

**FALL
OF
FALCO**



S. RAQUEL JIMENEZ

PREVIEW VERSION

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Fall of Falco



Vermilion Series

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Fall Of Falco

By: S. Raquel Jimenez

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One Sinister Nutshell

Four years. Think of what can be accomplished in that amount of time. So many changes occur. I suppose completing a degree at university would be the perfect illustration of this. *Suppose* because I don't have personal experience to draw from but it's easy to assume from accounts in books and movies. It's a period of countless firsts: constantly toying with the responsibility of your semi-independence; the frequent dilemma of splurging on a night out or buying books. Have some fun now and again or hold out for the one? Experiences that shape the adult you will become.

I never went to college but I did have four years. Years in which I was changed completely, down to my very core, irreversible change. The most unspeakable, deplorable, and shattering things even grown men shouldn't be told of, I've lived. And I lived them as a child. The defining lessons learned in *my* formative years included: deceit, experimentation, mutilation, hatred and pain. Because of this time, the last decade of my life has been lived in a deadly peculiar way.

As a child, after my family had been brutally killed, I was abducted from my home. It pains me to say I *still* don't know how it happened or why. Before the grief could hit me, I woke up in the hellish place I would suffer in for years. I would be intermittently starved, confined to filth and darkness and constantly abused. As a result of the painful experiments I endured, I developed the strength needed to escape my captors. Not long after escaping, my conscience got to me. I decided to try and free as many people as possible from that place. Turns out I'm very good at it. Scary good.

There, that is as generic as I can explain without including the facts that make my story unbelievable and bizarre. How can murder, kidnapping, and medical torture fail to be bizarre on its own? Toss in supernaturally charged gene experimentation and the existence and employ of believed mythical creatures. Makes this a whole new brand of scary now doesn't it?

To my face I've been called many things. It's what's said about me in hissing whispers that reach farthest. A collection of small countries could be populated solely with my enemies. They'll recite my traits with passionate fury. She is a faithless abomination, a sadistic and merciless murderer. The pure incarnate of spite, malice, and bitter vengeance. She shamelessly lives to cause chaos and destruction. Even the most erroneous rumors have at least a grain of truth in them. Sadly for them, the grains in that list of grievances are boulder sized.

The trouble with my dark reputation is it's shockingly close to the truth. A killer is still a killer no matter which side she fights for. Add to this principle brutality. War killings are justified, an unspoken necessary evil. But I ask you, what happens to the soldiers who loose control? What of those soldiers who are more unfeeling brutes than honorable fighters? They are demonized, even by the organizations that reaped the benefits of their successes.

They become too tainted for anyone to touch. Reasons, circumstances, last-ditch efforts, kill or be killed, the greater good, not one of these things excuse the actions of a merciless killer.

Callous killer I am, but oh I have the right to be. As gruesome as I may sound, in spite of the horrific stories that follow me, there are still more people, families, mothers, children, friends, that greet me a blessed angel. Their angel of deliverance and vengeance—a liberator. For risking my life to keep

others from enduring what I—what *we* endured, I live this way. Shouldering the burden of a persona that inspires so much respect and devotion that it rivals the noxious loathing that seethes in others, I ask for nothing in return. To retire having utterly decimated an empire of greed and torture, I can live with everything else.

No Way To See Paris

“Your brother is late.” I sighed rolling my eyes.

The last thing I wanted to see was a cowering, wet, and naked old man. I threw him a towel. Zacharie Reynard isn't a hard man to find. The challenge with him is getting him alone without making too much noise. His favorite hammam was the best option we had—though despite our best effort, not so quiet.

Reynard may be a local fashion god *now* but that occupation is fairly new and almost laughable compared to the cretin we all know well enough to despise. It's funny how sometimes a person can be the

physical animal personification of their moral shortcomings. Zacharie is without question the biggest rat I've ever seen—a wet, hairless rat, yuck. The man even has whiskers—beady black eyes, long teeth, and twitchy.

Now why would I be sopping rat hunting in Paris instead of shopping or having a flirt-off with my master flirt of a brother in some trendy *discotheque*? Because, this rat may have vital information. *Zacharie* may know where to find the man responsible for the worst part of my life—hell for a lot of lives and counting. And if he doesn't know where to find him exactly he still has more information than I do.

Oswyn—the man in charge—devises human experimentation projects in facilities around the globe. The smaller less populated places are called clinics—the larger are hubs. On our side we call them prisons. The clinics don't usually hold more than twenty to thirty people at one time. Hubs have hundreds. We've brought down seven clinics and one hub in the past six years. We track down ex-employees like Ol' Zachy here for inside info and to make sure they haven't struck out on their own in the kidnapping and torture biz. After we get what we need from them we make sure it's *impossible* to fall into old habits.

The room was thick with steam fulfilling its purpose. Zacharie struggled to make out the faces of his violent intruders while scooting as far from us as the room would allow.

"Yes, *your* brother is." Tatiana threw back at me. She didn't look away from Zacharie. Just as he was trying to see us she was trying to catch his gaze. With that done, we wouldn't need our tardy brother.

“What do you want from me?” Time off has really softened this guy. It’s disappointing. For this we could have snatched him off the street.

“I say you just start without him.” I suggested ignoring Zacharie’s question. I already knew Tatiana was working on it. She muttered something in irritated Russian. After a year that language hasn’t warmed to me one bit. I just don’t have an ear for it.

Ignoring his question sent him sputtering. “There are no *women*,” he spit the word as if its simple utterance was dirty, “Allowed here. Who are you? Rolf!”

Zacharie called around us for one of his many bodyguards.

“Was that the big bald one by the door or the hot blonde in the lounge?” I asked to let him know neither of them would be coming to assist him.

“Was?” He gasped.

“I guess the tense depends on how fast you answer my questions—and answer truthfully. Now, for your own sake let’s not play games here. There are *so* many other things I could be doing—enjoying—in Paris rather than looking at steamed fruit.”

He winced at my jibe. I meant it to sting. I had to say *something* since just saying the word *women* puts a bitter taste in his mouth. “I ask again. Who are you?”

“Oh Ray.” I moved too fast for him to see in the hazy room. He jumped when my palms slapped the tiles on either side of his head. My face is inches from his. He stopped breathing and froze stiff in the stifling heat.

“*Mon dieu*.” Escaped still lips.

“He remembers! That’s good. Saves time.” I said.

“You can’t kill me!” He continued to sputter.

“Why do you think this?” Tatiana asked amused.

“I have connections here! More dangerous than the people I *used* to work for.” He made the past tense clear—like it would matter. If his new connection is more dangerous than Oswyn...that doesn’t help me not want to kill him. “You won’t make it out of Paris.” He looked very, very sure of that. Bless him.

“There are so many things I want to say to that but I haven’t the time.” I tapped my watch.

Zacharie is looking at me but he has been skillfully dodging Tatiana. He knows. Before that could fully annoy me the door flung open letting steam fly out. Good, let it stay open—my hair is suffering here. Xander ducked in. I snorted when Zacharie appraised all six plus, rugby forward built, feet of him. Oh yeah *now* he can see clearly—didn’t take his eyes off Xander as he walked over to him and pushed a syringe into his jugular.

“Plan B ladies.” He informed us.

Hands pressed against the injection point, Zacharie tried to make a run for it. Xander pushed him back to the bench with little effort.

“You poisoned me?” He hissed, shocked by what he obviously perceived as scandalous arrogance on Xander’s part. He is *not* grasping the seriousness of his situation.

“Maybe. Now sit still.”

Zacharie’s eyes flicked nervously around the room then back and forth between Xander’s face and the open hand at his chest.

“I injected you with an iron supplement. Relax. I’m pumping your heart at maximum expansion. Need that iron to spread a little quickly.”

Zacharie's eyes bugged and he flattened against the wall obviously in pain. He wanted to beg but he couldn't speak. After he was satisfied, Xander stood back to let Zacharie's body right itself. Zacharie gasped and clutched at his chest tears streaming down his cheeks—face as purple as an eggplant. Once he'd brightened a few shades Xander continued.

"There now." Xander said pleased. "Okay Reynard, we'll ask questions and you will answer them. With all that iron in your system I'll know if you're lying. If you lie to us I'll squeeze your guts tighter than I did your heart. Do you understand?"

"Yes." He croaked.

"You agree to cooperate then?" Zacharie nodded. "Say it, Reynard."

"Yes. Ahhh!" Zacharie doubled over shrieking.

"You lied." Xander snorted. "I told you I'd know. Do you know what they call me?" I hadn't noticed until now that blood covered Xander's hands.

It hadn't occurred to me to ask *why* we were using plan B. Xander had distracted me by jumping right in. Taking care to posture himself so the swipe of scar tissue across his throat looks its most intimidating, Xander waited for Zacharie to respond.

"Sweeney." Zacharie gasped.

Sweeney Todd, the throat slashing mad barber of lit and musical fame, is one name Xander has earned from the other side. He doesn't make it a practice to go around slitting throats, no. It's just that his ability tends to leave a messy scene. Xander can control blood flow. So be it sped natural circulation, stopping it dead in your veins, or diverting it out of your ears he can do that.

"Yes. Lie again and not only will I polish you off, I'll do it slowly."

"Where's brother?" I asked. I hated to interrupt his moment of intimidation but the blood on him has me worried.

"Just outside. We need to do this quick." He gave me a knowing look. Tyce is hurt, bad. Dammit. With our interrogator down no wonder we're using the much more invasive *Plan B*.

"Surely you know I have a much broader security detail. You must know there are more than six men protecting me at a time." Zacharie scrambled.

"Capitan?" I cringed. I hate when they call me that. They know it but they do it anyway. I tried to keep my face blank for company and nodded for Tatiana to continue. "I'd like to try a different way, if that is all right. Let me lead outside. There is something I want to...test." I couldn't refuse her. Was it her ability or the excitement and confidence in her eyes? Just in case I did a head-clearing shudder before nodding in approval.

In the short time Tatiana has been with us she's never killed anyone—not that we encourage it, do understand. She's usually *the bait*—because she's gorgeous, painfully so. We make the kills if they're necessary. If she goes out there to meet the second wave alone she'd be taking part in a preempted slaying. I'm not sure she's ready for the emotional after effects. Tatiana stepped outside to ready herself for Zacharie's Calvary. I know she's been working on something but I also know better than to want to see it.

"What happened to you?" Tatiana asked failing to keep the humor from her voice.

"Long story." Tyce answered clipped and in a tone much rougher than his usual velvet wash. He's pissed. It's bad all right.

"Mmm. When they come, it will be best if you close your eyes. Do *not* look." She warned.

Mmhum, I do not need to see. Back to the task at hand.

"Reynard, do you know where Oswyn is?" I asked.

"No."

"Can you find out?" Xander asked.

"No. I've been cut off. My purpose was served." Zacharie didn't sound too happy about that fact. Strike two.

"What was your purpose?"

"I compiled experiment reports." He answered.

"And?" I prodded.

"I helped in the orientation rituals."

"Or you tortured weakened and bound people trying to terrorize them to do Oswyn's will."

"Tomato tomAHH..." Xander gave him a warning tweak in the gut. I wondered if he was twisting the large intestine or the small. We are the *last* people who will find his attempt at blasé humor funny.

"Who sees the reports?" I asked.

"Oswyn of course and Victor."

"Where are they kept?"

"Records room, last I knew." Footsteps filed into the hall outside the steam room. Reynard smiled thinking he was home free. I heard Tatiana crack her fingers and remind Tyce he should look the other way. "There're here." He announced proudly – sitting up a little straighter.

"They're slow. We could be bowling your organs down the hall to meet them. What system is used in the record keeping?" I asked getting back to the point.

He didn't answer right away. Xander held up a reminding hand.

"File!" Zacharie said angrily.

"The *computing* system, Reynard."

"There is none. It's all paper. No computers. No Internet. I heard there is a master drive in the largest facility that has digital copies of all the files but I don't know if it's true."

"He's useless Elle." Xander is right. I hate it when we get to someone particularly difficult—and by difficult I mean heavily guarded and in the public eye—and they know diddly.

One last question. "What is the biggest facility you've worked?"

"Myanmar." He said.

"Yeah, he's got nothing." Dammit, another small fry. He'd only confirmed a point or two and given us a rumor. No new information. The one hub we shut down was Myanmar. He'd know nothing above his station but the rumors we've already heard. Shit.

"What about other ex-employees?" Xander asked. Sometimes they get moved around. Not all of their jobs end when we shut a clinic down. Some are smart enough to run and hide. Those confident in their power stay to fight us. Guess what happens to *them*.

"You've killed the ones I knew." Zacharie said.

"And why do you think it was us?" I asked innocently. It was us though.

"All signs point to you."

Zacharie spit into his hand then quickly flung the contents at me. I winced and braced for spit but something hot and sharp plunged into my right shoulder sticking into my collarbone. Instantly he was doubled on the floor. He gagged and vomited dark

almost black liquid—blood. The small piece of metal sticking out of my shoulder wasn't very lethal. At best it was a modified razor blade—thin and flimsy. He must have been aiming for my neck. Takes a lot of discipline to keep a razor in your mouth, hold clear conversation, and not bleed yourself to death.

I didn't touch it. There was no need. Instead I'd grabbed the sweaty lump up quick as lightning. The tiny blade that had penetrated my shoulder burst back out of the wound. Propelled by blood and amber flames it dug slower into his shoulder than it did my own. A groan of horror and pain bubbled from Zacharie's bloody lips. The tiny hole in me sizzled and quickly flashed like the first sparks of a roman candle.

"What *are* you? *Le diable!*" All color had left Zacharie's face. It has to be rough on the body to cover the full spectrum of sick and pained pallor in less than five minutes. His eyes are shimmering with tears.

"For you, tonight, I am exactly that." Slowly I pushed my middle finger into his wound. The nails of the other digits stabilized my grip on him, digging into his flesh. Stubby fingers grasped at an earpiece fitted in his ear like a hearing aid. I chose not to stop him. I *had* promised Tatiana a fight her way.

"Get in here now! Kill them!" A pain marred smirk painted his face. The corners of his bloody mouth twitched from his discomfort.

"You have your test subjects now, Tatiana." I did not turn around. It would hardly do me any good to actually *see* what she was up to. Instead I watched in satisfaction as shock, disgust and—always my favorite—fear, took turns reeking havoc on the Zacharie's face.

One by one bodies hit the floor. Tatiana ordered they endure their fates in silence. The tears that welled for Zacharie's own pain now fell in sheer terror for the men outside. One of the men gurgled something akin to words. Did he say *I love you*? I can't wait to hear the explanation for this later.

Tatiana, apparently finished with the Calvary, had a blade pressed flat to Zacharie's temple before he could say any more. Shivering, he stared up and began praying to himself in French. *That* pissed me off. His god should strike him dead on the spot for having the nerve to pray for his safety after the things he's done. As soon as I finished the thought his eyes rolled and he slumped down limp on me.

"Oh, he died." What a wasteful trip. We need to get Tyce to Doc. I made my way to the lift. The floor in the hall is slick. Great, more blood. Tyce truly has me worried. He got

triple teamed and ended up with a nice gash in his side. He moved in time to miss a full on stab in the stomach. Tyce, usually tall, tan, and lean muscle is instead wilted, sickly, and weak from blood loss. Even his hair, normally golden day or night, is leached of its envited brilliance—so very pale in the moonlight. But Tyce's smile is unaffected. "About time. Bring any blood in a baggie for me?"

"Ask Tatiana, she did all the letting this time." I said jokingly. Xander sighed. Aw no comeback, no fun. "Now, to get you to Doc."

Tatiana hasn't said a word the whole way down, face totally expressionless. I knew she wasn't ready. Not that I thought she would come out skipping, but a zombie walk and blank wide eyes?

Maybe that's just how jaded I am. A thing about myself that really does frighten me—how uncharacteristically apathetic I catch myself being at times. Most often during the times I should be horrified. Back to the point here, you can preach all day on what motivates you to live this life without flinching. Say you're down to do whatever needs doing in our work, but actually doing the dirty deeds is a whole other thing. Taking human life isn't easy and it damn sure isn't enjoyable. No matter how that person may have wronged you, a death at your hands put a mark on you.

How you process what you've done, along with the true reasoning behind it, are the lynchpins of sanity when it comes to murder. Staring off into space, still emotionally unmoved, the statuesque beauty seemed more stunning—if that's possible—especially next to Tyce's sickly pallor. Tatiana belongs on the runways of Paris, the cover of *Vogue*, not spattered with blood in the back of a stolen car fleeing the scene of carnage she'd orchestrated. Later, when she's alone, it'll hit her. I really want to believe she's strong enough for this. Until I know she's all right, I'll hold this knot of guilt in my stomach for not stopping her when I had the chance.

"You did not want that blood, trust me. I cannot wait to be clean of it." Still, she was unaffected.

"At any rate you really did more than your share tonight. It was impressive. MVP is yours. Start thinking of where we're going." I told her hoping to get her mind to something pleasant.

We arrived at our temporary residence in the Latin Quarter of Paris. I am Tyce's lone crutch. Xander is dumping the car. We both knew why Tatiana took to opening the doors for us instead of pulling half his weight, so it didn't irk me. I'm sure we looked quite funny to the teens smoking outside our building. With my being nine inches shorter, and at least fifty pounds lighter than Tyce, struggling to get him up the stairs must be a sight. This tired me more than the other events of the night. I took a big sigh of relief when I saw Doc. He took Tyce off my hands and got to work.

Doc, Dr. Tavares Knight, has been with me as long as Xander has. The cliché tall, dark, and handsome is not just words when applied to him. Though now in his fifties, he has lost none of his appeal. The set of his shoulders, the way he walks, the confidence in his tone, all demand respect. And we do respect him. Most of us are barely half his age. Given his age and the care he gives us that respect takes a paternal form. As with all of us he has an ability that reaches beyond normal talent. Doc Knight is an accomplished ex US military surgeon on paper but his ability is even more impressive.

"You look like shit, Tyce. How did you let *this* happen?" Before Tyce could answer he slapped the gash in his side with an iodine soaked cloth. The reply was a string of curses. "Hold still now. I'm ready. You know the drill." Cracking his knuckles and eyeing the wound, Doc bit down on his bottom lip and got started.

The drill, as we have all come to learn, is to concentrate only on your reason for being alive. The will you have to live pulses through him and emanates from his hands to heal you thorough and

complete. Just how complete is entirely up to you. Conviction drives the potency of his power. There is no need for stitches. No staples. Not even a bandage. If your thoughts waver it will show in the mending. Tyce bears down for impact.

Jade eyes lock on the splash of caramel stained skin. His head tilted slowly to the left. "Not good enough, Accati!"

Whatever thought Tyce was clinging to must have been too weak to do any good. "Sorry, first thought I had." Turning his head to stare out the window he tensed again to show he was ready.

"Don't apologize to me kid, it's your life." Doc waited. "Much better. Now, let's begin." Once I could see the flesh mending, pulling together with invisible stitches, I knew he'd be fine. Quietly, I shut the door behind me. As I thought, Tyce had been holding it in, for me. Pride has to hurt more than the healing—men. It's an unquestionably uncomfortable experience to be sure. Tyce must have his reasons. I'll let him be.

With the disaster of a job behind us I can't wait to get home, my home. Almost every continent is represented in our team. Because of this we have homes in each one. Though we move as a group no one is required to follow the whole. Each individual has proven beyond a doubt that they are able to take care of themselves. I can only speak for my own feelings but I believe we stick together not for fear of self, but to protect the others. In some way, the way that matters, we are a family.

On the boat to the cay I reflected on just how much we've all come to rely on each other. It must have shown clear in my face.

“Looking pretty serious over there. Care to share... Isabel?” Tyce asked.

My answering scowl reset his concentration on steering the boat. No one calls me Isabel – except him. I’ll never admit it aloud but it’s the accent that saves him. I don’t know a woman that can resist a good accent and apparently a good Italian one will make me forget I don’t like being called by my full first name – at least for a few seconds anyway.

There’s a reason we jokingly call Tyce *Hottie Accati*. He

can make a girl lose her religion and fast. I’m grateful everyday we’re in each other’s family boxes. Tyce is completely restored after the healing and a good nights sleep, almost glowing. His blonde hair is now honey tinted again – chalky skin had returned to a sun-kissed tan. Knowing he’d annoyed me, he stayed silent the rest of the way. Instead he focused on savoring every swell we skimmed.

Vermilion Cay

Arriving at Vermilion Cay is always a bittersweet experience for me. This private island is truly hidden in plain sight, tucked neatly among numerous Caribbean isles. It's where I was born and also symbolically reborn. For generations the Falco clan served as the caretakers and protectors of this place. The identity of whom they served is a secret as sensitive as the islands location. My father instilled a lot of lessons in me. One of my favorites is: *the best lie is the truth*. The truth is Vermilion Cay is a bird sanctuary. Not just *a* sanctuary, *the* sanctuary, in the very truest sense of the word.

My name, Isabel Falco Aves, should be enough of a tip. Truth in plain sight, again. All creatures belonging to the *Aves* class of the animal kingdom can

be found here at some time in the year. The majority of the population consists of endangered—and as far as the world knows—extinct, or *mythical* birds. The pride of the order, the sovereigns, is the Phoenix. Truly gods among their kind, and they are revered as such. So beautiful they cannot be viewed directly without an extreme emotional response.

My father was the head of the Falco clan. I am my parent's only child. They, as well as the birds, spoiled me terribly. Despite this, in my opinion I was a good kid, well liked. Phoenix are for the most part very solitary creatures but I was always welcome among them. They had a portion of the cay to themselves; they rarely left its boundaries. Knowing they showed an unusual preference for me, I was made their little messenger girl. After my visits I would take their lists of needs and wants back to my father. We existed to keep them all safe, from canaries to elephant birds—keep them safe and blissfully untroubled.

As soon as I was old enough to be aware I knew my life would be dedicated to them. This fact made me proud. Being completely content in the path my life would take lasted all of eleven years. In the eleventh year all the sweetness that makes up the bittersweet ended. The safest place in the world, the only place I wanted to be, fell into chaos. For reasons I wouldn't come to understand for years—so quickly I couldn't comprehend—my clan was eliminated. The age of Falco, ended. I lost my family, my home, and my freedom. I was totally alone and I had no idea why.

Whatever purity in me was slowly devoured by the situation I found myself in. I went to sleep little Isa, an innocent. I awoke specimen #47311, an experiment. For what I assume was days I was restrained in a dark room. Confined from my shoulders to my feet I begged for many things. First I screamed for help. I amended my tone in hopes this was the key, nothing. Tears fell until there were none left and I begged for water. No answer. Acid churned in my empty stomach. I was so starved that the thought of actually eating only made me sicker. Soon I didn't want any of those things anymore. I felt too far gone to be able to come back whole. The only thing left to want was death. I wanted to die. At eleven years old I wanted to die. Resigned to waste away I lay motionless. My mind was blank, black as my enclosure. Silence all around, the breath from my body too shallow to hear. Then, a voice spoke to me. It was low but not a whisper. Quiet but clear. *Finally*, I thought. This must be the end.

The warm tone washed over me. "Are you ready to leave this place little one? I can save you. You only have to say yes."

I was ready. Any place would be better than this but to go to heaven with this warm, loving voice as company made the question laughable. "Yes. I want to be with my family."

The angels voice was dotting now. "Oh. Dear girl you misunderstand. I can save your life. I can make you better. You will have a new family, with me."

"A new family? Will I be an angel too?"

He now spoke with firm adoration. As if he believed in his words so strongly the slightest hesitation would be unforgivable. "You can be anything you want to be. All I want is for you to never say no to me. Promise me and you will be more than you ever dreamed."

The way he spoke gave me hope. Maybe there could be life for me. I realized giving up would not take me to my family. They are in a place saved for warriors. Only those who lived with virtue, honor, and unselfish ambition could make it there. If I could live I could one day be like them, be better. Then when it is really my time to die I would be with them again. "Yes."

"Very well." The pitch-black room flashed bright white and I was blinded again. A door opened and what sounded like several people entered. The tight full body restraints began to loosen. It was so much easier to breathe. Two sets of hands moved me this way and that. It felt like I was being dressed for school while I was still asleep. I would miss that. My throat swelled shut with grief as I remembered all over again. I'd never see my family again.

"You *could* give us a little help you know. Dead weight isn't the easiest to handle carefully." I tried to open my eyes again but the light was still too much.

"Don't be so hard on her. She's just a child."

The two sets of hands were easy to tell apart. Thick meaty fingers held tight to my shoulders supporting me up in a sitting position. They were so pudgy it seemed like they couldn't possibly make a proper fist. The hands that belonged to the woman with the clear lesser amount of sympathy for me were almost sharp. Her boney fingers jabbed me all over as she rushed to change my clothes.

"I'm not being hard. I'm merely astonished. She's so young. How long has it been since we had a child with us? Not to mention the obvious fondness he already has for her." She snorted.

"Anis, don't make assumptions. You'll get us both in trouble. What is your name little girl?"

"Isabel, mam."

"Ah, polite to boot. Listen Isabel, you are going to have dinner with your savior. You are hungry aren't you?" I nodded. The lights dimmed enough for another attempt to open my eyes. Slowly, carefully, I peeked from my right eye—safe. My eyes wheeled. I fought to control the blinking long enough to be able to see my surroundings.

There wasn't much to see of interest. We were traveling down a long pale off-white corridor. The doors are all wider than normal doors and they have no windows. The floor is a checkered pattern of cream and gray. I'm being pushed in a wheelchair towards a door that is bigger than the rest. It's all so confusing. Each time I thought of a question, another popped in its place and confused me to silence again. Is this a hospital? Or maybe it's a foster home. Is that what he meant by *new family*? What happened to *my family*? *Why*?

We stopped in front of the last door in the hall. Until now I had not thought to see who was pushing me. The swollen hands belonged to an equally bloated body. I was surprised her finger didn't dial two numbers at a time while she pawed at a keypad on the wall. Her skin bulged around the bracelet she wore. If she attempted to make a fist it would pop at the weakest link. She reminded me of a boiled sausage about to burst from its casing.

"Oh damn! I've forgotten the code again."

Maybe she *was* pressing two at a time.

A silver haired waif of a woman swatted her away. "Honestly Carm you have *got* to diet. This is past ridiculous." Her back blocked my view of the keys. The door hissed open and we pushed on. The continuation of the corridor was twice as long as the previous leg. My eyes popped at the differences between the two. A deep forest green rug ran the length of the hall over the cherry wood floor. The walls looked like they belonged in a museum. We passed through quickly—so quickly I couldn't see it all clearly.

There were canvassed portraits of men and women I'd never seen before. Small showcases were sprinkled in no particular pattern between the large ornate frames. One held a very old gun suspended over a row of little silver balls. Another held a large cluster of purple quartz crystal. At the end of this hall the women patted their clothes straight and smoothed their hair. In unison they put on the two biggest smiles I'd ever seen. It was frightening.

The wide black door swung open without a sound. I was suddenly very nervous. I'd been too confused to feel any one thing until now. "Bring her in. Everything is ready."

A table large enough to seat twelve was lined end to end with tray after tray of food. The collective smell assaulted me as they pushed me forward. I'm so dry my tongue felt like sand on the roof of my mouth. The smell coupled with my new will to live unleashed the hunger that had escaped me in the dark room. My stomach turned angrily on its self, impatient. The chair stopped in front of an empty place setting at the end of the table. A little card above the plate read: *Welcome Isabel.*

"I am so very glad you chose to join me. Please, help yourself. You must be starving. Don't worry about manners tonight. You can eat like a lady tomorrow." It was the angel's voice, my savior. My eyes darted around the room looking for him but I was alone. The women, Anis and Carm, were gone too.

"Where are you," I asked, yanking several ribs off the slab in front of me.

"Would you like me to join you?" The angel asked.

"Yes."

I noticed a pitcher dripping with condensation next to my empty glass. The glass is comically oversized, more a vase than a drinking glass. I filled the two-quart tumbler to the top with a pale yellow liquid. I'd expected water. Too thirsty to care I gulped down a third of it before I could taste it. "Pear juice. My favorite."

"Is that so? I'm partial to pear nectar myself." The voice was closer now. My eyes flipped up to peer over the glass. He sat at the opposite end of the table smiling at me. He was the most elegant man I'd ever seen, an angel most definitely. The word that describes him most completely is *manufactured*. His features, his eyes, his hair, they all have a bemusing edge to them—a fabricated air. No human could naturally be so perfect. For a moment I thought he was an old movie star from the black and white films my mother loves. Loved.

"Where are we? What happened to my family? Who—" The questions rolled out unconsciously. There were so many in my head I couldn't hold on to them any more. I was surprised he could interrupt me when I felt so little in control of myself.

“Of course you are full of questions. You will receive an answer for each in time. I propose a deal. Continue eating until you cannot take another bite. While you are doing that I will answer your questions. Is that a fair arrangement?” I nodded. My concentration was slowly improving. Until now I hadn’t noticed his accent. Not British—or at least not what Hollywood has taught me Brits sound like. Definitely not American English.

“Wonderful.” His perfect smile flashed almost as bright as his clear blue eyes. Jet-black hair was slicked back away from his face. The contrast of his dark hair made the color of his eyes twice as striking. “My name is Dr. Oswyn. I do not know what happened to your family. I do know you were the only person brought from your home alive. This place we

are now is your new home. The people here are your new family. I know you must be very hurt and confused. Let us help you. You will be stronger with us.”

Dr. Oswyn’s voice was so soft and comforting that the meaning of his words had escaped me. It took a few moments to really hear what he’d said. When my brain caught up I thought my chest had cracked open. I was falling, heavy and so very fast. The impending impact terrified me. My body shut down before I could hit the bottom. I let the empty void in my chest spread out to the rest of me. My eyes rolled back in my head and it was dark once again.

I awoke again to white fluorescent light. This time, I am not restrained. Contrarily, I am wrapped

snug in comfortable cotton sheets. Trying very hard to focus on my surroundings, I slid my feet to the cold floor. There are pictures taped to the wall across from me – mostly pictures of singers and sandy beaches, a few post cards. One of the singers I knew to be Billie Holiday. Propped in the corner is a black acoustic guitar. The room is about the size of a large bedroom but has no windows. At first, it seemed there was no door, but on closer inspection I realized it's actually made of glass. A numeric keypad is on the wall next to the clear glass door across the hall. Another twin bed lay perfectly made – tucked corners and all – under the collage of musicians. In the corner next to the door sat a desk. Someone is sitting there, reading. A man.

“Um, hello.” I said.

The chair swiveled around to face me. The man is very tall. Even sitting down this was obvious. He slowly placed his left ankle over his right knee and eyed me suspiciously. His leg, ankle to knee, could be as long as my whole body for what I could see. He wore a black polo shirt and khaki pants, dress socks, no shoes. The dark-skinned man continued to stare at me. It reminded me of the stare my father would give waiting for me to tell the truth on my own. His eyelids started to narrow over his jade green eyes. I'd better say something.

“My name is Isabel. I think I live here now.” He scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“I guess it's best you think that,” he muttered. “I'm Dr. Knight.”

“You're a doctor too?”

He winced at my question, like I'd offended him. “I am a doctor, yes. You have no idea what kind of place this is do you?”

“My family was...” I couldn’t say it. “I woke up here. Will you tell me about it?” Suspicion still clouded his face. Why did he seem so reluctant to speak to me?

My anticipation for his answer was quickly overshadowed by surprise. A little boy now stood at the door peeking through his hands, which were pressed in a spying circle on the glass. The grief tugged at my stomach again. He looked like one of my cousins. For a moment, just a moment I hoped they were at home waiting for me. The memory of bloody bodies saturated floors made my heart stutter. The boy smiled at me. He reached his arm out of sight for a second and the door hissed open. All the doors around here sound like the breaks of a school bus.

“And what are you doing here Luca? No point in asking if your father knows where you are, they watch our every move.” Not a friendly tone, Doc Knight’s.

Luca slipped in closing the door behind him like he was keeping someone else out. “Father told me there was a girl here close to my age. He said she would play with me.”

“Well this is not a kindergarten.” Doc almost barked at the boy.

Luca ignored him and pounced on the bed beside me. He looked so excited to be there that he beamed.

His little hand shot out to me, “I’m Luca! There has never been a kid my age here before. I have so many toys. We’ll have so much fun! Do you like video games?” He rattled off so many questions I couldn’t keep my mind straight.

“She just lost her whole family Luca. I doubt she

wants to play." Dr. Knight had turned back to his reading.

"What makes you think she's allowed to go to your room anyway?"

"Because father said so." The chair swung around again. Doc looked down at Luca, his eyebrows knitted together in disbelief. "As long as an adult is with us she can come over whenever she wants." Luca stared back with the brattiest of faces. It looked like he was toying with the idea of sticking out his tongue, but thought better of it. I just met the man and even *I* know better.

One more speculative glare at the two of us, then Doc Knight had his back to us again. "I'm really sorry about your family," Luca added ducking into my line of sight. "But we're your family now." It looked like he really meant that. "Will you come round tomorrow?" For some reason I could not refuse this strangely familiar boy.

I accepted. He left. It was quiet again. The horrible memories of home threatened to flood my mind again. Why did this happen to us? Was our secret discovered? What had become of the birds of Vermilion Cay? Rehydrated, the tears ran down again unrelenting. I buried my face between my knees wholly confounded by my situation.

"Get it all out now," Dr. Knight said in a sympathetic tone. "If you are in here with me you can't be as close to them as he makes it sound. We don't know each other so you have no reason to trust me. But believe me they are not the kind of family you want. This is the last place you could ever want to be and quite possibly the last place you will see. This is not home. This is hell. I've been here six years, I know."

"Is your family dead too," I choked out.

“They could be. I have no way of knowing.”

“Can’t you call home?”

Dr. Knight turned slowly. “No, I can’t. Isabel, we are prisoners here. Don’t let them fool you.” He unfastened the thick leather bracelet from his left wrist and held it up towards me palm out. Something dark and rectangular stained his wrist. I looked him in the eyes and he nodded at me encouragingly. Before I could complete the thought I had my wrist held up for inspection. On the inside of my left wrist there’s a similar marking. Seeing it up close I could make them out. Inked into my skin is a barcode, underneath it the numbers: 47311. “What kind of family does that?”

Numbness washed over me head to toe while Doc Knight explained just what I was in for. We are being held here for testing.

“*Doctor Oswyn is obsessed with genetics. He searches around the world for people with the potential to be great and brings them here. Sometimes the experiments make them stronger, others die. Either way the process is extremely painful and lasts a very long time. As long as he has use for you, you cannot leave him. No one leaves alive.*”

Ironically I did get a new family. Not the one Oswyn had promised but one founded in the *home* he gave us nonetheless. All of them were at one time prisoners like me. Although our binding ties include blood we are not blood related. Our bonds are born first from the atrocities we survived. Second, our complete loathing for those responsible. Third and most important to us is the pact we made. We escaped but there were so many others still suffering there. Damaged as I was I still had a conscious. I could not sleep knowing as soon as I got out someone new would take my place.

Revulsion, spite, and revenge. All are common states of mind in our group. There is so much darkness in us. This is the real reason why we are so close. We understand each other. The pact doesn't require us to stay together but we do. To the outside it may appear we seek safety in numbers but it's hardly that. None of us doubt our ability to stay safe alone. We choose to stay together for the same reason brothers stick up for their sisters, why mothers protect their children. It's instinct, duty, and love.

Before I could step off the dock a few of the cay's avian inhabitants were waiting to welcome me home. I've always been able to understand birds. Sure bet it's why they are affectionately drawn to me.

A family trait to be sure, but no one before me had a sense as strong as mine. The birds don't have *voices*—save parrots and their cousins—our thoughts are just mutually understood, translating wordlessly from calls to seemingly my own thoughts. I stopped trying to figure it out years ago. Parrots *do* speak. They're like small children. Limited vocabulary tethers them to simple sentences. Still, I felt less strange in front of the others when they can actually hear the other end of the conversation.

"Welcome home, Elle."

The bright red parrot bounced and flapped eagerly perched on the back of a baby elephant bird—officially extinct. Baby indeed, he is five feet tall. Tyce hung back behind me—the giant birds always make him uneasy. Tatiana is rigid. Xander and Doc stayed behind wrapping things up on the boat. They kept the chuckles to themselves but couldn't hide the smirks over T and Tati's obvious discomfort.

"Thank you, Pom. Everything all right?"

“Home is fine. Miss you. Work goes well?” Pom flitted to my shoulder and the baby trotted at my other side.

“As well as it could. So, do you have a name little one?” When I’d left he was newly hatched and a few feet shorter.

“Little,” Tyce scoffed.

The name popped into my mind like I’d thought of it on my own.

“Phin. Hmm, how did that come about?” I looked the bird in the eye and waited.

“I see.” I turned to Tyce to include him. “When he hatched the fuzz on his head popped out of the egg first. It looked like a sharks fin.”

“Duh dah duh dah,” he chanted in an ominous tone.

Pom filled me in on every thing I’d missed while I was away. The owl population is up so more mice need to be bred, bought, and released. The vultures were harassing the hens again swooping down on them and enjoying their fleeing panic. I’d missed a very good falcon race. Not a single detail escaped me. The two birds departed as we reached the Falco compound gates. I chuckled at the sigh of relief Tyce and Tatiana shared.

The villa is quiet, which is fine by me. I want to be alone for a bit, to decompress. Walking corner to corner in my room to pull the curtains back always makes me feel like a showgirl unveiling the grand prize. The prize here is the stunning view of the southern half of the cay and the ocean. I slid the door to the deck open to let the salty breeze I love in. After a few deep, cleansing breaths I headed for the shower.

The summery water rained down on me from the ceiling-head while two shower jets took turns rhythmically whipping at my back. Steaming in this hot air will make the breeze that's waiting to lull me to sleep that much more refreshing. I stood there in a state of meditation, keeping my mind only on the sound of the water around me. Peace.

"When did you get back, *ane-chan*?" I tensed, relaxation over. I turned around wasting a perfectly good scowl on my uninvited guest. A big grin reached up his face narrowing his alabaster-blue eyes. His gaze is on me but as usual he's looking right through me, seeing nothing. I swatted his hand from the shower door and closed it back. He's letting out my steam.

"Dammit Kohl! Couldn't you wait until I got out? What the hell kind of brother peeps on his sister?"

Kohl chuckled. "Well I sort of need Nick if I want to peep. And to answer your question I am the perfect stereotypical little brother, successfully annoying you and interrupting your *girl time*. Don't you agree?"

"I agree all right. Are your bothers here? Why are you up so early?"

"There're around," He sighed. "I heard the curtains pull back and came to investigate."

Kohl Sasaki is one of three brothers from Semboku City, Japan. Triplets actually. He and identical twin Nick are also strangely polar opposites, yin and yang. Nick is the warrior, the muscle. He excels in any form of physical combat

he attempts, the ultimate fighter. Kohl is his negative. Snow white hair, thin frame, and blind. Honestly his blindness is a footnote. Kohl's other senses are remarkably strong. He sees in other ways. He could have been on the west pier and heard me pull the curtains. Nick is his other means of sight. When they touch, skin-to-skin, Kohl can see through Nick's eyes. Nick and Kohl Sasaki, affectionately Nichole.

"Well it's just me and when I get out I'm going to bed. Do not wake me up," I threatened.

"*Hai hai*," He agreed and ducked out.

I missed my bed. Not even a cloud could be more comfortable. I collapsed face down dead center on the bed and was asleep before I could fully exhale. Usually when I'm this tired my sleep is dreamless. Not today. Jet lagged and truly exhausted, I had not the strength to wake from memories I'd buried for my own sanity.

When I dream *normal* dreams, I know I'm dreaming. I can change things I don't like if I concentrate hard enough. If the dream is past fixing, I can wake myself and start over. This is not the same. It's as if I awoke in the past—in my younger body with my present, adult mind. I can only watch the replay of events. Nothing changes no matter how much I will it. I'm trapped in my own head, reliving the worst moments of my life, and feeling every second of it.

My stomach spasmed when I realized which day I would be forced to relive. The tiny dusty slate cell had one proportionately tiny excuse for a window. It couldn't have been more than a foot square—nearly blocked shut by thick iron bars incased in thicker glass. The bars on the door were equally obtrusive. Rain fell hard and fast outside. Shuffling sounds from another corner frightened me into an upright position.

“Ahhh I worry so much for you. Thought you would die there. Have not moved for days. Drink.” After so much time in atrophy, my equilibrium is shot. The slightest movement has me feeling like I am teetering on a cliff's edge.

The squat, elderly man knelt in front of me offering a ragged plastic cup of water—the only cup we have between us. His hands are very clean, uncharacteristic of our dingy surroundings. Without a word I took it and gulped it down. “What did they do to you this time?”

I tried to remember. “I'm not sure. I don't remember leaving this room, Mr. Cai.”

He leaned back and reflected for a moment on my response. At his most introspective, he looks comically like a nomad kung-fu sage in a bad 70's martial arts movie. Time had made tracks on his face and leached his hair of color. The concentration of wrinkles on his forehead relaxed slightly.

“Maybe this is best. Anything keep you sleeping so long can't make good memory. I'll tell you what I think. They hear about your plans to get out of here. This is punishment,” He nodded agreeing with himself.

I didn't have a plan. The truth is, I was just trying to make waves—be difficult. Teenage rebellion I guess. Mr. Cai, and others, seem to think that Luca and Xander are in on it—or they at least have an idea of what I'm *secretly* planning—like I'd leave him or Doc out. "They wouldn't say a word."

"You trust Luca too much. He Oswyn's son! You think he would help you? He reads those notes he sneaks you for sure. Trusting him is mistake," Another self-agreeing nod.

"He's never betrayed me in four years. I doubt he'd start now. Just the same, he doesn't know everything. No one does." I felt steady enough to relax a bit against the wall. As usual after blacking out in this place, I took inventory on my body. My legs *looked* fine so I wiggled my toes and stretched my hamstrings, nothing strange. I twisted my arms left and right and cracked my neck looking to the ceiling. Searing pain flashed up both forearms as I flexed. My arms jerked to my sides. Mr. Cai was on his feet over me.

"What is it?" He asked.

"My arm," I hissed through gritted teeth. I held my trembling arm out in front of me. Pressing them into my sides had made the pain worse.

Carefully Mr. Cai rolled back my left sleeve. Underneath the shirt, blood stained gauze wrapped the middle third of my forearm. Rolling back the right sleeve revealed identical bandaging. The blood is dark, old. It had been dry for some time. If mere flexing had aggravated it so severely I hated to think what peeling the gauze off would do. No doubt the drying process has welded the bandage to my skin. Mr. Cai held his hands out instructing me to wait. He refilled the tattered water cup from the common spigot a foot off the floor. No sinks here.

To the skin under the gauze the water is icy. The water that fell quickly over skin on either side feels lukewarm, strange. It felt so soothing I half crawled to the corner and let the water run free over my bandages. After a few minutes, I felt comfortable enough to let Mr. Cai unwrap the dripping wet gauze. Layer after layer, the dirty cloth grew in his hand. When the ball filled his palm I began to panic. As my skin became more visible, a lump is becoming increasingly defined. Seeing the raised area localized the pain. Soon there was a lump in my throat as well.

Finally, he pulled off the last ring to reveal the lump I was choking back panic over. We both gasped. The lump is an inch wide strip of raised and blistered skin about four inches long. It swipes diagonally across the inside of my forearm. The raised line is bright red in color and shines slightly. At the contours of my arm, the bulging skin puckers like it is stretched to its limits. It looks like a branding rod had stuck me.

The truth in the dream ended there. Now, I'm floating in dark water—completely submerged. Although there is no trace of light, I can still see myself. My arms stretched out, blindly gripping at the surface I could not see. My legs kicked rapidly until my thigh muscles twinged on the verge of cramping up. Pressure crushed in on me. My chest fought violently to expand, to fill my lungs with oxygen. But there is no air, just heavy liquid darkness on all sides. Weakened from the wild strokes, it dawned on me that I might not break the surface.

Swimming frantically in the pressing water was just denial. Now for stage two in the grieving process, anger. How in the hell did I get here? This is *not* how I am supposed to die. I have too much to do! There are so many people depending on me. This is not it. My anger manifested to rage. The water around me is suddenly hot. Tiny bubbles are forming all over my skin. The bubbles broke from me like a carbonated beverage on ice. The water is so hot now that the ache in my chest is nothing. I shut my eyes and locked my jaw. I want so badly to scream, but the thought of the scalding water in my mouth, my lungs, is too much.

Stinging pain on my right side of my face and bright light brought me back to reality. I barely noticed the voice shouting at me.

"Elle! Oi! Wake up. Look at me. It 's a dream. You're home. On the cay."

"Home," it was my voice now. The light was slowly becoming tolerable. Everything is blurred, further evidence I'd slept flat on my face. It will be a moment before I can see clearly again.

"I'm here. You're fine," the voice assured me.

I had been trying to right myself all this time. I must have still seemed out of it. Truly I am. It wasn't until his last words that I realized who was hovering over me.

"Xander?" I didn't mean it to be a question.

"Elle are you all right?"

"Sorry, yes. It's just, I can't see yet. I must have been sleeping pretty hard," I admitted rubbing my eyes.

"I'll say. It's been a long time since I've seen you like this. Sorry about that," he brushed my cheek with his thumb.

“You hit me?” I’m not mad. The alternative would have been devastating. I just wanted to be sure.

“It worked. Shaking didn’t.” He shrugged.

Finally I could see him. Falcos pride themselves on their keen eyesight. It was becoming irritating not seeing his face clearly. I guess Xander can see the focus return to my eyes because he relaxed and sat back at the end of the bed. I sat up hugging my knees. I always feel like I need to hold onto myself around Xander, especially being alone with him.

Deep honey brown almond shaped eyes watched me suspiciously. I let him stare me down waiting for him to be satisfied that I’m ok. It *was* just a dream, what was he so worried about. Usually I brushed off his doting as an unconscious habit due to time served. Xander and I escaped from the same place. In fact he is the first person I ever saved. We’ve been together ever since. I know him better than I know myself.

Xander’s ability is almost as unstable as my own. Unstable because it’s so powerful it’s difficult to control at times. Sometimes we’re unaware we’re affecting others around us, most commonly during periods of heightened emotion. I could feel pressure building in my nasal sinus, Xander. Before I could open my mouth to warn him, it was too late. Something ran warm and fast down over my lips causing me to shudder, blood. Head back, I slid off the bed and ran to the deck outside. Xander stayed where he sat – cursing himself.

In a bizarre way it's good he's more attached to me than anyone else. If just worrying about someone could make his or her nose a fountain, it's best he worries about me. I can feel the heat building on my face, so I leaned as far as I could over the deck's edge. Flames shot off towards the ground below my eyes. Flares popped off and recoiled into my nostrils. It sizzled, then tingled, and then it was over. The blood had stopped, like nothing had happened. If not for the blood on my face you'd never know.

You see Xander can freely manipulate hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells. In the simplest of terms, he controls blood. I, a fairly complementary opposite, can heal from most any injury, mended entirely by flame—Phoenix fire to be precise. Neither one of us are limited to those two traits. Our other unnatural skills *developed* in the *care* of Dr. Oswyn.

"Don't tell me it's okay. It is not okay." As usual after events like this, Xander is furious with himself.

"I'm fine, really."

"You haven't seen your face." He sighed.

"You know I don't blame you Xander. Forget about it." I'd said the words before I could stop myself. That did it. Even past the running water I'm using to clean my face, I can hear him.

"Forget I caused a pint of blood to pour from your nose because I was staring at you too hard!"

It's times like these that remind me everyone here is from somewhere else. Xander's chronic frustration over his control never fails to stoke up his Aussie. I took my time taking care to get every drop of blood off me.

A pint it was not. "Calm down. We can't be perfect all the time. We just need to work a little harder to control ourselves."

"*Ourselves?* You don't set me on fire occasionally." He'd have to calm down on his own. Nothing I could tell him would make a difference now.

"What has you so worked up anyway? No way *my* nightmare could upset you so much." He was silent. "What happened," now I was worried. Still he said nothing. His face tightened the way it does when he decides to keep quiet on an unpleasant subject. Xander needs to work on his *worrying* like I need to work on my temper. My left eye twitched, annoyed, one short step from pissed. Before I could say anymore there was a knock on the door.

"*Onee-san!* Can we come in?"

We? Without granted entry they piled in. Nick, Kohl, Tyce, and Tatiana. All of them took quick glances around the room.

"Where's the fire guys?" I asked.

"This is what we came to find out," Tatiana explained with a confused expression.

"It's fine. Let's go." Xander was corralling everyone towards the door. They all shot suspicious glances from him to me and back but left without a struggle. I was too tired to press him anymore.

Back in bed I thought I'd give sleep another try. The

tangled mass of pillows and sheets took a minute to unravel. With a sharp flick of the wrists, the top sheet fell straight over the sides of the bed. As it fell, I saw what had Xander so riled up. Never set him on fire indeed. The sheet is scorched like an iron had been left on them too long, brown in some spots black in others. I'd been close, crazy close, to turning this place to naught but ash. But Xander stayed. As hot as I was, he shook me, hit me, to bring me out of it. I may not have set him on fire, but I'd seriously burned him at the very least.

Sleep went off without incident this time. The heat monitors set up over my bed didn't register anything scary enough to send Xander running back. I woke up starving—not surprising seeing as I'd healed twice in the last 30 hours, having eaten only a small baguette and cheese. Tyce beat me to the cook top.

“Whatcha cooking?” I asked sweetly.

“Grilled cheese.” He answered just as sweet.

Great more bread and cheese. “That all?”

“Sì. That giant *baby* brought a mango up for you. Saw him leave it on the steps. I'll make you gelato with it later.”

“That's sweet.” Tyce looked impressed with himself. “I meant Phin. Gelato will be very nice, thank you. Since when can you make gelato?”

“I have a lot of skills you haven't experienced.” He smiled that half sleazy half charming smile. Only Tyce can pull off that mixture to come off as trustworthy and not disgusting. Each time he teases me this way, I send out a quick prayer of strength for the next woman he'll lay out the *real* charm for. Sound bet Tyce could talk a woman out of her panties in front of her father *and* her priest.

I rolled my eyes and moved on. "I really don't feel like cooking anything."

"Nick just walked off with a plate of super sized rice balls. Don't know what he put in them though. I can make you something, I guess."

"You guess." I rolled my eyes again—like I'd accept

after he made it sound like such a bother. "You'd think you'd be sick of cheese and bread after leaving France."

"I am not as picky as you when I'm hungry." He has a point.

Sure enough, Nick had a tray full of giant *onigiri* and a two-liter soda next to his favorite Sailor Moon glass. He sat cross-legged inspecting his nails past a fully outstretched arm. Color of the day? Metallic deep purple. His umber sarong—expertly knotted at the hip—flashed enough thigh to let me know either he's got on super skimpy briefs or he totally free ballin' it. Nick's bare foot—with matching purple toenails—tapped to the rhythm of whatever he's listening to through *Shocking Pink* headphones.

"Tell me that isn't all for you."

Ever the young gentleman, Nick stood until I sat down and did away with his music. "No, Kolie(Kohl and Lye) will want some I'm sure. They'll magically appear when I take the first bite. Here, this one is curry chicken." He handed me the massive lump of rice, poured the soda to clear Usagi-chan's head, and sat the glass between us. You can say a lot of things about our bunch but you can't say they don't have manners. Doc made damn sure of that.

"Thank you Nicky baby. So, Lye's here? He didn't barge in with the rest of you."

Lye is the oldest of the Sasaki trips – a fraternal twin. He's our resident tech master. It was Lye that installed and calibrated the heat monitors and combustion alert system in my room.

"He's been poking around in the main security grid all day. Wants to talk to you about something." Nick leaned in secretively. "You know Xander doesn't want us to tell you what happened right?"

"I figured as much. Don't worry I won't ask. I've got a pretty good idea what happened anyway. I'm sorry, Sweetie Darling."

Nick looked at me obviously annoyed.

"*Baka* (idiot). We all see how hard you work to control it. So you slip, in your *sleep*. That's why we're here, to help each other, right?"

There's no arguing with these people sometimes. "This is really good." I said of my curry stuffed ball.

"Not too big?" He asked.

Unable to resist I replied, "Is this where I make a balls joke?"

"Typically." Nick smiled.

Alrighty then. "I can handle huge balls just fine. It's the hairy ones I can't tolerate." I quipped. "You?"

"Sure I can get them in my mouth but it's the creamy center I enjoy." Nick giggled taking a bite of his *onigiri* to reveal tuna salad.

"Since when do ladyboys like you eat fish?" I asked before I nipped at my ball again.

"Since the can said chicken, bitch." He answered swatting at me with his long braid that had been resting in his lap.

"We could go all day." I laughed.

“If gabbing stopped us from eating all these carbs and protein I’d say we were on to something.”

“Good thing you have teen metabolism and you’re a training junkie.”

“Best junkie to be.” He said raising his half eaten ball in a toast.

“Amen sister.” I laughed more raising the glass.

“Hallelujah. Now let’s eat.” Nick said truly tucking in.

To my surprise I ate the whole thing. Nick decided to run off some of those calories in the gym. I made my way onto the grounds to find Lye. On my way, Tatiana informed me I was to accompany her to a spa shortly. She’d made reservations for everyone to meet later tonight for a private dinner. If I didn’t know how much she wanted to go I’d think these choices were for my enjoyment alone. Not far from the main house, there is a little hut that resembles an outhouse.

The hut opens to stairs, the stairs descend underground

to a corridor that slopes slightly for a few hundred feet to another door.

Even in the low light, from the foot of the stairs, I could see the keypad on the door is no longer there. Arms folded, I stood in front of the heavy metal door wondering how exactly I am to get inside without it. A strobing blue light dotted quickly across my face. Three low pulse tones sounded and the lock released. I stood in the doorway not wanting to step further inside. This area has at least two air conditioning units dedicated to it to keep the security systems cool.

“Christ Lye it’s freezing in here! What are you up to? You know I hate cold.” I called inside.

All I could see were a pair of beat up combat boots sticking out of a small crawl space on the side of the main security systems interface bay. "Nag. Nag. Nag. You *know* why it's cold in here. Or do you want the systems to fail?" Lye called from inside the machine.

Always such a smart ass—Sasaki trait. Only Lye could fit in there. Cynthia could but she might get lost inside she's so small. Slowly the boots shuffled back and he eased carefully out of the small hatch. Lean legs like his were made for skinny jeans. He wears them well. Although he is the tallest of the three, Lye is the least defined, soft, pure even. The boy is physically unscathed by our lifestyle. This kids baggage is all mental. The brothers were not so lucky.

Tufts of his Prussian blue locks are matted to his scalp with grease. If ever Lye allowed himself to be dirty, the sole reason, without question, is for his most obsessive hobby. Anything in our care that requires electricity is fair game for his fun. Making our mobiles internationally functional, untraceable and free was a Sunday afternoon whim. Outside of solder singeing his fingers, wearing tatty work ready clothes, and letting his hair stray from its carefully contrived disarray in order to truly glutton himself tinkering about, Lye Sasaki is always pristine. Eclectic true, but flawless. His thin frame the perfect mannequin for most any style—Mad scientist to Tokyo model, effortless.

"Your brother said you wanted to talk to me. Just what couldn't wait until you were done here?"

"Not that it couldn't wait..." A shiver whipped though me head to toe. "I love seeing you uncomfortable is all. It's so rare you know."

"I could roast you alive you know." I leaned closer to him only sparing half a grin.

Challenge sparked in his eyes as he copied my stance with a full smile. "But who would make sure you have constant live broadcast access to TV Tokyo *and* who would translate?"

"I don't need you to translate anymore, thanks."

Lye jumped up into a Peter Pan pose—both hands balled into fists perched on his hips. "So you admit you need me?"

I have a talent for rolling my eyes and narrowing them to slits all at once. I'm told it's scary. "Did you ask me out here *just* to piss me off, Sasaki?"

That did it. He knows I'd never hurt him but he also knows better than to test my temper. "You need to get laid boss. You're so testy lately. I asked you out here to discuss the new additions I made to secure the compound. I knew you were leaving soon, so I wanted to make sure I caught you. Annoying you is just a bonus."

The sharp tap of stiletto heels echoed down the corridor. I realized how tense my stance is and relaxed. "You're right. I am a little wound up, hence my trip. I'm sorry if I made you, uneasy."

"Apology accepted. Where are you going anyway?" He asked.

"We are going to be late. What is hold up?" Sweet perfume preceded the towering beauty into the already cramped room.

"Oh, Malikov-san. Thought you were my brother." Lye folded his arms and flashed a sly grin.

"Your brother does not wear heels. And when will you start calling me Tatiana?" She huffed and clutched her coat at her chest.

“My brother doesn’t wear heels as far as you know. And, I’ll address you informally when you stop being such a prude.” She tightened her grasp on her coat while taking half a step back out the door.

“All right enough ribbing. Look, we have a spa date that we are going to be late for if I sit through your briefing. This can wait until tonight right? I’m sure nothing would please a newly relaxed me more than to hear how safe I am at home—thanks to you of course.”

Tatiana eyed Lye warily, her stance is now as tense as mine had been. Lye could see that and held his palms out while looking around me. “Relax, Malikov-san, I didn’t mean anything by it. Friends?”

“Friends are not so rude, or so formal.” She stalked back up the corridor. “I will be in the boat.”

My signature slit eye-rolling combo activated unwillingly again.

“Wonderful. Ease up on her Lye. She’s trying her best.”

Shock rolled over his face. I can’t tell if it’s genuine. “What? What did I do? I’m glad you two are going to chill out somewhere, so sensitive.” He said shaking his head.

We walked back up to ground level together. “Look, we all have our baggage. She has a reason to be sensitive. On top of that she’s new to the team and the cause. Give her time to warm up.”

“It’s been a year. How long does it take to thaw out?”

“How long did it take you to thaw out? Or Kohl?” His lips pursed into a pout. “Right. Go clean up. We’re going to dinner tonight, all of us.”

Without a word, Lye made his way to his room. As soon as I got to the dock, I could tell just how much that one word had set Tatiana back. *Prude*. Of all the things to call her. Tatiana sat huddled defensively in her full-length trench coat. Tropical climate or not, she's always covered from the neck down. If not for being her chosen spa buddy, I would only know what her hands and face look like. If Tatiana kept her hair covered, you'd think she's a conservative Muslim – one

pretty hijab away. Well, maybe her desired fit is a little too snug for that comparison, but you get the idea.

"If you are going to defend him –" She started when I stepped on the dock.

"No. No. He knows no more about you than anyone else in our circle of fame. True you and I who are well aware of your past would think him cruel, but he is not. He just doesn't understand you. And picking on the new kid is what insecure teens do. Try to see it that way. On the other, hand I spoke with him. He will rein it in."

Tatiana took a deep breath and sighed. "How did you ever find those boys anyway? All three are –"

"Irreplaceable." I interjected. "I didn't find them actually. They found us. Or Lye found us at least."

She stared at me in disbelief. "*He* found you? No one finds you."

"Yes. An interesting story."

Her interest piqued she leaned onto the control console. "I'm listening."

"I'll tell you at dinner. Nick hates missing his own story. He likes to put on a more animated show than I will." This seemed enough for her. Tatiana sank back into her seat and began scanning radio stations.

I never really went for the whole *spa experience* thing until Tatiana joined up. The occasional massage and regular nail service was good enough for me. Tatiana *loves* the spa. She'd go every day if she could. This is the only situation in which she feels comfortable being touched. Poor girl, her mental baggage may be the heaviest of us all. Fresh off a job that proved more tedious than usual, we deserved and needed this pampering.

As each service rendering team came and went, our every whim catered to by the staff, a sense of peace seemed to win over Tatiana's usual guarded demeanor. After one of the many treatments we had, she stretched out long and slow like a cat, and then hugged herself like a content child.

Unconscious acts of true pleasure from *her*? No one would believe it. Only Tyce and I know just how amazing a sight it is coming from her. We know why she is terrified of self-gratification.

Tatiana Malikov is the newest member of our team. It was just over a year ago that she joined us. If not for Tyce's inescapable talent for extracting the truth out of others, I'm sure we would not have accepted her. Her reputation is as black as mine on some levels. Around our kind, she is commonly known as *The Body*. True the tall, voluptuous, Russian has the body of a goddess, but ivory skin, raven black hair, an hourglass figure, and brilliant violet eyes did not win her the name. It was originally a command.

“The body! Look only at the body!” Her stationed guard would say.

She has only to speak a word, and if you were lucky, and equally *unlucky* enough to see her lips move, your will would no longer be your own. You would be lucky in that you would experience the strongest desire you could possibly imagine. Those who eventually recoup their senses, usually none to very few, describe different things: Unconditional devotion, a vicious urge to protect, pure love, or breathtaking lust, are the only existing accounts. No matter which it is for the day’s spa staff, one fact ruled out: There is nothing they wouldn’t do for her. The dedication to providing the ultimate spa experience is slightly tilted to please her more than me. I don’t mind. It isn’t their fault for looking at her face as she speaks. It is the polite thing after all.

After steam rooms, massages, facials, waxing, hair, and nails I feel at ease. My nails were now painted bloody red—the way I like them—instead of stained with the real thing. My mouth twisted as it occurred to me that on some level both sets of hands are attractive to me. My thoughts scare even me sometimes. And I always wonder how much of it is me and how much is Phoenix. Maybe speaking to Tyce again would be beneficial. He will listen, not judge, and he’d never repeat my dark thoughts to anyone. This path of thinking is wearing on my refreshed mind. I’m glad the restaurant is so close. Downtime with my boys always helps.

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