

The Cleaner

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Summary: Some people work in offices. Some people teach. Some heal. Others paint and make music. I do none of that. I'm the person you call when you have a problem you don't know how to deal with. Or when you don't have the stomach for it. I take out the trash. And I'm damn good at it. Call me The Cleaner. AH.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

The Cleaner

Summary: Some people work in offices. Some people teach. Some heal. Others paint and make music. I do none of that. I'm the person you call when you have a problem you don't know how to deal with. Or when you don't have the stomach for it. I take out the trash. And I'm damn good at it. Call me The Cleaner.

"Come on, asshole."

It's cold as fuck out here, and for the hundredth time, as I dial in the elevation on my fancy new scope, I regret signing on for this shit.

As if on cue, fifteen hundred meters away, my target finally steps through a pair of double French doors onto the wide Mediterranean-style terrace ringing the second floor of the villa. His movements are quick and agitated, and as he stops beneath one of the ornate lamps lighting the space, I watch him rake a nervous hand through a swath of jet-black hair before pulling out his cell.

Watching his lips, I can pick out a word here and there, but his language isn't one of mine. Plus, even with the high-powered optics, it's dark, and with the frigid temperatures, puffs of silvery steam pour out of his mouth with every breath.

I check my wrist and curse because this is taking entirely too long.

"Whitlock, target is in range," I say into my mic. "Do you have confirmation?"

"Hold," he answers back, as calm as ever. Then again, he's not the one laying on his belly on top of a fucking barn in the middle of the Carpathians in the dead of winter and trying not to freeze his ass off. "Zurich is tracing the latest transactions."

"Tell Zurich to hurry the fuck up."

He laughs. "Right. Do you have any idea what it took for me to get them to cooperate at all?"

"I don't care." I open and close my fist, wincing at the sharp, needle-like pain in my knuckles. "I'm turning into a popsicle here."

"Just be patient."

I snort at that, blowing out my own cloud of steam. Glancing up, I watch it dissipate into the velvet sky above. Thousands of stars twinkle and shine. "Seriously?"

He doesn't respond, but I didn't expect him to.

Returning my focus to the dark-haired man on the terrace, I see his agitation morphing into full blown panic. His arm flails out to the side, and he's yelling into his cell. Eyes wild and darting, he reminds me of a caged beast.

He knows something is up.

Those dumbasses in Zurich probably tripped an e-alarm when they started digging.

Back behind the French doors, a slim, blonde in blue silk hesitates before walking out to join him. Oblivious that her husband's empire is about to come crashing down, she tugs on the fine wool of his suit coat, smiling and urging him to come back inside. He ignores her at first, still yelling into his phone. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what's coming next.

"No, girl," I whisper to myself and to her. "You get your ass back in the house. This isn't going to end well."

When he slaps her and shoves her against the wall, I almost take him out right then and there.

Obviously, this isn't her first rodeo. Holding her cheek and swiping away an errant tear, she slides right, just out of his reach, and then scurries back through the doors.

"Fucker."

There's nothing worse than a man who beats on his wife or kids.

Strike that, there's a lot worse.

You wouldn't think so, but trust me, I've seen it all.

Beating on his woman is the least of this guy's offenses.

The target slips his phone back into the inside breast pocket of his tailored coat and growls out something to the pair of black-suited guards that followed him out and flanked him. They're tall, dark, and beefy, but I've seen their kind before. All bark, no real bite. And they don't even have a clue that I'm out here, watching and waiting for that final call.

Speaking of, a blip of static hits my earpiece before I hear Whitlock's low southern drawl. "Come in."

"Do we have it?" I ask.

"That's affirmative. Got that asshole dead to rights." I swear I can hear that son of a bitch grin. "You are clear for elimination."

A dark smile curls my lips, mimicking my forefinger around the trigger.

"Just a little more," I say, pressing my cheek to the hard stock of my rifle as I center the reticle. With another quick adjustment, the man comes into sharp, unrelieved focus. I can count his eyelashes.

For a brief second, everything goes silent. The cold, winter wind stills. The tiny specs of fluttering snow stop falling. The creatures in the forest behind me go quiet, as if they're holding their breaths right along with me.

Something in the primitive part of his hindbrain kicks in. The target's shoulders abruptly straighten, and he looks out onto the vast blanket of white in front of him, searching for something he doesn't have a prayer of seeing. His lips drop into a small, surprised *O*.

I don't give him the chance to run.

I don't even give him the chance to take another breath.

No, with a single flex of my finger, a high-powered round whistles across those fifteen hundred meters, and I blow that motherfucker's head off.

Panic erupts on the terrace, and even as far out as I am, I hear a woman's blood-curdling scream.

I allow myself all of two seconds to admire my handiwork before packing up my gear like any other day.

"It's done," I say to Whitlock as I sling my rifle over my shoulder and move toward the rickety ladder hanging off the back of the barn. "Get Emmett to pull the sat shots and send them over to the client for receipt."

A beat later, a low whistle comes through my earpiece.

"Jesus, Swan," Whitlock says, no doubt already looking at the overheads. "You're one scary fucking woman."

Yes, I am.

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Notes:

Welp, I caught a bunny and just couldn't help myself. We'll see how this goes.

1. This is fiction of the action/thriller variety and written for the express purpose of entertainment
2. There be graphic violence, adult language and themes, and likely a little sexin' in here, so mind that M rating accordingly. No other warnings will be provided
3. Regarding story structure and such, my outline is looser than what I used for OPERATION: Break the Dawn. This fic is meant to be less serious. It'll definitely be less detailed and will remain in 1st person POV. Chapters will also stay on the shorter side. All that's to say that I mean this to be something a little less difficult for me to write, lol
4. Thank you for joining me on this little ride. I hope you enjoy, and as always would love to hear from you :)

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Less than twenty-four hours after taking out Ștefan Petrescu and nearly freezing my ass off, I whip around the last winding curve and turn off the Parkway onto an unmarked dirt drive.

To anyone passing by, the thing just looks like an old, abandoned farm road. Deep ruts cut through the red, iron-rich soil. Flanking each side sit ancient, crumbling rock fences and dormant fields of tawny hay. Further in, walls of hundred-year-old oaks climb the sky. In the spring, their leaves arch over the road in dense, umbrella-like canopies.

It's all very pastoral.

No one ever sees the spider web of military-grade cameras.

Or the motion sensors and heat-trip alarms.

Or the occasional pair of steely-eyed recruits logging their daily miles in full combat gear.

At the end, dead in the center of roughly eight hundred and fifty acres of prime Appalachian highlands, I park my bike next to a brand new, sun-fire yellow Porsche. The thing looks ridiculous sitting here in the middle of nowhere, and I roll my eyes at the utter absurdity of it. Because, seriously, there's no way she can keep that car from bottoming out on that shitty-ass road. I give it two weeks, max, before I get a call begging for my truck keys and tow strap.

Either way, I need a shower.

And I really need a fucking nap.

Instead of going straight into the house – a far more modern, glass-and-more-glass affair than the surroundings would suggest – I spear my helmet onto a nearby fencepost and head over to the massive, freshly-painted gabled barn across the yard.

About the time I step through the open doors into the concrete alley, I catch the telltale fleshy thwack of someone having a very bad day.

"What's wrong with her face?" I ask. No sense bothering with bullshit pleasantries.

"She wasn't fast enough."

Standing off to the side, watching a pair of sweaty, late twenty-somethings trying their damndest to beat the shit out of each other, a tall, statuesque blonde with the features of a model just shrugs. Frowning when the one with puffy eyes and purple-black cheekbones falters and falls back, she yells, "Were you, Mallory?"

Eyes boggled half-way out of her head, the recruit ducks another swing. In a quick, lithe move that proves how she got this far to start with, Mallory fakes left and then slams a right hook into the other woman's ribcage. "No, ma'am!"

"But we're working on that, aren't we?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Rosalie cuts me a sideways grin.

Rosalie Hale, 32

Height / Weight: 6'0" / 150

Hair / Eyes: Blonde / Blue

Education & Experience:

8 years; Staff Sergeant, USMC Marine Raider Regiment

4 years; Private Security Contractor, Wolf Corp

2 years-Present; Co-founder & Private Security Contractor, Eclipse LTD

"You were fast," she says to me, making a show of checking her wrist.

Now, it's my turn to shrug. I mean, she's not wrong. "There was snow," I answer, wrinkling my nose because *fucking snow*. "You know I hate cold weather."

When I yawn and stretch, Rosalie cocks one of those perfectly sculpted brows of hers. I should probably tell her that they make her look like a perpetual bitch. She'd probably appreciate the compliment.

"Still, I thought you'd be gone at least 'til Tuesday."

"Meh, good timing." Peeling off my leather jacket, I chuck it across one of the empty stall walls. "Whitlock somehow managed to get Zurich to pry open his accounts. Spooked him and made him careless."

Rosalie barks out an unexpected laugh, which for some reason, makes both recruits blanch cadaver white. I don't think I want to know. Hand to hand is her domain, and I'm not the only scary woman on this farm.

"Cheater."

I shoot her my meanest glare. "Fuck you, Hale."

Of course, she just flashes me one of those megawatt smiles of hers before abruptly turning as serious as death itself. "I need you to fire McCarty."

"Again?" I snort because this isn't a new topic for her. "What'd he do this time?"

Leaning back against the adjacent stall, she rolls her baby-blue eyes. "He asked me out."

I laugh hard at that. "What'd you say?"

"Fuck, no."

Not surprising. Rosalie Hale isn't exactly the dating type.

"Come on," I say as I watch the other recruit – a blond ex-Navy diver named Stanley – flip Mallory across her hip and pin her to the ground. "That can't be it."

"Fine." Rosalie huffs. "When I told him no, he asked if I just wanted to fuck."

It takes a lot of effort to school my expression as I wait for her to continue, but, no, Rosalie doesn't say a word and instead just glares daggers at the women grappling on the floor. After a few seconds of silence, only broken by the sounds of bodies smacking, my lips finally twitch. "Well, was he any good?"

That hateful scowl turns on me. "Yes, and that's the fucking problem, *Bella*. And that dumbass gave me flowers." Her knuckles crack. "What the hell am I supposed to do with flowers?"

Yeah, no way am I jumping into that shitshow, so I roll my shoulders and turn toward my office in the back section of the barn. Right before stepping through the door, I lean around the frame and call out, "I don't know. Smell them?"

She flips me off like usual. "Fuck you, Swan."

My office is nothing spectacular. Hell, it's in a fucking barn. But it does the job, I like it, and when I plop down into the stupidly expensive leather chair McCarty ordered on my behalf, I kick my boots up onto the matching walnut desk and lean back.

Because I'm me, I don't really do relaxing well, so after about thirty seconds, I pull my cell out and hit send.

Whitlock answers before the first ring. "Took you long enough."

Jasper Whitlock, 33

Height / Weight: 5'10" / 175

Hair / Eyes: Light Brown / Hazel

Education & Experience:

M.S. Computer Engineering & Information Systems, UT-Austin

2 years; Middle East Analyst, Central Intelligence Agency

6 years; Intelligence Analyst, National Security Agency/Central Security Service

1.5 years-Present; Information & Systems Director, Eclipse LTD

I swear that asshole is psychic.

"Did you hear back from London on Petrescu?"

In the background, I hear keys clacking at breakneck speed. "Deposited this morning," he says. "Legoland sends their regards and thanks."

Nodding, I swap the call over to speaker and pull a slim laptop out of the bottom side drawer. It's brand spanking new and yet another McCarty special. "So, what'd I miss?"

"Three requests came in since you flew out last Friday. Two didn't meet the criteria, so I declined them." The clacking stops. "The third warrants a discussion."

No joke, my brows climb past my hairline because this is highly, *highly* unusual. Whitlock doesn't need to discuss jack shit. He knows what we do, why we do it, and he's played gatekeeper since the day I lured him away from the Fort Meade spy lords. "Who's the hit?"

"Mikhail Aronov."

"Who?"

"One of the new Russian oligarchs, but he spends most of his time abroad these days," he answers, dryly ticking off details like he's reading me his grocery list. "He's powerful. Well-connected. Has ties at the FSB and the GRU. Billionaire several times over, but he's come up quick." Whitlock pauses for half a second. "Looks like his net worth has tripled in the last two years."

Leaning back in my chair, I blow out a loud breath and dry wash my face. "What's he do?"

"His public face is VolTerra Mining. Lithium, gold, copper, all the usuals, but they also have uranium and plutonium assets. Operates in all the usual garden spots."

I tap out the target's name to do a quick image search, just to get a feel of who we're talking about. Hundreds and hundreds of images instantly pop up in an even split between corporate headshots, high-dollar social events, and interviews with the media.

Like most at that level of the stratosphere, Aronov has a distinctly monied look about him, the kind of aristocratic features and bearing that would stick out even if you removed all the fancy clothes and trappings. Tall, dark, and generally handsome, I'd

peg him somewhere around fifty. His eyes are a dead giveaway, though. They're sharp and cold. This guy is an apex predator.

I should know.

I'm one, too.

"Non-public face?" I ask, clicking through a few more images before closing the browser.

"Drugs, weapons, chemicals. Trafficking. You name it, he has his fingers in it."

Great, he sounds wonderful. But nothing Whitlock has said is that surprising, so I have to ask. "I mean, that's all completely shitty, but what's setting this guy apart from the usual nightmares?"

The phone goes silent for a long moment, and when Whitlock comes back, his voice is lower and carries hints of something I've never heard from him, not even when we sent Rosalie to take out that Taliban elder who'd had his own mother stoned.

"Bella, two months ago, he firebombed an entire village in the DRC."

It takes me a minute. "The fuck did you say?"

"Firebombed a whole goddamned village. At least four hundred people wiped out, and the remains were just bulldozed into a mass grave on the outskirts."

My stomach lurches, and any hint of tiredness vanishes. "Why? What was he after?"

"VolTerra has a large mining operation in the area, and there were signs of some minor protests from the locals, but motive is unclear." His keys start clacking again. "Reports are showing women and girls were taken, too. Several have already showed up on the circuits... This guy is bad news."

"No shit." Whitlock is right. This guy is bad news, but he's not exactly quiet about it. "But if he's gone that far and been that overt about it, no one would bat an eye if he was taken out through official channels."

"They've tried," he says. "CIA took two runs at him. Six of their top tier operatives were delivered back to Virginia in body bags. No heads."

Jesus Christ.

My lips mash because I already know the answer to this one. "Who sent the request?"

"Platt," he says, and despite the horror of our conversation, a tiny smile creeps into his voice. "She called me directly from her gigantic new office at Langley."

"*Shit*. I owe her, and she knows it." Sighing, I swipe a hand through my mess of hair. There goes my fucking nap. "Send me the file and let me take a look."

"Already done."

Of course, it is.

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Notes:

Legoland: intelligence community's nickname for MI6, UK's equivalent to the CIA

Fort Meade: Army installation located in Maryland and the headquarters of National Security Agency (NSA)

FSB: principal security agency of Russia and successor agency to the Soviet Union's KGB

GRU: foreign military intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo, an African nation with vast natural resources plagued by near-constant war and political instability

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

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About the time the sun comes up and starts peeking through the barren trees, I hit mile ten and decide that I've had enough for one day.

While I've logged thousands of miles over the years, I've never liked running. In fact, I utterly hate it most days and rank it right up there with rolling around in snow. But it's one of those unfortunate things you just do in my little world because maintaining peak physical condition is pretty damned necessary.

That said, if I'm ever running on the job, there's a high likelihood I've fucked up somewhere.

Bypassing one of the larger ponds, I veer off the worn path looping the farm and cut across the hayfield adjacent to the barn. When I hit the edge of the yard, I'm there just in time to catch a jacked-up Rubicon swinging into the spot between my bike and the Porsche. Of course, it's that dumb Call of Duty Black Ops edition. McCarty thinks it's hilarious.

A beast of a man hops out of the Jeep, and I just can't help myself.

Vaulting over the fence ringing the yard, I yell, "Hear you have a thing for flowers."

The man spins around much faster than his size would suggest, and his dark eyes narrow, instantly pinning me despite my all-black attire and the shadows from the low, early-dawn light.

McCarty belts out a loud laugh. "It's fucking with her, isn't it?"

Emmett McCarty, 31

Height / Weight: 6'5" / 225

Hair / Eyes: Dark Brown / Brown

Education & Experience:

6 years; Staff Sergeant, US Army, 1st Special Forces Group Airborne (Green Berets)

5 years; Special Agent, US Secret Service

2 years-Present; Operations Support & Private Security Contractor, Eclipse LTD

Grinning, I jog over, and when he reaches back into the Jeep and grabs a cardboard tray, I grin even wider.

"It was a good move," I say, swiping one of the four steaming cups wedged into the tray.

Emmett's massive shoulders roll in a loose, lazy shrug. Despite the cool January temperatures, he's in an old olive drab Army tee. A mass of black and gray tats creep out from under his shirtsleeves, twining around his forearms to his wrists. There's a wicked looking skull on his right, and when he flexes, it looks like it's screaming.

"Eh, I'll eventually wear her ass down," he says, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"Wear down..." I pause to slug back a gulp of hot, bitter caffeine and then cock a smart-ass brow. "Or wear *out*?"

"Hold up, she told you?"

"No shit, Sherlock."

Emmett flashes me a row of pretty white teeth right before hip checking me hard enough to knock me off the path. I do *not* spill my coffee, and he just laughs at my acrobatics. He laughs even harder when I punch him in the bicep. If it's not obvious, McCarty's got a fucked-up sense of humor.

"Hell, yeah," he says. "Just means I'm getting a repeat performance."

Shaking my head because I really don't need to know that shit, I suck down the rest of my coffee, flick the cup into the black barrel by the door, and mutter, "Your funeral."

"Oh, but what a way to die."

When we step into the large lounge-like conference room across from my office, the lights are already on. Sprawled out across one of the long leather couches against the opposite wall, Rosalie glances up from the keyboard balanced on her knee, glares at the man next to me, and resumes setting up the video.

A second later, one of the two gigantic screens mounted to the wall blinks to life.

"Hey, fucker," Emmett draws. As he hands Rosalie her coffee, that drawl turns into an outright purr. "And good morning to you, darling."

Every bit of Rosalie's 6'0" frame stiffens. She's literally vibrating, no doubt a nose hair from coming off the couch and taking that dumbass out. On screen, Jasper just rolls his eyes, and with a dry huff, goes back to typing. His lips move, and I just make out a low, mumbled, "*Idiot*."

"Where's Spooky?" I ask because we really need to get this show on the road. Plus, I need to divert the impending bloodshed, at least in here. If they want to fight out in the alley, that's fine. We have water hoses for that.

Almost on cue, a sing-song soprano comes from behind me, accompanied by a barely-there tug on my ponytail. "You rang?"

I *just* suppress the involuntary flinch because, *Jesus*, that woman's quiet, even by our standards.

Alice can also be downright creepy.

Alice Brandon, 34

Height / Weight: 5'1" / 110

Hair / Eyes: Black / Brown

Education & Experience:

M.S. Behavioral Psychology

4 years; Lieutenant, Human Intelligence, US Army, 4th PSYOP Group Airborne

6 years; Interrogator Intelligence Collector, High-Value Detainee Interrogation

Group/Federal Bureau of Investigation

2 years-Present; Co-founder & Private Security Contractor, Eclipse LTD

"How was Romania?" Skirting around Emmett, Alice plops down on the other end of the couch. Since I've been out of pocket, she's gone a little goth. Neon violet highlights peek out from her short, inky mop, and she's sporting a set of slick, shiny black fingernails. Next to Rosalie, with her pale complexion and delicate features, she looks like some kind of emo porcelain doll.

"Cold as fuck," I reply as I target the recliner directly in front of the screens. The thing is ancient, ugly, and half-way wallowed out, but it's the most comfortable chair on the

planet. Plus, its very existence pisses Emmett off, which just makes me love it even more.

Across the way, Alice's eyes glitter, and for a too-long moment, she stares at me with an unnerving kind of intensity. As serious as a heart attack, she asks, "Did you see any vampires?"

Like I said, fucking creepy.

But I know better than to say that out loud, so I just shrug. "Only monster in sight was Petrescu, and he's definitely not rising from the grave."

She makes a tsking sound. "Well, that's unfortunate."

The clacking on the screen abruptly stops, and when I look over, I catch a split second of rapt fascination in Whitlock's expression. When those shrewd gray eyes find mine, his face clears, and those lightning-fast fingers of his resume their non-stop pecking.

Great, this place is turning into matchmaking central.

While we wait for the second screen to come up, I turn back to Alice. "How are the recruits doing?"

Grabbing her standing order of black tea from Emmett's tray, she thinks for a second before responding. "Mallory and Stanley still need a lot of work. They're too high strung. While they're physically strong, both quickly crack under duress." Her lips purse with what I can only describe as a kind of detached, clinical disappointment. "Real pressure would break them completely, and they're too expensive to break."

What Alice calls *duress* would leave most people screaming and scarred for life. I don't want to know what she considers *real pressure*, but she's damned good at what she does. By the time she's finished tearing those recruits down and building them back up, they'll be capable of anything.

Literally *anything*.

"Weber?"

Her eyes shade even darker, and a slow, almost predatory smile lights her fairy-like face. "That one is coming along nicely."

A shudder rolls down my spine because *fuck*.

"How soon do you think she'll be ready to deploy?"

Alice takes a delicate sip. "Now, tomorrow, next year. *Never*," she says, and it's in that same eerie, sing-song voice of hers that occasionally makes me wonder if she's got a screw or two loose.

I scrub my face, wiping away the light sheen of lingering sweat from my run. "Could you be less oblique?"

"Yes."

No joke, there's a blood vessel in my forehead that's about two seconds from popping, and my jaw clamps down on the not-so-pleasant response sitting on the tip of my tongue. About the time I open my mouth, Alice's face suddenly splits in two.

"Too fucking easy, Swan," she says, laughing because she's Alice.

It's way too early for this bullshit, so I cheerfully flip her off. "Fuck you, Brandon."

"Aw, I love you, too." She throws me a wink and chugs the rest of her tea like she's at a kegger. "Oh, and you can deploy Weber any time you want. That one's solid."

Jasper's dry, bored voice comes through the screen. "If you two are done, I have Platt on the line."

The other screen flashes bright blue. In the center, a gold ring circles a right-facing eagle above a shield and a compass. A second later, the seal disappears, and a woman's face, backed by a fancy beige and cherry office, replaces it.

While I've known her for years, I never can tell exactly how old Esme Platt is. Even now, there's not a line on her face, and with dark caramel hair pulled back into a loose yet somehow elegant twist, she's one of those women who could be thirty or fifty. All I know is that she's been in the CIA long enough to wield a great deal of power.

Even the directors jump around her.

I've seen it firsthand.

And let me tell you, it's a fucking glorious thing to behold.

"Platt," I say with a polite dip of my chin. I mean, I did work for the woman for four years.

Esme's eagle-eyed gaze skips around the room before cutting straight to me. One corner of her mouth pulls up into an almost-smile. "Good to see you, Isabella."

That would be me.

Isabella Swan, 32

Height / Weight: 5'4" / 125

Hair / Eyes: Dark Brown / Brown

Education & Experience:

8 years; Sergeant 1st Class, US Army, 75th Ranger Regiment & 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (1st SFOD-D) G Squadron

4 years; Operator, Special Operations Group (SAC), Central Intelligence Agency

2 years-Present; Founder & Private Security Contractor, Eclipse LTD

"Have you reviewed the file?" she asks, not wasting time with small talk that no one needs.

"I have."

"What do you think?"

I look over to the other screen. Jasper's expression is carefully neutral, but like the rest of the team, there's a subtle sharpness there. He wants this guy *gone* like last week's leftovers, but this is a risky hit, and seeing as how it falls squarely in my domain, he knows the decision is ultimately mine. I nod at him and then to Platt. "Aronov needs to go."

"Good." Her posture relaxes, ever so slightly, which frankly, I find a little odd. "Latest intelligence positions him in Vienna. We believe he's meeting with an arms dealer out of Iran. I just sent Whitlock the most recent surveillance."

Jasper's fingers fly across his keyboard, and his feed blinks out, replaced by a barrage of long-distance photos.

Standing inside the vestibule of St. Stephen's.

Tucked into a private balcony at the historic Wiener Staatsoper.

Climbing out of a jet-black Mercedes outside the Amador on Grinzinger Straße.

In every single shot, Aronov is surrounded by people. Blondes, brunettes, red heads, you name it, his entourage is young and every one of them oozes model-level gorgeous. The man's a freaking collector of women.

A half dozen stern-faced, dark-suited bruisers flank him, but unlike Petrescu's warm bodies, these guys are the real deal. Even from the stills, it's clear that they know what they're doing, and while it's not obvious or overt, I can tell they're all packing serious firepower.

It's all distracting enough that it takes me a moment to register what *else* I'm seeing.

"Stop," I say, shoving out of the recliner to move closer to the screen. "Go back two."

Jasper flips back two shots.

"One more."

Crossing my arms, I look over to Esme. "Who's the Frogman?"

Esme jerks, which is a stunning tell from her, and here in the conference room, there's a barely detectable rustle of fabric. I don't know what surprised the team more – my question or Esme's reaction.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Cool, placid even, Esme's voice belies that moment of surprise, and her features instantly slip back into a familiar mask of disinterest.

I don't believe a word of it.

I know exactly what I'm looking at.

He's in every single shot, always in the periphery, always watching.

Security, but *not*.

The guy's tall, somewhere north of 6'2". With broad shoulders tapering to a trim waist, he's nothing but hard lines and planes, topped by messy, bed-head hair the color of a dirty penny and emerald green eyes that pop even through the telephoto. With a lightly stubbled jaw line that could cut stone, he's a fucking smoke show.

But all that prettiness does nothing to hide the utter lethality that he wears like a second skin.

"*Bullshit*," I say to Platt. "That ginger's ex spec ops, or I'll eat my shoe." I study his stance – the looseness and casualness of it, countered by the near-constant movement of those gemstone eyes. This guy's a panther waiting to strike. "If he came out of the Unit or SAC, I'd know him." My lips flatten into a hard line. "He's DEVGRU."

Esme sighs. "I'm not supposed to be sharing this. Despite what clearance you think I have, I'm not even supposed to know who he is."

I level her a flat, don't-start-with-me glare.

"Fine, that *ginger* is Edward Masen. And yes," she finally replies, pausing to blow out a long, slow breath. "Twelve years DEVGRU. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen. You name it, he's been there."

"What the fuck is he doing with Aronov?"

"For the last few years, Masen has been a private contractor." She shoots me a small smile. "Much like you, only he generally works alone. He's highly effective."

That doesn't exactly answer my question, but I can connect the dots well enough.

"Who's he work for?"

"For the most part, us. Occasionally, he contracts with the Israelis and the Brits."

My brows slant. "Then why are you talking to us if he's already in position?"

There was a long, *long* beat of silence.

"We don't know what side he's on."

Oh, *shit*.

Not waiting for me to respond, Esme waves a tired hand. "As you're already aware, we sent some of our best operatives after Aronov, but they didn't even get close."

I motion for Jasper to keep flipping the photos. It's the same scene, over and over. The guards don't even blink at Masen's proximity, and in more than a few, he's in the back of that Mercedes, right next to Aronov himself.

Something's still not quite right. "What else?"

"Masen's handler disappeared three months ago," Platt replies. "We're presuming he's dead, too."

Double shit.

"Who's his handler?" I ask, just in case I happen to know him.

Esme's features pinch, but unlike before, she anticipated where I would go, so her reaction is barely noticeable. I only catch it because I'm watching her so damned closely.

"Carlisle Cullen."

The air electrifies and the room instantly stills.

It's so quiet, I hear the blood rushing through my veins. When I look down, the tiny hairs on my forearms stand on end.

"Bella, I'm calling in my favor," Esme says. "In addition to taking out Aronov, I need to you find out what happened to my husband."

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Notes:

Thank you all for reading! I love seeing your reviews and comments. It makes me so happy knowing you're enjoying. I'm kind of having a ball writing it. :)

1st SFOD-D G Squadron: SFOD-D is Delta Force, which along with DEVGRU, is the premier, highly secretive US special ops force. The G Squadron works alongside the assault teams, including direct involvement in black ops, reconnaissance, undercover operations, etc.

SAC: Special Activities Center is the division of the Central Intelligence Agency responsible for covert operations and paramilitary operations. They specialize in black ops, counter terrorism, target elimination, hostage rescue, etc. Operators are typically recruited from military special ops units.

Frogman: common nickname for a Navy SEAL.

DEVGRU: Naval Special Warfare Development Group, abbreviated as DEVGRU (DEVELOPMENT GROUp) and commonly known as SEAL Team Six. Along with Delta Force, they are the premier, US Tier 1 special ops force.

The Unit: nickname for SFOD-D, Delta Force

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Happy Monday!

"Where are they?"

Like usual, Whitlock rolls his eyes at my apparent lack of patience. "Just picked up the Mercedes on Rennweg."

With a couple of quick keystrokes, the bank of temporary screens he and Emmett set up in the hotel room blink to life. In the center, a small motorcade of slick black vehicles approaches an intersection right outside the Innere Stadt.

In the front SUV – a brand new boxy G-class – sits a pair of stern-faced bruisers. Aronov's big-ass sedan with heavily tinted windows comes next, followed by a second G-class with another pair of security guards. Like the ones in the front and the guys picked up on Platt's earlier surveillance, they're the real deal. The blond, pale-eyed fucker riding shotgun is openly sporting a matte black H&K MP5K subcompact.

It's a solid weapon, especially for close quarters. I can't really fault him there.

But it lets me know that Aronov doesn't give a fuck about even pretending to follow any kind of local laws.

"Any idea on what he's been up to?" I ask and then suck down the last gulp of some shitty Nespresso Emmett swears by. It tastes like wet dog to me.

"Looks like they came out of the Russian Embassy," Jasper replies, simultaneously swapping one of the other screens over to a recorded feed of a large, ivory-colored Neo-Renaissance palace. Functional, black iron fencing rings the building, contrasted by the gold, domed spires of the nearby cathedral rising in the background. "They were there for around an hour and a half. I'm working on who they were meeting."

I don't know how, but Whitlock's managed to gain access to Vienna's very intricate network of traffic and security cameras. He isn't a hacker... so he says, but his connections are excellent, and they go both wide and *deep*. More importantly, he's got that rare, *rare* innate gift for convincing people to do whatever the hell we want them to do. I mean, no one – *no one* – gets the Swiss to give up their clients, yet that's exactly what they did with Petrescu.

Let's just say that I'm glad he's on our side.

I also hope he's not been bargaining away any first-born children in exchange for this level of surveillance.

It's really that good.

As Aronov's entourage exits the embassy, one of his bruisers passes a thick, tan-colored envelope to the guard at the gate. As soon as the gate slams shut, the soldier pockets the envelope, turns on his heel, and then heads straight back into the embassy.

Interesting.

Stepping closer to the makeshift desk, I squint and try to make out the street sign as they turn off Rennweg onto some smaller side street. "Do we know where they're

heading now?"

Jasper clucks his tongue and clicks a tiny square, bringing up yet another camera and view. "Appears he's going back toward the Sacher. My source in the hotel tells me he's in the Butterfly Suite."

"Of course, he is." Several thousand a night's chump change for a guy like Aronov. "Hope he tips the staff at least."

One corner of Jasper's mouth tugs up. "Platt's people have been tracking a known entity out of Iran. Flew in two nights ago, about the time your charter landed in Bratislava. They think the initial meeting is today."

"*Shit*, just keep an eye on him. Anything else?"

Whitlock's fingers fly across the keyboard, and another one of the screens pop up, this one with rows and rows of times and dates. "Apparently, Aronov *really* likes opera."

My nose crinkles. "What?"

"He has tickets for tomorrow's night's premiere," he says. "Same private box as last week."

Opera is *not* my thing, but that doesn't mean I haven't sat through my share of screech-a-thons. Assholes like Aronov always like that shit, or at least pretend to. Seeing as how I like eliminating them, there you go.

"What's playing?" I ask, just hoping it's not fucking Wagner.

Jasper chuffs out a laugh. "Don Giovanni."

"Wonderful." Rolling my eyes, I glance over my shoulder to Alice, where she's sitting cross-legged on top of the very expensive gilt and glass coffee table positioned between a pair of fancy brocade couches. "Spooky, what do you think?"

Alice looks up from the inch-thick file on her lap. "I think this is some shit intel, that's what." She makes an ugly face and blows a chunk of violet highlighted hair out of her eyes. "Is this seriously all they have on this bastard?"

Leaving Jasper to his tracking, I slouch down into one of the matching brocade wingbacks and dry wash my face. "Apparently, or at least that's what they're willing to give us."

The responding sound she makes falls somewhere between a huff and a laugh. "*God*, no wonder."

I don't ask her what she means by that. They always say a picture is worth a thousand words, and Alice's expression says it all.

Instead, I tell her, "I sent Dayan a request earlier this morning, just to see what he can get on him. On Masen, too."

"Good." A slow, approving smile stretches Alice's face as she nods. "Eli's people at King Saul Boulevard always have excellent intel. Plus, that man's in love with you."

I laugh at that. "He's in love with any woman who can hit a target."

She snorts. "Okay, that's probably true. But still, he'll bend over backward for you."

"So," I say, quickly redirecting from *that* uncomfortable conversation. More tired than I like to admit, I lean forward to rest my elbows on my knees. "Aronov. Ideas?"

Alice sighs and slaps the file down on the glass in front of her. "I have no idea what *really* makes this motherfucker tick. At least not yet... And Masen's a fucking blank

slate. What we have on that asshole's been redacted to the point of uselessness." She makes another one of those huffing sounds. "You're going to need to get... a lot closer, especially if we want to figure out what the hell happened to Cullen."

Jasper's bored baritone pipes in. "Tomorrow night?"

I look over. "Can you get me tickets?"

Whitlock sends me a pissy, almost-baleful glare, like I just insulted both him and ten generations of his ancestors. Apparently, my question isn't even worthy of an answer.

Alice *tsks*. "Get a private box, something conspicuously pricey." She pauses. "And it needs to be close to Aronov's, but... not too close. Same level. If you can get one diagonal or across, that would be *perfect*."

"Consider it done," he says, and that little glare of his morphs into something else altogether when he nods to Alice.

Jesus, he's obvious. He would make a *terrible* field operator.

When I arch a brow, Alice waves me off. "Aronov needs to come to us. Anything else would be suspicious."

"Us?"

"You and Rosalie." Thumbing over to the as-yet silent blonde in the opposite chair, Alice's cheeks split into another one of those creepy little grins of hers. "She'll be the diversion. Bait, maybe."

Now it's Rosalie's turn to look surprised. "Excuse me?"

Still wearing that creepy grin, Alice rifles through the file and extracts a handful of stills. Laying them out across the glass, one by one, she says, "Look. What do you see?" Not waiting for either of us to respond, she jabs a finger at a triplet of women off to Aronov's side. They're all tall, leggy, and absolutely stunning. "You're a perfect fit for his... *collection*."

Rosalie gags. "Gross."

"Agreed." But that grin widens as she whips out another shot, this one older. "But see, while you look just like his little harem, with a tiny bit of work, Bella here... She looks like Aronov's *wife* – his long-dead and, it would appear, much *beloved* wife."

"Fuck."

Enjoying this way too much, Alice throws a hand at Rosalie's general person and then at me. "So, you'll get his attention... along with every other straight male's in the whole building, but B here..." Alice's eyes glitter. "When he sees her, he won't be able to stop himself."

Thirty hours later, an impeccably suited McCarty swings open my door, and I step out of the decked-out, jet black A8 he somehow procured on short notice. As I tuck my arm through Rosalie's, plastering on a sparkling smile that rivals the rhinestones in my dress, he leans in. "You got everything?"

I tug on the fucking gigantic diamonds dangling from my ear. Yet another McCarty special, they're 100% real and distracting enough that no one would ever notice the tiny, skin-colored tab in my ear canal. "Yeah, we're good."

He hands me my clutch. "As soon as you can, go to the second-floor ladies' room. In the last stall, in the usual hiding spot, you'll find your Glock."

"This fucking blows," Rosalie says. "Tell me again why I don't get a weapon."

I laugh. "You couldn't hide a pea in that thing."

See, as the *bait*, as Alice likes to say, Rosalie looks like a wet dream. In head-to-toe, skin-tight, blood-red silk, she's like a wealthy, real-life version of Jessica Rabbit. With more cleavage than I'd know what to do with, curves to kill for, and legs that go on for miles, there's no possible way Aronov won't notice her.

Hell, I'm a solid 95% on the straight end of the sexuality spectrum, but if she were to come on to me right now, I'm pretty sure I'd cave.

Emmett's practically drooling.

"Seriously, Bella," Rosalie grumbles through gritted teeth, still sporting a beatific smile to anyone watching. "After this, I'm never, ever wearing a corset again. How do women wear this shit? I can barely breathe, let alone eat."

All I can do is shrug and try not to gloat that the navy-nearly-black, floor-skimming ball gown Emmett delivered to my room hours ago has *a lot* more freedom of movement, along with a full skirt to hide the empty holster currently strapped to my inner thigh. I make a note to go straight to the second floor.

Hey, a woman's got to be prepared. And despite the yards of fabric I'm swimming in, frankly, I feel a little naked without a sidearm.

As we step away from the car toward the front entrance and the hundreds of other well-heeled men and women, Emmett shoots Rosalie a wink. "Looking good, darling."

"Shut up, asshole."

Lips twitching, he tips his head in mock deference. "Yes, ma'am."

By the time we make it through security and I retrieve my weapon, we have about twenty minutes until show time. As a tuxedoed usher escorts us to our seats – half-way goggling at Rosalie as we go – Jasper whispers in my earpiece, "Be aware, Aronov is already in place and Masen's with him. Four guards."

Shit.

"Did you hear about Aaron?" I ask.

Rosalie throws me a flirty smile. "Oh, yes, I heard. I can't wait to see him."

"He's not going to know what hit him."

As we step down into our box, it takes every bit of training and self-restraint I have not to look over to the box directly across the *Mittelloge*. Instead, we point to the orchestra down below and the ornate, gilded trim work and lighting. Like we planned, all the while, Rosalie preens like the self-absorbed socialite she's pretending to be.

And damn, if it doesn't work, too. As I surreptitiously take in the surrounding boxes and rows, I don't think there's a man in the building whose jaw's not hit the floor.

Reaching into my clutch, I pull out my cell and flip over to the app Whitlock loaded right before we left. When I click on the little red box and tap in my code, the screen blips twice and then a moment later, I can see everything. Literally, *everything*. It's like I'm standing on the stage and looking out into the audience.

Somehow that sneaky son of a bitch hijacked the opera house's private cameras.

I have to say, it's more than a little disconcerting to see myself on camera, but it tells me everything I want to know.

"What do you think?" Rosalie asks, peeking over. "It's a beautiful building, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," I say, tilting my cell over where she can see. I grin as I watch Aronov's eyes track Rosalie like a salivating dog. "The view is just superb."

Sitting on Aronov's right, Masen's smoother. Instead of staring, he's playing bored and watching something on his phone. The subtle shift of his shoulders gives him away, however, and without a doubt, now that I see him in the flesh, I know he's every bit the silent, waiting panther I named him to be.

He's going to be a fucking problem.

Rosalie flashes me a row of teeth. "Do you think we'll have any problems... seeing the show?"

I catch the exact moment when Aronov picks me out. Those dark, lascivious eyes of his suddenly shoot wide, almost like he's seen a ghost. His Adam's apple bobs, dipping beneath the crimson tie looping his neck, and his lips part in a small, surprised *O*.

I don't watch the rest of his reaction, nor do I wait to see if he says anything to Masen. Instead, wearing my best put-on smile, I slide my phone back into my bag and play my part, idly chatting away with my model of a partner. But I can feel that man's eyes on me, and when the second pair joins his, a tingle skates down my spine and pebbles my skin. "No, I don't think we'll have any problems at all."

"Good. I've not seen this one."

I grin. "You'll love the ending."

Right as the lights begin to dim, an usher appears with a shiny silver tray, topped with a pair of tall, slim crystal glasses. I'm certain that there's several hundred dollars' worth of champagne sitting on that tray.

"My ladies, if you please," the usher says in low, lightly accented English. When he inclines his head toward Aronov's box, I have to school the smirk that wants to creep into my expression. "Courtesy of the gentleman across the way."

On cue, Rosalie arches a perfectly sculpted brow, glances over to Aronov, and without breaking eye contact, picks up her glass and makes a show of slowly sipping the fine, bubbly wine. When she's done, her red lips spread in a playful smile, and her tongue swipes across her bottom lip, licking away an errant droplet. It's a bold, blatant move, charged with a level of sexual heat I didn't know she had in her.

Holy crap, she's good.

There's no possible way I can pull off that kind of thing. So, I do something else altogether, something I suspect will work even better.

Leaving the second flute where it sits, I shoot Aronov an annoyed, borderline-pissed off scowl, doing my damndest to ignore the probing, emerald-eyed stare of the man next to him, and wave the usher off. In a low purr that I'm sure they can read, I say, "Please tell the *gentleman* to kindly fuck off."

Instead of being offended, just like I'd anticipated, Aronov's eyes gleam with instant, unbridled interest, and his cheeks crease in amusement.

Beside him, leaning back in his seat and looking sexier than any traitor has the right to be, Masen just laughs.

But I've caught my fish.

Hook, line, and sinker.

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Notes:

- Last chapter, a reader made a great observation. If you add up the ages and experiences for some of the team members, it puts them starting their careers at ~18. This is correct! Bella (Sgt 1st Class), Rosalie (SSgt), and Emmett (SSgt) enlisted vs were commissioned. It's not uncommon for enlisted soldiers and Marines to go in right out of high school. Alice (Lt), on the other hand, was a commissioned officer and would have started right after completing her BS. You can assume she picked up the MS along the way.

- And yes, for those who read OPERATION: Break the Dawn, you might have noticed a familiar name mentioned in the chapter above. It's *possible* that a certain incorrigible secondary character from that fic may make a small cameo in this one at some point. Call it an alternate reality / crossover if you'd like, lol. After a convo on FB the other day, I just couldn't help myself ;)

Innere Stadt: the central 1st District in Vienna. This is the historical section where you'll find the Hofburg Imperial Palace, various museums, St. Stephen's, the Burgtheater, etc

Sacher: Hotel Sacher is a historic 5-star luxury hotel in the Innere Stadt. It's hosted presidents, royalty, etc. The Madame Butterfly Suite is the premier accommodation at the hotel and is very, *very* expensive.

H&K MP5K: Heckler and Koch 9x19mm parabellum submachine gun. The K variant is a shortened machine pistol and was designed for close quarters battle use by clandestine operations and special services.

Wiener Staatsoper: Vienna State Opera, located in the Innere Stadt of Vienna

Mittelloge: this is the center-back seating section in the Vienna State Opera, occupying the 2nd and 3rd levels. These are superb seats, as are the boxes on each side where Aronov and Bella are sitting.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

The first Act takes for-fucking-ever.

Despite what Whitlock may think, I *am* a patient person, and as we sit there in the dark, I take more than a little delight in the fact that we've rattled Aronov to the point where Whitlock's given up cluing me in every time the man's head swivels our way.

I don't need the warning, though, nor do I need to turn. After so many years, my built-in radar is a finely tuned instrument. My skin crawls every time that man's slick, oily gaze lands on me.

Masen's another matter, however, and that one's quieter, probing interest has my fingers twitching for the 9mm strapped to my thigh. The one time I caved, right in the middle of Leporello's famous aria, he didn't even pretend he wasn't watching. No, when I turned, he just leaned back, propping his elbow on his armrest, and stared, flat and perfectly emotionless.

The lights finally come up for intermission. Right as we stand, the same usher from before appears in our box.

"Dear ladies," he says. His voice wobbles, just a little, and the hands clasped in front of him grip just a little too tightly, enough that his knuckles stretch white. "Herr Aronov – the gentleman who sent the champagne earlier..." The poor guy's throat bobs, no doubt, recalling my not-so-polite reception and preparing for the worst. "He cordially invites you to join him in the tea salon for the extended intermission."

I steal a glance over to the other box, just in time to catch the back of Masen's wide, straight shoulders as he trails Aronov and his guards as they exit.

Sporting a wide, heart-stopping grin, Rosalie claps and all but moans out a response. "That sounds wonderful! We would love to."

Playing my part, I roll my eyes. My lips mash together in a bland, forced smile that makes the usher cringe and immediately spin on his heel. He's going to have whiplash by the time the night is over.

"Well, this ought to be fun," I say as we follow our host. I give Rosalie a playful tap with my elbow.

Still preening for all she's worth, she leans down and whispers in my ear, "I hate you so much right now."

I just laugh. "Don't look at me. Talk to *Alicia* when we get home."

"Oh, I will," she murmurs. "You can count on it. And McCarty's going to pay big time for this fucking dress."

In my earpiece, I catch a peal of high, tinkling laughter somewhere in the background, followed by Whitlock's low, pained sigh.

The tea salon is truly beautiful. Tucked in behind the Mittelloge, Franz Joseph's private room is a showpiece of architecture and art, with embroidered silk wall panels and ornate gold-plated elements gracing every plane. Contrasting the gold and ivory, bright Renaissance-style paintings decorate the ceiling. In the center panel, a woman, surrounded by angels and children, plays a golden lyre.

The second we step onto the bright red carpeting, Aronov turns away from a pair of dark-dressed men and flashes us a warm, welcoming grin.

"Ah, ladies," he croons, crossing the sparsely populated room in a handful of long, purposeful strides. Like the fine wool of his suit and the subtle elegance of the Patek Philippe watch circling his wrist, Aronov's English is impeccable. It's cultured, articulate, and touched by the barest hint of his native Russian tongue. "I am so very pleased that you would join me this evening."

He reaches Rosalie first and immediately grasps her hand, pressing his lips to her skin. He holds on a second too long in a ridiculous, archaic move. Unflappable as ever, Rosalie just gives him a slow, alluring, *amused* smile, like she's used to men falling all over themselves. Like she *expects* it.

"I am Mikhail Aronov." He's damned near purring. "But my friends call me Misha or simply Aro."

"Misha, then," Rosalie says, as if she's tasting his name. "I'm Rosalie."

Aronov's not stupid and he knows better than to kiss my hand. But like with Rosalie, he still holds on a beat too long, and as his chin dips, his eyes roam my face in a slow, repeating circuit. "And you are?"

"Isabella."

His cheeks crease. "Do you go by Bella or only Isabella?"

Giving him my best flat, polite smile, I tug my hand away. "I'm fine with either."

He makes a soft humming sound. "Very appropriate."

Like I haven't heard that bullshit before.

We speak for a few moments, mostly about the performance. It's a useless, shallow conversation, but it gives me time to watch the man's features and begin to learn his tells.

A subtle tap of his fingers brings a tray of wine.

The lift of his brow sends his minions scurrying away when they approach.

The barest tilt of his chin brings them back.

"Misha, would you mind if I took a moment to look around?" Rosalie asks. When she sips her wine, she makes a show of slowly sliding her fingers down the long column of her throat. If he's watching, Emmett has to be hyperventilating by now. "I love this room. It's breathtaking."

"Of course, my dear," Aronov says, again in that low, sensual purr. He motions over to one of the tall, dark-haired guards standing off to the side. Unlike the usual bruisers, this one exudes a certain level of elegance and refinement. You can barely even tell he's carrying. "Mitya would be happy to show you some of the artwork."

Rosalie gives Aronov's forearm a gentle squeeze. "You're a delight."

As she walks away and tucks her hand inside the crook of the other man's elbow, Aronov lets out a soft, rumbling chuckle. "Your friend is something else."

I'm impressed by his use of vernacular. Considering all the time Aronov's spent away from home, I suppose it shouldn't be surprising.

"Yes," I reply. "Rosalie can be a handful."

He grins. "She is a stunning creature... Trust me when I say that there are men the world over who would kill over a woman like that." As he hands me a glass of ruby-colored wine, his features turn serious and those dark eyes of his resume their non-stop roaming. "Yet I find I can't take my eyes off of you."

Jesus, Alice is never going to let me forget this.

I arch a brow as I taste the wine – a sumptuous, perfectly aged Pinot Noir, and yes, it's basically sex in a glass – and then say over the rim, "I'm not really looking for a date."

Aronov belts out a laugh. "Of course. I apologize if I come on... *strongly*." He flashes me a row of perfect, white teeth. "I rarely have a need for subtlety. It's even rarer that I'm told no."

There's a slight, veiled warning somewhere in there, but I pretend I don't notice it, and my expression thaws into something approaching real warmth. "Well, at least you're honest."

Before Aronov can reply, one of his men approaches and whispers in his ear. It's in Russian, which, unlike Romanian, *is* one of my languages, but the surrounding noise makes it impossible to decipher. Whatever it is causes an instant flash of irritation.

"Isabella, please do forgive me," Aronov says, and that split-second of irritation vanishes. "This won't take but a moment. If you need anything at all, Feliks..." He pauses, motioning to the guard who interrupted. "Will take care of it."

"Thank you, but I'm sure I'll be just fine." I keep my tone light. "I'm enjoying your wine and like Rosalie, I'm fascinated by the history of this room."

It takes a little under five minutes for my radar to ping.

And, boy, does it.

As I study yet another section of ornate scrollwork at the end of the room, a shadow falls by my side, and every nerve in my body flares to life. Unlike Aronov, Masen isn't a showman, and he's deathly quiet, especially with the muffling of the carpet. Let's just say it's a highly, *highly* uncomfortable sensation having an unknown predator at your back.

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself."

As expected, I flinch. "*God*, where did you come from?"

One hand tucked into his pocket and the other casually gripping a crystal tumbler, Masen follows my line of sight. "My apologies. I didn't mean to startle you."

Yeah, right.

That was exactly his intent.

"It's fine," I say, waving a haphazard hand. "I should pay closer attention to my surroundings."

One corner of Masen's mouth pulls up, almost like he's laughing at some inside joke. "No, the fault is mine... I was just making the observation that you don't seem to be enjoying this."

I shrug and take another drink of my very expensive wine. "I've never really liked opera."

"Then why did you come tonight?" he asks, and like his footfalls, the man's voice is quiet. At the same time, it's unexpectedly deep and, as much as I hate to admit, not at all unpleasant.

"Rose loves it." I make a face. "And she really wanted to see Mozart here in Vienna."

"You two are friends?"

Fuck, he's obvious.

Already imagining Emmett's reaction to that one, a laugh tumbles out of my mouth before I can stop it. Rosalie's going to *die* when I tell her about this.

"Why? What else would we be?" I ask, and because I want to fuck with him, my brows climb half-way to my hairline.

The other side of Masen's mouth lifts into an absurdly attractive smile, one that crinkles his emerald eyes enough that I think it's actually real, and then he offers his palms in mock surrender. "Fair enough."

In my periphery, I watch him go back and forth, studying both the room and me. And just like in the auditorium, he's not even bothering to pretend he's not.

For a long moment, I don't respond, and instead just let the silence between us stretch and swell.

According to Alice, there's an art to leveraging silence. Apply too much, and you lose your prey's interest. Too little, and you've wasted your time. But if you apply just the right amount at the right time, you'll have yourself a canary who can't stop singing.

Masen slugs back a finger of what looks to be scotch. "You know," he finally says. "If you were wanting to get Aro's attention, that little stunt with the champagne couldn't have been a better choice."

My shoulders shake at that. "No, thank you, that was *not* my intention... *at all*."

"No?" Now he's the one cocking a brow.

"No, I'm not looking for an attachment," I tell him. My nose crinkles. "Plus, he's probably a little too old for me."

"Probably." Masen eyes me for another long moment. When he tips his chin in a quick sign of agreement, the green in his eyes seems to deepen and warm. "I'm Edward, by the way."

I give him a hint of a smile. "Bella."

A few minutes later, Aronov reenters the room. Whatever he had to deal with is apparently done, and he's again all charm and oily slickness. He stops to speak with Rosalie and his man where they're standing at the opposite end of the room, and then his long stride targets me once more.

"Bella." The way he coos out my name makes me want to hurt him. "Again, my apologies for the interruption. I was so enjoying our conversation."

I plaster on another polite smile. "It's not a problem. I was just admiring the artwork, and your associate here took it upon himself to keep me entertained."

"Excellent." Aronov's eyes dart to Masen. "Your lovely friend, Rose, told me that you are both from the United States."

"We are."

"So, what drew you to Vienna?"

My polite smile morphs into something a little less forced. "This isn't our only stop. We're doing something of a tour."

Aronov taps his finger, calling for another tray of wine. "How wonderful!"

"We've been traveling for..." I make a show of thinking. "A little over three weeks now."

A tray magically appears, this time sporting a pair of wine glasses and another tumbler of scotch. Without bothering to ask, Aronov swaps out my glass for a fresh one and then takes the second. "Where do you go next?"

I buy myself a little time by taking a drink, and immediately, Whitlock's quiet whisper is there in my ear, "His pilot filed a flight plan to Florence. VolTerra's headquarters is near there. Tell him Rome. Keep it vague."

"Rome," I say, looking past his shoulder to Rosalie. In addition to Aronov's *Mitya*, she's managed to accumulate two more of his guards. "Although, we may decide to stop in Venice first. We don't really have a firm timeline or back-end."

"Tell me, Bella, how is it that you travel so much?"

While his questions are seemingly innocuous, this is more than small talk.

It's more like an interview.

"As much as I hate to admit..." Pink heat creeps into my cheeks, an effect that took me years to perfect on command, and I duck my head to emphasize it. "I don't really have any other commitments at the moment."

Aronov's eyes glitter, once again roving my face. "How so?"

"I'm... how do I say it..." I hesitate, taking another sip of my wine. "I'm a silent partner in my late father's business."

"What business is that?"

I wave a random hand. "I'm sure you've not heard of it. It's a small, niche market."

"Try me," Aronov says, chuckling at my scowl. "I'm a bit of a businessman myself."

Okay, buddy.

Let's go.

"Black Swan Armaments."

On my other side, Masen goes still in a way few can ever achieve.

See, while Aronov has likely heard of my late father's business, Masen definitely has. I'd bet my Petrescu paycheck he's played with their products firsthand.

BSA carbines and rifles really are second to none.

I should know, they're my weapons of choice, after all.

Nonetheless, my backstory is rock solid, half because it's mostly true, half because it's been built block by block over a decade by the best the CIA has to offer and then strengthened ten times over by the *very* best – aka Whitlock. If anyone goes looking for me, online or off, all they'll find is a vague facsimile of the real me: Charles Swan's only daughter, as dull as they come. My years in the Unit and in SAC are invisible.

When Aronov motions for me to continue, I add, "My father founded it with one of his old friends from the Army after they retired. BSA mostly deals in smaller government contracts, really only in the US. It's why most people don't really know about it."

Aronov is positively gleaming. "You say silent partner?"

"I retained a certain percentage of shares after he passed away. But I have no clue how to run a business, nor the interest in learning, so the board handles everything. I... just do my thing."

Also true, although I'm definitely no Bruce Wayne. The farm took about everything I had.

"How fascinating. And I certainly have heard of your father's company," he says. "Do you have any experience with its products?"

"Of course." My face splits in what might be the first genuine smile I've given this guy. "When I was at university, I used to shoot competitively. Needless to say, I was well supplied."

Lies are always best believed when they're grounded in truth.

Aronov edges closer. "It's uncommon to meet someone... so deadly." Those glittering eyes are dancing, amused because he sees nothing more than an intriguing kitten with kitten-claws, exactly what I want him to see. "Please tell me this was only for... diversion?"

I go right along, laughing with him. "My father insisted that I know how to defend myself, but it's certainly not anything I've ever had to use in practice. No..." My shoulders roll in a delicate shrug. "I just like shooting things."

"Excellent. A woman as beautiful as you should never be made a victim."

You got that right, asshole.

I shake my head. "No woman, *period*, should ever be made a victim." I give him a little wink, just for good measure.

"Indeed, not."

Rosalie appears right on cue, just as the opening strains of the orchestra chime, calling us back to our seats. "I believe it's time to head back?"

Aronov signals two of his men before turning to us. "I would love to take you both to dinner. May I call?"

I frown, while Rosalie gives him a blinding, megawatt smile. "Of course," she says, barreling over my piss-poor attempt at a protest. "Misha, we would love to."

"Perfect." Aronov strokes Rosalie's hand goodbye and kisses her on the cheek, but his eyes never leave mine. At my elbow, once again wearing that cool, emotionless mask, Masen stands still as a statue. "I look forward to getting to know you both."

We'll see about that.

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Notes:

Thank you for reading and double thanks to all of you lovely ladies who drop me a line! I love hearing from you! :)

A quick note on Russian names: most Russian names have standard diminutives or short forms, as well as pet names, which are often used by friends, family, and close acquaintances. They're formed by adding various suffixes, usually *-sha*, *-ka*, *-enka*, -

ochka, etc. Misha is the short form of Mikhael. Mishyenko would be an affectionate pet name. Similarly, Alexander becomes Sasha and then Sashenka. Dmitri becomes Dima or Mitya and then Dimochka. Women's names have similar short forms and pet names (e.g. Ekaterina, Katya, Katka, Katyusha, etc). Some names have several standard-ish forms and which one used may depend on context and how close one is to the person.

Franz Joseph: Emperor Franz Joseph I was the emperor when the Vienna State Opera was inaugurated (originally called Wiener Hofoper, or the Vienna Court Opera). The tea room or salon was the emperor's private room and is connected to the Mittelloge, which originally was the court ceremonial box.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

My morning run is *almost* enjoyable, at least compared to last night.

While not as bad as being sprawled out on top of a barn in the middle of the Carpathians, it's still cold as shit, especially when I hit the Donaukanal and turn down the promenade that follows the canal's winding path. A thin layer of gray-white fog blankets the water, and with every breath, I exhale clouds of silvery steam. But the air is fresh and clean, and the bite of it erases Aronov's lingering sliminess.

This early, the promenade is mostly empty, occupied by no more than a handful of other joggers. Somewhere around the midway point, I pass by two elderly men out for a stroll on the opposite bank, and I can't help but smile when one tugs on a bright pink leash, redirecting an ancient-looking Schnauzer when it darts toward a bin of trash. Here and there, men and women, all bundled up and bleary, hurry off to work or wherever else they're going.

All that's to say, that damned ginger sticks out like a sore thumb.

I've picked Masen up twice already. The first time, I caught him meandering down the sidewalk a block and a half from my hotel. Maybe a coincidence, likely not, but this second time seals it. As I cross into the northern end of Schwedenplatz, I spot that fucker standing right on top of the bridge, hands in his pockets, staring down at the promenade and watching my approach.

Playing my part, I keep my eyes fixed on the canal and pretend that I don't have a clue he's there. Maybe a quarter of a mile down, well past the bridge, I slow to a jog, then a walk, and finally stop at a small café right along the water. There's a smattering of empty tables just outside, along with one of those tall, gas-fed patio heaters. Blazing a bright, fiery red, the heater spits out a bubble of pleasant, comforting warmth.

As soon as the doorbell rings my arrival, a tall, dark-haired early twenty-something jumps up from behind the counter. Baby-faced and sporting the scraggly start of a beard, the guy's expression tells me he's not used to women like me popping in this time of day, but I'll give him credit. The surprise clears as fast as it appeared.

"*Guten Morgen.*"

"*Morgen,*" I reply. Huffing just a little harder than needed, I make a show of wiping my face and take a long, considering look at the handwritten menu on the wall. I'm not exactly adventurous, nor extravagant when it comes to my caffeine, so I settle on my usual morning round. "*Einen kleinen Kaffee, bitte.*"

"*Mit Milch?*" the guy asks, right as the door chimes behind me.

A beat later, a gust of cool, winter air hits the back of my neck, and that telltale tingle skates down my spine. My heart gives a subtle thump inside my rib cage.

And here we go.

"*Nein.*" Ignoring the lurking shadow at my back, I grin and shoot the kid behind the counter a playful wink. "*Schwarz wie mein Herz.*"

The kid belts out a loud, unexpected laugh and just shakes his head as he rings me up. "*Das macht vier Euro.*"

I reach for the bills stashed in the inside pocket of my leggings, but a quiet baritone stops me.

"Allow me," Masen says. Stepping up to the counter beside me, he smiles when I jerk and holds up a pair of fingers. "*Zwei, bitte.*"

As Masen hands the guy a larger bill, I blow out a slow, purposefully shaky breath and then cut him a pointed glare. "Do you make a habit of sneaking up on people, or is that just reserved for me?"

Masen's shoulders shake in silent laughter. "Mind if I join you?"

That's not an answer.

I'm not sure if it's really a question either.

"Do I have a choice?" Grabbing my coffee, I pivot toward the door and target the small tables just outside. Masen doesn't say a word as he follows me out, and when we settle at the table closest to the heater, we stare at each other for a long, still moment.

Like me and my standard all-black running attire, Masen's all dark this morning, too: dark, *dark* indigo jeans, black shirt, black coat. Coupled with the dull gray, winter sky behind him, the monochrome palette makes his eyes look like a forest at twilight. That hair of his is a mess, like he's been running his fingers through it too many times. He's skipped shaving, too. It makes me wonder if he even went to bed at all, but, fuck, if it's not a good look. I'll give him that.

"So..." I take a slow sip of my coffee. The kid's brew is strong, bitter, and scorching hot, more so than my usual. I love it and mentally tag the location for tomorrow. "Are you a stalking me?"

Masen's lips curve. "I can understand where you might think so, but no."

"I don't think I believe you."

He takes a drink, and when he winces at the bitterness, I want to laugh. "Alright," he says. His voice is low and almost maddeningly calm. "I thought I saw you exiting your hotel and then again a little way back along the canal. And now... here we are."

I don't ask him how he knows where I'm staying.

That's child's play.

Especially since we *wanted* Aronov to come looking.

"Okay, but just so you know..." When I wrap my cold fingers around the heat of my cup, I let out a soft hum of disapproval. "I *will* throw this on you if you try to kidnap me."

"Fair enough." Those lips curve even higher, and something in his dark eyes sparks to life. "No kidnapping... At least not today."

"You're disturbing."

Leaning back in his chair, Masen crosses an ankle over the opposite knee. "You're not the first to tell me that."

Taking another sip, I arch a brow. "Not helping your stalker case."

"I suppose not." Masen grins another of those absurdly attractive grins of his. When he shifts in the wrought iron chair, I catch the faint outline of a shoulder holster beneath the bulk of his jacket. No surprise there. "You're an early bird."

I shrug. "Most days."

"How often do you run?"

"Usually, five days a week. Sometimes more, sometimes less."

"That's quite a commitment." While his chin dips in acknowledgment and not once does he miss a remark, those eyes of his constantly move, from me to the surroundings, and then back to me again.

Like any good operative, I have absolutely no doubt that he knows exactly where the kid from inside currently stands – twenty yards behind us where he's swapping out a trash bag. There's no possible way he's not already catalogued the pair of forty-somethings in navy tracksuits a hundred yards away. And he's definitely logged the tiny old woman pushing the rickety cart over on the other bank. Then again, I think everyone on the promenade can hear the squeak of those wheels.

My shoulders roll in another lazy shrug, and I answer with the truth. "Not a big fan of the gym. Plus, running is efficient when it comes to calories." I pat my stomach and shoot him a not-so-pretend flash of teeth. "Helps fight off all that expensive wine."

Masen chuffs out a laugh, but I don't miss the way his gaze drops and then latches onto the hand still resting against my abdomen. "Still," he says after a too-long second. "I saw you when you went under the bridge. You're fast. How many miles do you typically go?"

It's a weird line of questioning.

"Between five and ten, depending on what else is going on." I check my wrist. "So, what are you doing out this early? Other than stalking me, of course." Waving a hand at his general direction, I add, "I don't think you're really dressed for a workout."

Masen takes another drink of his coffee, and this time he manages to suppress the wince. "Just walking. Getting a little fresh air."

Now I'm the one leaning back. "Okay, grandpa."

Another laugh, this one louder, tumbles out of his mouth, and it's an aggravatingly attractive sound. "Nah, I just don't like being stuck inside all the time. And I've always been a morning person."

Based on his prior *occupation*, that's probably not a lie, but it's certainly not why he's out *this* morning.

We're silent for a few long moments, and with each minute that passes, a kind of tension builds in the air. It's like a string tugging on my consciousness, willing me to look over. I don't, however. Instead, I follow the path of an incoming mallard and watch the splash as it skids across the frigid water. My lips twitch when it dunks its head.

When I finally give in and turn, it's only to find Masen openly staring.

Frankly, it's fucking unnerving.

I drain the last of my cup and ask, "What exactly do you do for a living?"

Masen hesitates for a fraction of a second. "It's complicated." A tiny crease appears between his brows, and his fingers curl around his cup handle. I only catch it because I'm watching. "Security. Consulting. Things like that."

"Ah," I say, already nodding. "You're Mr. Aronov's bodyguard."

"No."

That *no* comes out hard and immediate, hitting like a punch. There's something else in his expression, too, something equally emphatic but too minute and quick to interpret.

But apparently, I struck a nerve.

Interesting.

"Okay."

"I'm more of an advisor." Masen offers me an almost apologetic smile. "My background is pretty specific, but it affords me skills and expertise that can be difficult to obtain outside a handful of circles. So, I advise him on certain matters."

Hopefully, those matters don't include firebombing villages.

Or beheading CIA operatives.

If so, I'm going to have to take that pretty face of his out, right along with his boss's.

My nose crinkles. "That sounds... *vague*."

His fingers drum against the tabletop, but when his eyes meet mine, they're clear, probing, and just a little too intense for this particular conversation. "Because it is."

Right when I start to reply, a low buzz vibrates my thigh.

"Shit." Digging into the small, stretchy pocket on the right side of my leggings, I pull out my cell. "Sorry," I tell Masen. "I need to check and make sure it's not Rose."

"Of course."

When I tap on my messages, I can't stop my reaction, and my face splits in two.

Dayan: *Neshama, what have you gotten yourself into now? I have something for you. Call me as soon as you finish your run.*

I don't bother to respond and just shove my phone back into my pocket.

"Your friend, Rosalie?" Masen's brows climb his forehead.

"No, it's another friend of mine." Still grinning, my whole upper body shakes because I swear that man courts danger like a favorite lover. I can already hear that low, incorrigible purr. He's probably jealous that I'm getting to play. "He hates it when I run alone. Says there's too many creeps out there."

"He's right." Masen doesn't smile and that tinge of inexplicable hardness is back.

"Boyfriend?"

I really laugh at that.

When Masen goes to ask, I wave him off. "Not hardly. Eli's more like the friend you call when you're looking for trouble and want an accomplice."

"I see."

We're quiet for another few minutes, and again that tension starts to build. A cold wind whips across the canal, beating back the warmth from the patio heater at my back, and tiny specs of snow begin to fall. In the breeze, they dance and swirl. When they hit the black of Masen's jacket, they linger for just a second before melting into the wool.

Masen slugs back the rest of his coffee, and when he sets the cup back on its saucer, the porcelain clatters. It's jarring, too loud in the silence.

I glance over. "Were you sent to check me out?"

He doesn't answer immediately, but when he does, his voice is as soft as spun silk. "Do I need to?"

"You tell me."

Masen starts to say something else, but his lips mash together in a hard, unforgiving line, and he shakes his head. He abruptly stands and looks out across the water before finally turning back to me.

"Don't be surprised when he calls on you tonight. Whether you like it or not, you made quite an impression."

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Notes:

Thank you for reading, and for those in the US, have a great Thanksgiving week!

Regarding Dayan / Eli above, yep, that's El'azar from OPERATION: Break the Dawn. A couple of chapters ago, I mentioned I'd be bringing him in for small cameo appearances... because I love him, lol. Consider it an alternate reality / crossover / etc

Also, a few folks have asked if there will be an EPOV. No, at least it's not in the plan. We'll stick with Bella's head for this story. Makes it a little more mysterious that way ;)

German:

Guten Morgen: good morning

Einen kleinen Kaffee, bitte: a small coffee, please

Mit Milch: with milk

Schwarz wie mein Herz: black like my heart

Das macht vier Euro: it comes to four euros

Zwei, bitte: two, please

Hebrew (transliterated):

Neshama: term of affection, roughly darling

Donaukanal: or the Danube Canal is an arm of the Danube that runs through central Vienna. It has a promenade that runs along its banks and there are several cafes, restaurants, etc there.

Schwedenplatz: this is a square in central Vienna. It's right near the Donaukanal.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

"That's unexpected."

"How so?" I ask as I yank my fleece over my head. Chucking it across the back of the closest couch, I drop down into the wingback facing the door.

Sprawled out in the opposite chair, Alice flicks a hand. "That he'd confront you out in the open like that, at least this soon." She stares down at the dogeared, inch-thick file on the table between us, and her lips twist into a grimace. "It's pretty fucking bold."

Dry washing my face, I slouch back into the cushion and kick my feet up on the edge of the glass. I give it two minutes, tops, before McCarty has an aneurysm and yells at me. "Well, what do you think it means?"

"I don't know." Alice hums. "Did it feel like a warning?"

"Maybe." I shrug. "It definitely wasn't friendly." Replaying the exchange, I suck in a chest-full of air and slowly exhale. "But I'm not sure I'd call it a warning... Or if it was, it's not clear what he was warning me about."

Before Alice can respond, there's a loud grumble behind me, and a water bottle drops in my lap. "Did you grow up in a barn?" Emmett mutters, cutting me a hateful glare. As he skirts by, he swipes my feet off the glass, and when I laugh, he grunts in irritation. "Describe him."

"Masen?"

McCarty plops down next to Rosalie and leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "Yeah, what was he like? Body language. Tone. Shit like that."

"Quiet," I answer, almost immediately, and shove a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "And I don't mean he just doesn't make noise. *He's* quiet. As in, everything about him." My eyes catch on a painting across the room. It's a high-end reproduction of one of Klimt's flower gardens, framed in an antique gold canvas floater to match the room. Blues bleed into greens in a riot of color and thrown-down patterning, yet its effect is almost soothing. "Calm. Efficient. Measured. *Calculating.*"

"So, he's basically you with a dick." Emmett nods, as much to himself as to me. "He was hunting."

"I am *not* like that."

Still parked behind his bank of monitors, Whitlock snorts right as Rosalie barks out a laugh. "Yes, you are," she says, rolling her eyes when I scowl. "You can be damned near terrifying sometimes. It's one of your better qualities."

I flip her off, and she just laughs harder.

Alice makes another one of those humming sounds. "You said he reacted to being called Aronov's bodyguard."

"Definitely. He was quick to negate that assumption."

Alice's expression is unreadable, and her dark eyes churn. She taps a shiny black nail on her bottom lip. "And he reacted again when Eli texted?"

Ignoring Emmett's pointed glare, I kick my feet back up. "It wasn't as pronounced, but something was there. He may have just been annoyed by the interruption."

"Maybe."

When she doesn't say anything else, I look over to Whitlock. "You catch any hits?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he replies, sounding almost bored as he simultaneously pulls up one of the screens. "Early this morning, someone in the Sacher ran background checks on you and Rosalie both." His fingers fly across his keyboard. "They went through a VPN server out of Iceland, and it was hidden under multi-layer encryption, but it was a pretty standard search." Whitlock shakes his head like he's disappointed by their lack of finesse. "Nothing popped up we didn't want them to see."

"Good." I crack the cap on my water and chug, erasing the lingering taste of my earlier coffee by the canal. "Can you call up Dayan?"

"You got it."

Five minutes later, Whitlock's screen pulses bright blue. In its center sits a simple seal with a menorah in the middle, ringed by a thin frame and Hebrew text. The seal blinks, then disappears, replaced by dark, glittering eyes set in an all-too-familiar face.

The second he sees me hovering behind Whitlock, El'azar shoots me a wide, devilish grin. "Good morning, Beautiful."

My shoulders instantly shake at that low, suggestive purr. "*Boker tov* to you, too."

That grin of his widens like it always does when I speak his language. My accent is godawful, and we both know it.

"I have missed you and your mischief," he croons, almost pouting. "When are you coming to visit me?"

Leaning against the back of the couch, I shrug and then sigh. "Maybe after this job. After all this fucking snow, frankly, I could use a little warmth."

"I would be more than happy to show you some..." El'azar wags his shaggy brows. "*Heat*."

Behind me, there's a chorus of groans, and I want to kick myself for giving him such an obvious opening. Instead, I roll my eyes. "You're terrible, you know that?"

"What?" Eyes dancing, El'azar fists his hands to his heart with dramatic flair. "You wound me, *kapara*."

I swear this man delights in tormenting me.

"I know, but you love me anyway," I say. Impatient and way too tired to play, I wave him on. "*Yalla*, now spill."

El'azar *tsks*, but then let's out a low chuckle. "Always business with you Americans, but fine." His gaze abruptly narrows at something off screen, and he rattles off a curt, pissed-off command in Hebrew before turning back to me. "First, you should know that you have managed to insert yourself into a hornet's nest." He shakes his head at me like I'm five. "Truly, you have a *gift* for finding trouble."

Great.

But he's not exactly wrong.

"Yeah? What did you find?" I slug back the rest of my water, and when I glance over to the foyer and the absurdly extravagant vase of blood-red roses that arrived while I was

out, I frown. "Apparently, we have a dinner to go to, and I'd really, *really* like to know what these motherfuckers are up to before we go in."

Like the flip of a switch, that playful, flirtatious demeanor vanishes. In its place, the stern-faced, eagle-eyed Sayeret Matkal commander I met in the middle of a firefight over a decade ago stares back at me. Now in charge of one of the most secretive units within the Institute, he's basically Platt, but with an even longer leash and often far better intel.

Sometimes it's good to have scary friends.

At El'azar's unspoken direction, Whitlock pulls up a second screen. Tapping on a series of photos, he pauses on a long distance shot of a dark-haired fifty-something exiting a black sedan outside a familiar Baroque-style tan and red brick building. While he's sporting a finely fitted charcoal suit instead of the expected gray-green uniform, the guy moves with a long-time soldier's precision and focus.

"That's Aleksandr Markovsky."

I look back over to the video feed. "FSB?"

El'azar's chin dips once, and the angle highlights the pale, two-inch long scar that travels along his hairline and the faint scatter of discoloration under the strong, square line of his jaw. "He's moved up the ranks quickly. Came out of Spetsnaz. Made a name for himself during the last Chechen War." El'azar pauses, and there's no disguising the disgust written in every one of his handsome, olive features. "Rumors say he ordered repeated sarin attacks on civilian safe zones to intimidate the fighting forces. Schools, nursing homes, even hospitals."

"He sounds wonderful."

A second photo flickers across the screen, and this new guy's tall, muscular, and younger, maybe somewhere in his early forties. With tousled white-blond hair and ice-blue eyes, he's got the kind of charismatic good looks you only see out of Hollywood. Those symmetric features are hard, though, like they've been chiseled out of stone, and the swoon-worthy smile he's wearing is nowhere close to real.

"That one's a slippery devil," El'azar says. "Kaius Koshmarin. *Bratva*, although that's not common knowledge and those who know are smart enough to keep their mouths shut. He's now moving into politics, but they used to call him Caligula. You can guess why."

Behind me, I hear Emmett grumble under his breath. "This shit just keeps getting better and better."

Slipping out of her chair, Alice approaches the screens. "What's their connection to Aronov?"

"The usual. Power. Money." El'azar barks out another order to a subordinate off-screen. "Apparently, Markovsky is married to Aronov's sister, so there are familial ties between those two."

"What about Koshmarin?" she asks, tilting her head and frowning at the blond.

"It's unclear how or when exactly he linked up with Aronov and Markovsky, but with his *other* connections, we suspect he's the one handling the massive amounts of heroin they're exporting out of Afghanistan. Likely moving significant volumes of military-grade weapons in and out of there, as well."

Fan-fucking-tastic.

"What about VolTerra?" I ask. "How does Aronov's mining operations come into play?"

El'azar grabs a stack of files and pulls out a set of documents littered with highlighted text and columns of numbers. "Finances are murky," he says, studying a handwritten yellow sticky affixed to the top of the page. "Seems that much of the income routes through our friends in Zurich and various international tax havens." He looks up. "And as you're aware, many of their key holdings are located in... *challenged* locations."

"So, in other words..." I pause, just long enough to peer down at Whitlock, who's already pulled up the same set of documents, plus another file that neither Platt, nor El'azar had a hand in locating. These new scans are all in German, and every one of the addresses sit in Paradeplatz. Whitlock's nose wrinkles as he skims the file, and then he finishes my statement, "VolTerra is essentially a vast, sophisticated front with enough legitimacy and scale to make people ignore what else is going on."

"Exactly."

I shove off the couch and pace the length of the room. "What about the women and girls? What's the deal there?"

"It's a lucrative trade, increasingly so, and it's one that often travels with his other activities and associates." El'azar's jaw ticks. "But... it looks like it's more than just a financial play for Aronov."

"What do you mean?"

Stopping mid-stride when he doesn't immediately answer, I turn back to the bank of monitors right as Whitlock pulls up a series of gruesome images. Flashing across the screen, a dozen lifeless women in various states of undress lie on stained concrete floors, beaten, bloodied, and disfigured. Purple-black bruises litter thighs, arms, chests, and faces. Even the bottoms of their feet.

"*Neshama*, this man is very, *very* dangerous, and he has absolutely no moral compass. When he tires of someone or something, he throws it off like yesterday's garbage." El'azar's voice grates like shards of broken glass.

Another photo pops up. This one shows a pair of women, a blonde and a brunette, both young enough I'd still call them girls. Tall and thin, they're as gorgeous as any model, and even dead, it's clear these two were once someone's pampered pets. Like the others, they're a mess of bruises, welts, cuts, and blood. Blue-black handprints circle one girl's throat.

I have a feeling I know what's coming next.

Aronov's brand of evil is startlingly predictable.

"These two young ladies – university students from Prague – were once in his... coterie," El'azar says, and judging by the sharp furrow in his forehead and the percussive drum of his fingers against his desk, he's spitting mad. "Aronov played with them for a few months, and when he didn't want them anymore, instead of letting them go, he had one of his guards beat them for entertainment and then sold them off like cattle." His jaw clenches again. "They were found last week in a dumpster outside of Naples."

Now, I don't just *want* to hurt him.

I *will* hurt him.

My nails bite into the meat of my palms. When I slide back into place next to Alice, I glance down and realize I'm not the only one who wants this motherfucker's head. While Alice's expression is carefully neutral, almost detached, the hatred burning in her dark eyes is almost incandescent. When she looks over at me, we share a long moment of silent communication. Satisfied by whatever she sees in me, she gives me a short, succinct dip of her head.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I lean back against the couch once more. "Tell me about Masen."

El'azar chuffs and tosses the stack of files onto the desk beside him. "He's an interesting one."

"Do you know him?"

He gives me a pointed look. "No, not personally."

One brow climbs high because Eli knows *everyone*. "Would you tell me if you did?"

"Officially, no," El'azar says, flashing me a row of pretty white teeth. "Unofficially, of course, I would."

I nod. "Based on what you have on him, do you think he's compromised?"

For a moment, El'azar doesn't answer. Instead, he leans back in his chair and scrubs his face. "Indeterminate," he finally replies, and he's not happy about not knowing. "By all accounts Masen and Carlisle Cullen had a strong relationship. As a private contractor, Cullen was his CIA handler for over three years, ever since he left the Navy. It's very likely they worked together before that."

El'azar rifles through another stack of folders. When he picks up a file, I glimpse the telltale eagle and stars of the DoD on the cover, and it's all I can do not to laugh at the irony. Before I can school my amusement, he catches the twitch of my lips and gives me an impish, incorrigible smirk that makes even Whitlock snicker.

Going on like nothing at all is amiss, he says, "Intelligence places both in Afghanistan and later Syria at the same times. Iraq, as well. It's probable that Cullen and the CIA facilitated Masen's departure from the Navy so that he could run assignments... outside the normal channels." El'azar peeks up from the file. "As you're well aware, private contractors have certain operational and bureaucratic advantages that agencies such as the CIA..."

"And yours."

He grins. "And mine, like to employ."

"Yes, I'm aware," I reply, and this time it's my turn to smirk. "It pays better, too."

A low chuckle rumbles his chest before he continues. "The rest you heard from Platt. Masen was meant to infiltrate Aronov's organization, gather intel, and then eliminate the threat... But he stopped passing along information months ago and he's not responding to any attempts at contact."

McCarty pipes up from the couch. "What do ya'll have on Cullen's disappearance?"

"If that man is alive..." El'azar says. "It would be a miracle. The hotel room he disappeared from was a blood bath. DNA samples matched."

"Why no body?" Rosalie asks.

"They likely knew he was Platt's husband as well as CIA himself." El'azar shakes his head. "They're probably just fucking with her because they can and because it's amusing to them." He spits out a low curse in Hebrew. "I expect any day now that she will receive a box with his head. If he managed to survive and they have him, by now, I'm sure he wishes he had not."

Shit.

Rolling my neck, I let out a slow, tired breath as the tight vertebrae crunch and pop. "I don't believe in coincidences. You think Masen was directly involved?"

"I know little more than Platt. I can't tell you what game he plays. It is unclear if he is on their side, yours, or his own." El'azar shoves the file on top of the others. "But my people will continue digging, and whatever we find, I'll send to you as soon as possible, red tape be damned. I am *fully* supportive of you ending this demon's existence. Markovsky and Koshmarin, as well."

"*Todah rabah*. You're the best."

A slow, sly smile stretches his cheeks. "You are just now figuring this out?"

"Yeah, yeah," I say, biting back a huff. "You don't need me stroking your ego."

And... for the second time, I want to kick myself for giving him that kind of opening.

Again.

In the same damned conversation.

Only this round, El'azar doesn't take it, and instead, his lips mash together in a hard line and he turns as serious as death itself.

"Be careful, Bella. Don't make me send one of my *Kidon* teams in after you. You know that I will, and the EU tends to get pissy when I do that." Eyes abruptly twinkling, he snorts at his own statement and gives me a playful wink. "Well, at least when they finally figure it out."

"I will, don't worry." My face splits in two, and I wink right back and add, "Oh, and Eli, tell your wife I said hello."

Just as the screen blinks to black, a loud, boisterous guffaw answers me.

Staring at the mass of crimson flowers by the door, I arch my back and shoulders in a long, lazy stretch, and when I spin back toward the team, my grin turns into something a lot more feral.

Now, it's my turn to hunt.

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Notes:

A quick note on "Kaius Koshmarin"... Russian has no hard C, hence the spelling with a K. Interestingly, Caius is an alternate spelling to Gaius (see more on that and the reference to Caligula below). *Koshmar* means "nightmare" in Russian. So... the last name is a play on that.

Hebrew (transliterated):

Boker tov: good morning

Kapara: literally atonement, used like *neshama*, meaning approximately darling, as a term of endearment

Yalla: common phrase taken from Arabic, meaning, come on, let's go

Todah rabah: thank you

Bratva: Russian for brotherhood, a common name for the collective units comprising Russian organized crime or mafia

Caligula: or Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, was the third Roman emperor. Some sources paint him as a noble and moderate emperor. Others cite his cruelty, sadism, extravagance, and sexual perversion, basically presenting him as an insane tyrant

Chechen War: above is in reference to the Second Russian-Chechen War, which was an armed conflict in Chechnya and the border regions of the North Caucasus between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, fought between 1999 and 2009. Both sides have accused the opposing side of committing various war crimes including kidnapping, murder, hostage taking, looting, rape, and assorted other breaches of the laws of war

DoD: US Department of Defense, is the executive branch department charged with coordination and supervision of agencies and functions of the US government related to national security and the US Armed Forces. The CIA and FBI are not under the DoD, however. The CIA is independent, and the FBI is under the justice department

IDF: Israel Defense Forces, or Israel's military

Institute: refers to the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, or *Mossad*, which is Israel's national intelligence agency

Kidon: literally, bayonet or tip of the spear in Hebrew, this is the elite unit within the Mossad that *supposedly* handles enemy assassinations

Paradeplatz: this is the financial or banking district in Zurich, Switzerland

Sarin: or NATO designation GB, is a chemical warfare agent classified as a nerve agent. Less potent than VX but still highly toxic. Exposure can lead to death by suffocation within 10 minutes if an antidote is not administered

Sayeret Matkal: General Staff Reconnaissance Unit 269, or simply "The Unit", is the prime special forces unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It's an elite special operations unit much like the US's SFOD-D (Delta Force) or SEAL Team Six

Spetsnaz: this is an umbrella term for Russia's various special forces & special operations units

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

"Misha, how on earth did you manage this?"

Just like in the tea salon, Aronov turns immediately. His gaze pins Rosalie at once, raking down her curves without a hint of shame, and the harsh lines of his face melt into a sickeningly sweet expression I'd like to kick right off him. Abandoning his stony-faced guard, his long strides eat up the room. The moment Aronov reaches us, he clasps Rosalie's hand and presses his lips to her cheek.

"Beautiful Rose," he croons as his other hand falls to the flare of her hip, where long fingers spread to hold her in place. It's a proprietary touch, and like last time, he lingers too long. As his lips whisper against her skin, his eyes find mine, dark and penetrating. "You are an absolute *vision*."

I'm going to need a really hot shower after tonight, one of those that nearly burns your skin off.

But he's not wrong, at least not when it comes to Rosalie.

For tonight's dinner, Emmett's really outdone himself. As both bait and distraction, Rosalie is in one of those iconic bandage-style dresses with a low, *low* plunging neckline. The thing is fucking magic. Its fabric sculpts her body into the kind of sexy, dramatic hourglass you only see in the movies. Coupled with sky-high, fuck-me heels, long, blonde curls, and blood-red lips, you'd have to be dead not to notice her.

I'm pretty sure she's going to murder McCarty by the time this job is done.

Especially since I'm in kitten heels and another elegant, yet comfortable full-skirted cocktail dress, albeit knee length this go around.

"Bella," Aronov says, releasing Rosalie to move over to me. When he risks my scowl and kisses the back of my hand, I plaster on my best polite smile. It takes everything I have not to jerk away. "*Perfect*."

Without waiting for permission – or me – Rosalie's heels pop against the dark oak floor. Sashaying into the dining room, she aims for a round table draped in pristine white linen positioned in the very center.

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant is a picture of understated style and sophistication. Down in the belly of a local winery, the dining room is narrow and long, with hand-laid, rustic brick walls that curve and flow into an arched ceiling running its length. At one end, a fire crackles in a wide plaster fireplace, and at the other, dozens of barrels of fine, aged wine sit behind a wall of solid glass. Overhead, modern, geometric chandeliers cast warm, soft light.

Rosalie trails her fingertips along the back of one of the chairs and spins toward our host. "Please tell me you didn't reserve this entire room just for us." She says it with just the right amount of scandal, but then her lips curl into a slow, pleased smile.

"This is nothing for me." Strolling over like he owns the place, Aronov waves a haphazard hand and returns her smile, but his is darker, borderline predatory. "But I feel I should warn you that I don't share well," he adds, low and sensual, as he runs the pad of his thumb across Rosalie's bottom lip. His fingers slide to her hair and loop around one of the long blonde strands. "And I find myself wanting *all* of your attention. So... this just removes any potential distractions."

"Hmm." Playing her part even though she has to be gagging inside, Rosalie leans into his touch and skates her palm down the brushed wool lapel of his suit coat. "You're just full of pleasant surprises, aren't you?"

Fuck, she's good at this.

Aronov damn near purrs. "You have absolutely *no* idea, my dear."

A door snicks open behind us, but I don't bother to turn. I don't have to, because my internal radar goes off instantly, chiming like church bells, and I can feel the weight of dark green eyes the second they land on the bare skin of my back. The sensation is almost electric, like a sharp current setting the air on fire, and my entire body prickles in awareness.

Unlike the crisp rap of Aronov's Italian leather shoes, Masen's footfalls are silent, and he walks across the room with the unhurried, prowling gait of a lion on the Savanna.

"Ah, Edward, there you are," Aronov says, simultaneously signaling the waitstaff to begin to seat us. That slick, congenial mask slips, just a little, and his features narrow. "*Ty opozdal.*"

"I'm aware." Pulling out his own chair, Masen shrugs, and the movement stretches the dark fabric of his jacket. While his expression remains flat – disinterested almost – those ever-moving, jewel-colored eyes of his are bright and alive. I watch him silently clock each entry and exit, and I can't tell how much of that is just habit. "As always, your friends are long-winded."

"Indeed." Aronov chuckles and motions for another server to pour the wine. "Were they amenable to our proposal?"

"They were satisfied with the terms," Masen says, dipping his chin in a shallow nod. "Kaius' people will handle it from here."

"Excellent." Aronov gleams. "Gianna will set up time with him before the end of next week. I'll have her include Sasha, as well."

Across the table, Rosalie takes a slow sip of her wine – yet another sumptuous and perfectly aged red – and looks at me from beneath lowered lashes. I give her a small, bland smile back, something that reeks of boredom, and adjust one of the glittering sapphire chandeliers dangling from my ears, just enough to grab Whitlock's attention.

Almost immediately, there's a soft whisper in my ear. "I heard. Already working it."

"Good," Masen says to Aronov. When the server goes to pour his wine, he places his hand over the rim and asks for Macallan 21 instead. "It's a significant contract, and I doubt you want Jacques and Laurent going off on their own like last time."

"Agreed." Aronov's expression hardens, but then it clears just as quickly as he looks over to me. "Ah, my apologies, ladies."

I give Aronov another one of my polite, bored smiles. "It's fine. We're on vacation, but you have a business to run."

"That's no excuse for rudeness," he says, right as a pair of tuxedoed servers deliver a series of fancy tapas-style canapés. "Tell me, Bella, how are you enjoying Vienna?"

As he's speaking, I take a bite of what looks like some kind of dumpling filled with a dense, dark meat pudding. Blood puddings are well outside my normal fare, but the taste is rich and earthy, balanced by the delicacy of the dough.

"Oh, Vienna is..." My dull, well-mannered smile spreads into something a lot warmer. Just to test his reaction, I give him a playful, mischievous wink and then after a moment of pause, I whip out a poorly pronounced, "*Ochen' khorosho, spasibo.*"

There's a beat of absolute silence before Aronov throws his head back. A loud laugh tumbles out of his mouth, but on my other side, Masen goes ramrod stiff. Again, even though my focus stays trained on Aronov, Masen's stare digs down to my bones.

"I did not realize that you speak Russian." Aronov's accent is heavier, and his voice comes out gravelly, somewhere between a purr and a growl.

It's my turn to laugh now. "No, no. Not at all," I say, throwing up my hands in mock surrender. "That's half of my entire vocabulary." I laugh again and take a drink of my very expensive wine. "I also know *da*, *nyet*, and *blin*."

Aronov's eyes twinkle, and his shoulders shake with silent laughter. The laughter ceases, however, and those eyes roam my face, darkening when they stall on my mouth. "*Ya khochu slyshat', kak ty eto govorish'*," he murmurs. "*Kogda ya yebu tebe glotku*."

Wow.

It's a good thing that I rarely blush. It's even better that I somehow manage to lock down my expression, because the thought of his dick anywhere near my throat is absolutely revolting.

Really, this motherfucker is just *begging* for a bullet to the skull, and underneath the tablecloth, my fingers twitch for the 9mm strapped to my inner thigh.

In my ear, Whitlock whistles and whispers a low warning, "You can't kill him yet."

No shit, Sherlock.

But Whitlock's right, so instead of doing what I really want to do, I drag my fingers away from my weapon and pick out another bite-size sample of gastronomic perfection. This one looks like a poached quail egg with a truffle vinaigrette. "You know," I tell him, making a show of taking a bite. "I have no idea what you just said. I hope it was nice."

Aronov's cheeks crease. "Oh, yes, very nice. One day soon, I'll explain it to you."

Fucker.

In my periphery, I catch a slight tick ripple along the stern line of Masen's jaw, and then without hesitating, he slugs back fifty dollars' worth of Scotch.

The first true course – some variety of mussels and smoked eel – rolls out next, followed by a half dozen more, each paired with its own complementing wine. By the time the staff ushers in some kind of delicate fillet, my lips are buzzing, and it's not exactly an unpleasant sensation.

Rosalie hums around her fork and angles toward Aronov. "Misha, tell me something interesting about yourself."

He flashes her an indulgent grin. "I fear I am a very boring man," he says. Reaching over, he toys with her fingers before dragging his lips across her knuckles. "I do very boring things that wouldn't be at all interesting to a vibrant creature such as you."

Rolling her eyes, Rosalie leans forward and playfully traces the curve of his face with the tip of her nail. "I doubt that. You feel exciting to me." She winks at me. "Doesn't he, Bella?"

My brows climb. "Oh, definitely."

A quiet punch of air comes from my right. But on my left, whether he's oblivious to my sarcasm or I'm just better at hiding it than I thought, Aronov preens at the compliment.

Rosalie and Aronov continue their idle, flirty chatter through the next few courses while Masen and I sit silent sentinel. Masen's gaze slides to me constantly, and like before,

it's fucking unnerving. But of course, I play right along and smile when I catch him.

As the servers clear away the last savory course, Aronov says to Rosalie, "Isabella said that you plan to tour Italy after Vienna. Is that still the case?"

"I know we're supposed to go to Rome." Pausing for a second, Rosalie taps her chin and then glances over to me. "We were going somewhere else first. Venice, right?"

I nod. "That's what we'd talked about."

Aronov drains his wine. "You know, my primary residence is in Tuscany, right outside of Florence."

"Oh, I had no idea," Rosalie coos as she drapes her hand over top of his forearm to give it a little squeeze. "I've never been there, but I've heard it's beautiful."

"The countryside is breathtaking." Aronov rubs teasing circles on the inside of her wrist. "Especially in the winter... much more so than dreary Venice." He steals a glimpse at me before tucking a blonde ringlet behind Rosalie's ear. "I'll actually be there next week myself. I would love for you to join me there."

And that's Bingo.

That's the invitation we need.

Access to that motherfucker's fortress.

Blue eyes bright and shining, Rosalie claps her hands together. She looks almost orgasmic. "Oh, how wonderful! We would lo—"

Right on cue, I hum and make a sour face. "Rose..." I say, drawing her name out. "I don't know." I give her a pointed look. "We have plans."

Rosalie shoots me a pouty glare that would make Paris Hilton proud. "Bella, come on." It comes out like a petulant whine. "Don't be a prude."

My frown deepens. "We don't really kno—"

"Of course," Aronov interjects, slick and smooth and slimy. "You are a smart woman to be skeptical of strange men bearing invitations, but..." He pauses, staring at me like he's already stripped me down in his mind. "I am certain I can find some way to assuage your... *reticence*."

Taking a drink of wine – this one a light, fruity white that came with the fish – I pretend to think. "It's a very kind offer..." When I peek over to Masen, I might as well be looking at a blank wall. "Let us talk a little and then get back to you."

"Certainly." Flashing me a row of teeth, Aronov leans back in his chair. "Once you decide, I'll have one of my assistants arrange everything. My plane is here, so there's no need for you to book separate travel."

Of course, being the Oscar-worthy actress she's proving to be, Rosalie beams. "Bella, please. This will be so much more fun."

"We'll see, Rose."

Two hours into dinner, as we wait for the first dessert course, I stand and excuse myself. Before I can even ask the question, a tall, thin tuxedoed brunette gestures toward a long, narrow, all-brick hallway on the opposite end of the dining room. Following her direction, I make my way to a tastefully appointed ladies' room, complete with a formal sitting area and crystal light fixtures. The second the door swings shut and I realize I'm alone, every muscle in my body relaxes, and I let out a slow sigh.

"What are you seeing?" I ask, just above a whisper.

Whitlock comes back immediately, "Managed to trace the car Masen arrived in. Video feed shows it pulling out of a drive in Landstraße, not far from the Russian embassy, before coming straight to the restaurant. Working on locating the owner of the residence."

"Good," I say as I readjust one of the glittering pins holding up my hair. "Keep on it. Depending on who it is, McCarty may need to pay them a little visit before we leave."

"You got it." Whitlock snorts. "I can't believe that asshole said that to you. I also can't believe you didn't gut him on the spot. That was a fine show of restraint, Swan."

"It wasn't without effort," I mutter. "Also, while you're at it, see if you can figure out anything about this Jacques and Laurent, whoever they are."

"Will do."

Before I head back, I give myself a quick once-over in the wide, gilded mirror over the row of fancy, sculpted sinks. Even in the low light, my cheeks look a little too pink, an obvious effect of the wine, but it works for the image we're after. Satisfied, I swipe on a fresh layer of lipstick, plaster on my happy mask, and exit.

I make it all of about two steps before slamming into a solid wall of starched white cotton and black wool.

"Jesus!" I stumble backward, and when the rough texture of the brick behind me scrapes against my back, I spit out a curse. "You have to stop that shit."

"Sorry," Masen says, low and hushed, and his fingers find my elbow in automatic reflex. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Yeah, right.

I peer over his shoulder down the long hall. It's dark back in this part of the restaurant, and the soft, warm light filtering in from the mouth of the dining room at the end throws shadows against the brick. With Aronov reserving the entire place, it's deserted, but for the two of us.

Dragging my eyes up to his, I cock an arrogant brow. "Checking up on me?"

Masen's shoulders roll, but his irises burn like dark fire when they pin me. "Tell me, did you understand what Aro said to you earlier?"

Running my hands down the front of my dress, I erase non-existent wrinkles. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

His mouth flattens into a hard line. "Why did you come tonight?"

I shoot him a pissed off scowl. "Well, that's a loaded question."

Masen steps closer, crowding into my space and using his body like a wall. One palm claps against the brick above my head. He's too close, enough that when I take a breath, I taste the subtle, masculine aftershave lingering on his skin. The dim light plays shadow games across the angled planes of his face as he watches mine. "That's not an answer," he says.

"Fine." When I suck in another slow breath of heated air, the fabric of my dress catches on the wool of his jacket. "I'm here because I'm a *very* good friend."

His forehead creases. "What do you mean by that?"

"Rosalie is absolutely stunning. She's sweet, funny, and smart..." I shake my head and wrinkle my nose. "But, if it's not obvious, she makes *terrible* choices when it comes to men. She has a particular weakness for..."

One corner of Masen's mouth tugs up in what appears to be genuine amusement. "Rich, old men?"

Blowing out something in between a sigh and a laugh, I nod. "As I'm sure you can imagine, they tend to... *dote* on her, which is something she finds pleasant and entertaining."

"That's..."

"Look," I argue. "In any relationship, each party has to bring something to the table. For some, it's youth or beauty or intelligence." Shoving back a wayward strand of hair, I shrug. "For others, it's..."

That half-smile spreads into a grin, and the effect is startlingly attractive. "*Money. Power.*"

"Yes. And against all better judgment and my own recommendation to tell him to politely fuck off, Rosalie seems to find your boss charming."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"If each party has to bring something to the table, what about you?" That grin vanishes, replaced by something a lot harsher. I can almost hear his teeth grind. "I can tell you right now that Aro is certainly interested in what you have to offer."

I level him a flat, no-nonsense glare. "I'm not at that table."

"Are you sure?" Masen asks. When I don't answer, he chuckles. "So, then you're here as Rosalie's..." One brow climbs in question. "Wingman?"

Staring him dead in the eye, I push off the wall, and now it's my turn to crowd into *his* space. He doesn't move at all. "No," I pop back. "I'm here because I don't trust men who have entourages. Or men who have *security advisors*." I look directly at his rib cage, right where I know he's carrying. "Especially ones who carry weapons into 3-star Michelin restaurants."

A muscle jumps in Masen's cheek, but he doesn't make any effort to deny it.

"And I'm not about to let my best friend walk into something like... whatever *this* is... by herself."

There's a long, tense moment of silence before Masen answers, and when he does, his voice drops and roughens. "You think you can protect her?"

"*Try me.*"

Masen's lips curve into another one of those lop-sided smiles, like he has no idea what to make of me, which in all fairness, he probably doesn't. Like Aronov, his eyes search my face, but instead of disgusted, I feel fluttering tendrils of intrigue and fascination. It's a dangerous reaction.

"Yesterday morning," Masen says after a second. Always aware, he glances down the hall. "You asked if I was checking you out."

"I seem to recall something like that."

He chuffs. "Just so you know, I also ran a background check on you. It's standard protocol for anyone in Aro's circle."

"Okay, your point?" I don't even bother hiding my annoyance.

"Everything came back fine, of course... Absolutely *nothing* out of the ordinary or unexpected. But then I assume you knew that would be the case." Masen leans in even closer, so close I register the warmth of his breath, spicy from the Macallan. When I feel the soft brush of his mouth against the shell of my ear, my skin erupts in gooseflesh. "I still think you're hiding something. I'd like to know what that is."

Pulling back ever so slightly, I lift up on my toes and flatten my hand against the hard planes of his chest. Heat radiates through my palm, and beneath my fingertips, muscles tense and involuntarily flex. When I reply, my lips ghost over the faint, scratchy stubble along his jaw. "That makes two of us."

He stills. "Are you going to accept Aro's invitation?"

"What do you think?"

Ducking under his arm, I move toward the dining room. Before I even take a step, five fingers circle my bicep and jerk me back around. "I'd prefer not to see you get hurt."

I look at where he grips me and then his oh-so-pretty face. "Is that a threat?"

"No, it's not." He drops my arm and roughly shoves the same hand through his hair. His mouth opens, then snaps shut in a second of angry indecision. When I start to walk away again, his voice halts me. "Let's put it like this," he says, and there's something indecipherable in his tone. "Bad things tend to happen to people – especially women – who attach themselves to Aro."

We stare at each other for another long, still moment before I finally dip my head in acknowledgment. "Thank you for the warning," I tell him, softly, because frankly, I don't know what to think of this guy right now. "I'll take that under advisement."

I turn toward the dining room. When I look back over my shoulder, Masen hasn't moved an inch, and his hand still presses against the brick. If I didn't know better, I'd almost say those wide, straight shoulders of his sag, ever so slightly.

Masen's gaze lands on me one final time, and his last words come out barely above a whisper. "Bella, please see that you do."

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Notes:

In Russian, Sasha is the commonly used diminutive or short-form for Aleksandr, as in Aro's associate, Aleksandr Markovsky.

Jacques is French for James. French is spoken in many countries around the world, including several located in Africa.

At some fancy foodie restaurants, you may be served a dozen (or even more) courses. These are usually tiny dishes, like... a bite or two, often served on weird, artsy little plates and trays. The ingredient combinations for these dishes can be wild. Oftentimes, you simply order the fixed coursed menu vs individual courses. Some places don't even let you order at all... you eat whatever they feel like putting in front of you.

Russian (transliterated):

Ty opozdal: you're late

Ochen' khorosho, spasibo: very good, thank you

Ya khochu slyshat', kak ty eto govorish', kogda ya yebu tebe glotku: I want to hear you say it when I fuck your throat

Da: yes

Nyet: no

Blin: pancake (a guy I dated many, many moons ago used to say this instead of *blyad'*, which means fuck, when he was around his mom, lol. It's kind of like saying fudge)

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

By the time Rosalie steps through the door separating our suites, it's already half past noon.

"I'm going to rip that motherfucker's balls off."

Not bothering to get up from my lazy, full-couch sprawl, I pick my laptop off my stomach and blindly set it over on the coffee table. Mentally preparing myself for the inevitable barrage of sound, my head drops onto the arm, and I call over the backrest, "Who are you talking about?"

See, Rosalie isn't exactly the quietest of operatives. No, she tends to yell and clomp, especially when she's pissed off. Judging by the racket going on behind me, boy, is she pissed off.

Glass bottles clink as she rifles through the contents of my minifridge, and then a second later, there's a loud huff. "How is that even a question, Swan?"

I snort. "You want to de-ball a lot of people. How am I supposed to know who it is this time?"

When she comes around the corner, Rosalie cracks the cap of an amber bottle with some German name, takes a long pull, and plops down onto the brocade couch across from me. Scrubbed pink, her face is absent the layers of warpaint from the last night's dinner, and like me, she's now the picture of casual idleness with messy hair piled on top of her head and slouchy, rolled down sweatpants. The ancient, threadbare, olive drab t-shirt she's sporting looks suspiciously large and suspiciously familiar.

I'm not about to ask her why she's wearing McCarty's clothes.

Nope. No way, no how.

"Seriously," she says, frowning, before taking another long swig. "I bet I used every bit of the hot water to get the feel of that creep off me when we got in last night."

"You and me both." Grimacing, I force myself to sit up and tuck an ankle under the opposite thigh. "I think I'm going need to more soap."

"Or bleach."

As soon as Rosalie kicks her bare feet up on the table, a second door – this one on the opposite wall between my suite and the rest of the team – swings open. McCarty's head pops around the frame, immediately homing in on Rosalie's furniture faux pas, but unlike with me, he doesn't say a word to her. Instead, he just shoots her a wide, enthusiastic grin and brandishes a familiar brown and yellow paper bag. The smell of French fries and cheeseburgers instantly permeates the room.

After last night's bout of haute cuisine, it's absolutely mouthwatering.

Circling the couch, Emmett drops the bag onto the table, motions for Rosalie to scoot, and sits down beside her. "Thought you two might need a little palate cleanser."

"Fuck, yes," Rosalie says, damned near beaming. Before she starts tearing into the bag, she fishes her phone out of her hip pocket and chucks it over to me. "By the way, take a look at that shit."

"Already?" I ask, swiping her code. "That was fast."

Unknown: *My beautiful Rose, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed dinner last night. I can't stop thinking about you. I can show you so many wonders. You and Isabella must join me at my home next week.*

My face screws up into something ugly enough to make Rosalie bark out a loud, out of place laugh. "Right? That son of a bitch tells you he wants to fuck your mou—"

"Throat." My tone is as dry as the desert, and there's no stopping the roll of my eyes.

"Whatever." Rosalie laughs again and then shoves a handful of fries into her mouth. "One minute he tells you *that*, but the next he's sending me this sappy bullshit. This is *not* what Spooky said would go down."

"Yes, it is," Alice says, waltzing through the same adjoining door McCarty used moments ago. "Aronov's playing power games. That's what psychos like him do." Rummaging through the bag, she extracts a box of nuggets, tosses me a second one, and then parks on the other end of my couch. "He definitely meant what he said to B, but at the time, he was just trying to shock her into revealing she understood him." She flashes me a row of pearly teeth. "Good job not killing him, by the way."

I dunk a nugget into some European version of sweet and sour sauce and flip her Rosalie's phone. "So... how do we run this?"

As she reads the message, Alice makes a pleased humming sound. "Don't respond yet. Give it until... I don't know, sometime tonight," she finally replies, looking over to Rosalie. "When you do, toy with him. Let him think you're ready to give him *anything* he wants." Alice's eyes darken and narrow. "But hold off giving a firm yes on Italy until... at least tomorrow, maybe the day after."

"Got it."

Alice's cheeks spread in an abrupt grin, but this one matches the darkness of her eyes and just screams that fucking creepiness she wears too well. When she taps her chin with a shiny black nail and opens her mouth again, I already know I'm going to hate whatever comes out of it.

"Keep going with Bella being the hard ass. Make it seem like she wants nothing to do with him," Alice says, pausing just long enough to stare me dead in the eye. "Aronov's not used to being challenged, especially by a younger woman he really wants to fuck and own. For someone like him... this is *foreplay*. He's probably already jerking off just thinking about you."

Gross.

"Yeah, can we not talk about that right now?" I level Alice a flat, annoyed glare, pluck out another nugget, and wave it at her to make my point. "I'm trying to eat lunch."

A peal of high-pitched, soprano laughter answers me.

Thirty minutes later, Whitlock finally rolls in. Wrinkling his nose, he eyeballs the empty wrappers and boxes, and then grabs a bottle of sparkling water out of the fridge before dropping down into the other wingback.

Plum-gray shadows ring his hazel eyes, and judging by the creases in his normally pressed uniform of solid button-ups and jeans, Whitlock didn't sleep a lick last night. Shoving a hand through wild hair, he blows out a loud, tired sigh. "That property Masen visited before the restaurant looks to be used for meetings only. No one's living there, at least not that I can tell from surveillance."

"Can you tell how often it's used?"

Whitlock frowns. "Masen and Aronov both were there at least twice within the last week. A few others, underlings from the looks of them, have gone in and out, as well."

Chuckling my empty box and sauce into the bag, I ask, "Do you know who owns it?"

Whitlock's features twist into a weird mix of frustration and admiration. "It's currently listed under at least four layers of aliases, all internationals. Whoever set it up was a fucking pro."

"*Shit*," I mutter, eyeing the mass of crimson roses still sitting in my foyer by the entry. "Any leads?"

"A few, but nothing concrete." Jasper's shoulders curve, and with a harsh swipe of his face, he slumps back into the cushion. "I'm pretty sure we'll find it's tied to Koshmarin or some of his cohorts. I sent the info to Platt to see what her people can come up with. Dayan, too."

"What about the earlier meeting with that arms dealer out of Iran? Think this was related?"

"Hard to say." He shrugs. "Aronov's a busy guy. He plays on a lot of playgrounds."

My fingers drum a hard, fast rhythm against the armrest as I debate just how bold we want to be. We need info and we need it before we get on that fucking jet. I look across the table to McCarty. "You feel like doing some breaking and entering?"

Emmett's responding grin is positively feral, and a ripple of anticipation crawls across the muscled lines of his chest and shoulders. "Thought you'd never ask," he says. He thumbs over to Alice and then shoots Whitlock a sideways glance. "I'll take Spooky, and while we're there, we'll deposit a few of your fancy electronic toys."

Beside me, mimicking the larger man, Alice uncurls like the little pit viper she is, and her sprite-like features light up. "This should be *fun*."

Obviously, we have very different ideas of what constitutes *fun*.

Rosalie and I share a long moment of silent communication before I finally nod. "Okay, we just need to keep it quiet. See what you can find out... and don't kill anyone."

I don't miss the hard line of Whitlock's lips, but he shakes it off before anyone else notices. "I'll work on temporary bypasses for the security system and pull together the floorplans," he says. "Shouldn't take long at all."

McCarty's sharp gaze lands on me. "When are you thinking?"

"With Aronov and his entourage leaving soon, we don't really have the luxury of time or planning."

"How about tonight?"

I don't answer at first, and the hard drum of my fingers slows to a light, steady tap. Shoving off the couch, I pad over to the tall, east-facing windows. Through the thin sliver between the heavy curtains, I watch the steady flow of bundled-up people and passing cars. "I'll go out for a late-night run since I skipped this morning," I say after a moment, and a slow smile curves my lips when I turn. "I'm pretty sure I'll have an audience the second I step outside the hotel. That'll be a few less eyes for you to worry about and give us plausible deniability if needed."

At exactly nine, I tuck my phone into the side hip pocket of my leggings, pull a fleece band over my ears, and step under the warmly lit awning just outside the hotel. Like I'm not quite sure where to go, I take a quick look left and then right, and with a polite smile

at the doorman and another moment of feigned indecision, I head northwest, away from Landstraße and McCarty's target.

Like my morning runs, the winter air is frigid, and tiny pinpricks stab my lungs with each breath. When I exhale, clouds of silvery steam pour out of my mouth and swirl into the velvet sky above. Outside the main thoroughfares, it's darker and shadowy, too, even with the lamps and strings of shimmery lights that drape like canopies over some of the streets.

With the compact footprint of the Innere Stadt, I quickly pass by the stately, arched face of the Hofburg Imperial Palace. Buying myself a little extra distance and time, I cut into the adjacent Volksgarten to do a leisurely loop around the gardens. I do the same at the Rathauspark across the street before eventually going deeper into the residential and commercial neighborhoods further north.

I pick up my tail about the time I hit mile four.

As I turn onto a long stretch of buildings and apartments, I glimpse the lines of an older 3-Series. One square headlight glows dimmer than the other, and cancerous rust eats away at the black hood and fenders. It's his speed that gives him away, though. He's too slow – too cautious – especially since the streets are emptying fast.

I see him again when I turn a corner, and then once more two blocks later. This time, when he goes by, a streetlamp shines at just the right angle, aiming its light on an unfamiliar bearded chin hidden inside an oversized hood.

Fuck.

Not what I was hoping for.

And there's no way I can let this guy know I've made him.

My phone buzzes my hip, but now's not exactly the best time or place for me to stop.

Pretending I have no clue what's going on – no concept that I'm being followed or stalked – I keep running, maintaining the slower pace you'd expect from someone jogging at night in unfamiliar territory. When I take another corner, the street ahead is utterly empty. Not a single other person in sight. Thin layers of ice coat the handful of older vehicles parked along the curbs, and other than a few glowing windows here and there, the buildings on either side stand silent and dark.

I spot the BMW a hundred yards in front of me. Like the street, the car's now empty, too, and with each footfall taking me closer, every one of my senses goes on high alert. My heart thumps in a slow, steady rhythm, recognizing the start of the hunt, and my muscles coil for the strike.

A shadow dips into the mouth of an alley up ahead. I tag him at somewhere north of six-foot and packing around two-hundred twenty-five pounds of nothing but muscle. Even with the distance and the darkness, I can tell the guy moves like a fighter, like someone who likes to break faces for sport.

Twenty feet away from the alley, there's a rustle of fabric, and I pick up the glint of shiny steel.

Ten feet away, I take a deep breath.

Five.

A solid mass of muscle slams into me the second my shoe crosses the dip in the sidewalk.

Relaxing into the hit, I let his arms squeeze around me, and I flail like I'm supposed to as he drags me back into the narrow alley. As soon as we disappear between the

buildings, he throws me against the wall, and my back and head smack against the brick with a loud thump.

Before I can blink, a hard, meaty fist punches into my ribcage, followed by another in the center of my gut. I fold in half at that, making some kind of appropriately pained noise and plea.

Alright, so it's like that.

The guy grunts something unintelligible as he comes at me again, this time grabbing for my hair and aiming a fist at my face.

I duck, right before he can connect, and throw my forearms up in a rising block against the assault. Faster than he ever saw coming, I spin, ram my elbow into his nose, breaking it with a sickening crunch, and kick his kneecap in with my heel. When he howls and swings again, I dodge a second time and land a hard, staggering blow directly into his windpipe.

The guy instantly chokes and doubles over, but he's a brawler and he's been here before. He's up a second later, and this time, in his right, there's a wicked-looking serrated blade on the end of a pair of steel knuckles.

I have about two breaths to catalogue the man I'm fighting. My initial assessment on size was right. He's a big fucker and while he's slow and probably stupid, he knows how to cause damage with his body. Closely shorn head. Mangled left ear. Dark, squinty eyes that scream for my death. An array of scars and tattoos litter his throat, face, and hands, giving away his *Bratva* ties immediately. Blood oozes down his chin and into his beard from his broken nose, and when he smiles at me, crimson liquid frames his teeth.

He spits out a wad of blood and saliva and then takes a step toward me, growling a low, menacing, "*Ty, yobanaya blyad'.*"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, *a u tebya malen'kiy khuy.* Now let's go, motherfucker."

His blade sings through the air.

I throw up my forearm in another block, simultaneously jabbing a fast, hard right into his open side, and then like the good girl I am, I shove my knee straight into his groin. The guy buckles with a wheezy, high-pitched scream, but I don't back off. No, I hit him again and again, splintering his ribs in the process. He slices at me in a fit of blind, agonized rage. Pivoting, I catch his knife hand, twist, forcing his arm into an extension, and then slam the heel of my palm into the back side of his elbow to break it. The knuckle knife clatters to the pavement.

Grabbing him by the shoulders, I flip all two-hundred twenty-five pounds of him over my hip. Locking my ankles around his waist, I swing into position behind him and slide my arm under his throat in an iron-clad rear choke. Frantic, he scrabbles at my arm as I begin to squeeze, but I have neither the time nor the patience to choke him out. In a single lightning-fast move, I wrench his head up and to the left, snapping his spine and putting an end to this bullshit.

I stand with an aggravated huff. My ribs ache, my back aches, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a knot on the back of my head where I hit the brick. But at least I won't have any visible damage to explain away.

It takes me all of about thirty seconds to grab the body by the armpits and drag him behind a dumpster in the back of the alley. Noting the map of tats on his hands and knuckles, I take a couple of photos, just to compare when I get back, just to see who we're dealing with now.

Coming out of the alley, I feign nonchalance and peer up and down the empty street, listening for any hint that someone noticed our struggle. Like before, it's absolutely

silent. Satisfied, I pluck my cell phone out of my pocket and tap out a quick set of coordinates with a message to Whitlock.

Clean up needed on aisle 9.

Whitlock: *Are you fucking kidding me? I'm kind of busy right now. You know this.*

Tell whoever to bring a big bag.

Whitlock: *Unbelievable. Fine, I'll arrange it.*

I contemplate turning back to the hotel, but quash that thought as quick as it hit me. For one, it would be suspicious, but more importantly, the team still needs time at that target, and it looks like I'm a damned good diversion. Before I continue on, I scroll to the message that buzzed my hip right before Boris back there decided to play mortal combat.

The second my eyes hit the screen, my normally rock-steady heart slams against my sternum.

Unknown: *Out running again?*

Shit.

Muttering under my breath, I jog to the nearest cross-section and duck into a deep alcove in front of a dimly lit pharmacy. When I peek out onto the street, it's still just as quiet, just as dark. At the end, in front of a larger residence, a black and white tuxedo cat silently stalks some unseen prey from the top of a plastered wall. He pounces a beat later, only to jump back up onto the wall, mouse in tow.

Good kitty.

My breathing turns shallow as I stare down at the message again, but there's no way I can get away with ignoring it, so I tap a curt response.

Unknown: *Out running again?*

No.

Masen comes back almost immediately.

Unknown: *Liar.*

I have no fucking idea who sent Boris the Brawler, whether it was Aronov or Masen, or one of the other illustrious pieces on this fucked up chessboard. All I know is that Masen is far more dangerous prey than the asshole who just tried to kill me, but fine, I can play this game.

Stalking me again?

Unknown: *You want some company?*

Depends. Are you planning to kidnap me?

Unknown: *Maybe.*

Better think hard on that, buddy. I fight dirty.

Unknown: *That makes two of us.*

Unknown: *Meet me at the café on the promenade.*

It's closed.

Bring me Starbucks and I'll be there.

Unknown: *Done.*

As far away as I am, it takes me fifteen minutes just to make it over to the Donaukanal, more to get down to Schwedenplatz. By the time I hit the promenade, my lungs burn from the cold, but a faint sheen of sweat coats my face. Underneath my jacket and thermal, my skin is slick with it, and the ache in my ribcage starts to approach something close to actual pain.

I slow to a jog at the bridge, and when I see Masen's increasingly familiar black-on-black silhouette standing at the edge of the canal, I drop to a walk. He spots me instantly, but then again, it's not exactly a challenge. We're the only two people for at least two hundred yards.

Stopping a dozen feet away, I force my lungs and heart to calm and pretend to watch a low-slung barge sluice through the water.

"What do you want?" I ask.

Masen doesn't answer right away. Instead, his eyes, almost black in the dark, scan me from head to toe, not even bothering to hide the appraisal. What he sees, I have no idea, but after a moment, one arrogant brow cocks as he extends a white and green insulated cup. "Good enough?"

Nodding, I take the offering, and without another word, we make our way up to the café. The place is closed, just like I said it would be, but that doesn't bother him at all. Like he owns the place, Masen flicks the outdoor heater on and flips a pair of chairs off the closest tabletop.

"So," I say, sipping my coffee. Black, strong, and bitter, just like I like it, it's hot but no longer scorching. He had to wait for my arrival, longer than he anticipated, but I'm not sure what to do with that little tidbit just yet. Maybe it means he wasn't the one who wanted to kill me. Maybe not. "Are you going to tell me why we're here?"

Masen's wide shoulders roll in a lazy shrug. "Why not?"

"Bullshit."

"Maybe after living abroad, I miss talking to my fellow countrymen," he says. When he glances over, a small, wry smile plays across his lips. In the cold, those lips of his contrast darker against his skin. They look fuller, too, and for a brief moment, a chill that has nothing to do with the weather skates down my spine. "Maybe I find you interesting."

"Maybe I find *you* annoying," I pop back. That wry smile breaks into that stupidly attractive grin of his, and a laugh spills out of my mouth before I can stop it. "Why don't you tell me why you work for Mr. Aronov?"

"Why not?"

Taking another sip, I watch Masen, clocking the subtle creasing around his eyes. He's missed another day of shaving, and the stubble softens the angles of his face. His hair

is a mess, too, like he's been running his hands through it. "You don't seem like you like it."

He stares at me for just a second, and then gazes up at the sky. "Everyone's got to eat."

Interesting.

Behind me, the heater finally begins to ramp up, and the radiant heat comes off in slow, pulsing waves, buffeting the bare skin of my face and hands. Between it and the coffee, I feel like an ice block gradually melting. "Okay," I say, sliding my chair even closer to the bubble of delicious warmth. "What did you do before this?"

Across the table, Masen's watching me again, his expression as penetrating and indecipherable as ever. "I was in the Navy."

"Yeah?" I make a humming sound, like I'm having to mull it over. "How long were you in?"

"Little over twelve years," he says as he twists the lid off his own cup. A slight breeze coming off the water carries the aroma my way. It's sweet and creamy, nothing like the paint thinner Rosalie accuses me of drinking.

"Well, what did you *do* in the Navy? Were you on a boat?"

I have to admit, I'm proud of myself for that one. Sailors *hate* it when you call their ships boats.

Masen's eyes, lighter in the glow from the heater, gleam. "No, I wasn't assigned to a *ship*. I was on a SEAL team for most of those years, so I did a lot of... different things."

"In other words..." Playing my part, I shoot him a wink and then smirk. "You were kind of a bad ass."

Masen laughs at that, and I've heard enough of his laughs that I can tell it's a real one. "That might be a stretch," he answers after a second, folding his hands neatly in his lap. His voice drops, and this time there's something in his tone that I can't quite name. It's harder, maybe a little solemn. "But I have my moments every now and then."

Tilting my head, I hum again. "How does a Navy SEAL wind up working for a Russian oligarch? Isn't tha—"

"That's a long story," he cuts in. "Not a very interesting one either." Before I can ask or argue, he swaps gears on me, repeating the same question from last night in the hallway. "Are you planning to accept Aronov's invitation?"

My lips mash together. "We still haven't decided."

When Masen replies, this time his voice is soft, barely audible over the lapping water nearby. "I wish you wouldn't."

"You and me both," I say, draining my coffee. "But here we are."

"Here we are." Those shoulders of his dip into another almost-sag, and suddenly, he looks older than his thirty-five years. He looks like Jasper this afternoon. He looks *tired*.

When I echo my earlier query, my voice matches his. "Why did you contact me tonight?"

He looks over, and our eyes meet. "I wanted to."

I swallow. "Does your boss know where you are?"

One corner of his mouth pulls up, but this smile speaks of something akin to bitterness. "No, and it would be best to keep it that way."

"For you or for me?"

"Both."

Across the canal, a bell clangs, and I automatically turn to look. When I spin back in my chair, Masen's eyes once again find mine, and then they trail down the column of my throat where they fix on the pulse point just above the line of my jacket.

His brows slam down.

"What? What's wrong?" I ask, but the second I swipe my fingertips down my throat and slip through the viscous, crimson liquid sitting on top of my skin and slowly drying - blood from that motherfucker in the alley - I *know*.

I know that he knows.

"Bella, why are you bleeding?" The softness vanishes, and Masen's jaw ticks. "And while you're at it, why don't you tell me why you're favoring your left side."

Fuck.

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Notes:

Thank you for reading! I hope you're all having half as much fun reading as I am writing.

I'm trying to reply to everyone who reviews, especially since I know fanfiction alerts aren't working for some, but sometimes (like last chapter) I suck at it. And then when I'm replying, sometimes I lose track of who all I've replied to. Sorry if I've missed you or if you wound up getting a double response, lol. I do really love hearing from you and so enjoy seeing your reactions as we go. :)

Russian (transliterated):

Ty, yobanaya blyad': you fucking whore

A u tebya malen'kiy khuy: and you have a little dick

Landstraße: this is the third municipal district, which borders the Innere Stadt to the southeast. The Russian embassy is in this district

Hofburg: located in the centre of Vienna, this is the former principal imperial palace of the Habsburg dynasty

Volksgarten: a public park in the Innere Stadt. It's part of the Hofburg Palace

Rathauspark: park across the street from the *Rathaus* (or Town Hall)

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Happy Thursday!

I'll say it again.

Fuck.

I don't respond for a long moment and instead stare out across the canal, watching the lights from the city reflect and shimmer off the top of the water. Another barge creeps past, and as the seconds tick by, the silence between us stretches and swells, pressing against my senses until it feels like I'll choke from it. Despite the heat pulsing against my skin from the heater, ice crawls down my spine.

I want to kill Boris all over again for this shit.

"Are you going to answer?" Masen asks, and his voice drops, once more dangerously soft.

Dark and sleek, the panther is back, a silent, patient predator waiting to pounce.

"Fine," I say, slowly dragging my gaze away from the water and back to him. I keep my tone flat, my expression neutral, but let the grip on my empty cup tremble, just a little, just enough that someone with his training would instinctively pick it up. "Earlier this evening... I ran into a little *trouble*."

Masen stills. "What kind of *trouble*?"

Carefully setting my cup on the table, I offer him a small, vague smile and stare just to his right, another tiny avoidance that I'm banking on him registering as nerves peeking through the bravado. "There was a guy who thought I might be a good mark for a wallet."

"Tonight?" Masen's brows climb. "Before coming over here, you're telling me you were mugged?"

"No," I reply. When the next wave of heat hits my skin, I allow a minute flinch, and my teeth gnaw the inside of my cheek. "Not exactly."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Fiddling with my zipper, I let the silence do its magic. I swear Alice is going to love this shit because it's damn effective, too. As I stall, Masen's features harden – turn angry even – and his movements grow restless. His fingers drum against the side of his cup.

"I don't carry a wallet when I run," I say, right when Masen opens his mouth to ask again. "The guy wasn't happy about that, so... he knocked me around a little." I shrug and give him another small, hesitant smile. "He wasn't expecting me to hit back. I must have bloodied his nose right before I ran away."

Ramming a hand through his hair, Masen abruptly looks away and then lets out a slow, measured breath that fogs the winter air. The hard brace of his jaw rolls, and those eyes of his, dark and alive, constantly scan up and down the promenade, like he's watching for something, or someone.

It's the most unsettled I've seen him, in person or on surveillance.

And it's *fascinating*.

But I can't tell if he's pissed that I was attacked, or that his henchman failed.

After a minute, Masen's focus shifts back to me. "You okay to walk?"

"What?" I ask, watching him stand. "I ran over here, didn't I?"

Still searching the promenade, no doubt clocking every single living entity within range, Masen wavers, just for a second, and his mouth mashes into a harsh line. A beat later, he nods, almost as if to himself, and then he tilts his head toward the street and the lamplit city behind us. "Come with me."

"Yeah," I say, leveling him a pointed glare. When I cross my arms over my chest, he tracks the motion. "I don't think so."

Masen sighs, and the muscles beneath his jacket twitch in agitation. When he shifts, I can just make out the subtle twin holster lines sitting against his ribs. "Look," he answers back, softer, wearing another one of those unfathomable expressions of his. "I'm not going to hurt you."

No shit.

I might have to hurt him, though.

That's yet to be decided.

Slowly, I shove out of my chair, keeping to the other side of the table. "Where are we going?"

"Just need to go somewhere a little less public for this conversation." In a handful of quick, efficient moves, Masen flicks off the heater, flips the chairs back on top of the table, and tosses the empty cups into a nearby bin. "Plus, I need to make a call."

Fucking *jackpot*.

After second of feigned indecision, I dip my chin in reluctant agreement, and without another word, Masen gestures for me to follow.

We exit the promenade north of Schwedenplatz, only to cut across the sparse, dying traffic over to the mouth of the more touristy Rotenturmstraße. This late, the stores and shops are dark, having long-since shuttered their doors for the evening. Here and there, wide, street-facing displays dimly glow, and shadows dance across the sidewalks. Soft, mingled noises pour out of a handful of straggling restaurants, but even those are emptying fast.

Like the inexperienced civilian I'm pretending to be, my head swivels in confusion. "Where are we—"

"Just be patient," Masen murmurs. He ducks down when he says it, right next to my ear, even though his eyes stay on the street and buildings. Like on the promenade, they're moving in a non-stop scan of our surroundings. It takes real effort for me not to do the same. "It's not far."

"I—"

"Trust me."

Yeah, right, buddy.

Masen sets a clipped, purposeful pace and sticks close to the buildings and awnings. We pass the Starbucks a couple of blocks from the canal. At the corner, he slows and glances down, searching my face for what, I don't know. When his fingertips find the curve of my lower back, I startle, but I don't shake him off. Instead, I just arch a

questioning brow and let him to steer us onto a less trafficked perpendicular street. Two blocks down, we hang a right, then a left, and then after another short stretch, we turn back right.

We take a half dozen more turns, and as we go, the streets begin to narrow, with some cinching down to little more than cobblestone alleyways and walk-throughs. Tucked in between the buildings, it's dark back in here, too, but Masen doesn't slow, nor does he hesitate.

For my part, I have absolutely no idea where we're going, other than we're steadily following a winding, circuitous path southwest toward the center of the Innere Stadt. Ahead of us, climbing high above the rooflines, the massive, Gothic south tower of St. Stephen's looms larger with each passing minute.

Two streets off Stephansplatz, Masen halts under a ratty looking canopy covering the back service entry of some local boutique hotel. Before I can ask, he hits a buzzer on the side of the door, and a beat later, the lock clicks. Without wasting a moment, we slip inside.

I take one look at the scuffed-up tile and the long, poorly lit hallway in front of us and stop dead in my tracks. "Hold up," I mutter, gripping his sleeve. "This looks like something out of a horror movie."

Masen chuckles, and the light touch of his fingertips turns into a flattened palm against my lower back. "We're just passing through... Call it a short-cut if you'd like."

Interesting.

It's been a while since I've played these kinds of cloak and dagger games.

Sucking in a deep breath, I give him another cautious nod. "It better be. I don't want to have to punch you, too."

True to his word, we quickly traverse the vacant hallway – what looks to be at least half a block in length – and then immediately exit the hotel into a small, rectangular courtyard. Enclosed by tall brick and plaster buildings on all four sides, the space is private and quiet – almost intimate. Small planters and gardens line the hand-laid path cutting through the center. Heavy wrought iron benches, unused and coated in thin layers of gleaming ice, sit at each corner.

Just when I think we're going to stop, we don't. Masen doesn't even pause, and we cross the courtyard in a few short strides, targeting a large, ornately carved oak door going into the building across from the hotel. He taps a code into a keypad, and then he's leading me inside, straight to a set of stairs. We finally stop moving outside a plain, solid gray door on the fourth floor somewhere in the center of the building.

No kidding, my eyebrows are past my fleece headband at this point, and while I'm acting my part, I won't lie. My heart thumps inside my chest a little too fast, and my hands, freezing from our wintry trek, feel clammy.

This is risky – *too* risky – but it's too late to turn back now.

As soon as we walk in, Masen flips a bank of switches by the door, and I freeze.

Because whatever I was expecting, this *isn't* it.

Not at all.

Large, modern, bright, and cast in shades of sophisticated gray and white, I'm standing inside a luxury apartment, not some scummy hotel room. Without waiting for permission, I skirt a pair of gray leather sofas and pad across the dark, chevron-patterned wood floor to a set of tall, floor to ceiling windows, framed by thick, snow-white drapes. Judging by the view – a nearly unobstructed vista of the south tower, lit up and glowing in the dark – this place had to have cost a fortune.

"You live here?" I ask, not even trying to hide my disbelief. I'm not faking that either.

Masen peels off his jacket and chucks it across the back of a bar stool tucked underneath a massive marble island splitting the living room and adjacent kitchen. "I lease it."

I swear, Whitlock's going to have a coronary when I tell him about this place, that is, once he gets over me going off script.

Glancing up at the high trayed ceilings and the monochrome artwork decorating the walls, I ask, "How long?"

Now that we're finally out of the public eye, the harsh lines of Masen's face relax, and one corner of his mouth pulls up into a small lop-sided smile. "I've had it a few years."

The place is too neat, too clean. I can't find a speck of dust, yet little things – the wrinkles in the leather cushions, the knot in the shade pull, a pale, white orchid, alive and well, on the table by the window – tell me someone comes here every now and then. "But isn't Mr. Aronov and his..." I frown. "*Entourage* at the Hotel Sacher?"

Masen's eyes follow me as I circle the room and catalogue the small hints at his taste and personality. "Yes, that's where we're staying."

"That's... I'm confused." Stopping on a white, low-pile rug in the center of the room, I look at him then and note that he's not even bothering to hide the fact that he's armed. A pair of Glocks – not unlike mine – in matching black leather holsters sit strapped against his ribs, one on each side. "Why do you stay at the hotel if you have an apartment?"

Masen doesn't answer. Instead, he just grimaces, unclips his shoulder rig, and lays his weapons on the counter.

Walking over to the opposite end of the island, I touch the smooth, cool stone and trace my finger along a dark, jagged striation. "Does your boss know about this place?" I ask, although I'm pretty sure I already know.

Masen's eyes narrow as they find mine. "He's never asked."

"And you never volunteered." Filing that little tidbit away for later, I wave at the pair of 9mm's. "Is that normal for you? I mean, are you always... *armed*?"

A chuff of a laugh spills out. "Always."

"That's... *disturbing*."

He doesn't argue with me there. Pulling out a second bar stool, he just summons me to come over and sit, and as I ease into the surprisingly comfortable seat, those eyes of his resume their non-stop roaming of my face. "Now..." he says, stepping closer until my knees press against the fabric of his jeans. "Where did this guy hit you?"

I'm surprised that this is Masen's lead in, but there's no harm in some partial truth here.

"I didn't realize how few people would be out. I was passing by an alley west of the hotel. A man jumped out, grabbed me, and then threw me into a wall." I pause as Masen's focus shifts to my neck and head. "So yeah, I'll probably have a nasty headache tomorrow and maybe a few bruises on my back."

"What else?"

I run my palm down my left side and I want to smack myself for not hiding that better. "Before I could get out of the way, he managed to punch me in the ribs and then again in the stomach."

"Fuck." Masen mutters something else under his breath. It's low and angry, but otherwise unintelligible, and then he rakes his fingers through his hair in an increasingly familiar tell.

I shrug with put-on casualness. "I was able to get out of the way of most of it. It wasn't much worse than when I used to spar at my local gym."

"Did you see his face?"

"Not really." Huffing out a loud breath, I slump against the short backrest of the stool. "I mean, I was kind of busy trying to get away from him."

"What do you remember?" Masen presses, ignoring the bite in my sarcasm. "*Think.*"

I shoot Masen an irritated scowl, but nonetheless, I make a show of *thinking*, because I really want to know what the fuck he's going to do with this information. I even close my eyes, like I'm reimagining this horrific, *traumatic* experience. Honestly, I just want to laugh because Boris wasn't exactly a challenge. That fucker just got a couple of lucky shots because I needed to take him out away from prying eyes and cameras.

"He had a dark beard," I answer after a second. "But he was almost bald, or it was cut really close to the scalp, like some kind of skinhead."

"Height? Weight?"

Easing off the bar stool, I step into Masen's space when he doesn't move and eye him up and down. "He was a little shorter than you, I think, but... bulkier." I take in the black, long-sleeve fitted tee he's wearing, how his wide, athletic shoulders stretch the fabric before tapering down to a trim waist. So close, his abdomen is a veritable maze of sculpted dips and valleys. "Not as lean."

Masen nods. "Anything else?"

I sit back down and tap my finger on my bottom lip. It doesn't escape me that like before, Masen's gaze marks the movement, landing on my mouth. It's a weighty, almost electric sensation and not at all unpleasant. I will myself not to look at his in return. "He had some tattoos, but I couldn't tell what they were. They looked... rough. Like gang tats or something."

"Shit," he mutters. "Where were they?"

"On his neck and his hands. They were on his knuckles, too."

"*Goddamnit.*"

If I thought I was fascinated before, I'm now damned near mesmerized. Masen's beyond unsettled; he's *rattled*, which says a lot for someone like him.

Catching himself, he wheels away. "Did he say anything to you?"

"Not that I could understand." Shoving a stray ribbon of hair behind my ear, I shake my head. "Whatever he said wasn't in English or German."

"Okay..." Masen takes another step back and dry washes his face. "Give me a minute if you don't mind. I need to make a call. You want something to drink?"

"Water, if you have it."

Reaching into a sleek, stainless-steel refrigerator, he grabs an ice-cold bottle of mineral water and sets it on the marble in front of me before pacing into the living room. Less than a minute later, whoever he's calling picks up, and the two launch into the rapid, abbreviated exchange of two people who know each other well.

"Mitya, *privet. U menya k tebe bystryy vopros...*" Masen says as he ambles over to one of the windows. His Russian is excellent, better than mine, and he doesn't waste a second in getting to the point. "*Kaius... ty znayesh', v gorode?*"

"*Vcherashniy den'?*" he asks after a second, and then following another pause, he spits out a low curse. "Fuck."

This is the most I've heard him curse, and I'm not sure what exactly that means.

As they're talking, I crack the cap on my water and take a long drink, washing away the lingering bitterness from my coffee. Like I'm bored and just waiting for him to be done, I pull out my phone and tap a quick message to Whitlock.

The evil emperor's in town. Arrived yesterday.

Whitlock: *What? How do you know this? And where the fuck are you?*

I'll explain later

Grinning at my phone, I fake a couple of swipes and let my eyes scan down the screen, all the while listening to the man in the room beside me as he bullshits Aro's henchman and mines for information.

Staring out the window, Masen grunts and then laughs at something I can't hear. "*Nye, Nye... Ya prosto podumal, chto videl odnogo iz yego brat'yev.*"

I text Whitlock once more.

Also, be aware, the emperor brought soldiers with him. One down.

Whitlock: *Noted. Do you need a ride home?*

I'm good for now.

Whitlock: *By the way, that other game finished up. No injuries on the playing field.*

Good job.

Aro's Mitya – or Dmitri – says something. It's loud enough that I hear the rumble of his voice, but with the high ceilings and distance, the words are garbled and lost. In my periphery, I catch Masen stealing short, quick glances over at me as he lists out the same descriptors that I gave him earlier. "*Ya ne pomnyu yego imeni. Bol'shoy chelovek... Boroda... Tatuiovki.*"

Still toying with my phone, I hold my breath and strain to pick up Dmitri's next response. Barely audible, the name *Yakov* filters through Masen's speaker.

So, Boris the Brawler is actually Yakov the *Bratva* Enforcer.

Or was.

"*Nyet. Eto ne problema,*" Masen replies. He yanks back one of the drapes to survey the street below. "*Mne prosto bylo lyubopytno, pochemu on zdes'.*"

Only curious, huh?

Dmitri pops back with something else. Barking out another laugh, Masen makes his excuses for his absence from the hotel. His voice stays light and amused – almost like he's a little drunk – but his posture gives him away, though. Those shoulders of his are

too stiff, and his knuckles curl around the thick fabric of the curtain. "*V otele skuchno... Ya poshel v bar, chtoby vypit.*"

Hearing them winding down, I finally look up from my phone, only to find Masen openly staring at me from across the room as he speaks. "*Mozhet byt'... Nu ladno togda...*" he says, trailing off. He makes another non-committal humming sound before muttering a bored, "*Do zavtra,*" and ending the call.

Walking back over, Masen tosses his phone onto a table by one of the couches. When he props his elbows on the island and drops his forehead onto the heels of his palms, I quietly ask, "So, what was that about?"

"It's nothing."

I look over. "I don't know who you were talking to or what you were saying, but I think you know more than you're telling me, and I think I have the right to know."

Masen scrubs his face in tired aggravation. "If it were up to me, you and your friend would go on your merry way and never look back..."

"No ki—"

"But seeing as how I'm not getting my way," he cuts in, almost angry. "Remember how I told you bad things happened around Aro?"

I take a slow sip of my water. "Yeah?"

"This doesn't have Aro's fingerprints, but it does have those of one his... *associates.*"

I make an appropriately strangled noise. "What? But... *why?*"

Masen's shoulders roll, from fatigue, bitterness, or anger, or maybe some blend of all three. "Who knows. Some of these people like playing games – very dangerous games for anyone who gets sucked into them – just because they can and just to keep the others on edge..." His chin drops and his chest expands with a slow, deep breath. "These aren't good people, Bella."

I don't answer that one, nor do I ask him the obvious question: *If they're not good people, what the fuck are you doing with them?*

"Look," he says, angling toward me. Masen's voice goes soft enough that I lean forward without even realizing it. "Aro's dangerous, for sure, but if you ever find yourself alone in a room with a guy named Kaius... Tall, blond, somewhere around forty... You get out of there as fast as you can and then you come find me."

I swallow and reply in the same hushed tones. "It sounds like you know about that from personal experience."

Shadows darken his irises. When he doesn't reply, I clear my throat and say, "So... you're thinking the guy that tried to mug me works for this Kaius person. I still don't get why he'd come after me. I've never met these people."

"I don't know either, but the next time I see him, I'm going to find out."

What I don't tell him is that there's zero probability of that happening. Yakov's never spilling his secrets.

No, by now, that shitty old BMW is sitting in the middle of a chop shop, and Yakov's bouncing along the bottom of the Danube.

A few minutes later, Masen straightens and goes over to the sink. He returns a moment later, holding a plush white cloth, dampened and steaming.

"Take your jacket off." The words come out low and rough.

Shooting him a sideways glance, I comply without a word, peel my jacket off, and toss it on top of his. Masen steps in closer, and this time, his hips bump my knees and pry them apart so he can stand between them. Far more gently than I would have expected, he takes his time wiping Yakov's blood off my neck. As he works, his eyes, still the color of a forest at twilight, move down my face to my neck, where they flit down to where my thermal stretches across my chest.

When he's finished cleaning me off, Masen drops the cloth onto the counter and moves his hands to the back of my head. Slowly, giving me all the time in the world to pull away, his fingers slide into my hair and lightly probe my scalp for the knot I know he'll find. When his fingers dig into one of the tight muscles of my neck, I let out a tiny, unconscious noise of approval. His Adam's apple dips at the sound, and my stomach flutters, just a little, and my fingertips burn with the sudden, irrational urge to map all those pretty lines and valleys beneath his shirt.

It's such a dangerous reaction, and I know better than to act on it. I should back away and regain my footing and distance.

But I don't.

Instead, I watch him watch me, and my tongue sweeps across my bottom lip before I know what's happening.

"Your head's not too bad. Just some bruising." His Adam's apple bobs again. "Let me see your side."

I blink. "It's fine."

"I want to make sure you don't have any cracked ribs."

I don't respond immediately, but then my hand drops to the hem of my shirt of its own volition and against all better judgment, tugs my thermal up to bare my left side. Despite the comfortable temperature of Masen's apartment, my skin erupts in gooseflesh, and something warm and heavy settles low in my abdomen.

Masen's palm covers my entire side. His skin burns against mine, and like with my head, he's surprisingly gentle as he traces each one of my ribs. When his thumb skates along the bottom edge of my sport's bra, he asks, almost in a whisper. "Does that hurt?"

I swallow. "No, not really."

"Are you sure?"

When I look up, Masen's face is right there, so close that all I'd have to do is stretch and his mouth would be on mine. "I'm a little sore, but nothing feels broken."

A smile plays across his lips. "You've had that many broken bones?"

My cheeks crease. "You have no idea."

While he's finished with his examination, Masen doesn't pull away. No, his thumb continues its light, perusing trail along my ribs, eventually falling to frame the flare of my hip. This time, when his gaze lands on my mouth, it feels like gravity.

It feels like all the things I'm not supposed to be feeling.

I don't even register him leaning down, nor do I notice my thighs spreading to accommodate his proximity, nor the long fingers splayed out and lightly gripping the side of my throat. I just feel the soft, shallow pants of warm breath ghosting across my skin and the electric, almost effervescent charge in the bare inch of air between our mouths.

"Tell me to stop," he says, squeezing his eyes shut and dropping his forehead to mine.

I don't tell him to stop.

I don't want him to stop.

I don't want to stop this at all, but the last thing I need is to fall for a guy and then have to execute him.

Rosalie's going to give me such shit for this.

"Fuck." Before I can even open my mouth, Masen abruptly jerks away. Whether he's somehow read my mind or had his own little epiphany, I don't know. A small shudder rolls down his frame, and he exhales a shaky lung-full of air. His fingers slice through his hair as he mutters, half to me, half to himself, "What the hell am I doing?"

I can't answer that for him.

All I know is that everywhere he touched aches for him to do it again.

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Notes:

Recall from previous chapters, Kaius's Bratva nickname was Caligula, who was a sadistic, insane tyrant *emperor* of the Roman Empire.

Just for fun, *Yakov* is the Russian variant of the Hebrew name, Jacob (Ya'akov). The Spanish name, Santiago, derives from the same Hebrew name for Jacob via Sant Iago (Saint James). In canon, Santiago is one of the Volturi guards.

Russian (transliterated):

Privet. U menya k tebe bystryy vopros: Hey. I have a quick question for you.

Ty znayesh', v gorode?: Do you know if he's in the city

Vchershniy den': Yesterday

Nye, Nye... Ya prosto podumal, chto videl odnogo iz yego brat'yev: No, no, I just thought I saw one of his brothers [Recall *Bratva* means brotherhood and is the common name for Russian organized crime]

Ya ne pomnyu yego imeni. Bol'shoy chelovek... Boroda... Tatuirovki: I don't remember his name. Big guy. Beard. Tattoos

Nyet. Eto ne problema: No. It's no problem

Mne prosto bylo lyubopytno, pochemu on zdes: I was just curious why he's here

V otele skuchno... Ya poshel v bar, chtoby vypit': The hotel is boring. I went to a bar for a drink

Mozhet byt': Maybe

Nu ladno togda: Well, okay then

Do zavtra: See you tomorrow

Stephansplatz: a square at the center of Vienna. It is named after its most prominent building, the *Stephansdom*, or St. Stephen's Cathedral, which is Vienna's main Catholic cathedral and one of the tallest churches in the world. Construction on the cathedral was started in 1137, and it has been modified multiple times over the centuries, most notably in the 1300s. Style-wise, it's a blend of Romanesque and Gothic.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

"It's show time."

Jumping off the couch at the quiet baritone, I circle around to the bank of screens right as Whitlock slides through the adjoining suite door. He's across the room in a handful of brisk strides, and after snapping his laptop into the dock, his fingers fly across the keyboard. A few seconds later, the monitors blink to life.

Silent as a church mouse, Alice trails in a beat later and plops down in the chair next to Jasper. As we watch Aronov and his guards file through the ornate mahogany entry door of McCarty and Alice's target residence, she spins halfway around and shoots me a wide, Cheshire Cat grin.

"Hundred bucks says the library," she says, and when she bumps the man beside her, I don't miss the tiny smile that plays across Whitlock's lips as he continues to work.

"Why's that?" I ask.

"You'll see." She wags her brows and then nods to Whitlock. "Go ahead, cowboy, flip it over."

With a couple of keystrokes, the black and white checkerboard foyer on the center screen vanishes, and a palatial Victorian gentleman's room appears in its place. Rich, burlwood panels and dark oil paintings cover the walls. In the center, facing a large, intricately tiled fireplace, deep-cushioned sofas and chairs sit on top of strikingly complex parquet flooring. A massive, floor-to-ceiling bookcase occupies the far wall, filled with antique leather-bound books with gilded bindings. Twin, low-hanging chandeliers and coordinating table lamps cast the room in a warm, amber glow.

It's the poster child for heavy, masculine opulence, and it's not lost on me that Aronov's suffocating tastes run a solid one-hundred and eighty degrees away from Masen's light and modern bolt hole near Stephansplatz.

I'll take the bolt hole any day.

Dressed in his usual bespoke charcoal suit, Aronov crosses the room and parks in a leather armchair facing the entry. Unlike the congenial, flirtatious mask he wears with Rosalie and me, today his angled features are flinty and harsh, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that he's not a happy man.

"This isn't going to be pretty." Leaning back against the couch, I cross my arms over my chest as I watch Aronov's long, elegant fingers slowly curl around the armrests. "He's fucking *pissed*. Do we know who's he's meeting with?"

"We do," Whitlock replies, simultaneously pulling up a headshot of a man with a dark beard and matching short-cropped hair. Ash smudges his temples, putting him somewhere in his mid to late fifties. Stress lines crisscross his forehead, and a long, jagged scar cuts down his left cheek. "Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Ahmad Taeb."

"That's the arms dealer from before? The one Platt's been tracking?" I ask, studying the pale, almost eerie, gray-green eyes staring out of the screen.

"The very same. He's on a handful of Wanted lists, and Platt's people pin him as an ex-Quds Force commander. According to Dayan, it looks like he's still acting on their behalf." Whitlock grimaces. "I don't need to tell you who he's been shopping for."

"Wonderful." I peer down at Alice, where she's chewing on her thumbnail, and then back at the screens.

Aronov's guards take position against the walls. Two of them – Dmitri and Feliks – I recognize from the opera, as well as the past three nights of showy dinners and pricey drinks. Those two stand on either side of the entry in a display of casual idleness, but their features give them away. They're cold and hard, and the wary tension radiating throughout the room makes them twitchy.

A few moments later, Masen strolls in, hands in his pockets and clad in his signature uniform of dark-on-dark. Without saying a word, he targets the chair to Aronov's right and settles into a lazy sprawl. Unlike his boss and his men, Masen is a man untouched, silent and calm, completely unperturbed by the surroundings or the currents thickening the air.

If anything, he just looks bored.

But I know better than that.

Never mind the guards and the small arsenals slung across their chests. As I watch him hook an ankle over the opposite knee and slowly peruse the entry and the line of windows along the opposite wall, it's obvious that Masen's the dangerous one in this room.

Alice leans forward on her elbows. "Think Taeb is going to make it out of there?"

Whitlock and I answer in unison. "No."

On the screen, Aronov checks his wrist – by the face and fine leather band, yet another ridiculously expensive Patek Phillipe – and then looks over to Masen. "*Chto Sasha skazal?*"

"*Yemu plevat!*," Masen drawls, and a ghost of a smile teases his lips when he shrugs. "*Yest' drugiye kliyenty, kotoryye budut platit' i u kotorykh ne budet problem.*"

"*Khorosho.*"

Alice glances back at me. "What are they talking about?"

"I'm not sure," I tell her, watching Masen tuck his phone into the inside breast pocket of his leather jacket. "Aronov is asking about Sasha – Markovsky, I'm assuming – and Masen just told him Sasha doesn't give a shit and that there's other clients who'll pay and won't be a problem."

"Well, that doesn't sound good for our dealer, now does it?"

Before we can continue, right as the antique clock on the wall chimes ten, a trio of men walk into the room. Judging by the grizzled beards and dark-eyed glowers, the pair of bodyguards trailing Taeb are seasoned pros, but their gait and posture are off. Their movements are choppy and nervous, and the second they clear the entry and clock Aronov's men lining the walls, they might as well be fresh-faced recruits on their first field trip outside the wire.

"Mr. Taeb," Aronov purrs as he stands and extends his hand in greeting. Smiling that slick, oily smile of his, he motions to the couch beside him. "Thank you for joining us on such short notice."

Taeb's pale gaze laps the room, skipping over the guards, only to pause and narrow on Masen, before finally returning to Aronov. "Mr. Aronov," he says in heavily accented English. He ducks his head once in polite deference. "I was not expecting you personally."

"But of course." Aronov's smile widens, flashing the other man a row of pearly teeth. "I always make time for friends and clients such as yourself."

Aronov subtly taps his finger against the armrest of his chair to signal a black-suited attendant stationed by the door. Quick and efficient, the younger man sets out a traditional Persian spread of spiced black tea and pours from an ornate porcelain kettle into small, transparent *estekan* cups and saucers.

When the server offers Masen, uncaring of social niceties, he just waves him off, and I *almost* laugh at Aronov's split-second scowl.

"Maintaining relationships is *so* very important in our business," Aronov continues, eying Taeb over the delicate rim of his glass. He inhales a deep breath of aromatic steam and sighs before taking a sip. "Would you not agree?"

Taeb flinches. "Yes, certainly."

"Please, my friend," Aronov says, motioning to the service on the table. "Enjoy your tea."

In front of me, Alice lets out a low, almost-approving whistle. "Look at the body language. Listen to the pitch of his voice. That motherfucker's *good*," she mutters, glancing back at me. "He's like a cat toying with a mouse... B, Aronov's *enjoying* this."

"I know." My lips mash together. "What do you make of Masen?"

Alice shakes her head. "No clue, other than he's not really enthused about being there and he clearly gives no fucks if anyone knows it."

Whitlock looks over, but Alice bumps him again and answers before he can even open his mouth to ask. "Sure, the attitude might be annoying, but it's also probably why Aronov likes him." She taps her bottom lip. "He sees Masen as, if not an equal, close enough to it to keep around."

"Plus," I add. "He's *very* good at what he does."

One slim shoulder lifts, and Alice grins. "Well, there's that, too."

The next few minutes drag by in polite, stilted conversation before Aronov finally places his empty glass on the table beside him. He stares at the Iranian over steepled fingers.

"Now, Mr. Taeb," he says, utterly calm and low enough that Whitlock has to crank the amplification on the microphones. "I understand that you have some... *concerns* about the shipments."

"Your price is too high." Taeb's voice is loud and firm, but when he settles his cup on its saucer, his fingers give him away. They tremble, ever so slightly, just enough that the glass rattles in the silence.

Aronov's brows climb his forehead. "I must confess that I am confused." He draws out the words, and his head tilts as though he were genuinely intrigued. "The price was clear from the beginning. If the terms were not to your liking, why are such things surfacing only now?" His eyes turn dark and predatory, and he once again grips the armrests of his chair. Even with the distance and camera angle, I can see his knuckles stretch white.

"We—"

"After all," Aronov cuts in, almost crooning. "Half the inventory has been delivered, and it is my understanding that your... *clients* already have them in their possession." That smooth singsong turns gravelly, and Aronov's accent loses its aristocratic refinement. "In fact, *Mr. Taeb*, three days ago, I watched my rockets explode on the evening news."

Taeb jerks in his seat, but I'll give him credit. The man has a spine, and he fires back almost immediately. "Now that we have seen the weapons in action... it is clear they are inferior."

Aronov's jaw ticks. "You insult me."

"My apologies," Taeb says. His throat bobs beneath the collar of his oxford. "It is not my intention to offend."

The smile Aronov gives the other man is positively menacing. "Yet you have offended... *spectacularly*."

As the two men on the screen position and posture, I whisper to Whitlock. "Think there's any truth to what he's saying? That Aronov's selling second rate product?"

"No," Jasper murmurs back. "They probably thought they could coerce a lower price once they took possession. Standard procedure in the region. Saw that shit all the time back when I was working the Middle East desk." Shaking his head, Whitlock looks at the arms dealer with something almost akin to pity. "Taeb's minders set him up to take the hit once they realized Aronov doesn't fuck around like that."

"He's an idiot."

"Tell me about it."

Taeb's eyes flit to Masen and then back to Aronov. His lips curve. "I hear rumors that you have had some *challenges* with the Americans."

Aronov stills. "How interesting. Where might you have heard this rumor?"

"Come now, Mr. Aronov, we all have our sources." Taeb chuckles, but beneath the put-on show of humor and swagger, there's the unmistakable mark of fear.

I've heard it enough. It sounds like razor blades.

Taeb's forehead gleams with a heavy sheen of sweat. "I understand that they have sent several operatives against you."

"Yes, it is possible that we entertained some... unexpected visitors," Aronov replies, slick and smooth, as he crosses a leg over the opposite knee. "I assure you that their stay was brief, and of course, we made certain to return them to their rightful handlers, along with an appropriate message."

"|_"

"Did your rumors tell you this?" Aronov growls, low, threatening, and eerily cold. "Did they tell you how we desecrated their bodies while they still breathed? How they screamed and begged for death? Did your rumors and sources tell you how we *broke* them and took their tongues and later their heads?"

A shudder rolls down Taeb's frame before he can stop it. He swallows again but doesn't take the bait. Instead, squaring his shoulders, the arms dealer glares at Aronov and says something that grabs every thread of my attention. "I have also heard other rumors that your *visitors* were due to a hit you took out on Esme Platt's husband."

Masen's eyes flicker.

It's slight, an almost non-existent tell that only a handful of people would ever catch. I only see it because, not kidding, my stare is about to burn a hole through the screen. Without conscious direction, I grip the cushion against my back.

Waving a dismissive hand, Aronov laughs, and it's the quiet, chilling laugh of a psychopath. "Why would I do such a thing?" he asks. "If that were true, purposefully targeting the family of a very senior CIA official and a respected operative in his own right... that would be either very stupid, or very bold, don't you think?"

Taeb wipes his palms across his pant legs. "So, Carlisle Cullen is indeed dead then?"

A muscle jumps in Masen's cheek, another minute break in the passively bored facade.

"Come on," Whitlock mutters as he splits the screens, zooming in on each man. "Keep going. Tell us what we need to know."

When Aronov shoots the Iranian another one of those oily smiles, Taeb presses. "Do you not fear further retaliation? Do you actually believe that Platt will let you be?" He folds his hands neatly in his lap. "It would be such a shame for certain information to make it to their ears..." He shrugs. "But perhaps we could come to an understanding..."

Aronov arches a brow. "What kind of understanding would you propose?"

Taeb smiles. "Perhaps you would consider a... price adjustment for the order and for future arrangements. These are substantial transactions, and we have many, many opportunities to deploy your weapons."

"*Fucking A*," Alice mumbles, scrubbing her face. "He's stupid, but he's got balls."

Aronov throws his head back in moment of true amusement. "Mr. Taeb, I can assure you that the American CIA is of no concern whatsoever to me." Glancing over to Masen, he downright purrs. "Edward, what do you say? You know them better than I do, after all."

"No, they're of no consequence." The look Masen levels Taeb is flat and disinterested, just like his tone. He's so convincing that I almost miss the flickering flame of anger still in his eyes. "If Esme Platt or the CIA sends anyone else, they'll be dealt with, just like all the others."

A chill races down my spine.

"Now, unfortunately, I do have another meeting to attend," Aronov says as he stands. As he extends his hand to Taeb again, that congenial mask slides back into place, and he once more oozes charismatic charm and affability. "Perhaps we can work out a small... discount... just as friends." He gives the other man a friendly wink and then gestures to Masen. "My associate here will handle any further negotiations."

Without waiting for Taeb's response, Aronov steps toward the door. Halfway there, the rap of his heels ceases as he pauses. He turns back to Masen, and the curl of his lips is bone-chilling.

"Edward," he says, low and deathly cold. "*Ubey yego*."

Shit.

Aronov's men fall in behind him as he exits the room and then the residence itself. The moment the front door thumps shut, reverberating through the villa, Masen stands and walks over to a small, discreet wet bar hidden inside one of the wall panels. He grabs one of the crystal decanters and pours two fingers of what looks to be Scotch into a matching glass before offering the same to the man on the couch. "Care for something a little stronger than tea?"

Taeb shakes his head. The folded hands in his lap dry wash in nervous agitation. "Thank you, but I prefer to keep my wits."

A soft laugh spills off Masen's lips. "Then you shouldn't have come here today." He takes a drink, wincing at the burn. "You shouldn't have tried to renegotiate your contract."

Taeb's responding smile is as dry as the desert. "Mr. Masen, I think we both know that was not my decision to make." When Masen doesn't reply, Taeb continues. "You and I, we understand how the world works."

"Yes, we do." Leaning back against the wall panel, Masen studies the other man. His features betray absolutely nothing, yet I, as well as Taeb, know exactly what's coming next. "And your bosses made a grave mistake... one that Aro is willing to forgive once there has been recompense."

As Taeb opens his mouth to reply, Masen slugs back the rest of his Scotch. Crystal clatters against the bar as he slams down the glass. In a smooth, lightning-fast move, he reaches inside his leather jacket and whips out a sleek, black Glock, fitted with a modified cylindrical suppressor.

Masen's so quick that Taeb's guards don't even have time to blink.

Two pops shatter the silence.

There's a beat of mute surprise, and then crimson blooms appear dead center in each of their chests. As if in slow motion, one of the guards manages to lift his weapon, but another shot rips through the air and shreds his heart. The guard stumbles back and slides down the wall, leaving behind twin red streaks. Pools of blood seep onto the parquet flooring.

Masen spares Taeb a final, almost-bored glance before tapping him square between the eyes.

"*Fuck*, that's one cold son of a bitch," Whitlock says, as we watch Masen snap a photo of Taeb's body and type out a quick text. "Motherfucker's fast, too." He shoots me an inscrutable look. "As fast as you."

I give him a bland smile at the compliment and then peek down to Alice, who's studying Masen like he's some kind of perfect puzzle.

"What did you pick up from all that?" I ask, shoving away from the couch to pace the room. "Did I hear what I think I heard? Or rather, what I *didn't* hear?"

Alice's dark eyes churn and spark. "I think Masen has secrets."

"And?"

"I think Carlisle Cullen is still alive."

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Notes:

To all who celebrate, I hope you have a wonderful and merry Christmas. :)

Russian (transliterated):

Chto Sasha skazal?: What did Sasha say?

Yemu plevat': He doesn't care / he doesn't give a shit

Yest' drugiye kliyenty, kotoryye budut platit' i u kotorykh ne budet problem: There are other clients who will pay and who won't be a problem

Khorosho: Good

Ubey yego: Kill him

Quds Force: branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that specializes in unconventional warfare and intelligence operations. The organization is responsible for extraterritorial operations and supports non-state actors in many countries, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Yemeni Houthis, and Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. The United States and other countries have designated the IRGC and Quds Force as a Foreign Terrorist Organization

Estekan: small, transparent glasses used to serve (mostly) black tea in Iran. Tea is kind of a big deal in Iran, and Iranian tea culture is heavily influenced by the Russian and Central Asian tea cultures.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Happy New Year, my friends! Here's to 2022 being a better year for all.

At any point in time, the Schönbrunn Palace is absolutely stunning.

Bedecked in the finest, most sumptuous materials and furnishings the 18th century had to offer – and more gilt than anyone could ever need – Maria Theresa's summer home is a spectacular display of Rococo architecture and imperial opulence. Each of its seemingly endless rooms shines as its own separate marvel and theme. Fanciful Renaissance-style paintings decorate the ceilings. Portraits and dark oil hunting scenes adorn colorful, silk-paneled walls. Massive crystal and gold chandeliers hang overhead in every room, complemented by ornate floor lamps and sconces along the walls. Plush, jewel-toned sofas and settees sit atop exotic carpets and luxurious hand-laid walnut flooring.

In terms of sheer extravagance, this place puts Aronov's library in Landstraße in the shade.

Tonight, it's something else altogether. Coated in a fresh dusting of pure white snow, the palace and its grounds glitter like the brightest diamond.

Frankly, I'm a little stunned Aronov could pull this shit off.

Renting out an entire Michelin-rated restaurant is one thing. Privately reserving Vienna's – and maybe the country's – premier cultural attraction for the evening is on a whole different level.

"Are you good?" I ask as Rosalie threads her arm through mine.

Bracing against the frigid winter air, we quickly move across the cobblestones, away from the slick, black Mercedes that Aronov sent to pick us up, and target a wide, crimson, carpeted path leading to a glowing entry on the ground floor. A half dozen men in black suits – all armed to the teeth – mill around outside, watching the arrivals. As we approach, every single one of them straightens and takes notice.

See, like every other night, my partner in crime radiates a level of confident, unapologetic sexuality that few could come close to matching, and even fewer could ever afford. From the shimmering, strapless designer corset to the skin-tight leather pants to the red-soled, fuck-me heels, she's temptation incarnate.

And she knows it, too.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Tossing a mass of blonde curls over her shoulder, Rosalie gives me a scarlet-lipped smile. "You know how much I fucking *love* teetering around in these stupid shoes."

I snort at the sarcasm dripping in her voice and shrug. "Well, at least you're in pants this time."

"Oh, fuck you, Swan," she says through her teeth, simultaneously throwing a flirtatious little smile to one of Aronov's beefy security guards positioned just outside the gleaming double doors. She eyes my simpler, yet ridiculously expensive monochrome black ensemble – a sheer lace couture top that hugs my curves, paired with sleek, fitted trousers and sparkling strappy heels – and that little grin of hers turns blinding. "Unlike some people, I can't even bend over." Rosalie leans down to whisper in my ear. "I have

on two layers of Spanx – *two* – and McCarty still had to help me get into this shit. Do you know how embarrassing that was?"

I laugh at that and then give her a playful wink. "Yeah, like that wasn't by design."

Pinching the inside of my arm, Rosalie shoots me a hateful glare, right as a low baritone rumbles in my earpiece. Of course, that just makes me laugh harder.

As soon as we pass Aronov's bruise by the door and step inside the impressive square-shaped foyer with its high painted ceilings, a pale, blond tuxedoed twenty-something immediately greets us in lightly accented English. "Ms. Swan and Ms. Hale," he says with a slight bow of his head. "Herr Aronov extends the warmest of welcomes to you this evening. He has specifically requested that you be escorted directly to the Gallery, so if you please, follow me."

Declining the offered elevator, we ascend a wide, intricate stone staircase to the main floor, and then the blond leads us through a maze of dazzling sitting rooms and galleries. Judging by the lights and lack of ropes or barriers, it looks like nothing is off limits tonight. Here and there, I catch the hum of voices, but it's when we cross the bold red carpeting and pass by the towering portraits and paintings decorating the Hall of Ceremonies that I nudge Rosalie.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" I murmur, smiling and acting like I'm pointing at the gilt stucco and superb rocaille work instead of the quartet of well-heeled, dark-haired fifty-somethings chatting by the window. The men's stone-faced bodyguards stand off to the side.

"Oh, yes," Rosalie says back, taking my lead and dragging me away from our escort to examine a massive oil on canvas. As I turn, I pick up two more men at the opposite end of the room, and I have to school my expression when I catch Markovsky's charcoal suit and stern, shrewd features. I glance away a split second before his dark-eyed gaze lands on us.

Adjusting one of my earrings – yet another pair of twinkling diamond chandeliers that draws the eye away from the tiny skin-colored tab in my ear canal – I throw Rosalie another fake grin and lean in even closer. "It's like a fucking who's who of Europe's wealthy underground."

Whitlock's low whistle answers me. "You're not wrong. Working the security cameras now, but I can already tell you Koshmarin is there, too, as well as several other major players." I can just make out the lightning-fast clacking of Whitlock's keyboard. "You both need to be *very* careful. There's a lot of potential violence in that place right now."

Rosalie rolls her eyes and with a shake of her head, she pulls me back toward our escort, who, to his credit, patiently waits for us in the center of the room. He's probably used to flakey rich people by now, but I still give the poor guy an apologetic smile.

A few minutes later, after another couple of diversions to catalogue Aronov's illustrious guest list, we step into the Great Gallery. With its grand crystal mirrors opposite tall windows, cream and gold adornments, and vibrant frescoed ceilings, the hall itself is a work of art. And like any good king, our target holds court beneath a magnificent gilt chandelier in the very center.

"And here we go," Rosalie mutters under her breath, simultaneously throwing up a mask of sultry enticement before he can turn. Pulling away from our escort – and me – she weaves through the smattering of suits and shiny dresses and saunters over to Aronov, where he's conversing with a pair of men I don't recognize.

With a neat, tidy haircut, conservative attire, and a slick, too-easy smile, I pin the swarthy man on the right as somewhere in his forties and likely some kind of businessman. The other one – tall, muscled, and with lazily spiked, dirty blond hair – is something else, however. On the side of that one's neck, a set of black curving lines peek out of the collar of his jacket. More lines and images cover the backs of his

hands, and based on the mottled scarring along his jaw and throat, I have no doubt he's earned every one of those markings.

Regardless, they're the ones who give Rosalie away.

As she approaches, their eyes trail to Aronov's right, homing in on the sway of her hips like every other male in the room.

"Misha, darling," Rosalie purrs, right as he spins to greet her.

Aronov's cheeks crease in instant delight, and when she runs her blood-red nails from the top of his shoulder down his arm, in what's turning out to be his signature move, he catches her hand and brings her knuckles to his mouth.

"My beautiful, beautiful Rose," he says, abandoning his conversation and snaking his arm around her waist like the shining trophy she's pretending to be. "I am so pleased you could join me this evening."

"I've missed you." Rosalie's voice is throaty, seductive, and just a little pouty. And because she's a fucking pro at this, she ups the ante. Her baby blue eyes glint with mischief as she steps in closer and presses her lips to his in a soft, wet, suckling kiss.

I *almost* gag on her behalf – a reaction echoed in my earpiece by McCarty's low, annoyed huff – but *damn*, if Aronov doesn't respond. I swear, I can see the shudder roll down his spine from here.

"*Mmm*, I see that," Aronov growls back, staring her up and down like he's ready to strip her down right then and there. He gives himself a little shake before glancing over his shoulder and targeting me with unerring accuracy. As I make my way across the room to join them, his features gleam in stark, open appreciation.

"Isabella."

"Misha." When I use the diminutive, familiar form of his name, something dark and possessive slides into Aronov's expression. Wearing my most courteous smile, I let him plant a lingering kiss on my cheek. Unlike with Rosalie, thankfully he keeps his groping to himself and settles for lightly resting his fingertips against the small of my back.

A quick round of introductions tells me that the slick, too-easy smile belongs to Alex Retzos, who, according to Aronov runs a vast shipping and real estate conglomerate out of Athens. Mr. Prison Tats is apparently Jovan Dobroschi. I don't miss Aronov's conspicuous dance around Dobroschi's profession, and it takes everything I have not to punch the guy in the throat when Whitlock's quiet whisper tells me he runs one of the Albanian clans' interests in Prague and is wanted for trafficking underage girls and at least half a dozen suspected murders.

Wonderful.

Just a pile of fucking wonderful.

A few minutes into our polite conversation, Retzos shoots Rosalie a suggestive wink. "Aro here tells me that you and Isabella are touring Europe. How are you enjoying your travels?"

"Oh, we've had a ball," she coos, flashing the Greek a warm, inviting smile that makes his mouth go slack in return. "Vienna has been... amazing." Playing it for all she's worth, Rosalie gives Aronov's bicep a squeeze and trails her forefinger down the fine wool lapel of his jacket. "I can't wait to visit your home in Tuscany."

Aronov preens like a peacock, and while he looks at Rosalie, those fingertips resting against my back turn into a flattened palm. His thumb brushes up and down my spine. "My dear, the pleasure will be *all* mine, I assure you."

"I am sure it will." Retzos chuckles, and it's a deep, warm, not-unpleasant sound that makes it easy to forget he's responsible for billions in trafficked heroin and military-grade weapons. "If you ladies grow tired of this old man, give me a call. My yacht is currently sitting off Mykonos and feeling very, *very* lonely."

Aronov throws his head back and laughs. "Are we comparing boats now, Alex?"

After another few minutes of idle chitchat and banter, my internal alarm rings like a bell when Dobroshi turns to Retzos. Like we're not there at all – like we're nothing more than Aronov's usual mindless, *disposable* arm candy – he says to the other man, "What is the latest on the shipment from Gwadar?"

Retzos nods, and that easy-going affability fades into something a lot more ruthless. "It departed last week on schedule. My people tell me there were no issues whatsoever from the Port."

"Expected arrival?"

"The containers should arrive into Rotterdam late next week. Each is electronically tagged and coded for tracking," Retzos replies. "We do not anticipate any problems at all. Our people are already in place, and the Customs inspectors have already been taken care of."

"Excellent."

Aronov's voice drops as he looks over to Mr. Prison Tats. "You have buyers lined up?"

The fact that these three are having *this* conversation in the middle of a semi-crowded room says a lot about exactly who's here and what kind power Aronov wields. That Aronov is now willing to have it directly in front of Rosalie and me says something else, and it's either very good... or very, *very* bad for us.

Either way, we've hit a fucking goldmine.

"A fourth will come to me in Prague like we planned," Dobroshi says as he plucks a crystal flute off the tray that comes around. He slugs back its entire contents. "The remaining amount will split between London, Amsterdam, and Paris."

"Distribution?"

Dobroshi chuffs. "Kaius and I spoke earlier tonight. His people are set to handle inland routes like usual. Once we take possession, we will take care of additional allocations."

"Very good." Aronov's roaming thumb creeps to the center of my back, sliding across the delicate lace. When he realizes I don't have a thing on under this flimsy top, and that whatever *assets* I have are simply hidden by the strategic design of the fabric, his lips curve. "This is a... substantial transaction. Let me know if you run into any challenges."

"Of course." Dobroshi's responding smile turns dark and sly. "I heard you had some recent troubles with the Iranians," he says. "I also hear Taeb has disappeared."

"There are no problems. Taeb was a fool and was managed accordingly." Aronov tsks. "Our clients in Tehran have a much better understanding of our operation now." Aronov's palm skims down my back, falling to my waistband, where his fingers slip just beneath. He uses the leverage to tug me in closer, and I swear, I can't *wait* until I get to cut this motherfucker's hands off. "In fact," he goes on, oblivious to my irritation. "They've requested new supplies of *Tochkas* and *Iskanders*, just as a show of... *friendship*."

Dobroshi's shoulders shake.

My internal radar abruptly pings again, and as they continue their conversation, a bevy of chills that has nothing to do with the temperature of the room skates across my skin.

I don't have to spin around to know who's watching me.

No, I can *feel* that pair of scorching, emerald green eyes drilling into my back, anchoring on Aronov's hand tucked into my clothing.

I pick up Masen's black-on-black silhouette moving at the edges of my periphery. When I finally turn, pretending to look around for the server with the wine, I catch him by one of the tall windows, where he's accumulated a trio of young, leggy Eastern European blondes so gorgeous they could easily pass for models.

Two of them – a light honey-haired bombshell sporting a distinct sulk and a radiant platinum blonde that could be *Snegurochka* herself – I instantly recognize from Platt's earlier surveillance shots. As lovely as they are in their shiny sequins and barely-there chiffon, the second they look over at Rosalie and then me, they might as well be slinging daggers.

Then again, I can't say too much about that.

When *Snegurochka* places a manicured hand on Masen's forearm in undeniable invitation, a spark of incandescent anger threads through my veins. It's irrational and stupid, and I need to get my head out of my ass and in the fucking game. Nonetheless, I *almost* laugh when his smile shutters into a grimace as he gently waves her off.

The woman replies with a petulant, "Edward, *no pochemu?*" but Masen's already gone, disappearing into the crowd like the ghost he is.

Retzos and Dobroschi meander off a few moments later, replaced by yet another pair of equally shittastic dark-suited, stern-faced *associates*. Murmuring a polite excuse about freshening up and wanting to see a few of the galleries, I weasel my way out of Aronov's grasp.

I can tell the fucker isn't exactly pleased by my exit, but when I take a play from Rosalie's book and lick the tip of my tongue across my lower lip, he warms right back up.

"Don't make me chase you," he says. "I promise you, I will win."

Ignoring both his trailing eyes and the not-so-subtle warning in his words and voice, I slowly make my way across the Gallery and wander into the creams and golds of the empty Rosa Rooms in the western wing. Idyllic pastoral scenes of mountains and rivers decorate the walls, offset by bold, red Baroque armchairs and sofas.

Smiling and pretending to gaze at the artwork and décor, I mutter under my breath, "Did you catch that shit?"

Whitlock comes back immediately. "I did."

"Get that intel to Platt as soon as possible. Tell her we're looking at a very, *very* large shipment of likely heroin coming into Rotterdam next week. Considering the players, I'd wager a minimum of a tonne, but it could easily be double or triple that. Fuck, maybe more."

"You got it." Whitlock's keys are already clicking. "Interpol?"

I glance at the entries and still, listening for any hint of company. "Only if you have someone you really trust. Aronov has to be in some pockets to do what he does."

"Agreed."

"Have them start watching for *any* container ship coming out of or routed through Pakistan." I stroll into an adjacent salon and repeat my contrived examinations. "I really, *really* want to see what happens when Aronov loses a hundred-million-dollar shipment to seizure."

Alice's high, tinkling laugh answers this time, and then she chimes in before I can respond. "It's not the primary objective, but we need to see if we can pick up anything else on those fucking missiles, too."

"Definitely. Let Eli know about that one, just in case he doesn't already know." I pause in front of an ornate ceramic stove positioned in the corner of the room. "You guys stick with Rosalie's feed and see what she can get out of them. I'm going to do a little exploring and scope out who else is here."

Whitlock goes quiet before answering. "Careful, Swan. Last time you went solo, you snapped a guy's neck."

"Yeah, yeah."

Continuing my leisurely stroll, I move through more rooms and tucked away cabinets. Most of Aronov's invitees have stationed themselves back in the Great Gallery, where they can mingle and be seen, but I meet a handful here and there. A pair of suits laughs by a massive mirror. A triplet stands off to the side next to a wide, porcelain-tiled fireplace. Just inside a doorway, there's a wrinkled, beady-eyed seventy-something with a voluptuous auburn-haired trophy – young enough to be his granddaughter, of course – clinging to his side.

If nothing else, one thing is abundantly clear. Other than the pretty baubles and toys, Aronov's guest list is almost exclusively male, and while they're a veritable rainbow of sizes, shapes, shades, and ages, they all share that special something that I can sense in my sleep. It's a specific brand of narcissistic arrogance cut with power, hunger, and violence.

Like I said, a pile of fucking wonderful.

Acting like I don't hear the muted pad of leather-soled shoes at my back, I stop in the Yellow Salon and make a show of inspecting the colorful, floral-patterned chaise positioned in front of a double row of children's portraits. A faint reflection in the protective glazing gives me the size and proximity of the menacing blond standing in the doorway just behind me.

"Why hello there."

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Notes:

Alex is a short form of the Greek name Alexandros, or Alexander in Latin. Alec is an Anglicized variant of the same. **Jovan** is a Serbian/Macedonian/Albanian form of John. Jane is one of many feminine variants of the name John. The last names for Alex (Alec) and Jovan (male Jane) were borrowed from actual criminals/murderers from their respective countries.

Russian (transliterated):

No pochemu?: But why?

Gwadar: a coastal port city in Pakistan. It's directly south of Afghanistan near the Iranian border and is a major seaport used to traffic opium derivatives (heroin, morphine) coming out of Afghanistan via the "southern route". Drugs trafficked

via the "southern route" end up in Western Europe, the Arabian peninsula, China, SE Asia, and North America (often via West Africa).

Schönbrunn Palace: was the main summer residence of the Habsburg rulers, located in Hietzing, Vienna. Its history goes back to the 1500's, and the current structure, a 1,441-room Rococo palace, dates to the mid-1700s during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa. The palace and grounds are one of the most important architectural, cultural, and historic monuments in Austria and is now a major tourist attraction.

Snegurochka: or The Snow Maiden, is a character in Russian fairy tales, first appearing in the 19th century in literature. In the mid-20th century, during the days of the Soviet Union, tales began depicting her as the granddaughter and helper of *Ded Moroz* or Grandpa Frost, who is a legendary figure in Slavic mythology, similar to St. Nicholas.

Tochka: refers to the Russian OTR-21 Tochka missile, which is a short-range, road-mobile, solid propellant, single warhead ballistic missile designed for battlefield deployment. *Iskander* refers to a similar, more modern missile system, also developed and produced by Russia.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

"Why hello there."

On cue, I jerk at the smooth, lilting voice and whirl around. In the brief second it takes me to turn, the man's long strides eat up the room, and I find myself staring up at a tall, muscular man somewhere in his early forties. With tousled, white-blond hair and a charming Hollywood face, this guy's smile is perfect – wide, blinding, and nowhere close to real.

I step back from the wall of dark navy wool and crisp white cotton and clear my throat. "Hi... Hello."

A low, amused rumble vibrates in his chest. "You must be Isabella."

"I am," I say, washing my hands in nervous agitation. I feign lack of recognition, but allow a sliver of feminine admiration to steal into my expression, just like all the other trophies and baubles. "But I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

"Kaius." Koshmarin's smile widens, hinting at the predatory intent he's barely even trying to leash. "I am one of Aro's very close *associates*." He edges closer, corralling me. "I handle some of the... *messier* aspects of the business."

Playing my part, I frown. "I... I don't think I follow."

Making no effort to clarify or answer my half-question, Koshmarin just tilts his head, and for a long, tense moment, he simply studies me. Unlike Aronov or the others, there's no seduction or sexual heat in this one's ice-blue gaze.

No, right now, he's all business, and his business is brutality and bloodshed.

After Aronov's lingering touches and saccharine smiles, it's almost refreshing.

He taps a long finger to his chin and finally murmurs, "And you are his newest diversion, a diversion we neither need, nor want."

Not one for beating around the bush, I see.

Granted, that much was clear the second he sent that dumb lackey, Yakov, to take me out.

"I wouldn't go that far." I let my voice tremble, just a little, and take another step back, moving deeper into the western wing, toward the silence and emptiness of the royal apartments. Koshmarin follows my retreat, crowding far too close for polite company. "Really, I just met hi—"

"Oh, but I would," he says, cutting in, and then he flicks his wrist in an arrogant, dismissive gesture. "Your blonde friend... *Rosalie*..." He drawls out her name, rolling the *R*. "Now, that one could be a good bit of momentary fun, a pretty little cunt to wet his cock." Eyes gleaming with dark anticipation, the man laughs. "*Byat'*, I might even take a run on that little *shlyushka*."

The laughter abruptly ceases, however, and his cheekbones sharpen into blades. "But you... you're going to be... *messy*." Swallowing, I open my mouth to ask, but once again he cuts me off, this time almost crooning. "You look just like her, you know."

"I'm sorry, what?" Blinking in confusion, I shake my head. When I stumble backward into one of the walls of the adjacent Children's Room, I dimly note the bank of portraits and olive velvet chairs beneath the crystal chandelier. "I think you have the wrong idea. I have no idea who you're talking about."

He shrugs, and the motion pulls the midnight fabric of his suit tight across his shoulders. "Aro's wife." Pausing, his lips curve and dance with mischief. "Well, his *dead* wife."

I jolt. "What?"

Koshmarin's fist darts up toward my face. As his forefinger loops around a stray strand of hair, it takes every bit of my training and self-control not to break his hold and then break his fucking face.

Really, it's just so incredibly tempting.

But as much as I want to, I don't.

Not yet.

Instead, I give him the fearful flinch he's looking for.

"The likeness is uncanny, really," he says, musing more to himself than to me. "It is no wonder he is beating off to you so hard."

My back slides across the gilt stucco wall. "Was she... ill?" I ask, even though I suspect I already know the answer.

"Fuck, no." Koshmarin belts out a laugh. "That bitch was fucking some pissant and tried to leave when Aro caught her. Her lover had no idea who he was playing with." He laughs again. "She was even fat with that fucker's bastard."

My eyes boggle.

That was not in the file, but it certainly explains a few things.

When he speaks again, his tone goes flat. Lifeless and reeking of boredom, it's absent any hint of empathy. He might as well be chatting about the weather. "So... of course, Aro had no choice but to have them both... taken care of." His shoulders roll. "Pishka talked too much anyway."

Air saws in and out of my lungs.

"Where did you come from, Isabella Swan?" Koshmarin asks, tugging on my hair sharply enough that my scalp burns.

Frantic, I glance around, like I'm searching for someone to help. "I—"

"You just appear... out of nowhere?" A calloused palm claps over my throat, and I silently curse him nine ways from Sunday. This son of a bitch is going to *make* me hurt him tonight, which is going to cause a thousand new headaches for Whitlock, not to mention fuck up the plan.

"Maybe I should take care of you right now. Maybe even right here... It would be so much easier that way," he says as his thumb finds its way to the dip at the base of my throat.

I suck in a loud, shaky breath, even as my heart rate slows to a steady, thumping rhythm. My muscles relax from years of beaten-in training and instinct, loosening and readying to strike.

Koshmarin just smiles, thinking I'm going limp in fear. "Aro would not even know. And if he did, he would... *eventually* get over it."

"Look," I reply, swallowing against the pressure on my windpipe. "I don't know—"

"Kaius."

Koshmarin releases me instantly.

As he whips around, I collapse back against the wall. Quickly recovering, I sidestep the Russian and dart a half dozen feet away, toward the center of the room and the all-too-familiar, black-on-black figure strolling through the open door like he's out for a relaxing walk in the park.

But I'm not a bit fooled.

I've seen Masen in action. The man moves like death itself, and while his posture remains casual and loose, there's something in his expression that I can't quite name. The brace of his jaw might as well be granite, and those pretty gem-stone irises of his are dark, almost angry.

A vein in Koshmarin's forehead jumps in irritation. "Edward."

Masen says nothing in return, and the two men eye each other across the room for a long, still moment. There's a spark in the air, and it reminds me of my days back in The Unit, waiting those handful of frozen, electric seconds, right before the truck of C4 lights off and takes the face off the side of an Afghan mountain.

I know exactly which one's the C4 in this scenario, and I inch toward him.

A few more beats tick by before Koshmarin finally folds. His cheeks abruptly split into a wide, placating smile, and the zinging current in the room momentarily eases. "I was just... introducing myself to Aro's newest acquisition."

"So I heard." Like the rest of him, Masen's voice is quiet and maddeningly calm. Hands still shoved into his pockets, he prowls deeper into the room, subtly positioning himself between me and his target. It's, no doubt, a conscious decision, even though he spares me little more than a cursory, disinterested glance. "I'm not sure that Aro would appreciate your particular style of greeting."

"We have enough problems. We do not need this kind of distraction right now."

"Not your call to make."

"Yes, it *is*." The smile vanishes with Koshmarin's growl, and the glare he sends Masen is positively furious. "You know nothing. I have handled Aro's little *diversions* and *messes* far longer than you have been around."

Koshmarin's little show of intimidation falls flat, and one corner of Masen's mouth pulls up. "But you're not handling this one."

"What are you going to do about it?" Koshmarin paces closer, and his eyes flit back and forth between Masen and me. "Would you stop me if I slit her pretty little throat?"

Masen just shrugs like he's bored, but I see through the lazy, feline façade. I see the tiny ripple of muscle beneath the finely tailored suit jacket. I hear the hushed intake of air. I sense the pinpricking tension coiling back up, like a spring on the verge of exploding. When Masen's right slides out of his pocket and drops to his side, the distant hum from the Gallery fades into buzzing white noise. While he doesn't go for his Glock, the threat is as clear as day.

So softly I almost miss it, Masen says, "Try me, and we'll see."

Koshmarin stills.

A bead of sweat rolls down the back of the Russian's neck, disappearing beneath the starched white collar of his oxford. Another minute of thick silence passes, now volatile

enough that my slow, steady heart rate cranks up in time. I'm about two seconds from reaching into Masen's jacket and grabbing a weapon myself when the rigid line of Koshmarin's shoulders finally slumps. His palms flash in fake surrender as a dark, taunting smile teases his lips.

"*Fine*," he spits. "You can have her for now, but you best keep her and that blonde whore out of the way, or I *will* handle it..." Hands still up, Koshmarin slowly backs away. Right before exiting the room, he calls over his shoulder, "And make sure Aro stays on track with Kinshasa. He better not fuck this up."

The silence is deafening, and once we're alone, we don't move for several seconds.

Yet when we do, it's not back to the Gallery.

Masen does a quick check of the room and the adjacent salons before turning back to me. I don't know what he sees in my expression, but his betrays absolutely nothing. No more than an arm's length away, he stares at me, and his chin dips in a single, clipped acknowledgement. Without another word, he grabs me by the wrist and pulls me in the opposite direction of Koshmarin's withdrawal, toward the extravagant private dining room of the royal family, and then through the suite of apartments beyond.

We don't stop moving until we turn a corner and hit a simple, almost austere study and matching bedroom. Dressed in shades of masculine browns and khakis, it's a startling contrast to the bold, colorful opulence of the other cabinets and galleries. Warm Persian rugs top the parquet flooring, muffling our footfalls.

From what I can recall from the floorplan, we're about as far from Aronov and the Great Gallery as we can get, and since leaving Koshmarin we've not seen a soul.

But even that's not good enough.

Constantly watching our surroundings, Masen guides me toward a coffee-colored silk wall panel, where I can just make out the vague outline of a concealed door. He shoves against it, and when it doesn't budge, he pops his fist against the wood, right where a doorknob or latch would be. Wincing at the telltale splintering behind the silk, I shoot him a disbelieving glare. Masen just shakes his head before I can speak, and the second the wall swings inward, he yanks me inside and pushes the door back into place.

"I can't believe you just broke the—"

My protest is cut short by a harsh, shushing sound. Grabbing me by the elbow, Masen swings me around until my back thumps against the door.

In the split-second before he steps into my space, I peer around him. We're in yet another bedroom or study, only this one's far smaller, and its furnishings and décor are even simpler than the stark brown rooms we just departed. Judging by the size and proximity to the emperor's private space, my best guess is that this was the valet's quarters. Closed off from the typical tour and main rooms, it's cooler in here. It's dark, too, illuminated only by the soft yellow light bleeding in from around the door.

"Are you alright?" Masen asks. His voice is little more than a rough, gravelly whisper, and he's close enough that his body heat radiates through the sheer, almost non-existent lace of my top.

"I'm fine." I give him a wide-eyed, jerky nod and gulp back a stuttering breath. When I inhale again, I catch faint hints of a warm, almost intoxicating masculine cologne. "Thank you for that, but... I don't understand any of what just happened."

Even in my heels, Masen tops me by half a foot, forcing me to look up. Intense and probing, his eyes bore into mine, and for the second time tonight, I'm aware of my heart kicking fast against my sternum.

"I told you not to let yourself be alone with him."

My palms smack against the hard wall of his chest, but he doesn't move an inch. If anything, he just leans in closer, and like before, just like in his gray and white bolt hole in Stephansplatz, a fizzy, almost drunken warmth curls through my veins and pools in the pit of my stomach.

I have no idea how or why he has this effect on me.

But I like it far, *far* more than I should.

"Kaius sought me out," I tell him, scowling at both him and the fluttering in my gut. "I didn't exactly have a choice."

"No, you didn't." He grimaces and something bitter, something akin to resignation, sneaks into his tone. "And now you don't have any choice at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even if you wanted to, you couldn't back away now." A sharp, cynical laugh spills out of his mouth. "Not after the people you've seen tonight and the conversations you've witnessed. Aro made sure of that."

"I don't under—"

One hand drops to my waist, pulling, then pushing and caging me against the door. "Yes, you *do*."

Without conscious direction, my fingertips walk down the planes of his chest, skimming over the thin, silky cotton of his button-up, lightly tracing the lines and valleys of a body sculpted by years of war and fighting.

My lips mash together into a hard, flat line. "Yeah, but it sounds better if I say I don't."

Masen goes motionless.

After a long moment, his cheeks spread into an abrupt, unexpected, and ridiculously attractive smile that I can see even in the dark. His shoulders shake, taking me along with them.

"What?" I ask.

Sighing, Masen looks up at the high stucco ceiling above, and when he swipes his hand over his eyes and scrubs his face, I suddenly grasp that he's letting me see him like this. He's letting me witness something he never allows Aronov's crew to see. He wears the same expression he wore the other night on the promenade. It's the same one I saw again in his apartment.

I'm right.

Masen is *tired*.

When he looks at me again, he sighs once more, and I itch with the irrational desire to rub away the deep stress line between his brows.

"Look," he whispers as his grip cinches around my waist. "I'll try to protect you and get you out before it's too late, but..."

I study his face and the pale bruising in the hollows of his eyes. "Why?"

He frowns, and a war plays out across every one of his features before he finally replies. "I don't know."

"You're not like them, are you?" Deep down, I will him to say no.

A huff tumbles out, but he hesitates before answering. "I'm trying very hard not to be, but some days, there's no other option."

"Then why are you here... with Aronov?" I ask. "Why are you helping these people?"

That grimace is back, and Masen looks away, but the fingertips bracketing my waist slide to my hip and spasm. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," I say. "To me, at least."

Masen's teeth grind, but then his gaze falls to my mouth.

And I just thought the confrontation in the Yellow Salon was tense.

Gooseflesh ripples across my skin.

As if in slow motion, still fixated on my mouth, Masen reaches up and palms my bare neck. His long fingers splay out, spanning the side of my throat, framing my face, and his thumb ghosts across my bottom lip. The hand still on my hip squeezes, pulling me between his thighs and positioning me flush against him.

Masen's breath comes out in rough, warm pants, tinged with peppermint and the spice from his usual round of Scotch. When his lips move, he's so close that I don't know if I hear him speak or if I just feel it.

"I don't trust you."

"Good," I whisper back, tilting my head, just enough. I'm not sure if I'm challenging him or begging him or both, but when I snake my arms around his neck and slide my fingers through the short hair at the base of his scalp to tug him forward, like I'm just *daring* him to act, his eyes turn bright and fiery. "I don't trust you either."

A harsh noise of surrender hits my ears.

And the next thing I know, Masen's mouth slants over mine.

My lips part in mute surprise, and he takes it as the invitation it is. Licking into my mouth, his tongue strokes against mine. It's slick and sensual, a blatant, aggressive mimicry of sex that turns my brain inside out and makes the warmth in my abdomen go molten.

This isn't some kind of gentle meeting of strangers. No, Masen handles me like he knows I won't break.

This man kisses me like he's starving.

Barring none, it's the most desperate, devouring kiss I've ever experienced, and every single cell in my body flares to life.

When he angles my head back and drags his lips along my jaw to my throat, sensation and utter *want* whip through me, and I swear it feels like I'll drown without it.

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Notes:

We'll be leaving Vienna soon... Italy awaits! Love you ladies (and guys) and thank you so much for reading!

Pishka... Not a real word or name. I have no clue how Sulpicia (canon Aro's mate) would be handled as a Russian diminutive, so close enough. :)

Since I'm playing with names so much, which can make it a little hard to keep up with when reading as a WIP, here's a little summary/cheat sheet of our named villains thus far:

Aro = Mikhail "Misha" Aronov (Russian, Oligarch)
Marcus = Aleksandr "Sasha" Markovsky (Russian, FSB & former Spetsnaz commander)
Caius = Kaius "Caligula" Koshmarin (Russian, Bratva boss)
Demetri = Dmitri "Mitya" (Russian, Aronov's bodyguard)
Felix = Feliks (Russian, Aronov's bodyguard)
Santiago = Yakov (Russian, Bratva enforcer, Deceased)
Ahmad Taeb = original character (Iranian, ex Quds Force commander, Deceased)
Alec = Alex Retzos (Greek, Oligarch)
Jane = Jovan Dobroschi (male) (Albanian, Clan/mafia unit boss)
James = Jacques (only mentioned thus far)
Laurent = Laurent (only mentioned thus far)

Russian (transliterated):

Blyat': fuck

Shlyushka: diminutive of *shlyukha*, which means 'whore', so this would translate to 'little whore'

Kinshasa: capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Ya'll are some bloodthirsty ladies (and gents?). I love it.

"How much did you know about the wife?"

There's a long, drawn-out beat of silence, and it's quiet enough that I pick up the low hum of Platt's furnace kicking on back in Virginia. Impatient and annoyed with the usual CIA runaround games, I cross my arms over my chest and cock a single brow.

Through the screen, Esme's lips pinch, which, honestly, tells me everything I need to know.

"Spill," I say anyway and push off the couch to pace in front of Whitlock's bank of monitors. "We're getting on a plane in less than twelve hours. We don't have time for this, and when assholes like Koshmarin want to kill me, frankly, I don't give two fucks about your *clearance*."

"*Fine*." Tucking back a wayward ribbon of hair, Esme sighs, and I use the that split-second pause to catalogue her appearance.

While it's late on the Eastern Seaboard, it's not *too* late by her standards. Yet her perfectly coifed French twist isn't so perfect tonight. Mascara smudges darken her lower lids, too, and when she leans back in her leather chair, I catch the creases marring her normally pristine silk blouse. Even the bow-tie neckline is wrinkled and uneven.

This is the least put together I've ever seen this woman.

It makes me wonder if we're wrong about Carlisle Cullen and if Dayan was right about it only being a matter of time before those fuckers sent her *proof* in a box.

Before I can ask, Platt abruptly straightens. The ever-present glint in her eyes sharpens, and when she speaks, like the consummate professional she is, her voice comes out clipped and efficient.

"We knew Sulpicia Aronova was killed a little over six years ago," she says, folding her hands on the desk in front of her like she's at a Senate hearing instead of her house in McLean. "At the time of her death, they were on vacation, staying at Aronov's villa on the Black Sea."

"How?"

"Single shot through the right temple. 9mm. Point blank." The glint turns even sharper. "Beforehand, she'd been bound, likely to a chair, for several hours. Beaten severely. There were signs of an amateur attempt at torture."

As shitty as it is, it's not exactly surprising, especially considering who we're dealing with.

I steal a quick glance over to Whitlock, where he's parsing through a short stack of files that one of Dayan's runners delivered late in the evening. Without looking up from his work, he grabs the top file and slides it across the glass tabletop. When I flip it open, I thumb through the various notes and reports, penned in a mix of Russian, Hebrew, and English.

The photos are what grabs my attention, however. Clipped to the inside cover, there's at least a dozen stills, all centered in on Aronov's wife.

The first shot is a familiar one. It's the same portrait-style photo Platt's people included in the original files we'd been given – the one that supposedly looks like me. The next few are new. Mostly long-range surveillance, they show her with Aronov, and then there's Aronova with a series of attractive, dark-haired men, all fit and far younger than her husband.

I stop my skimming on the last two stills. Bruised, bloodied, and sprawled out naked in an abandoned field of tall grasses, the woman's body is almost unrecognizable.

"Aronov wanted to punish her?" I ask, passing those last two images over the couch to Alice. "Seems a little overkill."

Like me, Brandon's seen the dregs of humanity. Still, when she spots the plum-black rings around Aronova's wrists, the jagged slices, and the hematomas littering the woman's face, breasts, abdomen, and thighs, something dark and angry shadows her features.

"By most accounts," Esme replies and then takes a slow sip from a steaming mug. "At least in public, the man worshiped the ground she walked on, never mind the bevy of mistresses he kept."

I shrug at that. "Common for men in his position, particularly in the region." Fucking gross, but it is what it is. "Honestly, it'd have been odd if he hadn't."

Esme dips her chin once in agreement. "We knew Aronova had been having affairs of her own. But at twenty-seven and nearly two decades Aronov's junior, we assumed it was just your typical bored young housewife and absent older husband scenario." Her mouth flattens. "Most men like Aronov understand the dynamic and tend to look the other way..." She chuffs. "Hell, some – like your new friend, Retzos – even encourage it."

"As long as it's discreet and superficial."

"And Aronova wasn't." Esme nods again. "It became a point of increasing contention, and according to reports, behind closed doors, their relationship became volatile and more often than not, physical, especially by the time she started seeing the last one."

Alice slides the photos over to Rosalie, whose expression instantly morphs to bloody murder, and then jumps up from her wingback. Skirting the furniture, she parks next me in front of the monitors and asks, "What tipped him over?"

Esme gives Alice a wan smile. "It's our understanding that her last lover was one of Aronov's associates, so..."

"*Ouch.*" I wince. "Double insult."

"Exactly. We were not aware that she'd been pregnant at the time of her death. But it makes sense. Between the multiple hits to his ego, he—"

"Lost his shit." Chewing the inside of my cheek, I start piecing together all those possessive little signals and tells. "What happened to the guy she was seeing?"

"Found in his apartment in Florence the same weekend," Platt says, short and matter of fact. "Shot twice in the face. Close range. No other signs of trauma or struggle. No witnesses or evidence of entry. No leads. It was clearly a professional hit."

Rosalie comes around the couch and plops down in the desk chair beside us. "I take it that was Koshmarin."

"Or one of his underlings." Esme rifles through a thin navy-blue binder before addressing me. "Your account from two nights ago syncs with what we know of him. He

and his Bratva associates have been Aronov's muscle and have handled his network for years."

No wonder Koshmarin wants me dead.

That fucker doesn't want to deal with a repeat of the Mad King, not when they have so many other irons in the fire.

Glancing over to the window, I study the dim, early dawn light seeping between the drapes and beginning to creep across the rug. Outside, the streets are still quiet and empty but for the low rumble of a city truck passing by and a beat later, the wail of a distant siren.

I peek across the room to McCarty, where he's stacking the small mountain of designer luggage we'll drag with us to Italy, like any good pair of socialites, of course. Catching me, he straightens and shoots me a wide, toothy grin that no one has the right to wear this early. When I scowl in response, he just laughs and then pitches me a bottle of orange juice from the minifridge, silently mouthing, "It's good for you."

I scowl even harder because that man knows I hate juice, almost as much as that shitty Nespresso he dares to call coffee.

"Okay," I say, turning back to Esme. "Now tell me about Markovsky. How does he really fit in?" Cracking the cap on my bottle, I down a third and immediately grimace at the tartness. "And don't bullshit me."

"That one's more predictable." Esme's shoulders roll in a tired shrug. "From what we can tell, Markovsky doesn't really play too much in the drugs or trafficking side of the business." She flips through another few pages in her binder. "With his Spetsnaz background and FSB ties, he's mostly focused on the weapons trade."

Beside us, Whitlock finally looks up from his files. "Client or supplier?"

"Both," Esme replies, and then drains her mug. Reaching off screen, she grabs a familiar, black-labeled bottle and splashes in a finger or two of Tennessee's finest.

It's yet another brow-raising crack in her armor, but I'm not about give her any shit over it.

"From what we can tell, he's usually the one who connects Aronov's various shell companies with the clients. Warlords, cartels, sanctioned governments, you name it. He has connections with manufacturers within the FSU – both private and state – and he's the one greasing the wheels with the agencies. In other words, he has his whole hand in that pie."

Alice's nails drum against the back of the couch. "Where's he vulnerable?" she asks. "Dayan said he was married to Aronov's sister."

"That's correct," Platt says as she flips her binder shut and chucks it off to the side. "But you won't see much of her, if at all. Or their three children." She takes a long, slow sip of her whisky. "He keeps his family away from his business. Has a walled compound an hour out of Moscow. Dogs. Guards. Top-end security. Might as well be a fortress."

I nod. "Smart man."

Esme's dark eyes flash. "By all accounts, very... and just as ruthless. I'm assuming Dayan told you about the *alleged* sarin attacks back in the 90s."

Rosalie lets out a low, furious grumble. "So, not alleged then."

"Unfortunately, very much confirmed, as well as others," Esme replies and then tips back the remainder of her mug. "While not as... flashy or *excessive* as Aronov or Koshmarin, Markovsky has no problem whatsoever removing *any* obstacle unlucky enough to be in his path."

Across the room, McCarty clicks the lock on the last suitcase and ambles over to stand behind Rosalie's chair. He mimics my pose, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. The macabre black and gray lines twining his forearms writhe and jump when his muscles flex. That always-present teasing grin of his is long gone, too, replaced by a severe, nail-spitting expression that reminds me that Rose and I aren't the only ones in this room with a high kill count.

"You think he's the one who organized the attack on that village in the DRC?" Emmett asks.

"We believe Aronov gave the final go ahead, but it's near certain that Markovsky was involved. The incendiary devices used in that attack match those supplied to a warlord in the region..." Pushing back in her chair, Esme stares through the screen over steepled fingers. "Before he disappeared, Carlisle had been following those leads, along with managing the intel coming from Masen."

The room goes quiet, and I don't move for a long moment. Instead, my head tilts back, and I trace a hairline crack in the plaster wall, from its start at the edge of the intricate triple crown molding high above, all the way down to where it disappears behind the antique gold frame of a colorful oil on canvas.

When I look back at the monitor, my fists ball into tight hammers. "And... you didn't think that all this was pertinent information to share?" I ask, softly and calmly enough that even Spooky flinches.

At least Esme gives me the courtesy of an apologetic smile, however brief. "It wasn't something I could share at the time."

"Kind of like how much I resemble Aronova?" An aggravated huff spills out of my mouth before I can stop it. "Or... was that an intentional omission?"

The old Platt – the boss I both loved and despised – comes roaring back. "Your team is highly competent," she snaps, and it's the same, pissed-off, no-nonsense tone I've seen make directors leap. "I assumed you would put those pieces together quickly enough, on your own or via your own sources. But, yes, the resemblance is part of why you're the perfect fit for investigating Carlisle's disappearance and taking that motherfucker out."

"And the other reasons?"

"I trust you." Her eyes narrow. "And you don't miss."

I laugh because the latter is true, but every time I replay that scene with Koshmarin in the Schönbrunn, my blood boils. "You realize, this kind of bullshit is why I went private."

Now it's her turn to huff, and it's a bitter sound. "I'm aware."

Tossing the rest of my OJ to McCarty, I push off the couch and lean across the desk. "You've put Hale and me in a precarious position," I tell her. "Not saying we wouldn't have made the same decisions, but I don't like secrets. And I don't appreciate being sent into situations unprepared, *Platt*."

She looks away. "I'm aware of that, as well, and I'd like to say I'm sorry, but I'm not..." She hesitates before finally blowing out a loud, tired breath. Grabbing her bottle of Jack, she pours another two fingers. "I don't trust my organization right now."

Rosalie bolts upright. "The fuck does that mean?"

Instead of sipping, this time Esme just slugs her entire mug. "Carlisle and I had a system. When he was out on jobs, it was often challenging to maintain contact, and I wouldn't hear from him for several weeks at a time," she says. "So, he'd send me things, just to let me know he was alive and well."

Esme lets out a soft punch of air – almost, but not quite a laugh – and a hint of warmth softens her stony features. "It was never anything obvious. No accompanying notes. No return addresses, and he routed everything through non-stamped carriers. Just little trinkets – keychains, magnets, typical tourist garbage – that he'd send to a private box I have listed under an alias. No one ever knew about it." Her mouth turns down into a hard, uncompromising frown. "*No one.*"

"I don't follow," I reply, scrubbing my face. When I peer over to Alice, she's studying the older woman through the screen, and something vaguely expectant or eager lurks in her gaze.

Esme clears her throat. "I'm still receiving these trinkets."

The silence in the room swells for a moment before a tiny smile curls Alice's lips. She beats me to the obvious statement. "You told us he was presumed dead."

"I did." Esme's hands fold together in that familiar, cool, collected Senate pose. "That's what the analysts thought at the time... and what they still think. All the evidence collected at his last known location says the same... But the pieces don't add up." One hand slides to her center drawer, dipping in to extract a cheap, plastic keychain. A white horse rearing up with a red-coated rider on its back hangs from the ring. "I received this last week."

Whitlock jerks and then shakes his head. "What about your operatives?"

Esme blows out another long breath. "None of the individuals sent were mine, and their orders came out of another department... I was deemed... *too close* to the situation to be involved directly." She tucks the keychain back inside her desk. "I don't know what they were told or what orders they were given." This time she's the one shaking her head. "Regardless, there's no way they should have been such easy targets, especially after the first team was taken out."

Before I can respond, she adds, "It's why your current... *activities* are on a need-to-know basis, handled completely out of my shop, and even then, only a handful of very trusted individuals are involved."

McCarty lets out a low whistle. "Is all this off the books?"

She nods. "Very."

This shit just keeps getting better and better.

"All right," I say after another long, uncomfortable minute of silence. "I understand your predicament, but... don't do that shit again. If you have information that could keep my ass from getting shot, you better give it to me."

"I'll do what I can." I don't miss the fact that she isn't exactly agreeing, but I let it slide when I see raw desperation staring back at me. "Find him, Bella."

We step out of the black Mercedes onto the private tarmac just outside Vienna at precisely five in the evening. Like Aronov's soiree at the palace, the area surrounding the sleek, clearly customized jet is crawling with beefy, dark-suited bruisers, each sporting an array of urban weaponry.

As soon as the car door thumps shut, one of Aronov's bodyguards appears, welcoming us with a small, polite smile. That smile runs completely counter to the pair of Lebedev pistols sticking out from under his jacket, but I don't say a word. No, I just look around, like it's perfectly normal to be surrounded by well-dressed criminals.

"Ms. Hale, Ms. Swan," Dmitri says, gesturing toward the carpeted path leading to the stairs. "I hope your drive over was pleasant."

"Oh, yes, thank you." Playing her part, Rosalie pauses, places a manicured hand on his forearm, and shoots him a flirty little grin. "What about our luggage?"

"Everything will be taken care of," he answers. Glancing back at the mounting stack by the trunk, he lets out a low chuckle. "All of your baggage will be delivered directly to your rooms."

What he means is it'll be scanned and picked through with a fine-tooth comb before it's finally returned to us.

And, yes, of course, we're prepared for that, the same way Whitlock wiped and reprogrammed all of our electronics... just in case. Really, the most interesting thing these assholes will find are the scraps of Rosalie's barely-there silk and lace.

The toys will arrive later, care of McCarty.

Flashing Dmitri another row of pearly teeth, Rosalie giggles. "You're just a doll, you know that?"

The man barks out a loud, true laugh at that one and then, with a not-so-sneaky peek at the deep V of her neckline, mutters something low and fast under his breath.

It's probably a good thing Rosalie's Russian isn't the best.

She'd have laid that motherfucker out right then and there.

Once we reach the bottom of the steps, Dmitri veers off and belts out a curt command to a pair of guards lingering by the cars. Rather than immediately ascending, Rosalie bends close, cooing and marveling at the ridiculous aircraft in front of us. Glossy black, with metallic flakes that throw light in a dazzling prismatic effect, the paint job on this thing had to have cost a fortune. I dread seeing whatever gaudiness awaits us inside.

"I take it he was being rude," she murmurs.

"Very." I snort at that.

"Fucker." Looping her arm through mine, she takes a quick look down the airstrip, and her voice drops to a whisper. "Speaking of... are we ever going to talk about your little *interlude* the other night?"

"Do we have to?" My face scrunches up.

Shoulders shaking in instant, undisguised delight, that smile of hers turns distinctly smirk-like. "Well... did you fuck him? At least tell me that."

"No."

Not kidding, this woman has the nerve to look disappointed. "Did you want to?"

I'm not about to open that can of worms – least of all right here – and I barely resist the urge to flip her off. My elbow jabs into her ribs, and I plaster on my best grin, muttering through my teeth, "I hate you."

Laughing like the gorgeous bitch she is, Rosalie tilts her head slightly to the left. "Who knows, you may get your chance... unless we die, that is."

"And you're not morbid at all."

Regardless, I don't need to turn to know who that little head tilt was for. No, my radar's working just fine. I know exactly who arrived the second the muted sound of a second car door hit my ears. Just like I know who's staring at my back right now.

Even across the open tarmac, that man's emerald gaze feels like a caress against every one of my senses.

So, I just shake my head at her and drag her laughing ass up the stairs.

I have to say, I'm pleasantly surprised by the interior of Aronov's plane. Considering what we've seen of his tastes, I was expecting more of the same suffocating opulence and gold-plated extravagance. Instead, a sleeker, more modern kind of luxury greets us.

Butter-soft tan leather chairs and benches split the cabin into a quartet of lounges, each lit with soft, sophisticated lighting. Razor-thin flat-screens cover the opaque glass bulkheads, displaying a dozen time-zones and scrolling financial markets. Fine, gleaming slabs of pale granite top the tables and cabinets, all cut from some kind of dark, dramatically striped, tropical wood. Scattered throughout, subtle Art Deco lines and nods give the space a warm, inviting feel.

I spot Aronov the moment we clear the front galley.

On his phone and parked in a club chair with one leg crossed over the opposite knee, the man looks like elegant wealth personified. Still in his signature charcoal suit, he's dropped the usual tie and unbuttoned his collar. And right on cue, the second his eyes land on me, he grins like the proverbial cat and motions us in.

Slipping by, Rosalie throws me a private wink and sashays her way to the center of the cabin, stopping only when she reaches the chair right beside his. She takes her time settling in, too, swinging her hips like the vixen she's pretending to be. Still talking into his phone, Aronov eyes her up and down and then reaches over to curl his palm over her knee. Because she's fucking good at this, when his hand slides a little higher up her thigh, she just leans over, brushes her lips along his jaw line, and mouths, "*Naughty.*"

I don't know if I want to vomit or laugh, but like always, it has the intended effect. He might as well be drooling, and when I opt for one of the club chairs on the opposite side of the aisle, Aronov stares at me like I'm something to eat.

Ten minutes later, as the engines start to wind up, Aronov growls out a low, pissed off, "*Dovol'no! Ty nichego ne delayesh', krome opravdaniy.*" A deep rumbling baritone answers back. With the whine of the turbines outside, it's impossible to discern more than that, but whatever the guy says makes Aronov absolutely livid. His knuckles go white as his fist tightens around his phone, and his eyes turn into chips of black ice. "*Ya khochu rezul'tatov... Ili ya khochu krovi.*"

Ending the call with an angry curse, Aronov chucks his phone on the table in front of him.

"That doesn't sound good."

My head jerks up at the dry commentary to Aronov's furious demand for *results* or *blood*.

Back in his usual nondescript, monochrome attire, Masen's the picture of bored disinterest when he appears from behind the bulkhead. Hands tucked deep inside his pockets, he calmly walks in like he owns the place. Those always-roaming eyes of his do a quick scan of the cabin, but his expression is flat, betraying absolutely nothing.

Aronov glares and flicks his wrist in irritation. "*Nu ty opyat' opozdal.*"

Masen's lips twitch at the rebuke. It's a slight, almost imperceptible break in the façade, but I still catch it, just like I catch the faintest hint of something else when he replies, "*Mne nuzhno bylo pogovorit' s Aleksom.*"

At the mention of the Greek, across the aisle, Rosalie reaches down to the tote by her heels. When she pulls out her phone and makes a show of turning it off, she flashes me a veiled look.

"*Pochemu?*" Aronov asks.

Yes, Masen, tell us why you had a last-minute visit with Retzos.

"*Ya yeshche ne znayu...*" Masen replies as he stops at the chair facing mine.

Shrugging at the older man across the aisle, he peels off his jacket and shoves the long sleeves of his fitted t-shirt up to his elbows. Like the rest of him, Masen's arms are all lean muscle and flexing sinew. When he angles toward Aronov, a set of stark black lines and gray shading on the inside of his right forearm grab my attention, and I *almost* grin when I glimpse the familiar outline of the bone frog and trident. Turning back, he unclips his shoulder rig, and as he tosses his weapons on the nearby empty bench, his eyes land on me.

It's no more than a brief heartbeat of eye-to-eye contact, but the connection sends lightning licking through my veins. Judging by the hard brace of Masen's jaw and the rolling flex of his forearms, I'm not the only one affected either.

His Adam's apple dips once, and when he glances over to Aronov and adds a softly spoken, "*Chto-to ne tak... On chego-to boitsya,*" I have the distinct impression he's talking to me, just as much as he is to his boss.

Before one of us gives away too much, I offer Masen a bland, polite nod that says I have no clue what he just said, all the while making a mental note to warn Whitlock the moment we land.

I want to know what the fuck has spooked the Greek.

Moments later, the cabin door closes, and as the aircraft taxis out on the runway and begins its take-off, the two men continue their rapid back and forth. As they speak, the earlier fury gradually bleeds out of Aronov's expression and tone, and by the time the wheels leave the ground, the usual oily slickness is back in full force.

Finally swapping over to English, Aronov asks Masen, "Were you able to complete your other errands?"

"I did." Leaning back in the chair across from mine, Masen casually hooks an ankle over the opposite knee. His lips curve into an easy smile that's nowhere close to the real thing. "Just barely."

"You spoil that girl," Aronov says, laughing before turning to Rosalie. When I see Rosalie toying with his collar, giving me all the distraction I could ever want, I look over at Masen, only to find him staring.

"Errands?" I ask, waving off the stunning twenty-something attendant bringing around drinks.

"My youngest cousin. She's also my goddaughter."

I don't know what I was expecting, but that isn't it.

My brows hit my hairline. "Cousin. Goddaughter. *Really?*"

"Yeah," he says. Another one of those stupidly attractive smiles brightens his face - this one real - and it's impossible for me to forget what that mouth felt like against mine. "I send her little gifts from time to time."

"That's..." I hesitate. "Unexpected."

There's a long beat of silence where Masen's smile doesn't waver. Those pretty gemstone eyes of his roam my face in a repeating circuit, lingering on my lips, then my throat, and then flitting back up to my lips all over again. It's like he can't get his mind off me either.

Like he's wondering what my lips would taste like in the daylight.

Like what my bare skin would feel like against his.

When he abruptly looks away and signals the attendant, I ask him, "So, what kind of stuff do you send her?"

"Nothing much." Masen pauses just long enough to pluck the heavy crystal tumbler off the attendant's tray. "Just little mementos from my travels. You know... piddly tourist junk."

When he looks back at me, for a second, Masen's gaze burns into mine, and my heart hammers against my sternum in response. The fire in his eyes extinguishes as quickly as it appears, however, and his shoulders roll in another one of those lazy, feline shrugs. "I don't really get the chance to call much anymore," he says, and his voice is as soft as spun silk. "It lets her keep up with my travels... I know she gets worried sometimes."

Holy shit.

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Notes:

I know some of you may already be aware, but in case not, I'm on facebook as "katinki writes stuff". Sometimes I post teasers and picpiration and such for this story. Feel free to hit me up! I love talking to you ladies. Thank you for reading and following along. I so enjoy seeing your reactions. It really makes this whole writing thing such fun for me.:)

Most Russian surnames change with gender. For last names ending with -v or -n, for the feminine form, you just add an -a at the end. For last names ending in -y, you replace the -y with -aya. Examples: Ivanov/Ivanova, Lenin/Lenina, Dostoevsky/Dostoevskaya . Hence Aronov's wife's last name was Aronova. Markovsky's wife's is Markovskaya. And if Koshmarin had a wife, hers would be Koshmarina.

The white horse and red-coated rider is a reference to the famous Lipizzaner Stallions. The breed is closely associated with the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, Austria, where the horses demonstrate the *haute école* movements of classical dressage. So... that would possibly imply that Esme received the keyring from Vienna...

Russian (transliterated):

Dovol'no! Ty nichego ne delayesh', krome opravdaniy: Enough! You do nothing but make excuses

Ya khochu rezul'tatov... Ili ya khochu krovi: I want results... or I want blood

Nu ty opyat' opozdal: Well, you're late yet again

Mne nuzhno bylo pogovorit' s Aleksom: I needed to have a chat with Alex

Pochemu: Why

Ya yeshche ne znayu: I don't know yet

Chto-to ne tak. On chego-to boitsya: Something is wrong. He's afraid of something.

Bone frog & trident: recall, Navy SEALs are colloquially called Frogmen. The bone frog tattoo depicts the skeleton of a frog. It's a mark of acceptance into the warfighting fraternity, and the tattoo has evolved into a tribute to fallen comrades. The trident is a common symbol associated with Navy SEALs and is depicted on the trident pin, aka the Special warfare insignia, which is awarded to Navy SEALs.

FSU: former Soviet Union, or post-Soviet states, refers to the 15 sovereign states that were republics within the former Soviet Union. Some continue to retain close ties to Russia and have agreements in place around military cooperation and support (e.g. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan)

Lebedev pistol: is a new Russian semi-automatic 9×19 mm Parabellum pistol, produced under Kalashnikov Concern and designed by Dmitry Lebedev

Wetwork: this is a euphemism of Russian origin for murder or assassination (involving spilling blood). The expression and the similar wet job, wet affair, or wet operation are all borrowed from Russian terms for such activities and can be traced to criminal slang. The expressions are sometimes associated with elimination operations handled by the CIA and the old KGB. In fact, the KGB used to have a department that was colloquially called "*Otdel mokrykh del*" or the Department of Wet Affairs.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Mikhail Aronov lives in a castle.

A fucking castle.

Perched on the top of a hill in the center of a vast vineyard estate, his *home* – as he simply calls it – is something straight out of a traveler's dream. Built off the bones of a medieval fortress, complete with soaring towers, crenulated parapets, and a grand keep-turn-manor, it's a magnificent mixed stone and stucco affair, steeped in old world charm and personality.

Ringed the compound, along with its intricate gardens and hedge mazes, expertly restored stone walls climb the sky. Inside, forming its own little hamlet, dozens of matching buildings dot the grounds around the main house. A massive, multi-story winery and its carefully disguised warehouses sit to the south. A set of stables and a coordinating carriage house occupy the north. Aronov's garages stand to the east, housing a parade of exotic vehicles. The fucker even has his own conservatory, filled with enough rare, fanciful plants and birds to make a naturalist weep.

His *home* is so utterly enchanting that you don't even notice all the modern enhancements.

Like the spiderweb of high-resolution cameras.

Or the hyper-sensitive motion and heat alarms.

Or the armed guards with black and sable Belgian Malinois patrolling the grounds like we're in Baghdad instead of the heart of Tuscany.

Wearing my best early morning smile, I wave at a pair of meandering guards as I jog through the open gate and head toward the long road leading out of the estate. Not quite prepared for my sudden appearance, both men throw up their hands in an automatic polite greeting, and I laugh to myself when it finally hits them. Their waves drop like lightning, and they start sputtering in panicked, rapid-fire Russian.

The burly blond in all black scrambles past the guard building by the gate and shouts, "*Madam, vy ne mozhete uyti!*" When I don't acknowledge his yelling, he spits out an angry curse and tries again. "Ms. Swan, this is... not allowed, not without escort!"

Unlike Aronov's personal bodyguards, this one's accent is heavy, and his English comes out stilted and hesitant. It's a muscle he clearly doesn't have to flex often, and for a second, I almost feel sorry for him. I mean, the guy's just doing his job after all.

Of course, I don't feel guilty enough to stop.

No, I've got shit to do, so instead, I toss him another playful grin and belt over my shoulder, "It's fine! I do this all the time!"

The man stutters out another frustrated protest. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's about two seconds from trying to chase me down when a crisp baritone comes out of nowhere and stops him in his tracks.

"*Andrey*," Masen says, far more calmly than the arm-waving guard. I steal a quick glance back, only to find that familiar dark silhouette casually walking across the yard. "*Vse v poryadke. Ona mozhet uyti.*"

Masen stops beside the flustered guard, and even though he's addressing them, not me, those eyes of his follow my every move. Just before I'm out of earshot, I catch him bark out a loud laugh and slap the other man on the back. "*V lyubom sluchaye, ty ne mozhes' poymat' yeye.*"

Picking up my pace, I grin because Masen's not lying. There's no way that blond could catch me anyway.

While it's cold this morning, especially in the shade, the temperatures here are nowhere close to the frigid weather we just left in Vienna. My breath barely even fogs, and when I squeeze my fists inside my gloves, I can actually feel my fingers. It's *almost* pleasant, vaguely reminiscent of my usual runs around the farm back home.

A mile and a half away from the compound, I hang a right behind a stand of tall, skinny cypresses, leaving the openness of the paved drive, and cut down a narrow path that threads between the seemingly endless rows of dormant vines. The ground is rough. Judging by the washed-out ruts and jagged rocks, no one's been back in here for years, and as the vines morph into clumps of taller, thicker olive trees, the path disappears completely.

In other words, it's fucking perfect.

I slow to a walk when I glimpse a small ramshackle stone shed with a caved-in roof. It's a relic from a bygone era and gradually sinking back into the earth. My walk turns into a leisurely stroll as I pretend to admire the rustic scene, all the while checking for any signs of Aronov's expansive security system, or worse, his men. When I find nothing but the gentle sway of the evergreen leaves, I pull out my phone, like I'm logging my miles, and unlock the hidden, encrypted app Whitlock loaded before we left. A satellite image, far more defined than your standard Google search, appears instantly, and with a quick tap, I snap a photo and drop a pin on my location, along with a simple message.

Look at this gorgeous old building tucked among some olive trees. Just wanted to share since I know how much you appreciate hidden gems like this.

A reply appears within seconds.

TheTravelingCowboy: *beautiful. I'd love to see something like that in person. Especially around sunrise or twilight. Maybe one day...*

I snicker at the name because there's no possible way Whitlock picked that one out himself, nor the avatar with its ridiculous neon variant of his precious Longhorns logo. But I get his message, and I have to wonder if I'll be able to pull off another solo run after the way I just snubbed Aronov's security team.

Either way, considering the undercurrent of violence that permeates this entire place, I want my fucking weapons, not to mention all our other toys.

I tap out a quick return before resuming my run.

I think it would be amazing at twilight. There's a really special kind of energy here.

TheTravelingCowboy: *I bet so. Looking forward to your next update. Don't keep me waiting too long!*

Don't worry, I won't. Rosalie sends her love, too.

Now that that's finished, I opt for a long route this morning and circle a significant portion of the estate, using the time and early morning light to scope out the grounds and evaluate the extent of Aronov's external security. It's all top-notch, but it's yet more evidence of his arrogance and conceit. His cameras and alarms don't stretch far enough out, and despite the elevated position of the compound, with the rows of towering cypresses and olive orchards, visibility is shit.

I bet that drives Masen batshit.

A mile out, I pour on the speed, stretching out my muscles in hopes of easing the tension that's been coiling tighter and tighter, ever since that night in the Schönbrunn when Masen dragged me into that room and put his mouth on mine. I still don't know what to do with that, any more than I know what to do with that fucking conversation on the plane.

Goddaughter.

Yeah, right.

But why and what the hell does it mean?

Frankly, the whole situation with Masen just pisses me off.

It's an unnecessary distraction that I really don't need right now. But every time I think about that man's calloused hands framing my hips and his tongue stroking against mine, giving and taking in equal measure, my stomach clenches in anticipation and my breath comes out far rougher than it should.

He's probably amazing in bed.

Fuck.

Huffing a little harder than I need to, I jog back through the gates and throw up my hand at the same pair of beefy guards standing outside the guard shack. This time, they don't wave back. Instead, they just scowl at me and grunt out a reluctant acknowledgement.

Chuckling, I head back into the house, and just like last night when we arrived, the warmth and elegance of Aronov's *home* is a punch to the gut. Where the target villa in Vienna suffocated with its gilt and heavy opulence, this one feels like a comfortable embrace, where the old seamlessly blends with new in pleasant, tactile textures and relaxing, earth-tone palettes.

Rustic, hand-hewn Tuscan tables sit among sumptuous leathers and fabrics. A fortune's worth of oil paintings – nearly all recognizable by artist and no doubt originals – cover the bare stone walls. Greek and Roman statues perch in hidden corners and niches. Antique bronze chandeliers hang from exposed beams, lighting the spacious rooms in soft, yellow tones. And the books... thousands and thousands of books, many ancient by their faded bindings, line massive wall-to-wall shelves.

Picking my way between the sofas and chairs of one of the larger living rooms, I target a pair of oversized double doors that lead out onto the wide main terrace. Positioned on the right-hand side, a table, complete with ivory linens and shiny silverware already waits, along with a red-hot patio heater positioned nearby. The subject of my last hour of reluctant contemplation sits there silently, slowly drumming his fingers against his knee as he stares out across the sprawling maze of winter gardens below.

I don't bother announcing myself.

No, I know he picked up my arrival, maybe even before the guards.

Just like I know he's the one who poured the cup of jet-black coffee steaming in front of the chair directly across from his.

"How was your run?" Masen quietly asks, not looking away from the gardens.

"Long," I say, sliding into the empty chair. Unable to resist, I take a sip of what just might be the best coffee I've ever tasted. It's deliciously bitter and strong, and I want to kiss him for it. Instead, I cock a brow and eye him over the delicate rim of my porcelain cup. "Did you tell those guys to let me go?"

Masen's lips curve, ever so slightly, like he's laughing at some inside joke. "They weren't exactly happy about it."

I shrug. "Oops?"

That little smile of his widens when he glances over. Leaning back in his chair, Masen takes a slow drink of his own coffee. From the cloyingly sweet aroma drifting across the table, I'd likely hate it. "*Oops?*" he slowly drawls, just a little incredulous. My shoulders just dip in another indifferent shrug, and he huffs out a laugh. "Well, I guess that's one way to look at it."

A gray-haired late sixty-something decked out in stiff black and white comes out a few minutes later, bearing an armful of breakfast plates and trays, along with a barrage of lightning-fast Italian that I don't have a prayer of understanding. When I politely decline the heavier meats and eggs in favor of fruit and toast, the woman cuts me a glare like I just insulted her and *all* her ancestors. Of course, Masen just winks and smiles that ridiculous smile of his as he takes one of *everything*, and that glare vanishes. The grin that woman gifts him positively glows.

"*Really?*" I stab a cube of juicy melon.

"What?" he asks, innocently enough, like he has no clue what I'm talking about, and then he bites off half a strip of crispy bacon. "Maria just likes my dazzling personality."

Dazzle, my ass.

We eat our respective breakfasts in surprisingly companionable silence. But I don't miss the way Masen's gaze repeatedly flits from me to the gardens and back again to me. When I finish my last triangle of toast, I pour myself another cup of coffee and say, "You were up early this morning."

He nods. "I was."

"Why?"

"I'm pretty sure we've had this conversation before." Polishing off his eggs – over easy and disgustingly runny – Masen places his silverware neatly across his plate. Almost instantly, a server appears out of nowhere, this one younger and jumpier, to whisk away the plates. The second she's gone, he leans back in his chair and kicks an ankle over the opposite knee. "Like you, I'm a morning person."

"Bullshit." I don't even pretend like I'm not watching him. "Why were you up and how did you know I would go out?"

"No reason."

I cut him an irritated glare. "Are you always this cagey?"

His shoulders shake. When they stop, he's staring at me again, and the blatant intensity of his gaze is as unnerving as it is exhilarating. "Fine," he says. "You said yourself that you usually go five days a week, so I assumed you'd be up, just like I assumed you wouldn't be content to be stuck inside the gates."

My stomach dips and my throat bobs before I ask, "Why would that matter?"

Masen grimaces, like admitting the truth is an affront to his very person. When my brows climb my forehead in question, he finally lets out a soft chuff of annoyance. "I

prefer knowing where you are, especially here."

That dip in my stomach turns into a damned near freefall, and I can't stop the next question that spills off my lips. "Why's that?"

The way he looks at me makes me breathless.

One side of his mouth lifts into a wry smile. "Are you really going to make me answer that?"

I'm not because I don't know if I really want to know the answer.

Instead of pressing, I just continue to sip the exquisite bitterness of my coffee as I watch a pair of gray-brown warblers swoop across the gardens. They're quick and skittish, moving from bushes to trees, before eventually lighting on an outstretched arm of a statue of Venus.

"Listen," Masen says, quieter, folding his hands together on the table. Despite the low volume, there's a certain abrupt urgency in his voice, something I'm not so sure he wants me to hear. "Aro will be down shortly. He usually takes his breakfast in his private rooms and then comes downstairs to his office..."

"Okay." It comes out more like a question than an affirmative.

"He's going to push you." Masen waves an impatient hand. "When he does... push back."

I startle like I'm supposed to, but I would be lying if I said I'm not genuinely curious where he's going with this. "What? What are you talking about?"

Shoving a rough hand through his hair, ruining what little effort he put into taming it, Masen sighs. "Despite what it looks like, not much goes on here that he doesn't know about." He slugs back the rest of his too-sweet coffee. "I generally get away with doing whatever the hell I want, but that courtesy extends to very few. It *won't* extend to you because you're a woman... and more importantly, because of what he wants from you."

I suppress the flare of instant irritation.

It's not Masen's fault that Aronov is a sexist piece of shit.

He's just delivering the message.

"So," I say, drawing it out like I'm trying to put words to thoughts. "You want me to purposefully antagonize him?" I give him a disbelieving glare. "After what you've told me? After the people I met the other night?" My hands fail to punctuate the point. "After that... Kaius whatever threatened to *kill* me?"

"Not necessarily antagonize." Masen shakes his head. "Be polite. Be friendly. Be warm if you want. Hell, even cozy up to him if needed... But Bella, do *not* be like the other women he's collected."

Even though I've seen the pictures and I *know* what Aronov's capable of, a chill skates down my spine.

"Don't act like prey. These people are sharks. The moment Aro scents blood, he'll rip you apart." Masen's jaw ticks, and his knuckles squeeze, turning pale against the warm, touchable tan of his skin. "I need you to help me keep you alive, at least until I can figure out a way to get you out."

I forget myself for a second, that this kind of conversation should terrify the fuck out of a civilian. "Edward, why do you care?" I ask him for the second time, barely above a whisper. "Why are *you* here?"

Masen just smiles in response, only this one's tinged with something dark and bitter. "I have things to do here."

"Like?"

His expression shutters as he turns back toward the gardens. "Nothing you need to worry about."

Damn it.

I know better than to push, so for now, I keep my mouth shut, slide my chair back from the table, and will my muscles to relax and unwind as the pulsing waves of heat from the patio heater wash over me. Coupled with the relative quiet out here on the terrace, the warmth almost puts me to sleep.

Of course, that little bit of peace and quiet shatters the second my ears pick up the swing of the doors behind us, and then I hear the telltale pop of Italian leather shoes against stone. When I start and look over, I see that Aronov's ditched the usual charcoal suit in favor of fine gray cashmere on top of a starched white button-up. Like his home, it's nothing but a graceful, sophisticated façade.

"My dear Bella," Aronov coos as his long stride eats up the length of the terrace. He immediately targets the chair between Masen and me, and I just catch the brief, inscrutable look he shoots the younger man. "If I had known you were such an early bird, I would have had Maria bring you up to my apartments to join me."

No fucking thanks.

I don't say that, though.

Nor do I stab him in the windpipe when he angles his chair toward me and eyes me up and down like he's already fucking me.

No, I just give him a light, almost playful grin and gesture at the vast scene in front of us. "I love it out here. It's just... *beautiful*." I duck my head and allow a little heat to color my cheeks. "Really, Misha, your home is breathtaking. I had no idea."

Like the preening little bastard he is, pride and sheer delight fills Aronov's every feature. "I am so very pleased you approve." His lips spread. "Perhaps I will be able to convince you to stay."

When I laugh, those dark, roaming eyes of his resume their appraisal, lingering on the stretch of my leggings and the fitted long-sleeve tee that hugs every one of my curves. "Speaking of beautiful," he says, and it comes out like a purr. "You are... radiant this morning."

My radar pings, and across the table, while my eyes never leave Aronov, I register the utter stillness of the man in front of me.

It's uncanny really.

I don't dare look, though, and instead throw my head back and really laugh. "What you mean is that I'm sweaty. I probably ought to go take a shower."

Aronov's mouth goes slack and his nostrils flare, like he's still thinking about all the ways he'd like to get me naked and sweaty. It's the same look from the restaurant, and I'm halfway expecting him to start rattling off more gross shit in Russian. "I am well aware," is all he says, still in that same growly purr. "As I said... absolutely radiant."

My shoulders shake. "If you say so."

He grins at my sarcasm. "How is the lovely Rose?"

"Asleep," I tell him, rolling my eyes.

He pauses just long enough for Maria to deliver a steaming cup of black tea. "Is she feeling better?" he asks as he spoons a cube of sugar from a silver bowl and dunks it into his cup.

"She'll be fine," I say, shoving back a wayward strand of hair that somehow escaped my ponytail. "Rose always gets migraines when she flies. She popped one of her sleeping pills, so I expect her to be out like a light for most of the day."

More like, she's scanning our rooms for surveillance equipment and starting to compile a map of the compound, but Aronov doesn't need to know that shit.

"I am glad you do not suffer the same affliction." Raising his cup, he inhales a deep breath of fragrant steam before drinking. "In fact... I hear you left my compound this morning."

Jesus, he does have his fingers in everything.

Still smiling like I don't hear the thinly veiled threat, I shrug. "Just for my usual run. Your vineyard is gorgeous. Much better than running in the city."

Aronov sets his cup down on its matching saucer. The porcelain clatters, jarring in the quiet. "Regardless, I would prefer you not leave without an appropriate escort."

I jerk, feigning confusion. "What? Why?"

While his tone remains light, his smile hardens. "For your safety, of course."

"Oh, come now," I reply. "Who's going to hurt me out here?" I give him a flirty little wink. "A farmer?"

The hard smile erases completely. "No, but there are... certain individuals who might wish to harm you. If nothing else, just to spite me."

Or maybe you just don't want your toys escaping.

The silence is deafening, and in a move that would make Spooky proud, I let the stillness do its magic, ballooning into something truly uncomfortable. Replaying Masen's earlier warnings, I let the playful smile drop. I mirror Aronov's flat, emotionless expression, tilt my head, and study the man like a hawk might the field mouse.

When the tension pricks enough that he turns restless, I softly ask, "You mean, like the people at your party the other night?"

Aronov freezes, and then a low, throaty chuckle spills out. Something dark and predatory moves in his eyes as the real Aronov comes out to play. "Ah, so you are observant, after all."

Not daring to look away, I calmly clasp my hands in my lap. "It was pretty obvious, don't you think?"

He doesn't answer for a second, but then his chin dips once. "It is true that I have certain *associates* who... fall into gray zones."

Gray... outright evil... okay, we'll go with that.

I nod. "I can understand that."

Aronov's eyebrows lift as he takes another sip of his tea. "Can you?"

"I believe I told you that my father founded a weapons company."

Masen finally moves. It's no more than a slight rustle of fabric, but it's enough to tell me that I've caught him off guard.

"Yes, I recall," Aronov answers, and intrigue colors the roughness of his voice. "Black Swan Armaments. I am aware of your late father's holdings."

"While I'm not involved in the business, I'm not naïve." I reach across the table to the glass of sparkling water Maria left when she delivered Aronov's tea and take a long, slow drink to wash away the remaining taste of my coffee. When I swallow, Aronov watches my throat with far more interest than I'd ever want. "I'm well aware that certain kinds of... business transactions can be fraught with less-than-ideal characters and situations."

Lying and throwing my father under the bus makes me want to hurl.

But if I know nothing else, I know that the late Colonel Charles Swan wouldn't give two shits about his name or reputation if it meant me taking this son of a bitch out.

Knowing my dad, he'd be right here offering to sell Aronov the weapons himself and he'd laugh when I finally put a bullet through this motherfucker's skull.

"Well, this makes things much, *much* easier." Aronov's eyes gleam, and he lets out another one of those low, gravelly laughs. "So, given your prior *exposure*, you must understand why I insist upon you being protected while under my care."

"I understand," I say, stealing a lightning-fast look over to Masen before directing my attention back to Aronov. "But I will have to decline restrictions on my comings and goings."

Anger wars with rapt fascination.

"Willful woman."

He says it like it's a curse, but he licks his lips right after.

"If that's what you want to call it," I say, dancing the tightrope. Across the table, Masen shifts in his seat. His expression is as dull and flat as I've ever seen it, but when I start to look away, I catch something else buried beneath the boredom – the barest hint of appreciation.

Aronov misses it completely.

Oblivious, he croons, "You are as willful as you are beautiful, Bella Swan." He reaches over and strokes the back of my hand, and I have to remind myself not to break his fingers. "And I find that to be an... intoxicating combination."

I offer him a bland smile. "Be that as it may, while I appreciate the concern for my safety, unlike the women you may be accustomed to, I have no interest in being someone's pet, and I won't be caged, however gilded the bars may be."

"Is that so?" Aronov pulls my hand to his lips, softly kissing my fingertips as he murmurs, "I do love a challenge."

Yeah, I don't think he's going to like this one.

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Notes:

Russian (transliterated):

Madam, vy ne mozhete uyti: Madam, you may not leave

Vse v poryadke. Ona mozhet uyti: It's okay. She can go.

V lyubom sluchaye, ty ne mozhesh' poymat' yeye: Either way, you can't catch her

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

"How's your headache?"

Rosalie's head pops up right as I slip through the door.

"All better," she says. Sprawled out on one of the leather couches facing the massive medieval stone fireplace in the center of our private sitting room, Rosalie chucks her laptop over to the cushion beside her and grins. "Absolutely *nothing* lingering."

"You're kidding." Cocking a brow, I cross the room, padding over the plush Persian rug topping the pristine and – what looks to be – perfectly restored original stone floor. "Nothing?"

"Nope, I checked everywhere. Twice." When I slump down on the matching couch across from hers and kick my feet up onto the antique, rough-cut coffee table between us, Rosalie shakes her head, like she can't believe it herself. "Either that motherfucker's arrogant or stupid."

We look at each other for a heartbeat before saying in unison, "*Arrogant.*"

I laugh and then proceed to tell her about the drop point and my *illuminating* conversations over breakfast.

"Fuck, that guy's disgusting," she says, wrinkling her nose as she pulls her hair up into a messy ponytail. I don't say a word about her being in one of McCarty's ratty t-shirts, and instead busy myself loosening and untying my running shoes. "Seriously, I can't wait until we take his ass out and get the hell out of here."

In a move that would give Emmett a stroke if he were here, I toss my shoes and socks over by the wall and angle to face the fire. I don't know how long it's been going, but the flames roar inside the hearth, and the heat pouring out feels like a dream as it washes over my sore muscles. "So, what you're saying is you'd rather be beating the shit out of Stanley and Mallory."

"Any day." Rosalie flashes me another beatific smile. "Think they miss me?"

"Doubtful. McCarty has Weber handling the physical routines while we're all out, and she's way nicer than you." I snort. "Oh, but apparently, when she's bored, Spooky's continuing their *psychological training* herself... virtually." An involuntary shudder rolls down my spine, a reaction that has absolutely nothing to do with the cooler temperature of the room behind me. "I don't think I want to know what she has them doing."

"*Shit.*" Rosalie makes an ugly face. "She's a scary little woman, you know that? Have you read her files? Like what she used to do back in the interrogation units?"

I nod, because I *have* read those files and I've seen her operate in person – on and off the books. Rosalie's not lying. Alice can be downright terrifying, honestly more than me sometimes. See, with me, there's an end – a bullet or broken neck or a little C4 under your car. But with Spooky... she'll just turn your brain inside out, extract what she wants, and then, smiling all the while, leave you stewing in madness.

I *almost* feel sorry for those damned recruits.

Rosalie gives herself her own little shake, and that ugly expression abruptly vanishes, morphing into something a little more serious. Her voice drops, too. "So, what about Masen?"

I arch against the cushions, stretching my back until the vertebrae crunch and crack, and shrug. "What about him?"

"Think he suspects?"

"Probably..." I say, grimacing. "Masen's not an idiot and he's been trained the same as us." I stretch again and then scrub my face in agitation. Dried sweat and grit from my run turn my skin tacky, reminding me all over again just how much I need a shower. "I'm sure he knows *something* is up, but I don't think he's put all the pieces together. He's sent out a couple of feelers, but he's still throwing off too many conflicting signals."

Across the table, Rosalie's quiet for a moment before finally blowing out a long, slow breath. "Maybe we should tell him. See how he responds."

"Not yet." Staring at the flickering red and yellow blaze, I shake my head. "Not until I get a better feel for what's really going on with him." A large, charred log at the bottom of the stack crackles and splits, sending a spray of sparking embers upward into the higher flames. "When we're alone, he acts like he wants to be the good guy, but... I watched him execute Taeb and his men. All it took was a single command from Aronov. No hesitation. No remorse. Ice runs through that man's veins."

Rosalie scoffs. "Right, like you can talk."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, but she's not exactly wrong. "I still don't know what role he had in taking out those CIA operatives." I look over to Rosalie. "But he definitely knows something about Cullen, that's for damned sure. I'd like to know what that is."

"You think Masen has him tucked away somewhere?"

"Who, Cullen?"

Rosalie hums an affirmative.

"Maybe?" Lips mashing, I sort through all the little tells and hints. I swear I'm the one that's going to end up with a migraine from all this. "Or maybe Aronov's holding onto Cullen as leverage. Or one of Aronov's buddies is doing it for him... Who knows." I give her a bland smile. "That's why we're here."

"*Shit.*" Rosalie lets out a low whistle and then shoots me a pointed look. "Maybe Masen's just setting up to take Aronov's whole operation down. That'd explain some things."

I hope so, but all I say is a quiet, "We'll see," and then swap topics before she dives into all the other shit I *really* don't want to talk about. "What do you think about the drop?"

Smirking at my pitiable lack of subtlety, Rosalie grabs her laptop, taps in a quick search, and then spins the screen around. "Tonight is going to be absolute dog shit, weather-wise. Front's coming through. Temps are going to drop at least twenty degrees. Freezing rain, sleet, low visibility." She gifts me a wide, toothy, *taunting* grin. "In other words, *perfect.*"

My head thumps against the rolled armrest. "Wonderful," I say, sighing more to myself than her. "Just fucking wonderful."

Rosalie's shoulders shake in undisguised amusement. The woman knows how much I hate the cold. "You want me to go?"

"No," I answer, tsking and rolling my eyes. "You need to make an appearance with Aronov. Keep that asshole busy."

"Ugh."

Normally, it'd be my turn to smirk, but I don't blame her. Aronov makes my skin crawl. "Tell me about it."

Sagging deeper in the cushions, she glances over and wrinkles her nose. "I really hope I don't have to fuck him. I'd probably puke... Or murder him the second he whipped out his cock."

"Well, that's one plan, I suppose..." My tone is as dry as a desert, but when she scowls, my lips twitch before I can stop them. "But no, I don't want it to come to that either," I say and then wave at the over-sized olive drab tee. "And I'm *sure* McCarty doesn't want it to."

Without warning, a down-stuffed, silk pillow with pretty little tassels flies at my head. "Fuck you, Swan."

The clock chimes nine right as I give the windowsill, frame, and nearby walls a final once-over, searching for any hint of alarm or motion detection. Just like Rosalie said, there's absolutely nothing. The room is clean, something neither of us expected.

Frankly, it's more than a little suspicious, but every time I look around, my radar pings for a different reason. It's this tiny tingle in the back of my head that says Masen had something to do with this. I don't know how, or why, and maybe it's just wishful thinking, but I'd bet my last paycheck on it.

Either way, I need to move.

With a quick zip of my jacket, I pull my balaclava down, tug on a pair of gloves, and ease out of the window onto the narrow stone shelf two feet below the sill. The thing is no more than a foot wide, and at three stories off the ground, it's a precarious perch, especially in the dark and with tonight's wind, but that's what sticky shoes and training are for. Worrying about falling is a waste of time.

Low and silent, I creep like a black-on-black shadow along the ledge toward the western corner fifty yards away. There's a minor hole in their grid there, where the angles of the cameras don't quite overlap. Once the sleet and freezing rain really start coming down, the cameras won't matter at all, especially with the darkness of the compound, but for now, I need to avoid them. Right along that corner edge, a heavy, black iron gutter leads all the way down to the gardens and mazes.

It's a slow, halting trek along my little ledge. Halfway there, right as I'm ducking under another pair of windows, a lamp comes to life inside the room, and its soft, warm light shines like a beacon through the glass. I scramble left and plaster myself against the rough stone bricks, just in time to avoid the outward swing of the casement style window.

Men's voices, quiet, deep, and in rapid-fire Russian, filter out. The whipping wind muffles the conversation, but I pick out a word or two and hear enough to know that one of them is Aronov's Dmitri. Without warning, a calloused hand breaks the plane of the window, coming far too close for comfort, to flick the glowing butt of a cigarette.

Fuck.

It takes them a solid five minutes to move on, and for the entirety of that time, I don't move an inch. No, instead, I just freeze my ass off and try to avoid the curls of pungent smoke from Dmitri's hand-rolled cigarettes. I'm just grateful they're not puffing cigars. Those things reek and take for-fucking-ever to burn down.

My muscles uncoil when the window finally clicks shut. A beat later, the light vanishes, and with no more than a single, slow breath of relief, I start moving again, not stopping until I'm right at my target corner. Stealing a fast glance at the dark ground below, I

grab the gutter and give it a hard tug, just to test the bolts holding it to the stone. The thing doesn't even rattle, and as I swing out, plant my feet, and lean back, I throw up a quick prayer of thanks to the artisans of old.

With the grip of my gloves, the sturdiness of the iron, and the coarseness of the stone beneath my shoes, the descent feels like child's play - just quick little ropeless rappel walk down. Climbing back up will be another story, especially with gear, but I figure as long as I can get back before the gutter's layered in ice, I'll be fine.

My soles hit the grass with a muted thud, and I immediately dart into the shadows behind the closest line of hedges. Taking a second to adjust my mental map, I peek over the top, watching for the guards and especially those damned dogs. Those Malinois are the last thing I want to deal with tonight. They're loud, and their teeth hurt like a bitch.

But more importantly, I *like* dogs, even grumpy dogs, far more than I like their handlers, and I have absolutely zero desire to hurt one just for doing its fucking job.

The guards... they're another story.

As quiet as a church mouse, I drop low and thread between the rows of tall winter hedges in a slow, winding, circuitous path through the maze of bushes and sculpted tress, avoiding the spiderweb of cameras and motion equipment I tagged just this morning.

Three rows deep, gravel crunches.

Like on the ledge, I instantly freeze, holding my breath as I stare through the sparser branches at the bottom of the bushes and watch a pair of black combat boots slowly meander toward me. Angled down in a low ready, the barrel of a brand spanking new A-545 rifle glints in the dark. On instinct, my muscles flex and loosen. My heart rate slows to a steady thump, readying for the strike as I simultaneously sink even lower to the ground and hug tight against the hedge.

A young, dark-haired guard stops right on the other side.

His gear clanks in the silence as he brushes up against the prickly leaves and branches. I feel him more than I see him as he scans the gardens over the top of the hedge line.

All that motherfucker has to do is lean forward, just a little, and look down, and my night's going to get a lot more interesting.

Listening, I track his movements.

He steps left, then right, and then he turns back. He's right on top of me again and surveying the grounds.

Just when I think I'm going to have to either take him out or retreat back to our rooms, his radio bleats out a pulse of static, followed by a low baritone growling in Russian. "*Oleg, gde ty?*"

Tsking under his breath, Oleg angles toward one of the buildings in the distance and taps the mike clipped to his tactical vest. "*V labirinte.*"

"*Tashchi svoyu zadnitsu syuda.*"

"*Da, da, khorosho,*" Oleg says back and then spits over the bushes, barely missing me. I almost laugh when he mutters a low, grumbled, "*Mudak.*"

Assholes, they may be, but I'm with his comrades; I'm all for this kid getting his ass back to wherever he's stationed.

Oleg paces behind the hedges, like some primitive part of his hindbrain *knows* I'm there, but after another thirty seconds of electrified tension, where the cool air ghosting across my skin feels like it's sparking, right on the verge of combustion, he finally clucks his tongue and moves on. Still tucked in my tiny ball, I watch him through the branches as he ambles back toward the north side of the house, following the same gravel path through the lines of hedges.

My back hits the perimeter wall ten minutes later, and with a quick glimpse at my wrist to time the guards, I slink toward the gates. Like they should be, the massive wrought iron affair stands closed, but there's a hinged walkthrough on the left-hand side sitting ajar. Either Aronov's guards are lazy, or their night rounds include an exterior patrol.

I hope they're just lazy.

But... fifteen yards. That's all I need to clear before I'm out.

And I may not have another chance to get to that drop point if I don't get my ass out there tonight.

Creeping toward the walkthrough, I pick up a pair of guards in the distance, crossing the lawn between the guard shack and the main house. A ninety-pound ball of fur and teeth walks between them, and even though I'm downwind and nearly seventy-five yards away, I shoot behind a stone pillar and go as still as death itself. I stay there, barely breathing, until the guards and their canine friend slip through a heavy wooden door leading into one of the adjacent buildings.

"Okay, Swan, let's go," I whisper to myself, and with one last lightning-quick scan of the compound, I suck in a deep breath and pop out from behind the pillar. I dash across those last remaining yards to the narrow opening of the walkthrough. As soon as my shoe hits stone, I lay on the speed, whipping around the metal latticework to target the darkness and shadows of the exterior wall.

Instead of taking the paved drive, I jump the waist-high ditch on the side of the road and enter the fields. Sneaking between the long lines of dormant vines, beneath the moonlit sky, I move from row to row to row in a random zigzag pattern, following the map of cameras and alarms I memorized on my run this morning. Here and there, vines snag my jacket, but I don't slow down, not until I hit the line of tall, skinny cypresses.

Even though my watch says only thirty minutes pass, it feels like it takes forever to cross the vineyard and reach that ramshackle building tucked in the middle of Aronov's olive grove. But as I slowly circle the trunk of one of the larger trees and duck beneath one of its sweeping boughs, I grin.

It's deathly quiet out here, and with the soft, foggy glow of the moon behind the low-slung clouds, there's just enough light to make out the shape of the crumpled roofline and the black mouth of the vacant door.

I prowl to the doorway, pausing low and tight against the adjacent wall to scan the immediate area. Looking out into the dark, I see nothing more than dancing shadows. Gusts of wind rustle the trees, and somewhere in the distance, I pick up the low rumble of an engine, but hollow and muffled, it's barely more than an echo.

Dropping to a knee, I peer into the hollowed-out building. With the caved in roof, the moonlight filters in, illuminating the cobblestone floor. Antique steel and wooden farm implements hang from the crumbling walls. Broken ladders lay across the floor, and in the corner, sits an ancient manually driven olive press, complete with a pair of enormous stone grinding wheels and lever.

Bingo.

I ease through the open door and cross the stone floor in a handful of quick strides, aiming for the wheels and the screw press a dozen feet away.

When I peek around the press, another grin curves my lips. "Thank you, McCarty," I whisper, instantly locating the all-too-familiar outline of a black, heavy denier pack and matching compact rifle case.

Kneeling, I target the pack and unzip the outer compartment to find my Glock, already fitted with BSA's latest and greatest experimental suppressor. Coupled with my subsonic rounds, this thing'll fire barely above a whisper. Not wasting any time, I grab a magazine, pop it into the well, and slip the weapon under my jacket into the back waistband of my leggings. "*Better.*"

I check my wrist again, cursing under my breath when I see it's almost ten. But about the time I go to shoulder my pack and rifle, the hair on the back of my neck stands at attention.

Every cell in my body stills.

Almost as if in slow motion, I catch a whiff of a light, musky male aftershave on the breeze, right as a twig snaps just outside the door. Silently, never looking away from the empty door, I lower my gear back to the stone floor and reach behind me to grab my Glock. I pull my weapon out, aiming chest-high at the door.

"*Kto zdes'?*" a man abruptly yells, and I piece the voice with the same blond gate guard from this morning.

I don't respond. Instead, as soon as I eye the reflection off his carbine as it edges around the doorframe, I spin on my heel and throw myself behind the grinding wheels.

Mother. Fucker.

There's no possible way this is ending well, not when Masen's *Andrey* spots my gear on the floor and bellows another garbled command for me to show myself in Russian.

Of course, I don't.

I'm not stupid.

I throw a handful of pebbles across the room to draw his eyes and cover my movement and then belly crawl from the grinding stones to the press. As soon as I hit the press, in a single, whip-quick move, I vault up and sprint to a wide, two-by-two column in the center of the room.

The blond is fast, but like Masen told him just this morning, there's no way he's catching me. Before he can grab his radio, I bolt from behind the column and rush him.

His eyes boggle with instant shock and panic.

Lowering my shoulder, I slam into him, knocking us both into the wall in a spray of debris and rocky shards. The guard lets out a strangled cry as his head pops against the stone, and I use that split second of pain and confusion to snatch the barrel of his rifle and twist it out of his grip. His rifle sling swivels and catches around his neck like a noose, and I use it as a pivot, swinging around behind him and choking him with the wide canvas strap.

A hard, meaty fist glances off my shoulder, and I kick his legs out from under him. When he goes to punch me again, I take his rifle and spin it like a corkscrew, cinching the strap tighter and tighter around his throat.

"*Vy odin?*" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

Because if he wasn't alone, I'd already be dead.

Or at least a lot less alive.

"Da," Andrey answers, sputtering and gasping for air. I yank his mike off his vest and throw it into the corner of the room. His arms flail, trying to grab me, but on his knees and slowly choking out, he's hitting nothing but air.

"Vy Izhete mne." I spin his rifle again, cranking down on the strap as it turns, and then ram the pretty, new suppressed barrel of my Glock into the soft tissue directly beneath his chin.

Andrey hacks out a panicked, "*Net! Ya ne Igu! Ya klyanus'.*"

Goddamnit.

I want to kick myself for this shit.

I should have known better.

What a fucking disaster.

"Alright," I say, slowly easing off the tension. "Where's the other guards? Where's the dogs?" I ram my knee into his kidney, earning a low, wheezy groan of pain. "*Gde ostal'nyye okhranniki? Sobaki?*"

"*Ikh zdes' net. Oni na territorii kompleksa...*" The guard's eyes roll up, trying to find me, and his voice goes soft and pleading. "*Net nuzhdy ubivat' menya.*"

That's where you're wrong, buddy. We can't afford loose strings right now.

Plus, judging by the telltale images stamped on his knuckles and glinting in the moonlight, Andrey here has done his fair share of evil.

Not to mention the fact that his hand's slowly creeping down to his ankle, to the matte black combat knife sticking out of his boot.

I give the guy a small, sad smile, and like the cold-blooded executioner I am, I pull my trigger and take his ass out.

Whitlock's going to give me so much shit for this.

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Notes:

I know, I know, you ladies want some Edward time. But after dealing with that slimeball, Aro, B needed to vent some steam. Edward will be back next chapter, I promise :)

Thank you so much for reading. I truly love hearing your thoughts and theories. Ya'll really do make this such fun for me.

Russian (transliterated):

Oleg, gde ty: Oleg, where are you

V labirinte: In the maze (or labyrinth)

Tashchi svoyu zadnitsu syuda: Get your ass back here

Da, da, khorosho: Yeah, yeah, okay

Mudak: Asshole

Vy odin: Are you alone?

Da: Yes

Vy lzhetе mne: You're lying to me

Net! Ya ne lgu! Ya klyanus': No! I'm not lying! I swear it

Gde ostal'nyye okhranniki? Sobaki: Where are the other guards? The dogs?

Ikh zdes' net. Oni na territorii kompleksa: They're not here. They're at the compound.

Net nuzhdy ubivat' menya: There is no need to kill me.

Glossary:

A-545: a modernized variant of the AEK-971 assault rifle, which is currently manufactured by Degtyaryov Plant (one of the most important weapons producers in Russia). It's chambered 5.45x39mm or 7.62x39mm. The weapon is used by Spetznaz and some Airborne personnel

Suppressor: also known as a silencer. This is a handy little device that you attach to a rifle or a pistol to reduce the sound the weapon makes when it fires. Despite what Hollywood wants you to believe, a suppressor alone won't make your weapon silent (usually will take you down to roughly the decibel level of a vacuum). For real silence, you need special *subsonic ammo*.

Subsonic ammunition: is ammunition that operates at velocities below the speed of sound. This avoids the supersonic shockwave or crack of a supersonic bullet, which, particularly for suppressed firearms, influences the loudness of the shot. In some specific weapon/suppressor/subsonic ammo combinations, you can achieve a shot that's very close to silent.

***Chapter 17*: Chapter 17**

Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight. I'm borrowing her characters and giving them some guns (again).

Unbeta'd, unedited.

Happy Valentine's Day! :)

By the time I step out of the shower, my watch reads almost eleven.

As much as I'd like to stay in and soak away the last two hours of cold in the ridiculous spa-like luxury of this bathroom, I need to get my ass out of here and be seen by at least a few of Aronov's staff. Never mind that it's late, it's called plausible deniability, and I'm going to need that shit once they figure out Andrey's missing.

Plus, after that little dance in the olive mill and subsequent race back, I'm too wired to sleep anyway.

Wrapping myself in a blanket-sized towel from the heated rack, I force myself to exit glorious, humid warmth. Padding across the stone floor of my bedroom, I target a pair of darkened windows and pull back the heavy silk drapes.

By day, the view from my corner suite is spectacular, ranging out a full one-hundred and eighty degrees across Aronov's vast, rolling acreage of vineyards, groves, and farmland, set against the distant, craggy mountains topped by snow. At night, it's a surreal dream. Far enough away from the ambient glow of Florence, the stars will shine like diamonds once the sleet and freezing rain finally pass through. Even now, the thin layer of ice coating the grounds gleams in the dim glow of the outside lamps.

Like the rest of Aronov's *home*, the rooms themselves are a master class in both comfort and affluence. Fine, silky Egyptian linens top the gigantic poster bed. Antique cabinets and end tables in matching burl walnut sit on top of plush, hand-woven rugs. Across from the bed, there's a second fireplace, yet another massive medieval affair, much like the one out in the sitting room, only this one's more elaborate, with intricate, colorful ceramic tilework framing the hearth.

Then, there's the Chagall.

Bathed in soft, warm light on the center wall, it's impossible to miss. The thing's as real as they come, and it's one of his masterpieces, too, a romantic, fanciful scene of two lovers embracing against the backdrop of flowering bushes and a moonlit sky.

It's not lost on me that the pale, dark-haired woman in the painting is Chagall's wife, nor that we share a common name.

While I'm more than aware of the state of Aronov's bank accounts, frankly, I'm still stunned that he could pull off that kind of acquisition on such short notice. But I'll give him credit; it's a slick move and far more subtle than his usual advances.

Either way, I have more important things to deal with.

Like the fucking dead guy outside.

Grabbing my phone off the nearby table, I tap in my code and open the hidden app. Whitlock's reply to my earlier message appears instantly.

The Traveling Cowboy: Un-fucking-believable

I roll my eyes because, really, where have I heard *that* before.

What can I say? I have a gift ;)

TheTravelingCowboy: *That is not the word I'd use*

Manageable?

TheTravelingCowboy: *And now you're insulting me*

You know you love me

TheTravelingCowboy: *We have very different definitions of love*

TheTravelingCowboy: *But yes. Em's already on it*

City?

At a little over an hour away, Florence would be my optimal choice. With the river winding through town, there are plenty of opportunities to hide a body or two, at least for a couple of days, while Whitlock hacks Andrey's accounts and sets him up to fall. And with the recent movements of the Families moving further north from their strongholds in the south, it's not going to be that hard to spread around the blame. Hell, considering what we've seen of Koshmarin, an internal hit is just as plausible.

TheTravelingCowboy: *Likely*

You know how brothers can be, always fighting

TheTravelingCowboy: *I do. I'll take care of it... like always*

You're the best

TheTravelingCowboy: *Now you're just stating the obvious*

Before logging out, I snap a quick pic of the Chagall and send it over.

By the way, this is hanging in my room. See what you can find out. Show it to Spooky, too. I want to know what she thinks

TheTravelingCowboy: *Will do*

TheTravelingCowboy: *And be careful. Please. Eli's already called twice. He's threatening to come get you himself*

Pfft, tell him to chill

TheTravelingCowboy: *I'm not stupid. Now turn your phone off for a couple of hours. I need to wipe the history and reload*

Chuckling at the hateful scowl I *know* he's sporting, I do as I'm told, toss my phone into the drawer by the bed, and throw on some clothes. Before slipping downstairs, I do a final check of my weapons and their hiding spots.

See, the nice thing about castles and gigantic rooms is the nearly infinite possibilities for tucking away small items, especially when you're willing to pry up the ancient, hand-cut timber planks beneath the rugs in Rosalie's room. Or when you don't mind carving

out the underside of your box springs. Or when you can climb the stone walls high enough to reach the recessed window ledge near the top of the double ceiling.

Satisfied that our gear is safe from prying eyes, at least for now, I pull the door behind me and quietly make my way to the curved marble of the grand center staircase at the far end of the hall. I clock the distance and rooms as I pass by, noting the slivers of light outlining a few of the doors.

Halfway down, I slow when I hear Rosalie's throaty laugh coming from somewhere deep on the second floor. Aronov's low, masculine purr answers, followed by a flirtatious exchange I can't quite pick out. Regardless, from her tone, she's got that son of a bitch eating out of her hand, so I'm content to move on and do my thing. Echoing in the background, there's a handful of other voices, too, as well as the distant rumble of a television.

I finally find my mark down on the main floor.

"Feliks," I call out, waving down the giant of a man right as he slides through a door leading into the central kitchen. At the sound of my voice, the bodyguard immediately spins, and like the rest of Aronov's crew, despite the hour, Feliks still wears his usual uniform of a suit and tie. Beneath the tailored jacket, I catch the subtle shape of twin holsters against his ribs. He's armed and ready, even here in the house, but the open amber bottle in his meaty fist tells me he's off duty.

"Ms. Swan." Feliks dips his head in polite acknowledgment. Like Aronov's Mitya, this one's moderately accented English is superb, and like any good professional, he quickly masks his surprise at my sudden appearance. Offering me a small smile that does nothing to soften the harsh lines of his face, he says, "It is late for you to be out roaming."

I don't miss the subtle rebuke.

"Come now, I'm on vacation," I say, laughing like the good little socialite I'm pretending to be. "It's not late at all." I pause and let a bit of pink climb my cheeks to sell my next line. "I do need some help, though..."

Feliks chuffs, and from the fidgeting line of his shoulders, I can tell the poor guy has no clue how to argue with his boss's small, American, would-be lover. He hesitates but then, with a poorly contained sigh, nods in a single, quick affirmative. "Of course. How may I assist you?"

I step closer. Taking a cue from my partner-cum-Academy Award winner, I slowly run my fingertips along his forearm, all the way from his wrist to his elbow. Hard, bulky muscle twitches beneath the fine wool, but he doesn't do a thing to reject my touch. If anything, he leans in closer.

Jesus, this is easy.

"This afternoon," I say, drawing it out. "Misha told me there was a pool somewhere." Putting on a little pout, I wave a haphazard hand, purposefully skipping past the set of stairs that I already know leads to the lower levels. "And maybe a steam room and sauna?" I flash him a row of teeth and make a show of worrying my bottom lip. "I would *kill* for a soak and a glass of wine before bed."

"Down the stairs one level. Just past the gymnasium and *banya*, you will find the path to pool." His answer pops out a little too fast, and as eyes fall in a quick scan down my frame, that small smile of his widens. His throat moves beneath the loosened tie looping his neck. "Would you like me to show you the way? Or perhaps you wish... company?"

Wow.

Not smart, buddy.

"I don't want to take you away from your evening," I tell him, motioning at his beer, and then give his arm a little squeeze, enough to soften the blow. "Plus, I wouldn't want to cause any *problems* for you with your... *employer*." I let that sink in, and from the nearly instantaneous brace of his jaw, it does.

Ah, that's right.

Your boss doesn't like sharing his toys.

"Yes, of course," Feliks replies, straightening at once as he gestures at the stairs behind me. "Please enjoy your swim, Ms. Swan, and let me know if you have any troubles."

I throw Aronov's guard a flirty little wink over my shoulder, doing my damndest to restrain the amused twitch of my lips.

How Rosalie keeps this shit up, I'll never know.

Less than ten minutes later, I finish my brief exploration of the empty gym, steam rooms, and an expansive, distinctively patterned, ash-lined sauna and follow the hallway as Feliks said. At the very end, right as I step out of the open doorway onto an arced stone catwalk, some twenty feet in the air, I stop dead in my tracks.

Aronov wasn't joking when he said he had a pool underneath his castle.

With a wandering natural shape and covering at least half the footprint of the structure above, it's more like an underground lake than a pool, surrounded by natural rock and the massive blocks of the castle's foundation. At one end, curtains of water cascade off a wide ledge high above, concealing a cave-like grotto. In the center, gargantuan stone support pillars rising to the ceiling sit like islands in the middle of pale, glowing turquoise. Along the walls, dimly lit sconces flicker and dance.

The effect is mesmerizing, and I don't even bother to go all the way down to check it out.

Instead, I duck back into the changing room between the steam room and the sauna, where I locate a small boutique's worth of *guest* bathing suits. Unsurprisingly, there's not a single garment meant for function. No, because this is Aronov we're talking about, they're all barely-there scraps of fabric meant to showcase the wearer versus providing real support.

Without thinking, I grab a slinky black one-piece that's supposedly my size. The flimsy thing offers virtually nothing in the way of a back, and the deep, plunging V of the halter neckline hits me damned near to the navel, but I really don't care.

When I said I'd kill for a soak, I meant it.

Exiting the changing room, I cross the catwalk and descend the stairs at the opposite end. The second I hit the travertine decking and spot the triplet of Olympic-sized lanes hiding behind the center pillars, I realize my mistake.

I'm not the only one down here, after all.

And I'd recognize that man a mile away.

Smooth and lightning-fast, Masen sluices through the water in a streamlined, economical crawl that eats up the length of the lane. Like everything else about him, he's quiet even here, too, barely making a splash, despite the power and purpose behind the strokes.

Considering his background, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, but I am. I'm not used to seeing this kind of focus and elegance of movement in the men I work with. Unable to resist, I walk to the edge on silent feet, and for a minute, I forget the dead man outside and just... watch him move.

I smile when he flip-turns at the end and starts his return lap.

Thirty feet away, Masen abruptly dives below the surface. A second later, now just over five feet away from my edge, a shaking head pops up, followed by the upper half of a chiseled chest.

Wet and slicked back, his hair's darker, and in the low light of the cavern, Masen's eyes look like midnight as they slowly climb from my legs to the deep V of my suit before finally settling on my face. I don't know what he sees, but there's a certain languidness in his silent gaze, echoed in the not-quite smile on his lips. His ribcage expands and contracts a little faster than usual, and his breath comes out a little shallower. I wonder just how long he's been going and how many miles he's already logged.

For a moment, neither of us say anything, and I continue my own perusal, noting the crisp lines of black and gray covering his left pectoral and shoulder. It's a superbly done nautical piece – a north-reading compass set against a shaded, old-world map – and on his right, the same side as the bone frog on his inner forearm, clean, cursive script decorates his ribs. It's too dark, and I'm too far away to read, but I'd bet my paycheck he's wearing a list of names.

One brow finally arches. "You coming in, or are we just going to stare at each other?"

My shoulders shake, but I walk over to the nearby stairs without a word.

I try and miserably fail to suppress my reaction when the cool water hits the bare skin of my thighs. It's not like it's *cold*, at least not compared to the last couple of hours of sleet and winter wind, but still. It's not exactly a hot tub either.

"Jesus," I mutter as I ease my way deeper.

"Come on, it's not that bad," Masen says, grinning that stupidly attractive grin of his. When I grimace, he tsks, right on the verge of laughing, and I swear I'm going to smack the teasing out of him. "Just go under, and you'll get used to it."

I shoot him a pissed-off scowl, even though I know he's right. When I finally dunk my head and come up, pushing the hair off my face, that teasing vanishes, however. He hasn't moved an inch, and as he watches me approach, those probing eyes of his shade even darker.

"So," I say, stopping no more than a foot away. Even balancing on my tiptoes, the water hits me right at the tops of my shoulders. "This is how you keep in shape?"

Masen's cheeks crease because he and I both know that *in shape* is a bit of an understatement.

See, coming out of the Unit and in my line of work, I'm used to a certain level of fitness and strength, especially when it comes to field operatives. It's just part of the job. But Masen's chest and abdomen might as well be carved out of granite, and his arms are nothing but hard, lean muscle and sinew, tanned from years in the sandbox.

For someone like me – someone who's used to being able to take down pretty much any opponent in the room – knowing that *he* could likely take *me*?

That kind of lethal, masculine physicality is downright exhilarating.

"Habit, I guess." He shrugs in a lazy, nonchalant roll of his shoulders, but the lingering intensity in his features tells another story. "And most of the time, especially when I'm down here alone, I find it relaxing."

"Most of the time?"

Masen steps toward me, and when I automatically float back in retreat, his grin stretches, and he follows. "I think you know what I mean."

I give him my best mask of innocence. "No, I don't."

Masen doesn't answer for a long moment and instead slowly corrals me away from the end of the pool, out of sight from the catwalk above and toward the back side of the center pillars. As we bob through the pale, calm water, his irises brighten and gleam. The normally hard line of his lips softens, and the sleek muscles along his shoulders and arms flex and loosen.

This is the most comfortable and most at ease I've ever seen this man. He's shockingly attractive, and I am definitely not immune.

"What are you looking at?" I finally ask as I prop my elbows on a submerged shelf by the wall. I kick my feet up in a slow, cycling motion to float on my back.

Masen chases my movements, and his voice drops in both pitch and volume when he speaks. "You."

I stare at the intricate, shaded lines of the map on his chest. Opposite the compass, a geared clock strikes twelve on the inside of his bicep. "Why's that?"

"In my line of work, you learn to recognize threats pretty quickly, and you're a very dangerous woman."

He's not wrong, but I don't think we're using the same definitions right now.

My brows climb, even as my lips curve. "Dangerous?"

"You heard me," he says, and beneath the water, I feel his hand drift down my spine before flattening against the dip in my lower back. It's a light, gentle press, just enough support that my body instinctively relaxes, and I float higher in the water. "And I should stay far, far away from you."

"Are you always this honest?"

"Depends on the topic and who I'm with." The brace against my back disappears. Before I can sink, he pushes my knees down and apart and moves to stand between them.

"Okay, then how about this," I say, drawing it out when he runs his palms down my calves. "Remember several nights ago at the restaurant? Your boss said something to me in Russian."

Masen stills. "I remember."

I pause for a second, studying the path of a lone droplet as it trails down the side of his neck and along the valley of his chest, where it disappears in the black and gray camouflage. "What did Aronov say to me?"

Masen's grip slides up my calves to the underside of my knees, and then he hitches my legs around his waist. An involuntary shiver races down my spine when he slowly leans in closer, tracing the shell of my ear with his lips. The touch is as light as a feather, but I feel it all the way down to my toes. As soft as spun silk, he murmurs, "Are we still pretending you don't understand Russian?"

It takes everything I have not to laugh. I angle my face toward him, rasping against day-old stubble and earning my own slight shudder when I whisper back. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

His whole body shakes with silent laughter as I let him pull me away from the wall. Snaking my arms over his shoulders, I lock my wrists around his neck, loosely holding myself up.

"Fine." Those shaking shoulders of his abruptly cease. A sharp huff of anger spills out, and when I look up, a rare display of icy fury stares back at me. Masen's jaw ticks, and

I don't miss the accompanying spasm of his grip around my thighs. "He said he wanted to hear you say *very good* when he fucks your throat."

Hearing it out of his mouth doesn't have quite the same effect.

Nonetheless, recalling Aronov's slick, oily ogling as he purred out the phrase sends a not-so-pleasant image flashing through my brain, and my nose crinkles. It's an honest response, too, never mind that this isn't new information.

That son of a bitch really will make me lose my lunch one of these days.

"Well," I reply, and I can't hide the dryness that finds its way into my voice. "That's *never* happening. *Ever*."

Masen doesn't respond at first, but then he ducks his chin once in silent, succinct agreement.

We don't speak for a little while longer and instead just float around in a slow, wandering, watery waltz. His thumbs move in tiny patterns across my skin, circling to a rhythm only he can hear. It's as soothing as it is arousing, and the shift in tempo from the previous few hours leaves me almost drunk.

"So," he says after a moment, quiet against the steady rush of the waterfall at the far end of the pool. "If we're being honest with each other, that bit you told Aro this morning about your father. How BSA sells on the black market. True or false?"

"False." I roll my eyes and adjust my hold around his neck. "*Obviously*."

"Yeah? Why?"

"You said to push..." I shrug, and the action generates sparking friction that neither of us misses. Something warm and heavy settles low in my stomach, and, no joke, at this point, between the contrast of the air and cooler water and the man wreaking havoc on my senses, my nipples could probably cut glass, a reaction the flimsy fabric of my suit does nothing to hide. "So, I pushed."

"That, you did." Masen's lips are again at my ear, smiling, and we're close enough that everywhere we touch, heat bleeds from him into me, sending wave after wave of shimmering gooseflesh across my skin. It's a heady, intoxicating sensation that I'm desperate to chase, even though my brain is well aware of the risk I'm taking.

"What are you looking for?" he asks a beat later, tracking my line of sight.

Fuck.

I hadn't even realized I was scanning.

Taking a deep breath, I opt for the truth as I glance over his shoulder to the dark corners high above. "Cameras."

"They're off," he murmurs, lazily running his lips down the side of my neck until my eyes close and I arch to grant him better access.

"What?" My fingers wind themselves through the short, wet hair at his nape, pushing and then tugging him back to where I want him.

"I told you, I pretty much do whatever I want," he says, swallowing as I reposition and sink a little lower in the water. A hard, thick line of male muscle hits my inner thigh, and everything south of my waistline tightens. Masen's fingers spread, inching higher and squeezing my thighs like he *knows* what he's doing to me. "I don't like being watched, and I've made that known as a condition of my... *employment*."

I give myself a little shake to clear my head, and pull back, where I can read his eyes. He stares back at me, not bothering to conceal the near-violent intensity in those

gemstone depths. I swear it feels like he's staring straight through every one of my walls. It's fucking unnerving, but I don't dare look away when I softly ask, "Are there cameras in my suite?"

"No." His answer hits like a punch.

"How do you know?"

Masen hesitates for a second, weighing his own set of risks, but then his gaze drops to my mouth before completing a slow, meandering journey of my face. "I removed them."

That radar of mine rings like a gong. "Why?"

He reaches up and pushes a water-logged strand of hair off my cheek. "That way his security team wouldn't catch you looking for them... which I'm assuming you've already done."

I don't reply to that – I don't need to – nor do I break eye contact when I ask my next question. "How'd you get them to agree?"

His mouth hovers over mine, almost touching. "I didn't ask permission."

As much as I want to follow up on that little admission, I don't.

Spooky always says that you can't push people like Masen too far, too fast. At best, they'll clam up, and you wreck what little trust you've built. At worst, they conclude you're a threat, and they put a bullet in your brain before you know what's happening.

And I'd prefer it if we didn't shoot each other.

We're quiet for another few moments, and Masen eventually walks us back toward the flat, submerged shelf against the center pillar walls. He doesn't let me go, though. No, if anything, he pulls me tighter against his chest when my back lightly bumps the tile. His right continues to hold me up while his left splays out across my ribs. My breathing turns shallow when I feel the slow, gentle stroke of his fingertips along the bottom swell of my breast. Beneath his shorts, he's still hard against my center, and that tension in my gut coils tighter and tighter. My whole body feels like a live wire, just waiting to spark.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask. While I certainly have suspicions, I want to hear him say it.

"I don't think you want to know."

Flashing him a mischievous smile, I run my teeth along his jaw until I'm at his ear. His Adam's apple bobs when my breath tickles across warm, damp skin. "What if I do?"

"All right." Masen chuffs out a laugh, a motion that makes the hardness between my legs twitch, and when he responds, his voice goes low and gravelly. "I'm thinking about putting my mouth on you again."

Jesus.

This man's going to give me a coronary.

My abdomen clenches, and considering how tightly I'm wound, there's a high probability that I'll kill him if he doesn't. Of course, I don't tell him that.

He's already closer to the truth than I want, and he's not the only one who shouldn't be pushed too hard.

"Is that your polite answer?"

Nodding and wearing something close to a smirk, Masen sets me down on the edge of the shelf behind us. The position gives me a few extra inches, enough that we're now at equal height. "Close enough."

Unable to stop myself, I run the flats of my palms down his chest to his abdomen, skimming across all those pretty lines and valleys. He jerks when my nails trace the sharp, V-shaped diagonals that disappear beneath his waistband. "If that's polite, what's the impolite version?"

Masen spreads my legs with his hips and leans closer until there's no more than an inch of heavy, humid air separating our lips. Slowly, giving me all the time in the world to react, he lets go of my hip and slips his hand into the plunging neckline of my swimsuit. His eyes never leave mine as he kneads my bare breast, rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger with a firm, repeating tug that sends zinging warmth through my entire lower half.

"I'm thinking about just how much I want to bury my face between your legs and stay there until you come on my tongue."

Fuck.

What do you know? I want that, too.

Because, right now, I swear to God, I'm ready to combust.

My heart pounds a jagged rhythm against my sternum, and it takes real effort not to whimper when he thumbs down the column of my throat as he continues his sensual assault on my breasts. I don't know if it's possible to orgasm from nipple stimulation alone, but I'm ready to find out. I manage a low, breathy, "You say that to all of your boss's guests?"

"No." His lips spread, so close against mine. "Never."

"What about that pretty blonde at the party?" I don't know what I'm saying, and jealousy is never a good look, but the thought of him like this with one of those women makes me itch for a knife.

"Tanya?" Instead of taking offense, Masen's grin spreads even wider, and the hand on my hip creeps up to the juncture of my thighs. His fingertips ghost over the thin fabric of my suit, following the center seam. "Absolutely *not*."

I cock a playful, arrogant brow, even as air saws in and out of my chest like I'm running a marathon. "So, I'm special then."

"Yeah, yo—"

This time, I'm the one who starts the kiss, silencing whatever else he was about to say. And just like that night in the Schönbrunn, the second we connect, lightning shoots through my veins, pulsing and timed to the rough, greedy strokes of his tongue against mine.

Grabbing him by the waistband, I draw him closer and lock my ankles around his trim waist until a low, grunting sound in the back of his throat hits my ears. That feather touch between my thighs dives beneath my suit, abruptly turning urgent and purposeful, like he's the one about to come undone, not me.

It takes him all of two seconds to find the spot that makes me moan, and I wasn't wrong when I guessed he'd be amazing in bed.

Even in this, Masen is *relentless* in his pursuit, so much so that my eyes slide shut, and I can't stop myself from sinking into utter sensation. My skin feels too tight, like I'm on the verge of explosion, and all I can do is hold on and touch him everywhere my fingers can find.

"*Christ*, I want you," he mutters against my lips, and then he drags his down my throat before taking my breast in his mouth, suckling and teasing until my back bows, pushing him to take more of me. I jerk when I register two fingers slowly pushing inside me, sliding and curling at just the right angle before he thrusts in and out, over and over, until I'm moving with him, riding his hand and damned near begging. Masen's lips release my breast with a wet sucking sound, just long enough to repeat the same plea from that night in his bolt hole in Vienna. "If you tell me to stop, I will."

I answer by pulling his face back to mine and licking my way into his mouth. Like the first, this kiss is hard and demanding, hungry, tinged with a kind of raw desperation I've never experienced. When I reach down to palm him over his shorts, Masen groans something between a growl and a needy sigh.

Before I can blink, those talented fingers of his stop their stroking and disappear. He lifts me out of the water with effortless ease, depositing me on the decking. Masen's out no more than a second later with a single, muscled shove, and then he's prowling up my body to settle between my thighs.

I yank him down as he rocks against me, and I'm a hundred percent sure that if he keeps doing that shit, I'm going to come from that slight motion alone. He knows it, too, but judging by the slackness of his features and the contrasting, coiled tautness of the muscles flexing beneath my palms, I'm not the only one about to lose it.

"I told you what I wanted," he murmurs, licking his lips as he starts to slide down my torso, and he grins that ridiculous grin of his when I raise my brows in expectation and push his head down to where we both want it.

Of course, because karma's a bitch, a loud, jarring vibration echoes in the cavern.

We freeze, going as still as death itself.

The vibration goes off again a beat later, and this time it pulses in a loud, repeating pattern that's impossible to ignore. It takes me a minute to realize that the noise is coming from both Masen's cell sitting on a table twenty feet away and the high-end, matte black digital dive watch circling his wrist. His watch pulses again, and the face blinks to life.

"I think someone wants to talk to you," I mutter as I lift on my elbows.

Masen's cheeks puff out with his loud, slow exhale, and I chuckle when he scowls at his wrist and then again at me. Still kneeling between my thighs, he taps his watch screen to silence it. When it just vibrates again, he growls out a low, pissed-off, "*Damn it*," under his breath.

"Give me a second," he says, jumping up to grab his phone off the table.

As he goes to answer, I slip back into the pool, ducking my head under to cool both my body and my libido.

This better be fucking good.

"*Chto ty khochesh'?*" he asks, and I have to muffle my laugh at the irritation he doesn't even bother to hide.

With the echo of the cavern and the background noise from the waterfall, I can't hear a thing from the other side of the line, but from the casualness and familiarity of the conversation, I'm betting it's Dmitri. As they speak, I watch Masen's expression as it subtly shifts, and by the time he asks his next question, a kernel of unease finds its way to the pit of my stomach.

"*Kto?*" Masen's eyes scan the room before darting back to me. "*Net, ya ne videl Andreya s utra.*" When Dmitri or whoever it is says something else, Masen shoves a

rough hand through his hair, and the hard line of his jaw rolls. "*Dolzhno byt', on gde-to vypivayet.*"

Yeah, if by out drinking, we mean no longer breathing...

I dive under the water again, coming up right as Masen says a quiet, "*Khorosho, ya budu cherez minutu.*"

Well, shit.

There went my fun for the evening.

Still aggravated, Masen chucks his phone on the table and walks back over, stopping only to squat down next to the edge. He's staring at me again, but there's something in his expression – something darker, something hard – that makes that kernel of unease bloom. My heart rate slows to a steady thump, instinctively prepping for whatever's coming next.

Slowly treading water a few feet away, I give him a soft smile and ask, "What's wrong?"

He frowns. "Nothing for you to worry about, but I've got to go." He palms the back of his neck and then waves up at the catwalk and exit in casual annoyance. But I see those wheels turning. "One of the guards isn't calling in."

"What?" Forehead wrinkling, I feign an appropriate level of concern. "Is... is that normal?"

When he looks back down, Masen's eyes burn into mine, and his voice drops into that same quiet, maddeningly calm register I heard right before he took Taeb out. "I don't suppose you've seen Andrey lately, have you?"

"Who?"

"Blond guy from the gate this morning."

"No, of course not." I shake my head and glide my fingertips across the glowing, glass-smooth, turquoise water. "I've been inside all day."

He smiles, but this one doesn't touch his eyes. "That's what I thought."

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Notes:

Russian (transliterated):

Chto ty khochesh': What do you want

Kto: Who

Net, ya ne videl Andreya s utra.: No, I've not seen Andrey since this morning

Khorosho, ya budu cherez minutu: Okay, I'll be there in a minute

Glossary:

Banya: this is the Russian word for sauna. Russian *banya* is originally a steam bath with a wood stove. The bath takes place in a small room or building designed for dry or wet heat sessions. It's an essential aspect of Russian culture, dating back centuries, and was historically used by all social classes. Even today, it's a place where Russian businesspeople and politicians meet.

Chagall: Marc Chagall was an early modernist, Russian-born artist. He was born Moishe Shagal in a Lithuanian Jewish Hassidic family in modern-day Belarus during the time of the Russian empire. He lived and worked in Russia and France and eventually moved to the US during WW2.

Bella Rosenfeld was Chagall's muse, love, and wife of 30 years until she died in 1944. He wrote of meeting her the first time, "Her silence is mine. Her eyes, mine. I feel she has known me always, my childhood, my present life, my future; as if she were watching over me, divining my innermost being, though this is the first time I have seen her. I know this is she, my wife." (quoted in J. Baal-Teshuva, ed., *Chagall, A Retrospective*).

The painting in the chapter above is based on his *Les Amoureux*.

Crawl: or front crawl, forward crawl, American crawl, or Australian crawl is a swimming stroke generally regarded as the fastest of the four primary strokes (crawl, butterfly, backstroke, and breaststroke). It's the stroke used almost universally in freestyle competitions; hence, you'll often hear it simply referred to as freestyle.

Sandbox: military slang, commonly used in reference to a forward position in Iraq or the Arabian Peninsula, sometimes Afghanistan, as well

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