom and Burt would sometimes fall asleep looking out at the mountains.

"Are you okay, Mom?" he asked, and even as young as he was, he knew how stupid the question was.

She squeezed his arm. "I hope I will be. But we might be a while, so I need you to pack some clothes and your schoolbooks, okay?"

"Awww," he groaned.

"Don't argue now," she pleaded. The tone stopped his protests cold. His mom was nearly crying.

He darted in to kiss her cheek. "Okay. Should I get you some clothes too?"

“No. No, thank you,” she said. “Some snacks. You’ll need some snacks. Pick your favorites. And a pillow.”

Now he was scared, but Burt told him once he had to be brave because this life was really hard for his mom and she deserved better. Spencer being brave made it easier for her. Spencer always tried to live up to that.

He packed up some clothes in his small suitcase, added his favorite pillow, then went to the kitchen cupboards and dug out packets of oatmeal, the good chocolate-covered granola bars he liked but which his mom said were basically candy bars, jerky, and after a moment’s hesitation, he added the rice cakes his mom really liked but he hated. Maybe they’d make her feel better. Or maybe they’d just help her smile. He didn’t know, but he added them anyways, the tears creeping ever closer.

They spent three days in the hospital. His mom didn’t want to be out of the room with Spencer, but the doctors had to do a lot of tests on her and she had to be alone with the big machines for them. She got Spencer alone before the lab people took her away, and she knelt down to talk to him face to face. Her cheeks were so hollow he could see parts of her teeth and gums outlined against them. Spencer was scared she was dying.

Quiet, so quiet, she said, “If someone tries to come for you while I’m in there and it’s not Burt, you say no. If they insist, you run. You don’t worry about me. You just get away as fast as you can. You remember where the caves are? The ones that look out over the cabin?”

Silent, Spencer nodded, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

“You go there. You take some food and a gallon of water, and... and...” She swallowed hard. “Your gun. You hide there until Burt comes to the cabin. You don’t come out for anybody else, no matter what, okay?”

He nodded again, and kissed her cheek, so terrified that he needed to go to the bathroom and right now. He waited until the nurses saw her into the room with the scary machinery, and he bolted for the men’s room, never seeing his mother’s terrified eyes looking after him as the door shut behind her.

But no one came for him.

Doctors and nurses alike tried to get Spencer to accompany them to the waiting room of the clinic room where they said his mother would be brought when she came out of the tests. Spencer didn’t really think any of them were bad people, but his mother’s words rang in his ears and he couldn’t trust any of them. He sat against the wall while some machine

made a big “hrum” sound, and when she came out on a gurney, he trotted along beside it like the German shepherd they once had. In her room, while she slept, he sat beside her, his knees drawn up to his chest, his feet on the edge of his chair. A woman came by, a very nice woman, who tried to be his friend and ask him questions. Spencer didn’t like her, and though he tried to be quiet for his mother, he couldn’t help snapping at the woman when she tried to squeeze his arm. His mom woke up and shouted at the woman that they weren’t taking her son away. She couldn’t shout long and it left her so tired she slept again, but the woman disappeared and didn’t come back.

It was the one and only time Spencer ever heard his mom shout at anyone.

Burt came on the third day.

He looked exhausted, but he moved fast and sure of himself. One moment he wasn’t there, the next he was sweeping into the room, throwing aside a jacket and rushing to the bed. Spencer’s mother woke, and Burt cradled her in his arms. Spencer, purely on instinct, climbed on the bed and hugged them both. Burt looked aside at him and gripped the back of his head to kiss his forehead.

Spencer knew what death was. And it was at that moment when the man he knew in his heart was his father kissed his head so gently that Spencer knew his mother was dying.

They took her home, despite the doctors and the nurses telling them they couldn’t. Later in life, Spencer wondered how long she might have lived if they kept her there. A month, maybe longer if she only came in earlier. He obtained his mother’s records and read them a hundred times, the lung cancer that killed her a genetic fluke. She never smoked a day in her life.

At home, propped up in bed, with Burt reading to her poetry and short stories from Spencer’s schoolbook, she was as comfortable as she could be in her last days. She could not eat or drink, and in the end, her fever rose to the point where her mind broke and she could not recognize them. Burt gave up on the reading and took one hand while Spencer took the other. They let her rant and talk, trying to soothe her when they could but mostly just trying to love her.

She had one last lucid moment, her eyes lighting on Burt. “Thank you for saving me,” she whispered. “Thank you for his life.” She turned and

caressed Spencer's cheek. For him, there were no words, only her best smile.

They buried her the next morning in a field of blue wildflowers, neither of them willing to leave the grave's side for a long hour afterwards. When they returned to the cabin, they sat out on the deck, glasses of water untouched beside them.

"Are you my dad?" Spencer asked finally.

Burt exhaled slowly, and nodded. "I am."

* * *

Two weeks after her interview with Spencer Foreman, Rhea finished up a rough outline of the article she planned on writing about him, reread it a dozen times, and fired it off to her editor. Hollis called her the next morning and told her to come in to talk about it. All the journalists worked remotely, so to be called into the Vineport Chronicle's main office was a big deal. Either Rhea struck paydirt with the article or she was about to get her ass seriously reamed.

Hollis was a slim, short man with a thin prickly beard. Two fingers on his right hand were missing, the result of Hanhart syndrome. He favored a pair of gold-rimmed glasses over contacts, and was wiping them clean with a disposable wipe when Rhea knocked and entered.

"Scratch-resistant coating is great until it comes off the lens," he grumbled, "and then it's like looking out at the world through a fog."

"You wanted to talk about my article on Spencer Foreman?"

"Yes," Hollis said, finally finishing up with his glasses and inspecting the lenses with a hard squint. Satisfied, he put them on and gestured at an armchair against the wall. She took it, and he swiveled in his seat to look at her. "Okay, so, first off, solid idea for a profile piece. I can't believe you got close to Foreman, let alone convinced him to talk to you."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. We print that the way you have it planned, we're going to be locked up in a libel lawsuit the next few years. And guess what? We don't have that kind of a budget."

"Nothing I wrote in there is libel," Rhea protested. "It all came directly from him or sources close to him."

"And how many of those will go on the record?" Her silence made him smile tightly. "Exactly. Zero."

"That doesn't mean it's libel."

“To a court of law, it will be.”

“What about the CMUs? I’ve been looking into those and they’re real. I think I’ve even found the one where his father was incarcerated, or at least where it used to be. He mentioned Terre Haute for a reason and there’s a record of a prison there that matches his description precisely.”

“They put his father in a prison for terrorists?” Hollis asked.

“They’re not just for terrorists but any criminals they think should be separated. And if this is true, this is bigger than even Spencer Foreman. It means the government’s been dumping prisoners who haven’t even gone to trial into secret prisons. That’s fucking huge.”

“And here we circle back around to the libel part of the conversation,” Hollis said. “You can’t prove any of this.”

“Then give me a week to go down to Indiana and poke around. Foreman might have destroyed the facility but there are going to be people around who remember it, have pictures, stories. There had to be shipments brought there, food and laundry services, all that. All I need to do is find a string to tug on and I can find people who worked there.”

“Absolutely not,” Hollis said.

“What? Why?” Rhea hated the screech in her voice but her temper was up now.

“Because if any of this is true, Spencer Foreman won’t want it getting out. And along those lines, what do you think he’d do to you, me, and anyone involved with this when an expose on his life is printed?”

“He practically told me to investigate it. He gave me his blessing.”

But Hollis was already shaking his head. “No. And that’s my final answer. But I’ve got something just as juicy for you. Heather Mycroft is coming to town and I got the newspaper half an hour with her. I want you on point, talking to her about her new clothing line.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Hollis?”

He blinked at her ferocity. “This is a prime-”

“It’s a puff piece! I’ve got the biggest gangster in the United States, maybe the world, talking to me, drip-feeding me some world-shaking shit, and you want me to talk to a bikini model?”

“You have conspiracy theories and a man known for manipulating women convincing you to chase your own tail over some myths and fables,” Hollis snapped back. “At best this is front page tabloid fodder.”

Rhea had a thought then. More of a vision, really. Strings attached to Hollis's arms, hands, and his head, making him dance and talk, and in a moment, she knew with little doubt that he was shackled by someone else saying no on this. Who didn't matter. The independent spirit of newspapermen died right around the same time when corporations became people, talking heads became TV news, and the written word became something of an amusing antiquity. Hollis had no say in this, and she felt almost sorry for him. He would live out the rest of his days sitting at that desk, regurgitating news from big corporate news entities, too afraid of creating his own.

"Heather Mycroft," she said out loud. "Sure. Yeah. Text me the details. I'm going to have a drink."

"It's nine in the morning."

But Rhea was already standing and walking away.

* * *

"Three, two, one, mark," Burt breathed across the headset.

Darkness fell over the mansion, and Spencer grinned. So far, things were going right as they planned. The dogs were taking a nap outside and now Burt and Gallo cut the power and the backup generator without any fuss. All that was left was for Spencer to make his way to the third-floor library, take the van Eyck, and walk out the front door.

Voices rang out in the house, people scrambling for lights that would no longer work. He hurried out through the pantry, the military-grade night vision goggles on his face outlining the mansion. It felt good to stretch. The smallest and nimblest of the trio, Spencer drew the short end of the stick and was brought into the mansion with that day's food deliveries. He hid in the pantry behind bags of flour, rice, cornmeal, and sugar until his father and their newish associate could cut the power.

The chef stumbled in front of him and Spencer stilled, his breathing even and steady. The man called out for a server, and a woman slammed through the doors, her hands outstretched like she was Frankenstein chasing a villager. Spencer sidestepped them both, not making a sound. Given the size of the kitchen, it wasn't much of a chore to steer clear, but he did almost hit another server coming in the door and had to back away again like he was dancing.

Then he was through and into the foyer. Flashlights cut across the hallway deeper in the mansion. No time to waste. He hurried for the stairs,

trying to stick to the rugs on the floor whenever possible to keep the noise his shoes made to a minimum., A candle bobbed on the second floor, and Spencer dropped low, pausing on the bottommost stair, ready to go for the closet under the stairs if need be. Like his pantry hideaway, this had plentiful stacks of blankets, sheets, and pillows he could hide behind if the need arose.

“One guard down and dosed,” Gallo said, his voice barely a whisper on the headset.

Spencer liked the man. Burt had his eye on Gallo ever since he left a private military contractor. Gallo was still a freelancer, but was tired working overseas in shithole deserts. He knew little of the art world, but he was one of the best hand-to-hand fighters Burt had ever seen, even better than himself, and he was an excellent driver. The problem was, he was still new, and Gallo had yet to be seriously tested when it came to his loyalty. So far, no one had passed that test, not when they saw the amount of money Burt and Spencer dealt in.

He waited until whoever held the candle opened up a closet and started digging, probably for a flashlight. Spencer hurried up the stairs, staying light, flexible. The man in the closet never heard him.

The second stairwell was at the end of that short hallway. A flashlight cut across, and a woman called, “Ford? Anything?”

The man behind Spencer at the pantry said, “Still looking.”

The woman stepped out into the hallway and Spencer dove into an empty bedroom just in time, trying not to breathe any harder than he already was. The flashlight swirled closer and closer.

“What’s happening?” the woman asked. “Why isn’t the backup power working?”

“I’ve got someone coming,” Burt said over the headset. “Gallo, can you...?”

“Two here,” Gallo said. “Looking for their friend. If they break north I’ll come to you.”

“I’m going for the van Eyck,” Spencer breathed.

“No,” Burt said. “Hold. There’s more security here. Where’d they come from?”

“I’m almost there,” Spencer said. “Just one more minute and I’m out.”

“Goddamn it, no,” Burt said.

But Spencer was already moving, rushing out into the hallway, head low. He hit the second stairwell, and light bloomed outside, so bright it was like daylight. Flares. They set off flares.

“Fuck,” he mouthed, and ran for it, not caring about noise, jumping up the stairs two at a time, the office doors less than forty feet.

Then he was through, the van Eyck on the wall above a bust of Philip the Good, allegedly an ancestor to the mansion’s owners. Spencer had his tools out, grinning madly, and then he heard it.

A double pop. Even with a silencer, there was no mistaking what that sound was outside.

“Two down,” Gallo said. “We need to go, now.”

“Abort,” Burt snapped. “Security’s coming, hard.”

Fifteen seconds, Spencer thought. I can have that painting down in fifteen seconds. It would bring in fifty-five point seven million dollars, his biggest score with his father to date. He eyed the door, then the painting.

And went for the van Eyck.

“Buy me a minute,” he breathed.

“Goddamn it, this is not worth it,” Burt said, his voice loud now. “They are coming and they’ll have you trapped. Get downstairs, now.”

“We’re out of time,” Gallo said. “They’re inside.”

Spencer heard them now, and stared up at the painting. Just seconds more.

“Gallo,” Burt said, and the anger was gone from his voice. “Channel nine.”

“Don’t, wait...” Spencer said, but he said it to no one. The pair of them switched channels on the headsets, and he was alone.

Footfalls on the stairs. His tools dropped on the floor and Spencer looked around. He had only two options. Out the window, a three-story fall that would probably end in him breaking something, or under the desk, where he had no doubt he’d be found in seconds.

There was a third option.

He knelt, going for the ankle holster and the small semi-auto. Seven bullets. He could take some of them down, go for their guns, and fight his way out. It was the only way.

Something banged outside. Something loud. Shouting. Gunfire.

His father came back on the radio, his anger gone.

“Spencer, there’s no time to argue about this. Leave the van Eyck. It’s just a painting. In ten seconds, Gallo’s going to bring the van to the wall underneath you. Pull yourself out the window, grip the edge, and let yourself drop. Keep your knees loose. Don’t lock them up.”

More bangs. Spencer hurried to the window and threw it open.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t be. I’m with him. We’ll be there soon.”

An engine, and the ping of gunfire off the bulletproof siding. Spencer hurried out the window, twisting and keeping his hands on the sill. Flashlights splayed across the sill, and he heard shouting. The van rolled to the wall under him, and like his father said, Spencer dropped.

The impact hurt, and he sprained something in his foot. But all in all, it wasn’t nearly as bad as it could have been. Gunfire lit up the walls around him but he was already hanging off the roof and pulling himself into the rear of the van.

“Close it close it close it,” Gallo shouted, and Spencer did.

“Where’s Burt? Where’s my dad?”

Gallo gave him one quick glance over his shoulder, and then focused on the grounds ahead of him. He slammed on the accelerator before Spencer could leap back out. They tore for the side gate, an employee entrance that fed out onto a quiet street. Out the window, Spencer saw a man with his pistol raised towards the sky, watching his business partner and his son make their escape. All around him were figures in suits with guns of their own.

It was too late. And it was all Spencer’s fault.

* * *

Rhea dressed for date night, but her mind wasn’t on dinner with Kelso. For one, she was still fuming over Hollis’s cowardly decision not to run her article on Spencer or the prison in Indiana. That was the sort of article that could make her career, not to mention give the newspaper a huge bump by proxy.

The second reason was far more primal. Over the past couple weeks, ever since she saw Spencer and that Mina woman fucking in the lounge office, she couldn’t get the image out of her head. Her words to Spencer were true. She didn’t want to sleep with him. But his power was undeniably attractive, the way he commanded the women around him. In another life, Rhea might have liked to be one of them. That kind of loss of self-control,

that sexual dominance, it was a kink she didn't realize she had, and it intrigued her even as she recognized it for what it was – a desire she could and would not act upon.

Kelso came over at eight and tried to get her to fool around a little before they grilled the turkey burgers. He was a good-looking man going soft and bald, but he owned it and made it work. A dad bod without actually being a dad, Rhea thought, and so comfortable to cuddle up with.

His hands were all over her the moment they said hello, and he guided her down onto the couch. "Aren't you hungry?" she asked him, trying to extricate herself as he squeezed her ass.

"Hungry for you," Kelso said, leaning down to kiss her breast through her shirt.

"I think the corn scale just broke," Rhea said.

His hands slid free of her ass and he started in on her slacks. "Yuh huh," he grunted.

Rhea sighed inwardly and gave in. She wasn't all that wet or particularly ready, so she pushed him away finally when he had his cock in his hand and guided him to the bedroom, where she lubed herself up for him and rested on her back on the bed. She curled a finger at him, and he came to her, grinning.

Rhea couldn't concentrate so she hung on and gave Kelso her best performance. It wasn't that he was bad in bed, and he was pretty hung, but thoughts of Spencer Foreman kept creeping through her mind and the way he had that woman Mina doing whatever he wanted, like she was a puppet. If Rhea somehow miraculously got to do this article, she thought she'd do a whole series, one on Spencer Foreman himself, one on his father and the former CMU where his father was held, and one on Foreman's women. Joy Crowley was the most obvious and prominent figure in his Tower, but Rhea wondered what the rest of their stories were.

Right, yeah, she was supposed to be into this. When Kelso started smacking her clit the way she liked it, she arched her back and moaned, "Oh yes, mm baby, uh huh..."

"You like that?"

Honestly, I'm bored and hungry. "Oh yeah, you know I do..."

Not long after, and she faked her orgasm with twirls of her feet and another arch of her back. Kelso rolled her over onto her hands and knees and though Rhea generally liked it missionary for the closeness and

emotional appeal, tonight she liked it like this, so she didn't have to keep making faces while she thought about the article, Foreman, and Hollis.

When Kelso finally came across her back, Rhea slipped off the bed while he caught his breath. "You were distracted," he said.

"Oh, no, I loved it," Rhea said.

"Your cheeks get flushed and you do this Kegel thing with your butt and your hips."

She turned and stared at him, confused.

"When you co..." He stopped and corrected himself. "When you orgasm."

"You can say come. We're in our thirties. And I do not."

"You do. I can't tell it with all women, but with you, yeah, you have tells."

Rhea came to him and kissed him. "I'm sorry. It's not you, it's a work thing."

"Oh, that's right, you had that meeting with your boss. How did it go?"

"Terribly. I think he's scared of printing something about Spencer Foreman, even if the guy himself is giving me information." She shook her head. "Hollis wants me to do a puff piece on Heather Mycroft instead."

"Wow, really? That's something."

"I guess. It should go to Alistair or Betty. He wants to dazzle me by making me think it's an important piece."

"It isn't? I mean... she's one of the biggest models in the world, hon."

"I know that," Rhea said irritably. "But this Foreman stuff goes well beyond him. Government cover-ups, secret prisons, all of it. I'm so close to so much. I just need some support from somewhere."

"Well, you have it from me, but you have to look at it from the newspaper's perspective too. That kind of an article, if you're right about this guy, I mean... it's not just a lawsuit you're looking at, but an actual damn gangster coming after them. And you."

"So you don't think I should do it either."

"Come on, that's not--"

"Can you be honest?" Rhea snapped.

Kelso stood, and started gathering up his clothes. "All right. No. I think you go for the Mycroft article. I think it's the safe play and it's still a boon to your career. I think if you keep things up going after this guy, you're going to dig up something that gets you hurt. Or worse."

Rhea glared at him. “You know what? I think I have a headache tonight. Let’s do dinner another time.”

“Rhea...”

But she was resolute. When the front door closed after him, she went back to her bedroom, dug out her tablet, and started looking into flights to Indiana.

* * *

They stared at the pictures of the fresh grave. Gallo’s eyes glimmered, and for that, Spencer was pathetically grateful. The man had only known his father for months before Burt was incarcerated. Spencer had known him for years, even longer if he counted the visits to his mother’s cabin, and he could not drum up any tears for his father’s burial.

He wanted to believe the grave belonged to anyone but his father. That the warden came up with a plan to bury another man in his place and keep Burt Foreman around to question until he gave up the location of the alleged vault where he kept his stolen goods and cash. And to that end, for that knowledge, Spencer was about to decimate the money in his father’s accounts.

“We’re going to buy the prison,” he said, his voice hollow. The warden sent them the pictures along with a cheery postcard with the time and date of Burt’s passing written on it. “We’re going to find the body, and we’re going to confirm it’s him.” Spencer looked up at Gallo. “And then I’m going to kill them. The warden. The judge. Detective Brennan.”

Gallo stared back. “If we go looking to kill every cop that crosses us, I’m out, Spencer.”

“Not all of them. Just this one. If he’d taken Burt to county jail, he’d be alive and in a supermax. Even if we couldn’t break him out, I could live with that, if I could see him from time to time or if we could send in people to make sure he’s okay. But Brennan took a bribe, and he took that option away from me. He dies for that and he dies ugly.”

They would succeed in that. Spencer would kill all three and feel nothing about their deaths, save for satisfaction that it had been done without complication.

But before that, the bodyguard and his young charge looked again at the photographs in front of them, a great change in their lives upon them. Gallo finally nodded. “So we’re buying a prison. And then what?”

“We buy a kingdom.”

* * *

Malena walked beside Natasha on a treadmill overlooking the first and second floor lobby. The blonde trainer was an unexpected fount of gossip within the Tower, and Malena leaned heavily on her to get the latest on who was sleeping with Spencer and when. She needed to figure out a way to get him alone and separated from the security team, or barring that, she needed to figure out some weakness she could exploit. Easier said than done. Many of Spencer's enemies throughout the years tried and never succeeded once.

But Malena was growing closer. Spencer trusted her again in the Tower after her day-to-day job at the ISP, letting her come and go with a freedom the other women in his stable didn't have. Without a contract to him, she was just part of the scenery as far as his security team was concerned. One of them, a guy named Stan, came over to her way of thinking when she promised him a blowjob once a week in return for access to the Tower's server room. Now she had access to camera feeds and the internal emails of the security team. That gave her the means to provide her husband Ron with times when security would be lighter around the businesses Spencer owned. They already made fifty or sixty thousand from steamrolling some of Spencer's sex workers as well as one of his high-end restaurants. The hit-and-run tactics were a diversion to make him think the threat was coming from some greater force, and it would hopefully create some windows of opportunity. It was just a matter of spotting her opening and then taking Spencer and prying the location of his vault from him.

That would be her husband's job. The thought of torture and murder didn't appeal to Malena, but for the billions Spencer reportedly had squirreled away in stolen goods and other treasures, she was more than willing to let her husband break whatever moral codes he wanted to get paid. Of course, Ron was the biggest weasel she knew, so she would probably have to dirty her hands a little bit when he finished with Spencer and execute him too. That would hurt. Despite his idiotic attempts at rapping and being a wannabe gangster, she was fond of her husband in the way people were fond of goofball pets. But Ron would get greedy, and think of some way of cutting her from the plan. Truth was, she was thinking the same thing, so she wasn't much better, but it would still need to be done.

After that, who knew? Maybe she would buy the Tower and Spencer's biggest assets. She fully expected his kingdom would hate Malena for his

death, but when they realized she would be a far more benevolent ruler than the womanizing grease-stain in charge now, they would worship at her feet.

"There's that reporter again," Natasha said.

"What reporter?"

"The one from the newspaper. The one that's been hounding around after Spencer."

"This is the first I've heard of it," Malena said.

"Really?" Natasha asked. This was her element, knowing something the other women didn't. "She's putting together a big article on him, trying to dredge up his past. She's been talking to a lot of the girls."

"That sounds like a recipe for getting banned from the Tower."

"You'd be surprised," Natasha said. "She's been around off and on the last couple months. Spencer could have kicked her out but he hasn't. He even had a meeting with her at the Cepheus. A long one. Mina says she was there and they didn't even touch. Spencer just liked talking to her."

"Wait, really? Which one is she?"

"Mina?"

A fantasy of strangling Natasha crossed Malena's mind, but she let it go. "No. The reporter."

Natasha pointed out the reporter as she took a chair at a small table near the food court. A few minutes later, the reporter was joined by a pair of Spencer's women, Aimee and... Tricia? Wasn't that her name? It was something like that. The reporter greeted them with handshakes, then they settled in as she dug out a notebook.

"Incredible. I can't believe he hasn't had her kicked out. Or worse."

"Right? She must have something juicy on him she's holding over his head."

Bingo, Malena thought.

* * *

"The great American journalist returns," Spencer said, sitting behind a conference table. The office was on the Tower's third floor, a quiet space with a nice enough view of the downtown district. It smelled faintly of cherry-scented cleaners, not all that unpleasant.

"Hello again. Thanks for meeting with me."

"My pleasure," Spencer said. "I was intrigued when you said you wanted a deal."

Into a phone on the table, he punched in three numbers and told them they were ready for lunch. Rhea helped herself to a club soda from a small corner fridge, and Spencer waited with his hands folded as she sipped and tried to figure out where to begin talking.

“I’m going to say this flat out, and I don’t mean any disrespect to the women you keep around you,” Rhea said. “But I’m not one of them. I won’t do anything sexual with you. That’s completely off the table.”

Spencer nodded, folding his hands in front of him.

“I’m sorry, I know this is all roundabout, but I’m a jumbled mess right now. I went to Indiana. I asked around. I... I’m sorry, Mr. Foreman. No one should have ever gone through what your father or those other prisoners experienced.”

He drew a long breath and let it out slowly. “Thank you.”

“The article I was planning about you. It’s become three. One about you, one about women in the Tower, and an expose about the CMUs. I’m not doing the last as a means to appease you or anything. That’s something that appalls me all the way to my soul, and it needs to be brought to light, even if it’s a decade too late.”

“I won’t tolerate any endangerment of my companions,” he said mildly. “I’m fond of you, Rhea, but that’s a line I can’t have you cross.”

“I know. I thought about singling out Joy Crowley, but the tabloids have done that plenty. Everyone I’ve talked to, their names will be kept anonymous.”

“I want final approval on all three articles, but especially that one. That’s not negotiable.”

“If you agree to my terms, you’ll have it for those articles and anything else I write.”

“And now I’m even more intrigued.”

“My editor was stonewalling me on this. He wanted me to write a puff piece about a supermodel who came to town. I decided not to, and I was fired.” Spencer raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing, so Rhea continued. “My boyfriend... my ex-boyfriend agreed with him. I decided to leave him too. And so I’m coming to you. I want to start a newspaper. My newspaper.”

“Not a profitable business.”

“No. It’s not. I’m not going to come at you with numbers and figures and lie to you about its viability. This will probably lose you money. But I

think I've figured out a way for it to benefit you too."

"How so?"

"A local section would be a no-brainer, something devoted to activities and businesses around the area. We give your businesses a glowing recommendation. Restaurants, shopping centers, grocery stores, whatever. We would be free advertising for you."

"Not exactly morally up-and-up."

"I'm not aiming to be, not with that. Give me free rein to write the important things, like the CMU article and a piece on you, and I'll gladly give up a piece of my soul to make sure you're taken care of. It's not so different than how things are done now with paid advertising features and columns. I can live with that. But the real news, that's mine and my reporters."

They tabled the discussion for after lunch. When they finished the appetizers and pork belly salads, Spencer leaned back, a faint smile on his face.

"You like the idea," Rhea said.

"I don't dislike it. I'll want time to think. If this happens, we'll need to set you up with several of my money people to talk about your needs."

"To be honest, 'if this happens' is far more of a positive reaction than I was expecting."

"Don't do that. Doubt is healthy, but it can cripple you, too. You're a smart, driven woman who understands the needs of small sacrifices for a bigger cause. I can respect that."

"Thank you. I'd like to ask you one more question. A personal one."

"You can ask. I might not answer."

"Why let me get this close to you? Why are you allowing me to pry at the corners of your life?"

Spencer stood, and Rhea joined him, not expecting an answer. But he surprised her once again as they neared the door. "A man like me builds a house on a lot of lies. It's good to have someone test the foundation I've created. To make sure there aren't any cracks I'm not seeing. If you find them, I'd hope you would come to me first before they became a liability. But I have eyes on you, and I'm curious to see what you can find that we might have missed."

"I wouldn't ever try to betray you," Rhea said.

Spencer gave her a wan smile. It seemed almost sad. "That's just it. Everyone is capable of betrayal, given the right circumstances."

"Everyone has a price?"

"What would you do if someone threatened your loved ones? The comforts you don't even think about? Warmth, a bed, a toilet? What if you never saw the sun? Or you were never allowed to sleep? What if all that was taken from you, used as a weapon against you?" Spencer shook his head. "Everyone cracks, eventually."

"Did your father?"

"No. But he was an extraordinary man."

"I'd like to get to know more about him."

"Now that's something I can't give up," Spencer said. "I'll think about your offer. Call you soon."

* * *

Spencer sat on the hood of the same car the detective used to drive his father to the kangaroo court where he'd been immediately sent to prison without a real trial. He and Gallo finished with their grisly work an hour ago. They stared at the dirt grave where they buried the detective, the last one of the three who needed to die.

Gallo's hand rested near the butt of his gun. Spencer thought, strangely calm, that if Gallo pulled on him, it was over. He had his own pistol, but Gallo could outdraw and outshoot him. Everything his father attempted to build over the last decade and a half could go up in smoke right now, if Gallo wanted it.

As if he sensed it, Gallo said quietly, "The night your father was arrested, you know what he told me on that private channel?"

"No."

"He asked me to protect you. Always. He had no reason to trust me, but I was the only one he could ask in that moment." Gallo looked up into the fading sun, his eyes closed. "I thought about it. What you're thinking of right now. Hurting you until you talked. Taking it all."

"Why don't you?"

"That's not the man I want to be. That, and you and your dad are the most fun I've ever had." He opened his eyes and looked aside at Spencer. "You should never trust me or anyone else. But I'm going to make myself a promise, right here, one I intend on keeping. I'm here for you. Whatever

road you want to walk, Spencer, I'm going to be there. But I'd like a promise from you too. A deal."

"What?" Spencer asked, his voice shaking.

"That you listen to me. You're brighter than me. You've got better ideas. You're going to be the man in charge, and I'll happily follow. But if I'm going to look out for you, I need to know I can count on you to pay attention."

Spencer's eyes burned bright with fury at the words, but there was shame, too. Gallo was right. For the first time since Spencer fucked up and his father was taken, in the dying light, feet away from the last dead man on their list, the future king of Vineport cried.

* * *

Rhea's phone rang at the same time as someone knocked on her door. She laughed, grabbed her phone, and glanced at the number. Private. The knock on her door grew more insistent. "Hey, I'm from the Tower," a woman called out on the other side. "There's been an emergency. Spencer needs you to come in for your own protection."

Rhea ended the call when it came in, and hurried for the door. Still on its chain, she peeked out. "What's going-?"

A gorgeous, curvy woman with black hair tucked under her baseball cap moved aside, and a man rounded the corner. He lifted one work-booted foot up, and kicked the door open so hard it sent Rhea flying backwards on her ass. She came up, gasping, and the man pulled a gun on her.

"Scream and you're dead," he said. "Nod if you understand."

Rhea nodded, eyes huge.

The woman dug out a roll of duct tape from her purse and smiled almost apologetically. "Let's get you tied up, and then we're going to have a chat about Spencer Foreman."

* * *

In the end, the reporter knew frustratingly little. But there was one interesting story she told them, one detail Malena should have seen for herself on that trip to New York. With her nose bubbling blood and several bones broken, Rhea told them about how Spencer seemed to care about Mina True.

"When they finished... he kissed her, and it was like... like... there was a connection there. The way they looked at each other..." Rhea said. She started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Mina. I'm sorry."

When Malena nodded to him, Ron pushed a pillow against the back of Rhea's head, pressed his pistol to it, and they ended it.

Afterwards, as they cleaned up, Malena speculated, "We can use this. The Mina thing. If we take her out of the equation and Spencer really did care for her, he'll want someone close at hand afterwards."

"Foreman? You sure?" He frowned. "I'll kill another woman again if I have to, but jeez, that seems like a lot of bodies."

"We don't have to kill her. As a matter of fact, we don't want to. We can use her." Malena grinned. "Torch the place, then let's find a hotel. I want to fuck and think."

"After that?" Ron asked, but Malena was already going for the door.

* * *

Earlier in the night, Spencer looked out at the city, smiling faintly to himself. A newspaper. Such an idiotic idea. But then again, when was the last time he used his money for something idiotic and idealistic?

He pulled out his phone, and dialed Rhea. Her chipper voice greeted him and told him to leave a message, so he did. "Hey, Rhea. Listen, I have a counteroffer, one I think you'll like. Forget covering my businesses in the local section. I want you to have the capital and free rein to run a newspaper the way you see fit. I've set up a meeting for Monday, so come by the Tower and let's get the process started. I'm excited to see what you can do."

A Day to Say Goodbye

Joy moaned around the ball gag in her mouth. The guy behind her, Tetsuya slapped her ass again, and she thrust back at him, eyes glassy. Spencer sipped a bottle of beer and watched, so lost in thought and anger he barely noticed the woman sucking his own cock or the show going on in front of him.

Ten men had been gathered to him in the Tower, ten of Spencer's supposed allies. He trusted none of them. That was entirely the point. He was trying to read their reactions, to see if there were any secretive looks or half-hidden smirks. So far, he was disappointed.

Two weeks before, from a perch in a nearby office building across the street from a cemetery, he watched Rhea be lowered into the ground. Spencer was not in a kind mood since, and he kept getting distracted by errant thoughts and what-ifs. He tried to focus on Joy but it was pretty damn hard.

Just as he said goodbye to one woman in his life, he was preparing to say goodbye to another. This would be Joy's last full day at the Tower. Someone on the inside fed whoever killed Rhea information, and despite knowing in his heart it wasn't Joy, Spencer had to sever ties to anyone who had a stake in seeing his downfall. Joy was right at the top of that list with a bullet.

Her panties on the floor kept drawing his eye. There was nothing remarkable about the French cut, but something about them sparked some dissonance inside his mind, as though there was something he'd seen but forgotten, something important.

He shook it off. Ever since Rhea's murder, Spencer felt a disjointed dichotomy within his heart. On one hand, he hadn't felt a fury of this magnitude since the death of his father. The need to find Rhea's killer pulsed inside him. She had been fundamentally good, and monster though Spencer might be, he still believed in leaving the truly kind and decent in this world untouched and protected. They were firmly off-limits.

On the other hand, his innate fatalism told him this was always bound to happen, that it happened before and it would happen again. Innocents would always be the most grievous victims of his power. He could fool

himself into thinking he was creating a kind of order in Vineport, strangling the harder drugs trade, consolidating the sex workers and their pimps into tightly controlled prostitution rings, and harshly punishing anyone who went full rabid. The truth was, he was a kingpin, and with that came collateral damage every single day. He just didn't see it as up close and personal as he had with Rhea. It was easy to ignore the suffering you caused if you weren't actually faced with it.

"You're distracted," the woman between his knees said. Kim was a South Korean beauty, a slim, beautiful thing with an eternal smile on her face. She came to the Tower four months ago looking to get an expedited green card for her family, Spencer agreed so long as she in turn stayed at the Tower as one of his women for a year. So far she'd proven herself to be an affable, bubbly personality, though he understood from Ona, the head of his women, that Kim could be possessive and catty, especially when it came to her girlfriend, another one of Spencer's beholden.

It had been just over two months since he last partook of Kim and Spencer wasn't sure why, except that there were over forty women in the Tower and he couldn't keep track of all of them. He could vow to do better, but as many knives as there were in the darkness lately, he wasn't sure he could keep to it.

Well, Spencer could do his best right then and there. He pointed at his cock, and she swallowed down his first few inches. It was all Kim could take. Her tiny mouth stretched obscenely wide around his thickness, her dark eyes focusing on his groin again as she fought to control her breathing through her nose. Given her diminutive frame, his cock in either her pussy or her mouth looked huge, like it would split Kim apart. She could not take him in the ass. Literally couldn't. Even with toys and lots of preparation, he couldn't get the tip wedged in there.

She slurped and licked him, and nearby, Isiah watched. His interest was equally divided by Kim and Joy, as well as the other three women walking around half naked, refilling drinks and bringing out trays of finger foods. The attendants were not to be touched by anyone but Spencer, as with Kim. Those women were there solely for Spencer's use if he wished.

Panties. Why was that sticking in his mind?

Tetsuya hastened his pace, his groin slapping hard against Joy's ass. Beside Spencer, Isiah groaned, "You gotta let me take Crowley's mouth next." As with the rest of the men waiting for their turns, he was wrapped in

a towel as he watched. At least one of them probably wouldn't join in. Big John got his jollies off watching, and was stroking himself under the towel. If he were to drool at the show, Spencer wouldn't have been surprised.

It would speed things along if Spencer allowed for two men to take Joy at once. He gestured at her, and Isiah slapped his hands together and rubbed them. Tetsuya finished with a grunt and a slap to Joy's ass, and Spencer said, "Tom. Your choice of her ass or her pussy."

"Her ass," Tom said promptly, and rose to his feet.

"Nancy, tend to Joy's ass and prepare her," Spencer said to a redhead. She hurried to fetch a bottle of lube from a table against the wall and do as he commanded. "Isiah will be taking her mouth. When he's finished, any of you can avail yourselves of that particular hole any time you like."

"Come in or on her?" Isiah asked, standing and tossing aside his towel.

"User's choice, but you're still to use condoms in her pussy or her ass," Spencer said. He tapped Kim's head and she pulled away from him, wiping at the spittle at the side of her mouth. He made a come here gesture, and she rose up. He turned her around and spread her legs wide around his own before pulling her back, ass to him so she could enjoy the tableau in front of them. She gripped his cock and guided it to her delicate pussy lips, moaning as she sank down.

"How much to fuck her?" one of the other guests asked, looking at Kim.

"Christ, how much to fuck any of them?" another chimed in.

"They're not for your use," Spencer said as Kim began to rock in his dick. To keep up appearances, there had been an entry fee to this soiree – fifty thousand dollars apiece to get a chance to fuck Joy Crowley, one of the city's most desirable women. For two hundred thousand more, they would get a digital recording of the lengthy session. Every man ponied up the extra money.

The cameras rolled as Tom accepted the lube from Nancy, and prepared himself. Isiah freed Joy's mouth from the gag, and she stared up at him. Her cheeks were flushed from a pair of orgasms she already had. The slutty politician and philanthropist dropped her head, eagerly reaching for the cock in front of her.

"I never would have guessed Joy fuckin' Crowley was this much of a slut," Isiah said. He patted her cheek as she sucked him down. "Aren't ya, baby? One big cock slut?"

She moaned around him. As he grabbed a fistful of her black hair and shoved his cock as deep in as he could reach, Tom smacked her ass cheek with his own prick. Joy tensed as he gripped his tip and pointed it at her asshole, then moaned again when he slowly slid in.

“Ah, fuck, she even loves that!” Isiah crowed.

Kim rocked on top of Spencer’s cock, her excitement building. She was one of the biggest voyeurs in his stable. His hands rose to her tits, cupping their fullness. She grabbed at his hips and started bouncing harder, taking as much of him as she could. That didn’t amount to much, so he called to Nancy again.

She came to him and knelt. She was Midwestern country through and through, big tits, big ass, fine red hair that bordered on blonde. Once the prom queen, head cheerleader of her college, and a nude model, she was now his eager cocksucker and pussy slut, and licked up every bit of him that didn’t reach Kim – and more. He couldn’t remember pairing these two before, but they responded and flowed well together, Kim crying out obscenities at the redhead licking her pussy and his cock and Nancy looking up with subservient lust in her eyes, worshipping the two of them.

And at the center of the room, her eyes flicking towards Spencer and moaning every so often, Joy Crowley was speared from both ends. Her ass rippled with every hard thrust from Tom. Isiah pounded her face. Unsurprisingly, it was the big real estate mogul who came first out of everyone getting fucked in that room. He gripped Joy’s hair, plunged deep one more time, rocked his head in a full arc, and shouted, “I’m coming, bitch!”

He spurted maybe twice before pulling back. Then again, he’d come once already watching the show. Isiah might be something of a frenemy, but goddamn, he was good for a laugh.

Joy let his cock go, and with come drizzling down her chin, she looked around the room and growled, “More. More cocks. Let’s go. Someone give me another fucking cock.”

Max Harris, chief of police and outspoken nuclear family and traditional American values advocate, jumped to his feet, throwing aside his towel in his haste to cheat on his wife for something like the twentieth time under Spencer’s thumb. That was all right. Spencer took his college-aged daughter’s virginity in a closet at a dinner party Chief Harris hosted, then at

the same party late at night fucked his wife's throat in another closet, so he felt oddly beholden to the chief. Plus, he had great closets.

Kim's bouncing turned erratic sometime after Max jammed his five inches into Joy's mouth, a sure sign she was about to come. "Tend to her," Spencer said to Nancy, and the redhead moved her tongue upwards, tasting the other woman's clit. Her hands rose to join his at Kim's tits, and he let her have them while he roped his arms around the slim Korean woman and started hammering up at her. Like that, Kim gurgled her way through an orgasm, and slid off him, laughing softly as Nancy bounced to her feet and mounted him in seconds. Kim took up her old spot while Nancy took hers, and it was like there had never been an interruption.

Panties. Why the hell was Spencer's brain fixated on panties?

Tom pulled out of Joy's ass and yanked off the condom. He jacked his cock hard above her back and came across her in a wide spray of arcing shots. Sandoval, another one of Spencer's guests, rose and gave two other men a glare when they tried to get to Joy first. He reached for her without having fished out a condom from the bowl on the table, and Spencer said mildly, "Condom."

"Fuck you, Foreman, I'm clean."

"I said, condom."

The room went still. Spencer patted Nancy's ass and she pulled off him and stepped away. Sandoval was the biggest, meanest son of a bitch there, but Spencer knew he could take him if it came to that. The crazy bastard once wanted to fight to settle a land dispute between the two, and Spencer left him with a broken leg and cracked ribs. Before Sandoval's crew could haul him to a hospital, he told Spencer they were going to drink together to the fight and the success of their business relationship.

Now he glared like a rabid dog, and Spencer stared back. Finally, Sandoval said, "All right, a condom. But Jesus, put that dick in something and hide it away. You're making all of us feel inadequate."

Nervous laughter broke out, and Spencer joined in on it. He nodded to Sandoval, who nodded back.

Is it you, Sandoval? Are you the one hitting me from the shadows?

Maybe. But the ISP hit didn't feel like him. Too precise, too intricate. Maybe he provided the men, though.

The frenetic orgy lasted another hour and a half, and to Joy's credit, she took every cock in that room – save Spencer's – and begged for more, even

at the end when she was left hoarse from the men who came down her throat and covered from her shoulder blades to the top of her ass in come. The men departed for the showers on that floor, laughing and talking to one another while Spencer was left with his women.

Joy was tended to with ginger strokes of wipes and warm, wet cloths. She could barely stand, so Spencer called for a wheelchair to be brought up to the floor. In the meantime, Joy, resting on a divan, looked up at him and he stroked her cheek.

“It wasn’t you, was it?” he asked.

“The reporter?” Joy croaked. He nodded. She licked her bruised lips and shook her head. “No. Michael and I... we’re terrible people. We’ve done things...” She trailed off, a tear sliding loose from a corner of her eye. “No, Spencer. Maybe I don’t have much of a soul left, but we have an agreement and I wouldn’t break that.”

He knelt, and took her hands in his, kissing each of them. “Had.”

“What?”

“We had an agreement. Tomorrow morning we’ll have breakfast together. You, me, the rest of the women. And then at noon, you’ll be free. Debt paid.”

Joy studied him, then slowly, painfully, rose to her feet. She embraced him, a hug so exhausted she more or less just leaned against him for support. Spencer hugged her back. Funny how alien the gesture seemed to him, so out of practice.

Joy pulled back, and wiped at her face. “Thank you,” she said. “This time together... it’s changed me. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad, but you’ve opened my eyes in a lot of ways, made me see some truths I didn’t want to admit.”

“I’m glad.”

Ona came through with a wheelchair, but she wasn’t alone. Behind her was Gallo and Nora Zell, and they looked worried. Spencer barely saw Joy out before Gallo held up a USB stick.

“You need to see this,” his bodyguard said.

* * *

In front of them on a bank of monitors was the same video, looping over and over and over again. Several glossy, full-page sized pictures were splayed out on the desk, gathered by Gallo after Nora intercepted the USB stick mailed to Spencer. Most the photos were of Rhea’s house in the

suburbs before it was burned to the ground, taken by Rhea's neighbors weeks or months ago. A couple were brand new as of an hour ago, taken by members of the security team after they got the USB drive in the mail.

The video showed Rhea's house too, namely her sidewalk and part of her porch. The dashcam video wasn't the best quality, but it was good enough to make out the details. A woman walked into view, unslinging a purse. She reached inside, pulled a pistol, and nodded to someone out of sight. A masked man circled towards her from the side of the house, and together, the two of them approached the door, out of view of the camera.

That was it. Ten seconds of footage, maybe, but it was enough. It was way more than enough.

Spencer picked up the note he'd already read three times. It was printed out in a simple font on regular paper stock, no fingerprints. *Mr. Foreman*, it read, *someone brought this to the attention of the police. I thought you would like to have the first look.*

Panties.

And in a flash of a memory, Spencer understood.

"Call Malena and put it on speakerphone."

Nora did, punching it up on a Tower phone. Malena said, "Hello?"

"We're looking at something here in the Tower and I need your help."

"What can I do?" Malena asked.

"I need phone records and emails for every woman in the Tower."

A pause, then, "Doable. The phone records might need to wait until tomorrow, but I'll poke a few people and get it fast-tracked. The emails I can have to you in an hour if you want them digitally. Longer if they need to be printed."

"Give us both. Thanks."

"You bet. Everything okay?"

"No." He nodded to Nora, and the chief of security hung up. "Where is she?" Spencer asked.

"Working," Nora said.

"Let's go check her room. I want to make absolutely certain of this before we act."

They did, heading up in the elevator. Spencer's fists clenched. Gallo didn't say a word.

The room was clean and devoid of much else than clothes. It was almost a bust, except when Gallo grabbed a chair and looked into the

recesses of the top shelf of the closet, he reached a hand in and came out with a pistol.

“Motherfucker,” Spencer breathed. “How did that get on the grounds?”

“I don’t know,” Gallo said. “But I’ll find out.”

“I want her head for this.” Spencer shook his head. “No. I want her to suffer. Dragged out into the desert. Put a fucking ball and chain on her and make her walk behind a water truck. Get it all on video.”

“Spencer,” Gallo said, gripping his shoulder. “Let’s take a walk before you decide anything. Get some fresh air.”

“Rhea was one of mine, Gallo. She was entering a contract with me.”

“I know. But maybe she was coerced. Maybe there are factors here we’re not seeing. Let’s take a walk, and we’ll figure out what comes next.”

Spencer’s chest rose and fell as he glared at his one and only friend in the world. Finally, he nodded, and they headed back downstairs.

* * *

Mina finished up her set with a hand to her forehead like she had a fever, even as she grinned lasciviously, her butt thrust out. Her eyes twinkled as her captive audience started clapping. Usually that early she was singing to five or six people, tops, but Spencer had guests that day in the Tower, and some of them stopped in at the Cepheus before they left for their corners of Vineport.

Lazar made a come-here gesture with his hand, and Mina said into the microphone, “Thank you, thank you, you’ve been lovely. I’ll be back on-” at that, Lazar shook his head fast, and she amended, “-later.”

She turned off the mic and set it back in its cradle. Lazar was already coming around the bar when she approached.

“Mr. Foreman is requesting you the rest of the day,” he said.

“Really?” she asked, smiling wide. “Did he say where I should wait?”

Lazar nodded. “You’re to shower, prepare yourself, and dress for a lengthy formal dinner engagement with him. When you’re ready, you are to phone ahead to Ona.”

She tried not to bounce on her feet. “Thank you, Lazar.”

He smiled wide. “Good luck. I think if that man could give his heart to anyone, it would be you.”

She blushed at that, and hurried away out into the lobby and towards the elevator banks. Security let her up on sight by now, and both men nodded and smiled while they waited for the elevator to descend.

In her condo, Mina tried not to hurry her shower too much. She used a light almond soap she hoped would make Spencer want to devour her, washed her full hair with her favorite shampoo, and spent some serious time down there making sure she was at her best for him.

As she blow-dried her hair, she smiled at the woman in the mirror. This was a strange life, and not the one she dreamed of as a child, but Spencer held her captive. He scared her, yes, and she knew he was a bad man, but that didn't mean she didn't care for him with all her heart. She wished the other women weren't in the picture and she could have him for herself, but that wouldn't be Spencer then, would it? And besides, she had her fun too with the other women. They could be kind of mean to each other behind their backs, but overall, the women in the Tower were like a sisterhood.

Mina spent long minutes on her hair, teasing out its fullness, giving it a crisp pop with some hair product. She went heavy with the makeup, liking the elegant look of the woman in the mirror. She kissed at herself, smiling wider, then went for her closet. She had the perfect dress, a satin one, black above the waist, cream below. It left her shoulders bare and drew the eye to her waist. Mina dressed, adding a pair of high heels and a pair of earrings, and examined herself in the mirror one more time. Whatever this dinner engagement was, she was ready for it.

Her choice must have been the right one. When Ona greeted her at the elevator, her eyes widened. "Wow. You look incredible, honey."

"Thank you," Mina said, feeling shy. "Is it okay for tonight?"

"He didn't really say what it was he wanted except that it was formal," Ona said, and shrugged. "If it's not, he's an idiot."

"Ona!"

"I'm just saying, if he decides on something else for his entertainment tonight, come find me." Ona eyed her up and down. "We'll definitely have some fun with you dressed in that. Mmm." She guided Mina into the elevator, then swiped a card and punched in a passcode. Before the doors could close, she stepped towards them. "All right. Good luck. Not that you'll need it."

"You're not coming with me?"

"Not this time. Spencer's orders."

The doors closed, and Mina braced herself, drawing deep breaths as the elevator ascended to the penthouse suite. Spencer brought her up here only the one time, at the very beginning of all this. She was so wrapped up in

him then she barely noticed a thing about the penthouse, but now, when the elevator stopped and opened on a short hallway, she took in every detail. The gorgeous paintings on the wall. The vase on the small, ornate wooden table. The grand, heavy doors in front of her pivoted open to Spencer in a light gray suit with a silky black shirt. The slim fit emphasized his figure well, and she melted just a little bit more when he smiled tightly.

“Mina. Hello. Thank you for joining me on such short notice.”

“Hello, sir,” she said demurely.

“Today, tonight, it’s Spencer,” he said, and stepped back. “Come in, please.”

“Thank you. You look very handsome tonight. More so than usual.”

He stopped her with a hand on her lower back and kissed her. With his lips still close, Spencer murmured, “And you look as beautiful as you ever have.” She kissed him again, unable to help herself, and brought a hand up to his freshly shaven cheek. The rich citrusy aftershave he wore made her want to nuzzle against his skin where he dabbed it. He pulled back, his hand still near her bottom. “We’ll be dining in tonight. Come in, sit.”

“Sir... Spencer, if I may ask, what’s the occasion?”

He guided her into the condo. Once again, she was struck by the starkness of it, the sparseness of its decorations. A few art pieces hung on one massive wall, no doubt by painters she probably should have known but didn’t. His couch was luxurious and deep, like a massive day bed. A pair of armchairs bookended a small table laden with a basket of fruit and a whiskey serving set. Deeper in, against the wall, was Spencer’s massive bed, loaded with a thick, downy comforter and a stack of pillows that rivaled her own. Just like the first time she was there, Mina marveled at the walls of windows overlooking the city. They must have stretched up nearly twenty feet, and though the sunshine still lit up the whole of the apartment, there didn’t seem to be a bit of heat let in.

He pulled a padded chair from an oval kitchen table for her and bid for Mina to sit before he answered her question. “Have you been preparing for me the way I asked?”

“My... my bottom?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I have,” she said, blushing. “Bigger plugs, every day.”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “That’s what today is about.”

“Whatever I can give to you, it’s yours,” Mina said.

Spencer pulled back, studying her. His smile disappeared, and he said, “You mean that, don’t you?”

She whispered, “I do.”

His eyes stayed on her for an uncomfortably long time. It was impossible to read his expression, and she began to feel unnerved by it when he finally stepped back and headed for a six-foot wine rack. He pulled two bottles, set them in front of Mina, and fetched a wine glass and a tumbler. When he poured her a glass of wine, he retreated to a cabinet she assumed at first was for china, but when opened, revealed a number of bottles on shelves. He selected a bottle of vermouth and bourbon, and brought them to the table as well.

When Spencer mixed his Manhattan, Mina said, “And fuck your cherries.” He smiled, raised his glass, and she clinked hers against his before they both sipped.

The wine was exquisite, soft and understated. She reached for the bottle to look at it. The label was too old and faded to read. “From Logrono,” Spencer said.

Mina thought for a moment back to her junior high days spent studying maps. “Northern France, right?”

“That’s it.”

“I was really into the Geography Club when I was young.”

“I didn’t realize that was even a thing,” Spencer said.

“It wasn’t in most places. Our civics teacher formed it. She loved to talk about the places she’d been and I loved to listen. France always sounded so lovely.”

“It really is. Paris, I can take or leave. It’s worth visiting, but I loved the smaller cities.” He gestured at the bottle. “Like Logrono.”

“I’d love to see the countryside there,” Mina said. “The wineries, the old houses, the hills. It looks so green there, but not like anywhere I’ve seen. Do you go there often?”

“Not anymore. In the early years, there, and most the world. Setting up the shipping lanes, establishing warehouses, finding headquarters, shaking hands, sometimes breaking the occasional knee, all of that I thought at the time required my direct attention. I wouldn’t do it differently, but I was a man without a home for years.”

“That sounds lonely.”

He shrugged. “It’s the life I chose to live.”

She didn't know what to say to that, so she sipped her wine. Spencer gave her that look again, like she was a book and he was trying to read her.

"Have you found out anything more about Rhea?" Mina asked. "I was so shocked to hear about her."

"Mm. We have some ideas," Spencer said, his eyes still locked on her. "But I want this day to be about you. We have until tomorrow at noon. I am releasing Joy from her contract and we'll be seeing her off."

"That's amazing!" Mina said. "Good for her."

"Does that mean you want to be released from yours?"

He did not seem to be joking. "No, sir. Spencer. I... I like being here. In the Tower."

"Why?"

She took a deep breath. "You."

"Not the clothes, the condo, the cars, the power?"

Mina was already shaking her head by the time he finished the question. "No. None of that matters a bit to me. It's you. That's why I wanted to come here even when you told me I didn't have to. I knew then I liked you. I didn't realize how much, but I think I always knew."

That finally broke his concentration on her. He turned away, and drank the rest of his Manhattan down. Still not looking at her, he said, "France. Anywhere else in the world you'd travel if you could?"

"New York. New Bainbridge too for that matter. The Irish countryside. Anywhere's countryside, really." She smiled faintly at that. "The places out there that are still quiet and lovely and peaceful. If I could wake up to one beautiful thing a day, I'd be happy. Like here. The view... well, I love sleeping with the curtains open. Looking out at the city at night, it's calming."

"Did you ever have any aspirations other than singing?"

"Oh, lots," Mina said. He poured her another glass of wine. Funny. She hadn't even noticed how quickly she drank the first one. "A race car driver. An actress. When I was a teenager, I thought being an ambassador would be really interesting. But by then, my mom had me on the road, and I left school early. Singing was what I had to be good at. I didn't have much of a chance otherwise."

"Do you regret it?"

"No. Well... some of it. There were places we slept when we would travel from stage to stage, where we barely knew the people or the area, and

sometimes...” Mina trailed off, grimacing at the memories. “My mom thought some prices were okay to pay. I didn’t.”

“What happened to her?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to. When I made it to Vegas, she assumed I was making way more money than I was and wanted more and more of it. I cut her off, she flew out, and we had words. About then, I met Sylvain, and he didn’t want me in contact with anyone from my past. Including my mom. That I was okay with. Wholeheartedly.” She sipped. “What about you? I know the rumor is your dad was an art thief, right?”

Spencer didn’t respond to that. Instead, he eventually rose, offered her his hand, and she took it. He guided her to the bed, where he slowly stripped Mina down. Maybe it was the wine getting to her, but she felt like a princess. The beauty and her not-so-beastly beast. She dropped her chin to her chest, smiling about that as Spencer brought down her dress and told her to lift one leg, then the other. He took the dress, disappeared, and came out with it on a hanger. She watched him put it on a rack beside the door and knelt, waiting for him to come to her, unzip himself, and feed her his cock.

He did come to her, but instead of unzipping, he lifted her back up and finished the job of removing her wispy panties and bra. Now he began to strip, taking his time as his eyes never left her body. When he was down to nothing but his briefs, he gripped Mina’s shoulders and pushed her down onto the side of the bed so she was seated. He stepped between her legs, nudged them apart, and knelt, stopping only for a moment to kiss her.

It was unlike any kiss they shared before. Long. Needing. He ran a hand through Mina’s hair, pulling her tight against him, his other hand resting on her hip. When he pulled back, he studied her again, but this time, his eyes seemed sad, distant. The expression was gone so fast Mina wondered later if she’d even seen it.

He knelt, then leaned in and began to eat her out.

It was good, and lazy, and slow. Spencer took his time, doling bliss out to Mina in tiny waves. He was playful in a way he never had been with her before, teasing her clit, her full lips, the thin strip of skin between her pussy and her bud. That too he kissed, a promise of what was to come. She was nervous about that. Not even Sylvain took her there. But Mina’s worry fled in the face of Spencer’s tender tongue, his probing fingers, his warm breath against her sensitive flesh.

She ran her fingers through his hair, moaning his name. “Spencer, oh, Spencer...”

He settled into a rhythm, lapping at a triangle of spots. Her clit down to her base on the left, then a slash to the right and a long tease back to her clit again. He slowly began to focus more and more on that little button, drawing Mina’s legs up and over his shoulders. He slid two fingers into her, then three, pumping them slowly in and out while he flicked her clit faster with his tongue. When he curled his fingers and found her spot, she drove back against the mattress, her climax a sudden, powerful thing that left her breathless and slapping her thighs against his head.

“Oh my God, sir, I’m sorry...”

He laughed softly, then crawled up her body to kiss her, his lips wet with her need for him. He didn’t say a word, simply stroking himself against her belly as he kissed Mina again and again. She wrapped her arms around his back and wondered deliriously why he was being this sweet, this gentle. Then he was inside her, driving deep but not hard, his hips rocking back and forth inside her welcoming pussy.

His hands slid around under her, one at her lower back, one on her butt, and he was twisting sort of, not far, but shifting her so Mina was balancing on one hip, the other slightly off the bed. The angle was incredible, and she brought one hand to her mouth to suck on her fingers, closing her eyes with the pleasure mounting again.

Faster Spencer took her, his thrusts short and coming harder. He brought one leg up to his shoulder, kissing the ankle and somehow going even deeper than he already was. She mewled and stretched her free hand above her on the comforter, clawing at it as he made it good for her again, his name spilling out of her mouth as the second orgasm washed through her. He pulled out, twisting her further, onto her stomach now. He nudged her legs apart, sliding up into her cunt as she rested her forehead on her arms, her need of him escaping her in breathy whimpers.

Mina was barely aware of a bottle being uncapped, but she sure felt his lubed-up fingers when they brushed her virgin hole. “Spencer,” she breathed, and he leaned down to kiss her shoulder.

“I have you,” he said, and his fingers slipped inside her.

The feeling was familiar – he’d probed her up to the knuckle before – but this time carried with it a weight of impending fulfilment, and she stilled, trying to experience every moment. He swirled the fingers around,

coating her walls. It felt neither pleasant or uncomfortable, but intrusive, like she was being examined for something. It made her smile, and she dropped her head again.

Then he was deeper, and that was uncomfortable, but it brought with it some promise of pleasure, too. It was an exploration of a part of her that had never really received tender ministrations before, and she reveled in the new experience, trying to decide if she liked it or not.

But before she could make up her mind, Spencer's fingers left her, and he spread more lube around her entrance and on his cock. He pressed the head to her bud, breathed, "Relax, Mina," and slowly, ever so slowly, entered her ass for the first time.

This, she liked.

The fullness of him pressed against the wall between her pussy and her ass, and that brought about a pleasure she hadn't sensed when his fingers were inside her. It wasn't quite like getting her G-spot stimulated, but the different sensation was new and welcome.

"Oh!" she said. "I like that."

"Yeah?" he asked. "Good."

He eased into her little by little. She wasn't sure how much of him she actually took – it couldn't have been more than a few inches, if that – but it felt like all of him was inside her, stretching her out. She twisted her head, mewling with the pleasure, and slid a hand underneath her tummy, down to her clit.

As Spencer began to rock back and forth inside her ass, Mina played with herself and thrilled to the combination. Her own needling words fell away to pure bliss, and she spoke nothing, her mouth agape. Spencer's breathing started coming heavier and heavier as his pace picked up. He stopped to add more lube both to her and his cock, and incredibly, it was even better when he slid back inside her, her body more used to him now and welcoming him.

Her orgasms strung together like calm, lengthy waves. She'd crest, come back down as the tide swept back out, then build right back up again to another crash upon the shore. How long Spencer held Mina captive like that, she didn't know, but at some point she looked up and the sun was setting beyond the city, the orange and pink hues lighting up the room like it was on fire. She grinned and sniffed, and thought this was her heaven, this slice of time with her man.

She was such a fool.

* * *

Spencer cradled her in his arms in the tub, her butt pressed against his groin. She was so tender and sensitive, but she liked the warmth and closeness more than the pain bothered her, so she snuggled back against him, twisting her head now and then to kiss him.

“You asked about my father,” he said, slowly stroking her belly with a soapy sponge. “Yes. He was a thief. A good one.”

“Was?”

“He died in prison.”

“Oh, Spencer, I’m sorry.”

“Me too. He was caught because of me. A moment of cockiness. I was young and impetuous. We were on a job. He told me to get out of there when security made a stronger appearance than we anticipated, and I didn’t. I thought I could steal the painting we were after and he ended up getting caught as a distraction to get me out of there.”

She turned. “My God, that’s... that’s terrible.”

“It was the hardest lesson I’ve ever had to learn.”

“I can’t imagine. What about your mother?”

“She passed. Lung cancer when I was young.”

“Was she part of your crew too?”

Spencer chuckled. “In a way.” But he didn’t elaborate, and she didn’t think he wanted to talk about it.

“It’s hard to imagine you as a child.”

“I don’t know that I ever really was. It was a strange childhood.”

“Mm. Spencer?”

“Hm?”

“Why are you letting me in like this?”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he stroked her breasts with the sponge, then her neck. He finally breathed into her ear, “I need to go start dinner if we’re going to eat before midnight.”

She pushed forward, and he rose behind her, water cascading off him. His glistening butt caught her eye and when he noticed her looking, she blushed and looked straight ahead again.

It might have been her imagination, but when he closed the door behind him, she thought he might have sighed.

* * *

After chicken diavolo served on a bed of asparagus tagliatelle, Spencer took her to bed again and they made love until the early morning hours. He spoke little, and in the end, Mina thought he was angry, but why she didn't know. She was too exhausted to give it much thought, and fell into a deep dream about being on a stage again in a dress much like the one she wore that night. Clowns filled the seats, laughing at her, crying big fake tears. She sang harder for them, trying to impress them, trying to win them over, but the lines to the song kept slipping from her mind, and she mumbled nonsense instead, trying to fake it. Their jeers grew louder, their taunting stinging like bees.

"Whore!" one of them shouted.

"Whore of Babylon!"

"Get off the stage, slut!"

A hand on her arm from behind. She turned. Spencer, his eyes blazing, his hand raised to slap her.

Mina shot upright, clutching at her breast, and finally, the wrongness of the previous night sank in. Something horrible was coming.

Spencer sat on the edge of the bed, fully dressed, a drink in hand despite the early morning hour. He didn't look back at her. "Get your clothes on," he snapped.

"What... what's going on?"

"I said get dressed. Now."

Mina was wrong. Something horrible was *here*.

She slipped out of bed, already crying, not knowing why. The dress was gone. In its place was a pair of sweats and some dowdy underwear. The sweats were a size too big, but she pulled them on anyways, casting fearful glances at Spencer. He watched her, his jaw clenched, and downed the rest of his drink when she finally tugged the top down in place.

"Spencer... whatever this is, last night-"

"Shut up," he said.

"-it was the best night of my life. I... I... if I've done something wrong..."

"Shut up!" he shouted. "Nora! In here, now!"

Nora, Gallo, Kiri, and three members of the security team barged into the condo. All of them were armed. All of them save Nora had their guns out, half-raised.

Mina stared at all of them, tears falling fast now. “No, no, no, I don’t know what I did.”

“You murdered Rhea,” Spencer snarled. “The hits on my businesses. You were the inside woman. I should have seen it earlier.”

“Rhea?” Mina asked, breathless. “You, you, you think I k-killed...?”

Spencer stood, his fury burning through him. He looked half-mad, his eyes bloodshot, huge. He roared, “We have the video. We have emails. We have phone calls. You are lucky I’m not throwing you from the roof of the building.”

“No,” Mina gasped. Despite the security team circling her, she darted for Spencer, falling to her knees in front of him. “I would never betray you,” she cried out, clutching at his pants. “Never. I would never hurt you or, or, or anyone in the Tower, or anyone.”

One of the security team grabbed her up by the throat. Mina gagged, her eyes huge, and someone slapped handcuffs on her.

Spencer stared down at her, all the muscles in his face twitching with his wrath. “You are banished from the Tower and Vineport. You’ve broken my contract with you-”

“No,” Mina wheezed, “no, Spencer, no, never, I’m yours...”

“-so if you step foot back inside the Tower, you will be punished beyond your comprehension for pain.”

“...I-love you...” she gasped, her breaths a thin whistle. “...never hurt... you...”

Spencer’s eyes shifted to Kiri. In the end, they were cold, emotionless. “Take her away,” he said.

Mina screamed when they dragged her towards the elevator.

* * *

Joy Crowley sat beside Spencer at the head of a grouping of tables in the lobby. While the rest of the women talked, ate, and drank, she fingered her collar, the same one he purchased on the trip to New York. He didn’t speak much during the goodbye ceremony, but now, as they finished up the last of the revelries, he leaned in and murmured, “You can take it off now.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

He smiled tightly, then reached behind Joy’s neck and unclasped it for her. She took it from him, looking down at the remains of her meal. Gallo caught his eye at the security station near the front doors, and nodded. Spencer rose, and held up the collar.

“Joy has not always enjoyed her time here at the Tower,” he said. “I only collar the most spirited of the women among you. You know that. But she has fulfilled her contract with me to the letter.” He snapped the collar in half, and let the pieces fall to the table. “Take today’s events as a lesson to all of you. Betray me, and you will be broken and cast out. Obey me, stick to your contracts, live out your days here in the Tower fulfilling my needs, and it will be whatever binds you that’s broken.” He raised his glass of iced tea. “To Joy.”

“To Joy!” the women called out, and raised their own glasses.

Spencer took Joy’s hand, and she stood with him. “This wouldn’t have been bearable without all of you,” she said. “Thank you.”

As a speech went, it was short and sweet, and Spencer liked it. He kept hold of her hand, and walked with her to the entrance. Gallo smiled tightly, and guided them out into the sunshine. He looked as exhausted as Spencer felt.

One of Spencer’s SUVs waited out at the curb. They walked towards it. “If Michael gives you any trouble, contact me. We’ll have a chat.”

“I will. I think his taste of power is going to outweigh the cost of it.”

Spencer stopped her short, and brought her hand up to his lips. “For your sake, I hope-”

A crossover jerked away from the light traffic along the street. It shot towards the Tower, the window coming down, a gun peeking out. Spencer moved, grabbing Joy as Gallo stepped in front of them, going for his own gun. Too late.

Spencer knocked Joy to the ground, covering her as gunfire erupted. The SUV leapt away, back into traffic. Gallo raised his gun, but there were too many cars in the way to risk it, and his hand was far too shaky. He fell forward, his free hand clutching the crimson blooming across his stomach.

Out of Control

Malena got the call about the hit at the Tower and nearly threw her phone across the ISP's office. Ron was losing his cool, acting outside the plan - her plan. She had everything lined up to sweep Spencer Foreman off the board, and her no-good idiotic husband went and pulled a stunt like this. Perfect.

She supposed it could be one of the others, her tenuous allies in all this, but none of them would be so stupid as to do this right on Foreman's front lawn. This reeked of Ron.

Malena stood and stormed out to the main office. Her employees looked up, and she said, "There's been an attack on the Tower. Spencer Foreman was very nearly killed, and his bodyguard's..." She swallowed back very real anger. "His bodyguard was grievously wounded." They buzzed, but she cut them off with a slash of her hand. "I'm going over there to see what I can do. Until things calm down, you enter and leave the building in pairs. If you see anything suspicious, no matter how silly you might think it is, you call it into the Tower."

She left without another word, face drawn in a silent snarl. There was no need to hide her anger. Anyone who knew her connection with Foreman would assume she was angry for his sake, not because someone botched a hit. What if they'd actually killed him? The vault's location would die with him.

This would stir up a hornet's nest like no other.

But maybe it could be twisted into another opportunity to get in close to Foreman. Malena could perhaps single him out among the chaos, torture him, and then... paradise. She didn't even have to sell the goods within the vault. All she had to do was tell her business partners the location once she knew it, and when they had the Foreman family's stolen property and secrets, they would pay her a cool half a billion dollars.

Five. Hundred. Million.

All for a little sex, anal, and some spankings. If Ron didn't fuck it all up first.

In the car, she opened the center console, pulled out the notepads and chargers inside, then pressed the hidden button near the bottom. A panel

lifted up, and she retrieved a cell phone from inside. Unsurprisingly, the moment she turned it on, it buzzed with missed calls and voicemails.

It rang even before she could jump into those and start assuring their partners that this wasn't her. Tetsuya. She sighed. Best she take a roundabout way to the Tower. There were going to be a lot of phone calls like this one.

* * *

The first two levels of the Tower were completely devoid of life save for teams of security. Every shop was closed down, and not a single person who wasn't carrying a gun walked through the grounds.

Jim, a former cop and now a Tower security guard, stopped her at the security gate. The only reason she even got that far was that she was a regular upstairs. "I'm not sure what the procedure is," Jim said apologetically. "I'll call ahead." He tapped a button on his shoulder mic. "Hey, this is Jim. I've got one of Mr. Foreman's regulars down here, ah..." "Malena."

"Malena. She's been staying in the Tower under Mr. Foreman's protection, but she's not one of his usual."

A cool female voice on the other end said, "No one is allowed into the Tower at this time."

Malena said, "I was helping Spencer... Mr. Foreman with a security issue. Copies of emails, phone records, that sort of thing. Nora will know what I'm talking about. I can help."

Jim relayed all that, and Nora's voice came over the radio. She sounded tense, and her words were clipped. "Let her up into her suite. I'll send down for her."

"Understood," Jim said. To Malena, "I'll still need to frisk you and you'll need to empty the contents of your purse."

"Of course."

They went through the motions of a security check, then she watched as Jim sorted through the contents of her purse. They held her stun gun and gave her a receipt for it for when she was ready to leave. Walking across the empty lobby was downright eerie. Everyone's eye was on her, and though she didn't have anything to do with the hit, she felt like she was being peeled apart.

The elevator waited for her, and she stepped on board with a man and a woman dressed in combat gear. Their hands never strayed far from their

guns, which made Malena shiver. She didn't like guns. Oh, she didn't mind using them, like when her husband killed Rhea, but they were distasteful things, the ugliest tools of the modern world. In another life, she would have made an impassioned hippy.

The elevator stopped and she headed down the hallway for her condo. When she finally killed Spencer, she'd take his penthouse suite. She dreamed of the day. True, this place wasn't bad, but his views... well, the man really did have excellent taste.

Nevaeh, a former stripper and her neighbor, opened her door and poked her head out. "Oh, it's you! God, it's been crazy around here."

"I heard. Poor Gallo."

"Yeah, no kidding," Nevaeh said, opening her door further and stepping out. "We were all still just sitting around after Joy's thing, you know? And then... bam bam bam. It was so quick."

"Did you see anything?" Malena asked.

"No, most of us were inside. Spencer and Gallo walked Joy out, you know, after her ceremony."

Say "you know" one more time and I'll gouge your eyes out when I'm in charge of this place.

Nevaeh shivered. "And so soon after Mina... well..."

"What happened with Mina?" Malena asked.

"You didn't hear? Oh my God. Mina got kicked out of the Tower and the whole city. Spencer said if she ever came back he was going to really hurt her."

Kicked out? Ugh, when Malena made that video, she thought Foreman would kill her, or make an example out of her. Then again, he did have a soft spot for the woman, so it made sense.

"For what?"

Nevaeh looked up and down the hallway, then leaned in closer and whispered, "Rumor is she was the one who's been causing him so much trouble. They think she even arranged for the shooting. Revenge for being kicked out."

"No! Mina?"

Nevaeh nodded emphatically. "It makes sense, right? They find something out, she gets kicked out, and she tries to kill Spencer. She was crazy about him. Like, maybe actually crazy. Well, you knew her."

“I... I didn’t think she was that crazy,” Malena said. That was certainly true. She saw Mina pluck up a spider off a wall once with a piece of paper and take it all the way down to the first floor and outside before releasing it into one of the small gardens out there. The woman didn’t have an ounce of spite to her.

The elevator doors opened up, and Nevaeh gave Malena another nod. Kiri stepped off the elevator, armed and geared up like the rest of the security around the Tower. “Malena,” she called.

“Be careful out there,” Nevaeh said.

Malena fought a mad grin. “You too.”

* * *

Spencer stalked the conference room, his fists balled, his eyes wild. “I want eyes on her twenty-four seven,” he spat. “If she calls someone about this, if she emails them, if she sends a letter, if she fucking faxes them, I want to know about it.”

Nora leaned over the table on her fists, staring up at Spencer. “Yes sir.”

Kiri led the way into the room and gestured at Malena. “She says there’s nothing more on a Tower cell phone or email that she can find.”

Malena nodded. “That doesn’t mean Mina couldn’t have had one elsewhere. If she had a friend come into the Cepheus, she could have used theirs. Or maybe when she was out or... or something. I’ll keep combing through the other women and employees to see if I spot anything related. Spencer, I’m so sorry.”

He punted an office chair. It flew at the wall and crashed backwards. “Fuck!” he screamed.

“I heard about Gallo getting shot. How is he?” Malena asked Kiri.

Kiri swallowed, and shook her head. “He... there was no time for an ambulance. We got him into an SUV and we still weren’t fast enough.”

Malena came to Spencer. She reached up, gripped his shoulders, then moved her hands to his face. His eyes settled on her, wild, unseeing, but they slowly focused. He dropped his mouth to hers, kissing her hard. “I need you,” he snarled.

She nodded, dropped her purse into an empty chair, and let him guide her out into the hallway and into another open conference room. He had the hem of her skirt up in moments, ripping away her panties. As furious as Spencer was, he still recognized she needed to be at least a little turned on, and moved his hand to her sex.

“Whatever you need,” she breathed as she pulled him in close.

His fingers slid across her, his thumb at her clit. He said nothing, his breath coming hard and hot. Malena reached behind her and felt for a big table. He pulled his fingers free and gripped her ass, lifting her up. She kissed him as he walked her back to the table. Her lust wasn’t faked. The thought of her dominoes all falling just right made her tingle head to toe. That she would get to have Spencer’s big dick inside her after his closest ally was killed and the one woman who might actually have been in love with him was exiled... well, that was just delicious, wasn’t it?

She lifted her top up and over her breasts, and he yanked down the cups of her bra, leaning down to suck one of her nipples. His hand went to her sex again, and hers joined him. They stroked her clit hard, and soon his rough fingers were inside her, pushing hard in and out. She moaned and latched her mouth onto his shoulder, biting him. He let out something like a growl, guttural and wordless.

His pants and briefs dropped to his knees, and he had his cock in his hand, stroking it hard. She was ready for him soon, her pussy slick with the thought of Mina being driven from the Tower, Malena’s only regret was that the stupid bitch would never know who it was that set her up. Maybe when Foreman’s empire was shattered and she had her crown, Malena would hunt Mina down and tell her the truth of what happened just before she gutted her.

Spencer’s fingers withdrew, and his cock filled Malena in one sharp plunge. She gasped, and wrapped her arms and legs around him, cocooning him as he plunged wildly in and out of her wet sex. Like a fly all wrapped up by the spider, she thought. Maybe a bit on the nose as far as imagery went, but still... delicious.

Despite his lack of control, Spencer lasted forever. Malena had good sex with him before – there was a reason her husband was so reluctant to go along with her plan of getting back into the Tower – but this was unparalleled. She was a goddamn ragdoll in his arms, coming with him wrapped up in her arms, then again when he pulled out, twisted her around, and drove right back into her pussy as she flopped down onto the table, crying out with his hard shoves. And even then, that wasn’t enough for him. Spencer laid her out on her back on the table, and dropped to his knees, eating her out with noisy slurps. She came again that way, then again, her

arms and legs so weak they could only twitch, her lips mashing together as she stared blindly at the door.

At the last, he crawled up onto the table itself, hovering over Malena, jacking his cock with one hand. He gripped one of her breasts with the other, squeezing it, twisting the nipple until it hurt so good. She took the other breast and brought the nipple to her mouth, sucking it as she stared up at him.. His come streaked across her belly, her breasts. His last shots hit her face, and all Malena could consciously think about was her makeup.

* * *

Weeks in, and Spencer finally let the women leave the Tower again, Malena included. In that time, she was escorted every day to and from the job at the ISP, making her grind her teeth. She couldn't risk calling Ron or going to him, let alone Spencer's other enemies. This was the first opportunity she had to see her husband since the hit, and she came to him sore in every hole. Spencer made her his number one slut in those two weeks, taking his rage out about Mina via an attempt to fuck every second of every day. He took Malena hard at least two, three, sometimes even four times a day along with one of his other pets. She endured it. Well... okay, truth was, Malena loved it, but she was anxious to get the plan back on track. The people aiding her weren't going to wait forever and if she didn't come through soon, she had no doubt they would find some creative ways of making her pay.

Malena drove to a grocery store, parked, but didn't get out. She dug out the burner phone and a car charger. Doubtless it was dead by now. After she plugged it in and booted it back up, she dialed Ron.

"Jesus, where have you been?" he asked without saying hello.

"What did you do?" she shouted, and hit the steering wheel so hard she thought she might have fractured something. "What the fuck, Ron?"

"The bodyguard thing?"

"Yes, the goddamn bodyguard thing!"

"It wasn't me!" he whined.

"Who else would be dumb enough to make a move on Foreman like that?"

"Would you stop calling me stupid?"

"Not until you brighten the hell up!" Malena shouted at the top of her lungs. Panting, she tapped the phone against her head, then said much more

reasonably, “Okay. Okay, you tell me it wasn’t you, I’m going to believe you.”

“I didn’t, I swear.”

Malena ignored that and kept going, trying not to scream again. “I have to believe it wasn’t, because if it was, someone’s going to find our bodies in pieces.”

Silence, then, “It wasn’t.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “Well, if there’s one bright spot to all this, Mina True’s been singled out as the insider in the Tower. So that part of the plan worked.”

“Does that mean I can come home?”

“No,” she said. “Not for a few months.”

“I miss you.”

“Yeah. I miss you too.” And Malena was surprised to find she meant it. “I’m sorry I called you stupid. I’ve been trapped up there all this time. Spencer has made me his new toy.”

“I don’t like you sleeping with him more than you have to.”

“You want to do it instead?”

That caught Ron off guard, and he laughed. Then, quieter, he said, “You gotta speak to them, baby. They’re getting nervous.”

“I’m on my way as soon as I’m off the phone.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Uh huh,” Malena said, and hung up.

* * *

Kiri said to Spencer, “Are you sure you want to be taking requests right now?”

“I’m sure,” he said curtly as they neared one of his office buildings. “Staying here any longer shows weakness. We have to return to a sense of normalcy.”

“What’s normal in our world?” she asked. At his glare, she mumbled, “Sorry. Sir.”

Ginette Duclos was not a small woman. Her upper arms looked like carp drying in the sun, and her gut peeked out from a popped button on her blouse. She sat in a monstrosity of a wheelchair in a ground floor office, a cloche cap upon her head. She rose on shaky legs to shake Spencer’s hand before dropping back down again, grimacing.

“How is the cancer?” he asked, pulling out a seat for himself and spinning it towards her to sit.

“Doctors gave me three months four months ago, so it could be worse.” Ginette spoke with a rasp. Once upon a time, she worked for him in a legitimate capacity. A sommelier of some repute, she helped him acquire several wineries and distilleries, some of his bigger moneymakers, especially with some choice celebrity endorsements.

“What is it you’re after from me, Ginette?”

“No telling me you’re sorry to hear the diagnosis is fatal?”

Spencer smiled perhaps his first genuine smile since Mina left the Tower. “Would you like platitudes, or would you like to get to business and not waste any of what time you have left?”

She gurgled out a laugh, coughed, and spit into a tissue. Her watery eyes lit back on him as he stood to fetch a trashcan. “Thanks. The grands don’t like to laugh around me anymore and anytime I do, they tell me to cool it. Won’t even let me have a joint.”

Spencer anticipated that, and brought out a baggie filled with edible gummies. “Two will do you.”

“A woman my size?”

“This is lab grown stuff. It would get a tyrannosaurus high.” She started to open the bag but he put his hand on hers. “Not yet. Not until we’ve talked about what it is you came to me for.”

“It’s my oldest grandson’s boyfriend.”

“Your oldest grandson... Noel, right?”

“Yes. Remarkable how you can remember things like that. We haven’t talked in, what, three years?” She coughed again, though this time, it came without the fireworks.

“What’s the boyfriend’s name and what’s he done?”

“Howard Barnaby. He’s got a temper on him. Noel’s tried to leave him three times, but Howard keeps threatening suicide or he’ll kill him. I think the former’s completely acceptable for a piece of shit like him, but for my grandson’s sake, I’d like you to, mm, charm Howard with a visit.”

“Sounds fun.”

“What are your terms?” Ginette asked. Her voice was worn thin from even that little amount of time.

“A bottle of your ’47 Bordeaux.”

“Go to hell,” Ginette said. “I’ll give you four bottles of a 1990 Gran Cru that’s twice as good and won’t leave you robbing me blind.”

Spencer held out a hand. “Done.”

* * *

It took about an hour to find Howard Barnaby, but they didn’t move on him until that night. Spencer, Kiri, and two of her team waited in a van three blocks away from the man’s house, watching a monitor along one of the walls of the van. Bo, a young, eager recruit handpicked by Gallo before the incident at the Tower, piloted a drone with a camera over the squat houses.

“That’s his Chevelle,” Bo said unnecessarily.

“As opposed to another Chevelle that might be on this street at this hour,” Larry said beside him.

Spencer caught Kiri’s eye and tilted his head slightly towards the young men. She shook hers. “They can handle themselves. But boss...”

“What?”

“Do you think this is the best idea? Putting yourself out in the open again like this?”

“You don’t have a choice. It’s my decision.”

“I know, but...” She sighed, frustrated. “I’m trying to do things the way Gallo would have for you. You listened to him. Please listen to me.” She gestured at the screen where Howard Barnaby was just pulling into his garage. “We can fulfill the contract for you. Put the fear of God into this guy.”

Spencer asked, “How?”

“We go in hard. Break a finger or two, drag him to a chair, then tell him not to come around where he’s not wanted.”

“Just like that?”

Now she was getting irritated. “Yes. Why?”

“Bo, switch to infrared, please.”

“Uh, you got it, sir.”

Bo did, and all three of the security detail blinked at the cameras. There wasn’t just one red mass in the house, but two. And surrounding it, in the bushes and trees above, were four more.

“Jesus,” Kiri breathed. “How did you know?”

“You think I’m on a rampage. I’m not. They think I’m playing it defensively. I’m not. This is still my territory and I know my people.

Ginette's cancer went into remission three months ago."

"Then that was..."

"A show, yes. She's not well, but she's not that sick."

"What do we do about them?" she asked, gesturing at the screen.

"We show them I'm still in charge."

* * *

Ginette stumped around the kitchen, trying to avoid her nervous habit of chewing the inside of her cheek. Checking her phone every ten minutes wasn't going to help, so she set about making a basic chicken alfredo. A cigarette hung out of the corner of her mouth and the water was just starting to boil when the doors crashed inwards.

The cigarette plopped into the boiling water and she went for a knife, the big long one whose use she'd never actually figured out. But it was plenty sharp, and she spun with it, feeling immediately stupid as two men in combat gear trained guns on her.

"Drop it," one of them said, "or we make sure you don't leave the wheelchair."

Ginette held up the knife, then tossed it aside with a heavy sigh. She collapsed into her wheelchair, a shaking hand going to her face. Spencer and the big bodyguard from earlier – Cici? – stepped into the kitchen. He dug out a phone, tapped away at it, and held it up for her inspection. She swallowed at the images.

At the bodies of the men who were supposed to kill Spencer Foreman.

"Funny trick, sending us after your accountant."

Ginette's fear didn't exactly break, but it lessened and she smiled. "A little bit funny."

"Anyone else in the house?"

"No."

"You understand what we'd do if there were?"

She nodded.

"Do you still have the edibles from earlier?"

Again, Ginette nodded.

"Dig them out, please." She reached into a pocket of the wheelchair, and produced the baggie of gummies. To the others, Spencer said, "Bo, back in the van. Warn us if anyone's coming. Larry, Kiri, sweep the house, then keep watch outside."

"Sir," Kiri said, and they hurried to obey.

Spencer returned his focus to Ginette. "Have one. Or two. Or ten."

His hand disappeared under the table, and when it reappeared, it held a pill bottle. From it, he withdrew two small pills. These he pushed towards the center of the table.

"The gummies will help with the pain," he said.

Ginette finally, completely cracked. "They approached me."

"Who?"

"They were Tetsuya's people. One of them had the tattoo."

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

"Anyone else you know making a run on the Tower?"

Ginette swallowed, hard. She opened the baggie, grabbed a handful of the gummies, and stuffed them in her mouth. It took a long time to chew them. He rose to his feet and got her a glass of water. When he sat again, she still hadn't moved, staring at the pills.

"Tell me, Ginette," he said.

She drank down half the water. Some of it spilled on her shirt, but she didn't care. She was dead already, even if she'd yet to take the pills. "All of them, Spencer. You've taken a couple punches and they've watched. Now they think you're weak, or as weak as you'll ever be."

"Hm. Why not come to me with this?"

"Why do you think?"

"Your family."

She nodded. "Tetsuya's offering a lot of money to get you alone and beat the vault's location out of you."

"And what do you think I could have offered you? Why would you be that stupid?" His tone was kind despite the harshness to the words, and she found her tears finally, in the end.

"Because kingdoms fall, Spencer." She reached for the pills, and he caught her hand.

"Give it ten minutes for the gummies to kick in. The pain..."

"I don't care," Ginette whispered. They stared at each other a long moment, and he let her hand go. She took the pills, tossed them back, and drank them down. She even opened her mouth to show him she'd swallowed, like one of his good girls. He rose, kissed the top of her head, and left.

A Spark

Mina's exile from Vineport was subdued compared to the drama leading up to it. Chiara, a lean, muscular woman, kept her handcuffed until they were beyond the city limits. After she pulled into a rest stop, she finally twisted around in her seat and asked, "If I uncuff you and you cause trouble..."

"I won't," Mina said tonelessly.

Chiara stepped out and had Mina twist sideways in her seat, her hands still behind her back. When the cuffs came free, she wiggled her wrists and her hands. Chiara let her use the restroom under her close scrutiny, and then they hit the road again.

On their way west, Chiara didn't say much and Mina was even less communicative. All she wanted to do was stare out the window at the shifting landscape and wonder what went wrong. She kept reliving Spencer's words over and over and over, unable and unwilling to escape them.

Hundreds of miles later, Chiara stopped for gas and fast food. Mina tried to tell her she wasn't hungry, but Chiara ordered a salad, fries, and a chicken sandwich for her anyways. Mina ate, but her mind was on Spencer at his stove, head bent, cooking for her.

How cruel to have such an amazing day together and then... this?

She had no more tears to cry, but her body tried anyways, and she rocked silently, hand at her lips.

"You going to finish those?" Chiara asked, gesturing to the fries. Mina turned to stare at her, silent, and Chiara took that as consent.

An hour and a half later, they arrived in Salt Lake City. Mina, in a daze of sorts and in the worst spiritual pain of her life, didn't realize they were leaving the Interstate until they slowed and turned off. They drove another ten miles, and pulled into a small parking lot for an apartment complex that looked just like three others in as many blocks.

Chiara twisted in her seat again. "If you want to live a full, happy life, listen up. In apartment two-oh-one, there are clothes and enough cash to get you some groceries and necessities. There will be no contact from you to the Tower, Spencer Foreman, or anyone associated with him except me. If

you are approached by his enemies, you call me. Otherwise, I never want to hear a peep from you. Understood?”

“Yes. But would you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“I need you to tell him it wasn’t me. Even if he doesn’t ever...” Mina swallowed, her guts writhing. “...even if he doesn’t want anything to do with me, he has to know, whoever betrayed him is still there.” Chiara’s glare softened, and she nodded. “And tell him... tell him thank you. For saving me, and for the... the one good day.”

Mina opened her door, stepped out, and with slumped shoulders, headed for the apartment building and her new life.

* * *

Mina didn’t know why she expected to wake up next to Spencer. They’d only ever spent the night together a few times, and only the once in his bed. The rest had been on trips, when necessity forced them into the same spaces. Those had been the best nights, though, and her imagination and heart always wanted to believe there would be more of them.

But there wouldn’t be, and Mina had to get used to that idea.

The apartment was enough. A single bedroom, a tiny kitchenette, a living room. The half-bath smelled faintly of mildew and more strongly of bleach. Apart from a sheet, cheap blanket, and a pair of throw pillows on the bed, the only other thing in the apartment of note was a manila envelope with three hundred dollars in cash.

She slept the first two days. Her dreams were full of nightmares. Of being choked by that guard again while Spencer watched. Of his fury. Of him cornered in the Tower, someone stalking him while Mina couldn’t shout loud enough through the windows to make him listen.

Bad as the nightmares might be, they beat the hell out of the waking world.

She finally dragged herself out of bed for two reasons – hunger, and necessity. The three hundred dollars wasn’t going to last long, especially since Mina had no idea how much rent or utilities would be.

Work wound up being at a nearby gas station. It was different than she was used to, and the endless flirting guys subjected her to at the counter got old, fast, but she endured, working ten to six every day and coming home at night to soak her feet in hot water.

Her mornings were spent at the library, poring over Vineport news. It sounded like things were reaching a boiling point in the city. Gang violence was back in a big way. No doubt it had something to do with the attacks on the Tower and Spencer, but she saw no news about him or her former home.

Stay safe, Spencer.

* * *

Two months in, and Mina couldn't figure out why the smell of the gas station deli's fried mushrooms affected her so much. Part of it, she figured, was the new guy. He was young, excitable, and had a tendency to wildly undercook or overcook things. There had already been two complaints.

He'd been getting better the last few days, but he must have reverted because something about that smell made her stomach feel like it was bouncing on a trampoline. An hour into her shift, Mina was so unsettled she had to excuse herself and rush to the bathroom. At least getting sick settled things for the rest of her shift, but it worried her. She was saving a good amount of money since no one had approached her about paying rent or utilities, but a hospital stay for a stomach bug would deplete her savings fast.

When she returned to her station, her closest friend at work, Christie, said, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I think so." Quieter, so the new guy couldn't hear, she added, "Does the deli kind of... smell to you? Like really strong?"

"Like something's rotting?"

"No, like... like the grease is really, um... strong, I guess."

"Haven't noticed anything. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," Mina said, then shrugged. "Probably just nerves."

She didn't think anything of the incident until two days later, when Christie, a couple of her friends, and Mina went to the movie theater to catch a matinee before hitting up a bar. Mina, who usually loved nothing more than a big tub of movie theater popcorn with all the butter and salt, took one whiff of the liquid butter and felt that powerful wave of nausea overwhelm her again. This time, she didn't get sick, but hovered over one of the theater's toilets for long minutes, sure she was catching something. She begged off the movie, returned home, and decided to schedule something at the clinic if it kept up.

It did.

That Wednesday, she took a bus to a small women's clinic Christie recommended. A doughy nurse with bright eyes and a brighter smile invited her back into one of the clinic rooms, where she proceeded to ask Mina questions about her medical history and her symptoms. Her questions changed to more pointed ones, ones that made Mina laugh at first. Questions like, oh, had Mina missed her period lately? Yes, but stress often did that to her. Had her breasts become more sensitive, or grown fuller, or had the areolas darkened? Well... yes. Had she been urinating more or had any constipation?

By that point, Mina was smiling less and less. There had only been one man to come inside her since Sylvain Pelletier's death, and that man had a vasectomy. She'd even seen the tiniest trace of the scar.

She could not be pregnant, because Spencer Foreman could not have fathered any children.

But in the strangest twist of Mina's already strange life, it seemed he could.

* * *

Mina got the call about the lab results at work, and fought through a fog of confusion the rest of her shift. On the one hand, she was ecstatic. She was having a baby. His baby. But with that came a terrible fear. What would happen when Spencer found out? He already hated her. If he thought she got pregnant with someone else's baby to get him back in her life, they would probably never find her body.

But he had to know. Regardless of the fear in her heart, she had to tell him. Back home, in her apartment, she called Chiara.

"What's the emergency?" the woman said immediately when she answered.

"Um. I don't know that it's an emergency per se, but it's something Spencer needs to know."

"Goddamn it, Mina..."

"Just listen, please. This is going to sound crazy. I know he has a vasectomy, but... I'm pregnant. He's the only one I've slept with who could be the father. I, I, I know his people won't believe me, that you'll think I got pregnant by someone else to get back in his life, but I promise you, I swear to you, it's his. I'll do blood tests. I'll do whatever I have to do."

Silence, then Chiara, quieter, said, "Who have you told?"

"Just you so far."

“Okay. Good. Keep it that way. This gets out, you’re going to become a target. Don’t whisper a word to anyone else. Where did you get checked out? What’s the doctor’s name” Mina gave her the information, and Chiara wrote it down on her end. “Okay. I’m going to fly out to you and pick you up. We’ll fly back here and get some tests done.”

“Thank you. God, I didn’t know if you’d listen, or...”

“If you’re lying I’ll kill you myself,” Chiara said, and hung up.

* * *

Mina told her boss she’d be taking a couple days off, that it was a stomach bug. Her boss sympathized and told her if she needed anything, she had her crew at the gas station ready to bring her some ginger ale and soup. That touched Mina.

At nine the morning after she called Chiara, the Tower guard pounded on her door. Mina let her in, already packed and ready to go. Mina smiled wide as the other woman swept into the apartment.

“I’m so glad you listened and came. I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

“Mm hm.” With a hand on her holstered gun, Chiara peeked in the bedroom, then in the bathroom, and came back out. “You didn’t tell anybody?”

“No one. I told work I had a stomach bug and I’d be taking a few days off.”

“Okay, good. Leave your bag. You won’t need it.”

“But my clothes...”

“I said leave it,” Chiara snapped. Then she smiled. “Sorry. You can get everything you need in the Tower again, if all this checks out.”

They walked out to a rented sedan, and drove.

Chiara’s smile unsettled Mina. It was soft, knowing. In all the miles they traveled together, she hadn’t seen Chiara smile once. Now she couldn’t wipe it off her face. Her phone rang, and she answered, “Chiara.” She listened, her smile widening. “Okay. Good. I’ve got her. We’re on our way to the airport now.”

Mina’s eyes flicked to the gun at Chiara’s side. When the other woman lifted her phone to glance at the screen long enough to tap the end call button, Mina’s hand shot for the gun and drew it, fast. She wasn’t terribly great with guns, but one of her mother’s friends taught her the basics.

“What are you doing, Mina?” Chiara asked, her smile going even wider.

“Give me your phone.”

“You’re not going to sho-”

Mina aimed the gun up at the ceiling, and fired. The noise was deafening in the confined space, and it was a long moment before she could hear Chiara yelling obscenity after obscenity, cradling her ear. Her phone fell into the cupholder, and Mina snatched it out with her free hand.

“Passcode,” she yelled, barely able to hear herself.

“I’m not going to do that. You’re not thinking right. I just want to get you back to Spencer and the Tower.”

“And I want to call ahead and make sure they know you’re here.”

Chiara was silent at that, and Mina smiled her own smile.

“They’ll never let you near there,” Chiara finally said. “You’re too important now. That baby’s worth more than the vault. You’re worth his whole empire.”

“Pull over,” Mina said quietly.

Chiara did, and turned to stare Mina in the eyes. “There are hundreds, thousands of his enemies between you and the Tower. You buy a ticket, they’re going to know. You use your debit cards, your credit cards, they’ll know. They will never let you get close to him.”

“Get out. Leave the keys in the ignition.”

Chiara did, stepping out into the sunshine and leaning down. “I’m going to find you, Mina.”

“No,” Mina said. Her voice might have shook but her hand was steady. “You’re not.”

And she fired.

* * *

Mina didn’t know much about crime but she did know she couldn’t drive that rented car for long. Doubtless they would already be searching for her.

She drove as fast as she dared to Christie’s house. Her boyfriend was a traveling nurse working a two-week job in Richfield. He owned two cars, a day-to-day Corolla and a comfier luxury Volvo he drove for work. The Corolla was in their garage, and Christie would be working until six. No one would know it was gone for hours yet.

The problem was, Mina didn't know where they might keep a spare key. She did, however, know where they kept a line of big, decorative rocks and a handy glass patio door.

"Sorry, Christie," she said, and chucked one of the rocks through the patio door. She used the tip of a patio umbrella to sweep out what glass was left.

Carefully, she stepped over the broken glass and into the house. Someone might have heard her break in, so she hurried to the front door and the key rack on the wall. There were lots of keys there but only one with a fob that read TOYOTA. She grabbed that one, hesitated, then all the rest in case for whatever reason that one didn't have the keys to the car. It did, and she pumped her fist.

"I'm coming, Spencer," she said, and punched the garage door opener.

* * *

A hundred miles away, Mina had to stop for gas. She saw a man talking on his phone by one of the pumps, and hurried over to speak to him as she was filling up.

"Sir. Sir! If I could use your phone for just a few minutes, I'd give you, um, twenty dollars."

He was a big guy with bleach blond hair, and eyed her from head to toe with a leer. "You in some kind of trouble, honey?"

"Something like that. Thirty dollars."

"How's about a blowjob instead?"

She walked away from him, muttering. A husband and wife guided their kids out of the store, and she darted for them. "Hi, hey, um, if I could just use one of your phones, I'd gladly pay you twenty dollars. Mine is dead, and..."

The woman looked at the man and shook her head slightly. He apologized, but kept moving with his family.

A middle-aged woman with her hair in a busy braid Mina liked overheard this and offered up her phone, free of charge so long as Mina made the call right in front of her car where she could keep an eye on her. Mina, grateful, took her up on it, looked up the Cepheus's number, and called Lazar.

"This is the Cepheus, and I am Lazar, your world-famous entertainer of the hour. What can I do for you?"

She smiled at the sound of his boisterous voice. *Please, let me trust you, Lazar. Please.* “Lazar. It’s Mina.”

He lost his good humor immediately. “I can’t be talking to you. You’re persona non grata around here. Worse.”

“I know, I know. Listen to me. I have something important I need to tell Spencer. Can you put me in touch with him or Gallo?”

“You didn’t hear?” Lazar asked.

Mina’s heart froze. No. Not Spencer. “Hear what?”

“Gallo was shot and killed just after you left. Spencer has been...” He sucked his teeth. “It’s been violent.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “Is Spencer... is he okay?”

“No. Not mentally. And to answer your question, I can try to get to him, but there are whispers in the Tower. Plots. One man, Tetsuya, he’s dead and people say Spencer killed him. I think it’s just the beginning. Things are about to go very bad here.”

“I need to get in there. And there are going to be people in my way trying to stop me. His enemies.” An idea hit her, a very basic one, and so stupid it couldn’t possibly work. “Lazar. I think I know how I can get back in the Tower, but I need your help. Please. I’d never hurt him. You have to know that.”

“He’ll kill me. That is not a figure of speech.”

“Please, Lazar. Trust me. If we were friends, trust me.”

Lazar took a deep breath. “Of course we are. Tell me what I can do.”

* * *

Mina looked and felt weirdly sexy, given the ridiculousness of the outfit. The burlesque outfit was nothing more than a corset and stockings with high heels. She thought she looked surprisingly good in it, with her breasts pushed up and shouting a hello to the world. Though she was still early in the pregnancy she didn’t do the corset up tight, leaving it loose around her stomach.

Sorry, little one. Maybe someday things will be normal.

Hah.

She fought the urge to touch her wig again as Lazar drove to the Tower. “For what it is worth,” he said, glancing aside at her bare thigh, “if you’d actually done a burlesque show at the Cepheus, we would have had a packed house every night.” Gone was his flamboyance, and in its place was

a nervousness. Even his accent was mostly gone. Still there, but lacking his flourish.

“Thanks, Lazar. And thanks for believing in me.”

“Let’s hope we are lucky tonight.”

“Yeah.”

They arrived, and pulled down into the employee parking garage. The attendant looked into the car, then at his tablet.

“She is part of the entertainment at the Cepheus tonight,” Lazar said. “Meet-”

“Mina True,” the guard said, going for a gun at his belt.

“Ah,” Lazar said, followed eloquently with, “Well. Shit.”

He stomped on the accelerator, and the big luxury car shot forward, hitting the security bar and snapping it at its base. The guard shouted something after them, and a bullet pinged off the rear.

“No no no, don’t shoot, don’t shoot,” Mina shouted, but they were already clear and hurtling towards the elevator bank.

Another guard shot out of a stairwell, his gun coming up. Lazar spun the car in a wide arc, Mina’s side to the elevators. He reached into his shirt and yanked off his security card, thrusting it at Mina.

“Go,” he said, his smile nervous and pensive. “Good luck.”

Mina shot across the seat, kissed his cheek, and hopped out, running the last few feet with her head down, hands over it. She swiped the card into the elevator’s reader as Lazar backed up, aiming the car at the guard who had just made his appearance. The guy shouted, fired a warning shot, and the car switched directions. As the elevator doors opened, Mina distinctly heard Lazar shout a giddy, “Wheee!” as he spun in a tight loop.

The elevator rose up. Stopped on the first floor. And opened up to four armed men and women aiming right for her head.

A Place to Rest Your Head

Spencer was ready to drop. His enemies seemed to know his every move and at this point only instinct and his father's training kept him alive and on top. He grinned. Same as it ever was.

Malena stood beside him, clutching her purse. She was his ever-present companion now. The ISP was under new leadership. He wanted her close, in there at the Tower with him. Kiri rode in the elevator too, looking worn thin. She bore a couple wounds from their attack on Tetsuya, a bloody fight that ended with the other man taking his own life before Spencer could get his hands on him. Kiri's annoyance with Spencer over that was quickly shifting into full-blown anger.

Good. People were tested in fires.

They came off the elevator, the trio moving fast. The lobby was back to operational, the businesses hopping even that late. They moved for the Cepheus. Someone reported Lazar had left his shift and Spencer, feeling more and more paranoid, wanted to know why.

Kiri's radio blared, "Breach, breach, garage level, Lazar and Mina True just broke through the gate and are heading for the elevators."

"What the-?" Kiri asked, going for her gun. "Lazar?"

"Ohhh, that bitch," Malena breathed.

Spencer stopped, twisting to look at Kiri and her radio.

"She's in the elevator, she's in the elevator."

"Override it," Kiri snapped into her microphone. "Stop it on the first floor and hold her. I'm on my way down."

She started for the stairs, and Spencer followed her. She turned around and held a hand to his chest. "No. We don't know what she's doing, what she's capable of. If she's got a bomb, or a gun..."

"She had every opportunity when she had me alone in my condo. I'll handle her punishment."

Kiri's lips twisted, and she moved again, not arguing. Her hand went to her gun and she drew as they hurried down to the first floor. Malena followed them, scowling.

Commotion. His people were shouting, "Drop the gun!"

"Please!" Mina yelled. "I have to talk to him. Please. Just a minute."

Mina, what did you do?

“Kill her,” Malena said, but neither Spencer or Kiri listened to her.

“We said drop the gun!” one of the security team shouted.

Spencer saw Mina at the same moment she saw him. They had her boxed in, and she did have a gun. It clattered to the floor, and she shot forward, but two guards blocked her. She pushed at them, her eyes wild. “Spencer. Spencer!”

“What are you doing back here?” he asked. “Do you not understand I mean what I say when I threaten people? Did you think I’d welcome you back with open arms?”

“Please, oh God, Spencer, just five minutes, just a minute, just... just... just seconds, please, they want me, they’re, they’re going to use me against you, Chiara, I had to kill her...”

“See?” Malena asked, her voice growing shrill. “She killed one of ours. Kill her! You have to shoot her now. She’s dangerous.”

“You killed... Chiara?” Spencer asked.

“I had to, I had to, she came to me, she told me she came from the Tower when she found out.” Mina wriggled one arm free and clasped it to her stomach. “I’ll take whatever punishment you want to give me, but not yet, not yet, it has to be in seven months, okay? Please.”

“Kill her!” Malena shouted.

“Seven...” Spencer started to say.

“I’m pregnant!” Mina shouted.

* * *

Three blinks was all it took for Spencer to come to the truth of it.

In the first blink, he thought how ridiculous the statement was. He had a vasectomy. Mina knew he had a vasectomy. Everyone in the Tower knew he had a vasectomy. Why would she claim such a stupid thing? She had to have gotten pregnant from someone else.

In the second blink, he realized there were, sometimes, cases of men healing from vasectomies.

And in the third blink, he thought of the simplest reason to believe her. Mina True loved him. She would not lie to him, would never try to hurt him just as she claimed.

Even if she just destroyed everything he built in one sentence.

Spencer blinked, and he believed. His life, his kingdom, fell with only those two words from Mina.

As fast as he'd ever moved in a fight before, nothing matched that moment. Spencer shot forward, plucking the gun from one of the guards and training it on another.

To Kiri, Spencer said, "The Tower is compromised."

Kiri stepped up behind him. "I have your back. Get to the elevator."

"No one's moving," Malena said.

Spencer turned.

Malena aimed a pistol right at Mina's stomach. "Finally," she breathed. "I've got you, you stubborn jackass. Give me the vault's location. Now. Then I'm going to walk her back into the elevator, we're going to go downstairs, and we're going to take a drive."

"No, please," Mina moaned.

"It's okay," Spencer told her over his shoulder. "There's nothing she can do."

"Bullshit," Malena said, aiming the gun at one of the guards and pulling the trigger. Nothing. She frowned, then unloaded the magazine and sighed. "Well. Hell. How long did you know?"

"Since Joy's orgy," Spencer said. "You overplayed your hand with the video."

Malena breathed out hard through her nose, shook her head, and asked, "How?"

"The yellow lines. Whatever footage you used for Rhea's house, you were looking at an image before the city repainted the yellow lines. You really thought you were going to sneak a forgery past me? You think that little of me?"

"Fuck," Mina growled, tossing aside the pistol.

"And then there were the panties," Spencer said as Kiri stepped around behind Malena, digging out her handcuffs.

"Panties?" Malena asked blandly.

"When your husband and whoever his friend was broke into your ISP, you were a little too ready to see me again."

"Panties. Well... that's it then," Malena said. "Oh, except... one pretty big thing. Like you said... Tower's been compromised, Spencer." She winked. "Who can you trust?"

Gunshots boomed close by in the lobby and people screamed. The guard behind Mina went down, holding his leg. Kiri shoved Spencer backwards, pushing him towards the elevator bank. She blocked Mina with

her body, more gunfire erupting. Malena turned and bellowed at the incoming guards that they had to keep Mina alive, and they were shouting back, but over the din of screaming customers and civilians, no one could hear a thing. Spencer moved, pulling Mina with him into the elevator. He twisted and jammed the button for the garage. Kiri looked in at him, smiling sadly.

“Jeez,” she said, and coughed up a bubble of blood. “You go through a lot of bodyguards.”

She collapsed, and the elevator doors closed.

* * *

Spencer came off the elevator, gun raised. Two guards shouted at him, He tried to warn them not to do it, but their guns came up and he fired two rounds, both knee shots. He hurtled towards them and kicked their guns away as they screamed and held their legs. Spencer spun as Mina clapped a hand to her mouth, looking at Lazar, head against his steering wheel, motionless, blood-caked.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God, I did that to him,” she gasped.

“Can’t think about that,” Spencer said grimly. “He’d be glad you made it.”

They rushed for one of the SUVs. Spencer dug out a set of keys from his pocket and flinched instinctually when someone fired behind them. He turned, fired back, his other hand searching the fob for the unlock button. He punched it, and said as calmly as he could, “In, in, in.”

Mina ran for the passenger side and threw herself inside. Spencer hurried to climb in, fired another shot to warn a fresh batch of shooters coming off the elevator, and reversed before roaring towards the entrance, only then shutting his door.

Mina buckled in, and when they roared onto the road, he had her hold the wheel so he could do the same. “I went to the clinic last week and I got the news yesterday,” she said. “Chiara told me to call her only in case of an emergency. I did, told her I was pregnant, and she flew down this morning. She wouldn’t let me call the Tower to confirm any of her story, so I took her gun and...”

“You did what you had to.”

She blinked away tears. “She said there were a thousand enemies between me and the Tower.”

“She was right.”

Mina nodded, swallowing as she looked behind her. Two cars jerked out onto the road, following them. “I got in touch with Lazar. I didn’t know who I could trust but I thought he was probably my best chance. I thought maybe I could get in if I dressed up like one of his burlesque performers, but... it didn’t work.”

Spencer said, “Sharp left.”

Her hand shot for the handle above the door and she gripped it tight, closing her eyes as he whipped the SUV so hard she was sure they were going to flip. They didn’t, and cut off another car so close they nearly kissed.

“Spencer, I meant it, I never betrayed you.”

“I know.”

One of the cars following them hit them in the right rear panel, and Mina gasped. Spencer didn’t over-adjust, but slowed to give the car a tap of his own.

The car jerked wide then came at them again, trying to batter them into oncoming traffic. Spencer held the line. The car was a third the SUV’s weight and couldn’t budge them. Frustrated, the other driver started to pull away again and Spencer dropped back, hitting their left rear. The driver jerked the wheel too hard and the car spun out of control, winding up pointing back the way they came. His buddy cruised past him as he tried to turn around.

“All this chaos, it’s because of the baby, isn’t it?” Mina asked.

“Yes. The moment you announced it, you became the most valuable person in Vineport.”

Ahead of them, two SUVs rounded opposite corners. Regular people hammered on their horns as the SUVs charged Spencer, going the wrong direction. “Little bump,” Spencer said, and hit the center divider going nearly forty. The impact jarred their bones, but they went up and over. He kept it on two wheels until they flew past the SUVs, then he eased the vehicle back to the right and into their lane again. One of the cars was back on their ass, but didn’t see the swerve coming as Spencer took a hard right. The driver tried to keep up with the turn, but traffic flowed against him and he was sideswiped by a sedan. Not a hard impact, but enough to take them out of the chase.

One down, three to go.

This time, there was no central divider. Spencer darted into oncoming traffic again, and Mina closed her eyes, sure at any moment they'd be hit. She thought, crazily, of her mother, of their last conversation.

You'll never be anybody without my help.

Well... look at her now.

Spencer shot to the left down a narrow alley. One of the SUVs followed, the driver too stupid to know it was a trap. Spencer slammed on the brakes, and the SUV behind them tried to do the same, but they were too slow. Spencer dropped the shifter into reverse and hit them hard. Gunshots pinged uselessly against the back of the armor-plated SUV. Their driver tried to accelerate as hard as Spencer was reversing, but no dice. Spencer's custom rig was too powerful, and shoved them back out into traffic. The passenger side guy, one of Spencer's guards, looked at the oncoming traffic, lifted an arm to protect himself, and was hit broadside by a crossover.

Spencer shot forward again, making a left at the end of the alley, then a sharp right, and another right. He pulled into a gift shop's parking lot and slid into a pair of open spots without putting the car in park. They waited. One of the cars cruised by, stopped, reversed. Spencer grinned one of the most terrifying grins Mina had ever seen, and she had to admit, she kind of liked it. He shot forward, the two men in the car shouting, and Spencer hit them hard enough to make their pursuers airbags pop. Spencer rolled down the window, drew his pistol, and shot out their tire as he passed by.

The last SUV cruised by the street they turned down, reversed, then stopped. Spencer and the driver looked at each other. Spencer shook his head. The other driver hesitated, then nodded, and instead of some final showdown, he drove on.

* * *

They swapped cars in the garage of a middle-income home in the suburbs. By then, it was late, and Mina felt ready to drop. She should have been happy, but instead, she felt scared. Terrified, even. Spencer had barely spoken a word since their escape from the Tower, and she sensed a powerful anger to him.

In the home too were different clothes of varying sizes in both men's and women's. Spencer told her curtly to dress for a hard hike, and she listened, choosing a pair of jeans, good shoes, and a tee and a sweater. He headed into one of the bedrooms and closed the door. A low murmur of

one-sided conversation came from within, too quiet to hear. He came out holding something that looked like a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt, fetched a backpack from a closet, and filled it with four bottles of water and a bag of trail mix from a cupboard. From a tool cabinet in the garage, he added a pair of flashlights and extra batteries.

The Jeep was a stiff ride, but utterly exhausted, Mina slept. How long, she wasn't sure, but when she woke, they were in the country somewhere. The moon was just bright enough to highlight a range of mountains in front of them. Her mouth tasted like putty, so she reached into the backseat and pulled one of the bottles of water out. She drank, and held it out to Spencer. He took a long drink too, and gave it back.

"We need to conserve it from here on," he said.

She nodded, her dread growing every mile they traveled. Spencer kept his eyes forward, never straying, and eventually pulled off onto a dirt road. They drove a few more miles up a series of switchbacks, made another turn, and traveled for well over an hour. The winding path couldn't be called a road anymore. The ruts were barely visible and overgrown with grass at times. A big owl swooped across the beam of their headlights, making Mina flinch. Still, Spencer said nothing.

The road was so rough they had to stop another mile in. Spencer pulled the backpack up front and handed Mina a flashlight. "We have to walk from here. Stay behind me, and mind the ruts. Stay to the center when you can. Snowmelt washes out the sides of the road, like ditches."

She nodded, and slipped out of the Jeep when he did.

It was a tough hike. The ruts weren't the only thing they had to worry about. Exposed rocks and roots, bared by spring rainfall and the winds poked up all over. Mina stumbled twice, but didn't fall. She couldn't keep up with Spencer's fast pace, and thought he might yell at her for slowing him down.

"Glad I didn't go with the heels," she said. He didn't respond, and she wondered what he had planned for her.

Another mile on, and Spencer stopped with a hand up. Mina stopped too. He splayed his light over the trees to their left, nodded, and said, "This way."

Their last road at least had the ruts to guide them. This one, Spencer seemed to walk mostly by memory or by some guide she couldn't see. They were deep in the mountains now. Birds rustled in the trees, and heavier

things moved through the underbrush. But it was also calming, those noises. If Mina was going to die up here on the mountains, she would not die alone. Little things would hear. Maybe they would not remember, or care, but they would hear, and that would be all right.

She didn't know how long they traveled that road, but by the time Spencer stopped again, her legs ached for need of a break. She asked quietly, "Can I have a drink?"

He stopped and unslung the backpack. She took tiny sips as he turned and looked into the nearest copse of pines. "It won't be far now," he said. "And then you can rest."

She cried, and she hoped he couldn't see it.

* * *

In the dark, Mina didn't see the cabin until they were nearly on top of it. Even then, she might have stumbled right into the wall if Spencer's flashlight hadn't caught the glint of glass.

"This is it," he said. "Take a seat. Catch your breath."

He guided her around to a wide porch. Several wrought-iron chairs sat against the building. She dropped onto one, and Spencer fished out a key and unlocked the door. He disappeared inside, and a few minutes later, she heard a motor starting. She rose, curious. Illuminated by a work light, Spencer stood in front of an old water pump system, priming it. It took, and he gestured inside the cabin.

"I was worried it wouldn't start. That's why I didn't want you drinking too much. Come on in."

"Where are we? What is this place?"

Spencer smiled faintly. "The start of my kingdom, I suppose." He didn't elaborate, and opened up a tall cabinet. From it, he withdrew a pair of work gloves and a shovel. Mina closed her eyes, trying to even her breathing, sure at any moment she would feel the cold press of a knife to her throat or a gun to her head. When she opened them again, he was forty or so yards from the cabin. Dirt started to fly.

Mina refilled the bottles and walked through the cabin. Small as it was, it didn't take long. A small bedroom contained a queen-sized bed, the blankets and mattress long given over to rot. The remains of a dozen board game boxes stood in a corner, the pieces scattered all over the floor. A closet held plastic totes of clothing, MREs, and supplies like matches and a lantern. In a corner of the living room was a small single bed, in mildly

better shape than the bedroom but the thick spiderwebs didn't make for much of an invitation. The stove in the kitchen didn't work, and she didn't dare open the fridge or the deep freeze.

Mina walked back outside, and sat to watch Spencer dig her grave.

* * *

It took him most the night. By the time a false dawn started to creep up over the horizon, Spencer was down deep enough that she could barely see his head poking out. She heard him sigh, then he said quietly, "That's good enough, I suppose."

He tossed the shovel up and out of the hole, then pulled himself out. Covered head to toe in dirt, he stretched this way and that, grimacing. From his pocket came his phone, and without an explanation, he started snapping pictures of the grave. That done, he stuffed the phone away. Shaking what dirt he could off, he retreated into the cabin. She heard the pipes creak, and then the blast of a shower. If Mina was going to run, now was the time.

She didn't.

Spencer emerged nude and shivering, holding two clothing bags. He ripped them open, pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a matching sweater, and pulled them on.

Mina whispered, "I understand."

He looked aside at her. The outline of his face was barely visible. The sun would be up soon.

"Our baby. You can't have them or me around because people will always try to come for us. Everything you've built will always be in danger because someone could use us." Mina sniffed, and cradled her stomach. "I love you, Spencer. I love you with all my heart. If it was just me, I'd drop down into that hole and I'd ask for the gun myself so no one could ever use me to hurt you. But please. For our baby... please."

He was silent a long, long time. Finally, he took a chair beside her and gestured out at the woods. "Only my mother, father, and myself knew the truth about who they really were. The two of them, I buried near this cabin." Spencer looked at Mina. "You'll be the fourth to know." She swallowed, and he turned his attention to the mound of dirt down in the field. "The great and funny truth about my father's life was that he wasn't an art thief until the world assumed he was. Burt was a soldier, a pretty good one. He was talent scouted by a mercenary organization. They called

themselves private military, but the truth was, they were killers. That's what they specialized in. You needed someone dead, you hired them.

"My father was great at his job, one of their best. There was a man in Colorado, a very powerful man. His public persona was a tech billionaire, but the truth was, he was more of a power broker, like me. He lived most the year in a secluded ranch in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by so much land Burt had to walk for days to reach it. When he was drunk and told me the story, that would balloon to weeks." Spencer smiled faintly at that. "Someone wanted the billionaire dead for a lot of good reasons. Human trafficking, mostly. The world was better off without this man.

"The thing was, no record of the house itself existed. Burt was going in blind, and it had to look like a suicide, at least on a surface level. No one was going to examine this guy's death closely but Burt had to at least make an effort. He arrived at the edge of the man's property, and camped out for a couple weeks. Watching, learning his schedule, learning the habits of everyone who worked for him.

"My mother, she was..." Spencer clicked his tongue. "She was bought by this man at a very early age. Over the years, he groomed her, like he did most the rest of the female staff. He kept them... he kept them as sexual slaves. Fast forward about twelve years, and Burt was in the forest, watching the house. My mother had a particularly... difficult day with her boss, and took a walk in the woods, crying. My father heard her, and despite being right on the verge of making his move, he went to her. He couldn't help himself. My father might have been a hard man, but he was occasionally a good one, too.

"She was startled, but she wasn't stupid. She understood why a heavily camouflaged man would be waiting around. Instead of screaming or ratting him out, they talked and fell hard for each other. Eventually Mom told my father a secret. There was a hidden basement, a grand storage room only a very few people knew about. He liked to take his women down there sometimes and..." Spencer trailed off, glaring hard into the morning pinks.

"Burt went in. He got the job done, but not before he got the man to take him down to the basement level. When he saw my mom was right, Burt realized the job had just changed. Down there was art, sculptures. Beauty that had been bought or stolen away by men and women of such power they could erase its existence simply by tucking the art away for centuries.

“How Burt hauled it all out of there, I’m not sure. The story changed often enough I think he had help, and I’ve got a suspicion it was the rest of the staff there. I think he promised to be the frontman for them and split some of his early profits with them to make sure they had better lives than the hell they’d been subjected to. But that’s speculation. I have no real idea. I think part of me hopes that’s what happened.

“After that, he stored the art away in a vault hidden away from the world and the elements. He knew what he had was important, but he didn’t have any gauge for it, so he kidnapped an expert, brought him to some of the art, and had him evaluate it. When my father took a painting to the black market and made tens of millions of dollars, he threw himself into learning the craft everyone assumed he was in.

“My mother, she wanted to stay with Burt, and he wanted to stay with her. But I was coming, and they were terrified of retribution for her captor’s death, not to mention the interest Burt was arousing selling off art here and there. If he was going to continue his work, they couldn’t be together. The risk was too much. He bought a few thousand acres up here through a dummy company, had this cabin built, and my mom and I lived our lives up here until I was ten.”

“Was that when your mom passed?” Mina asked, her voice hoarse. Somewhere nearby, she could hear a whup-whup-whup sound.

“Yes. She didn’t want to be treated because she thought someone would come for us if we drew too much attention. Given what I know now, she was right. Losing her meant Burt became a permanent part of my life until I fucked that up and got him killed.” Spencer turned to look at her, and his eyes were so weary, so sad. “I never believed you were the one who betrayed me. I hated hurting you, but I thought it was what was best, getting you away from the Tower. From me. That grave isn’t for you.”

“Then who is it for?”

The whup-whup-whupping was louder now, so loud it almost drowned out his words. Spencer shouted, “Them.”

A helicopter descended and landed in the fields beyond the grave. And from the pilot’s seat hopped Gallo.

* * *

“Spencer,” Gallo said, the day Malena sent them the USB drive with “Mina” walking into Rhea’s house. “Let’s take a walk before you decide anything. Get some fresh air.”

“Rhea was one of mine, Gallo. She was entering a contract with me.”

“I know. But maybe she was coerced. Maybe there are factors here we’re not seeing. Let’s take a walk, and we’ll figure out what comes next.”

Spencer’s chest rose and fell as he glared at his one and only friend in the world. Finally, he nodded, and they headed back downstairs.

Gallo tried to speak once in the elevator, but Spencer caught his eye and shook his head. Gallo was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. They walked through the lobby at a fast clip and stepped outside. Apart from the infrequent stream of people coming in and out, Spencer said, “All right, we should be okay to talk here.”

“You don’t believe for a second Mina did this, do you?”

“No, and I just figured out who’s been setting us up. But we need to play along. I’ve got one hell of an idea.”

* * *

Spencer walked towards him, and the two men collided in a fierce hug. Mina followed along, gaping at the two of them.

“You sure don’t look dead,” she said.

Gallo grinned and winked at her. “Little trick we had to pull. The Tower was rotten and we had to know how deep it went. Turns out, not so bad as we thought. About twenty of ours flipped and tried to take over. Of course, that could be more and they just didn’t have the balls to try and join up with Malena’s uprising, but the end result’s the same. Speaking of, a couple worms wriggled their way onto my path when it started raining. She ran from the Tower when it became obvious she was on the losing end, and met up with her fella at a hotel.”

He threw back the rear door. Manacled and gagged, Malena and Ron glared out at them.

Gallo produced a key and undid his hands. “Just like we talked about now,” he said mildly, and dropped the key into Ron’s hands. Ron freed himself of his leg shackles, then helped his wife. She tore out her gag and spit at her husband.

“You did your legs first before you helped me with my hands?”

Ron gave her a withering look, then turned it on Gallo. “Could you make this quick, please? I’m really tired of her shit.”

“Get out,” Gallo said to the both of them.

They obliged. Malena had blood spatters all over her dress and a bloodied lip. Ron was wearing pajama bottoms and a tank top. Obviously

he hadn't been ready for the revolution.

"Which one of us is the grave for?" Malena asked.

Spencer didn't answer that. Instead, he turned to Mina. "Don't watch this. Please."

"They killed Lazar," she said quietly. "It may give me nightmares, but for his sake..."

"Lazar?" Malena asked. "That wasn't Ron or me."

"It was one of yours though, wasn't it?" Mina asked.

Malena sniffed. "Well. Yes."

"He was kind to me. He didn't deserve that."

"And how many people has your boyfriend killed who didn't deserve it, huh?" Ron asked. "How much blood is on his hands? He's no saint, sweetheart. He-"

Gallo raised a pistol, pressed it to Ron's head, and then there was no more Ron.

Malena watched her husband's body fall, then stared at the ground in front of Spencer. She croaked, "We beat Rhea for hours, did you know that? Could they tell with the fire? She was pathetic." She spat. "This doesn't end with me. All the wolves are still at your door, Spencer. You're a dead man walking."

"I know," Spencer said. "That's part of the plan too." He looked around. "I never wanted to spoil this place burying the two of you here, but I wanted to bring Mina to see it. The beginning of my kingdom, and its end."

"Jesus, enough with the monologues," Malena said.

"Goodbye. You really were one of my favorites." He raised his gun, but Gallo took his arm and pushed it down gently. His friend shook his head and, in the end, did the job for him.

* * *

When they finished shoveling dirt over the hole, they took a walk through the fields to Burt and Maggie's graves. Gallo studied the marker he helped his young ward make once, and knelt down to pull a few weeds from Burt's grave.

"I don't think I did things quite the way you intended," he said quietly. "But I always tried to look out for him."

Mina wrapped an arm around Spencer. Maybe later she'd have some kind of feelings about the executions they just committed, but for now, she

felt only relief.

“I wish I could have met them,” she said. “Your mom... I know what it’s like to be captive.”

Spencer nodded and kissed the side of her head. “She’d have loved you.”

“Your dad too.” Gallo rose to his feet and shook his head. “I don’t like this next part.”

“Me neither,” Spencer said.

“What’s the next part?” Mina asked.

Spencer turned and smiled. “You and I have to die.”

* * *

A week later, Gallo leaned back at the head of the conference table, hands locked behind his head. “Whether you think the vault is a trap or not is irrelevant. You can’t afford the chance this isn’t the real thing. I can’t afford this continued war.”

“And why don’t you take it for yourself and disappear?” Ivanna Lawrence asked, glaring at him down her nose. With Tetsuya, Malena, and Ron gone, she was probably the biggest power player when it came to the betrayers of the Tower, and it made Gallo itch to have to deal with her.

“The Foremans were the art thieves. I’m not interested in running the illicit parts of this kingdom anymore. You can all fight about that or work it out, I don’t care. I want the Tower, I want our legitimate businesses, and I want you to keep your damn fingers out of my pies. Those are my only terms.”

“You know we know these pictures are bullshit. You’ve had plenty of opportunities before to kill Spencer, so why now? No, this is a fabrication. You faked your death once. We’re not going to fall for that trick twice,” Matteo Gucciardo, another crime boss said. In front of him were the grisly pictures of Spencer and Mina’s bodies in the grave. Well... sort of. Digital art was a magical thing.

“And?” Gallo asked. He sat forward, hands on the table. “Let’s pretend the pictures were faked. If Spencer Foreman was still alive, he’s basically offering you up God knows how much money in stolen art just to leave him the fuck alone. I’m offering you your control over the drug trade again. Play along, and we all walk away happy. There are no losers in this situation.”

Ivanna Lawrence pulled the pictures towards her, gave them a glance, then said, “They look real enough to me. Assuming the vault checks out,

that is.”

* * *

In a couple hours, it would be time for the craftsmen to show up and continue the slow, laborious process of restoring the grand villa a few miles from Eguisheim. Only one of the five buildings Spencer bought had been serviceable as a home at the start of their self-imposed exile. Over the years, the craftsmen helped make two more livable, restoring the beams and stonework of the roofs and bracing the crumbling walls while updating the interiors with plumbing and electricity.

Just in time, too. They were about to have visitors.

His wife chased their son through the fields, his mad giggling nearly as beautiful as her musical voice. It took Mina months to sing again after the madness in Vineport and later at the cabin in the mountains. That time was a waking nightmare for her. First the long ride on one of Isiah’s cargo ships, neither of them entirely sure that they weren’t going to wind up with a bullet in the middle of the Atlantic. Then again when they first settled in France, jumping at every sound, every stranger, every motorist who drove by their beautiful stretch of land.

But frequent calls to Gallo finally helped settle her nerves, especially with some of the good news in the early days about their fallen friends. Despite Spencer and Mina’s belief Lazar was dead, the EMTs managed to get to him in time. His recovery was long and difficult but as he bragged over their phone calls, he was Lazar, and he was invincible. Though her wounds were less grievous, Kiri’s recovery was plagued by infections, a result of bullet fragments in her back. Her surgeries stretched out over a long year and a half, but she fought through it. She would need to walk with a cane, probably for the rest of her life, but she healed.

“Come play, Daddy!” their son called. Spencer smiled, and put aside the paints he’d been working with. Oils, in much the same palette as van Gogh, though Spencer’s talents were of a markedly lesser quality. An expert in art he might be, but his newest hobby made him feel like a kindergartener slapping paint on a canvas. Oh well. He had a lifetime to learn.

He raced to their son, arms outstretched. Silas giggled and tried to scramble away, but Spencer swooped him up in a ferocious hug, trying to remember for the life of him if Burt had ever been this playful when he was a child. It didn’t matter. His parents did the best they could with the strange hands they’d been dealt, and now it was time for Spencer to try to pay that

forward, to make sure his son never saw a hint of violence, that he had a father around to watch over him, to protect him.

Mina watched them, smiling. Spencer wished he could give her another child, and they certainly gave it a rousing effort. There had been no more pregnancies announced at the Tower, making Silas a miracle in his parents' eyes.

As Spencer thought Mina would, she loved France. Her days were spent teaching Silas, reading, walking the fields around their house, or traveling with her family throughout Europe. Two nights a week, she sang at the local tavern, but she missed her piano player terribly. No one had quite the enthusiasm or the nuance that Lazar had at the Cepheus. But the work entertained her as it did her captive patrons, and she had a full house every time. Her French came along much faster than Spencer's, and she almost sounded like a native by this point.

He came to her with Silas and shifted the boy to one arm to kiss her and wrap an arm around her. In the distance, he saw the black car approach, and smiled to himself.

"What?" Mina asked, smiling herself.

"I have a surprise for you."

He kissed her again, and turned her to face the narrow lane lined by a small rock wall. He hoisted Silas onto his shoulders to see too and told his son to wave for all he was worth. Mina looked back tentatively at him, and Spencer kissed her shoulder.

"The companies have been divided," he said quietly. "The Tower belongs to the women and the employees who worked there."

"What?" she asked.

The car approached, the passengers visible, and at the very enthusiastic waving of the man in the passenger seat, Mina gasped.

"I thought you could use your old partner at the tavern. "

"And Gallo," she breathed. "Kiri."

The car pulled to a stop, and Lazar was out of the car in a flash. He moved with a slight limp, but it was barely noticeable. Mina grabbed him in a hug, and Spencer set Silas down, whispering for him to go join his mom. Spencer went to the other side, where Gallo was helping Kiri out of the backseat. Once she had her cane to lean on, they looped their arms together, and Gallo caught Spencer's quizzical look.

“Ah, there were some secrets in the Tower even you didn’t know about,” he said, rubbing the back of his head.

Spencer hugged them both, joined soon by Mina and Lazar. Mina looked down at Kiri’s swelling stomach and up to her face again. “Going to be a lot of noise around here. I hope you don’t mind.”

“We’d love it,” Mina said.

Gallo looked at Spencer. “It’s all done. Everyone is taken care of. Some of them will continue with the companies, some of them took a payout and walked away. Ivanna agreed none of them are to be touched. So far, she’s kept her word.”

“You know I didn’t expect you to follow me around the globe,” Spencer said.

Gallo grasped his shoulder. “I told your father I’d keep you safe. Now that extends to your family too. You’re not getting rid of me again.”

Spencer turned to Mina. “So I suppose I’d better ask. Mind if I invite some old friends to live with us here in the villa?”

“Yes,” she said immediately, bobbing her head. “Yes. Please.”

“Yes!” Silas agreed, rocking on his feet, no clue what he was agreeing to but happy to join in.

Mina showed the new additions to their family their new homes, but Spencer stayed out on the lane for a minute, drinking in the cool breeze. He grinned to himself, thinking about his enemies crowding the vault, selling off the treasures within. Hopefully it would be enough to satisfy them.

Someday, maybe, he’d tell the authorities about the other three.

His son came to him, tugging at his hand to come join them for breakfast. Spencer hauled him up, kissed his cheek, and wondered what kingdoms they might build together.

* * * * *

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