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Nicole Tsakoumagos
Cleveland State University

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THE STING IN THE GREEN CITY

NICOLE TSAKOUMAGOS

Bachelor of English

Cleveland State University

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submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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We hereby approve this thesis for
Nicole Tsakoumagos
Candidate for the Master of English degree
For the Department of
English
And
CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S
College of Graduate Studies by

Dr. David Lardner

Department & Date

Michael Geither

Department & Date

Dr. Adam Sonstegard

Department & Date

May 14th, 2018

THE STING IN THE GREEN CITY

NICOLE TSAKOUMAGOS

ABSTRACT

In an irradiated, alternate earth, where a mysterious supernatural phenomenon caused a near-apocalypse, the human race is back on it's feet. Four major cities dominate the landscape: New Sparta, The Mel, The Nocturn and Oz. In the first installment of "The Sting" series, explore the emerald, Greene Mob run metropolis, Oz. Gun-slinging, Ex-mercenary Kyra 'The Sting' Lee is living quietly in the outer part of the city with her dog, Doogie. The only family she has are the Castellanoses, a Greek four-part ensemble that own Kyra's favorite greasy spoon diner. Maria Castellanos is Kyra's best friend and her seemingly unobtainable love interest. On what should have been a relaxing night on the town, Kyra and Maria are attacked by a group of miscreant Greenes. Kyra takes them out without batting an eye, as well as cleaning out their whole sect. She begins reminiscing on her brief time in the Greene while she waits for the gang's boss to come by so she can finish the entire outfit and send a message to the Greene's head woman, Maven. But instead of the boss, Maven herself comes to confront Kyra about their past and future together. After their meeting, Kyra starts getting attacked as if someone has a bounty on her head. Suspicious of the timing and circumstances, she suspects old Greene enemies, perhaps even Maven, as the cause of the attacks. The more time she tries to piece things together, the more dangerous it gets for her and Maria to stay in Oz. She has to figure out who's got the hit on her and why, not to mention how she'll make it out alive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| PROLOUGE..... | vi |
| CHAPTER | |
| I..... | 1 |
| II..... | 9 |
| III..... | 18 |
| IV..... | 33 |
| V..... | 49 |
| VI..... | 63 |
| VII..... | 83 |

PROLOGUE

I can't help but wonder if Oz was always the slimy metropolis it is today. But how it came to be called the Emerald city was no accident. The whole city has a thin phosphorescent hyper-green glow. It's one of those tricks of light you kind of have to search for; like a rainbow or heat waves... but it's definitely there. No one really talks about what came before the Cities became fully functional beasts. Anyone who was alive before the cities probably died before their stories could be taken down. Then again, the cities grew and spread hard and fast like a virus. Maybe no one had time to take down some kind of history. Humanity probably need a clean slate anyway. Everyone has their theories about how the cities came to be or at least, how they grew so fast. I personally, like the idea that a behemoth solar flare tore humanity a new one some six hundred years ago. But it could've just as easily been a nuke... which would somehow explain why each city has a strange, radiation glow surrounding it but doesn't really explain how fast people managed to rebuild. Maybe enough smart or important people were saved that a decent blueprint for a new society was created. No one I know was there, so fuck if I know any more or less. But somehow out of the ruins, the x amount of survivors banded

together to form a new patched-together civilization. Four groups were strewn about the lands and made the four cities.

I've lived in Oz for what I remember to be my whole life, but I've heard stories of the other cities. Apparently, when you enter each city you sorta feel like you're passing through a gluey membrane. Whether that's radiation or not, no one's sure. Each city has its own way of digesting people, or so I've heard; Mars chews on you with sharp, unyielding war-teeth until you're a walking scar. The Mel passes you along with cilia covered in anti-psychs so divine, digestion feels like ecstasy. The Haze doesn't really stomach anything long before just being purged in a purple, watery wretch. Finally, Oz covers you in the acidic, digestive bile of greed to make sure your empathy doesn't upset the city's picky stomach. Everyone in Oz is only out for themselves and their money. That's why it's called Oz or the Mint more often than not; it's where the green comes from. Oz prints and distributes money to the rest of the cities. I bet people in the other cities think everyone in Oz makes sacrilegious amounts of cash and sleeps on king sized beds made of gryphon feathers and taffeta. The truth is, only about a third of the people in Oz fit that description.

There's basically only über rich and beat poor in Oz. The rich people are either direct descendants of the city's first leader or the Greene Mob. There's no law in Oz other than what the Greene wants. The Greene's sole purpose is to make sure all the money keeps the city's head nice and blistery swollen. Anyone dumb enough to try and make an honest buck outside of the Greene here gets beaten and shaken down. But not every wanna-be with a Tommy gun can have silk suits and a limo. Their respective

bosses make sure they get taken care of after they get their boss cut. The only way anyone else scrapes by in Oz is just by stroke of luck or being crafty with their business.

Papa Nick Castellanos for example, got in good with one of the district bosses, so Papa gets to keep forty percent of his income instead of the usual thirty. He doesn't bother to fix the place up to keep a low profile. It looks beat-up enough to suggest its struggling to stay afloat without forsaking that greasy spoon charm. The average person might pass it a few times before actually stepping inside.

CHAPTER I

PAPA Nick's is the last good dive in Oz. It's stuccoed in a tight corner between a seedy pawnshop and a broke-down auto body repair on Poplar and 3rd. What it lacks in hygiene and 'atmosphere' it makes up for in baklava, coffee and moonshine. Papa always keeps a carafe of his homemade brew for me tucked away. If I had a dad, I'd want him to be like Papa Nick Castellanos. He's a squat, fifty-something, dad-sized man with a salt and pepper moustache. I haven't met many Greek men, but if they're anything like Papa, they're good human beings... a species that's well near extinction nowadays.

The place is empty save for the Castellanoses and me. I pull up my usual, duct-taped stool at the counter. I could hear Papa and his kids in the kitchen babbling at each other in mile-a-minute Greek. I catch occasional snippets that Papa taught me, but they all keep saying something about their Yia-Yia. Which, if I remember right, means 'grandma'. Papa throws his hands up abruptly and stomps out of the kitchen with his head down.

"How's yia-yia, Papa?" I ask him. He looks up and greets me,

"Kyra-mou! I have your suma. One minutes, please." He turns around to face the liquor shelves, pulls out the carafe and pours me and himself three fingers. We raise

our glasses. He sips at his while I knock mine back and promptly beckon for a second. He lets out a throaty, oily laugh while he pours it.

“Pethee-mou, you drink like sailor!” I think it’s cute he calls me that. I think he said it basically means ‘kiddo’.

“You sweet talkin’ me, Nicky?” I smile and say back. He chuckles a little and asks,

“Mahna made galakto-bourieko. You wann’ piece?” I raise my eyebrows.

“No baklava today?”

“We no have enough karithia. Eh, what you call them, the nuts, you know?”

“Walnuts?” He claps and points at me.

“Yes, thank you pithee-mou. We no have enough walnuts, so manah make galakto-bourieko. Is very good.” He shouts through the pick-up window, “Ey, Niko. Ena komat galakto-boureiko!”

“What’s in it?” I ask. Before I get an answer, Niko slides a syrup-covered something or other on a little saucer-dish in the window. Papa picks it up, and puts it and a fork in front of me.

“Is crema, filo and syrup. Eat, is good.” I shrug and take a bite. The delicate filo crumbles and jelloey, citrusy cream squishes around my mouth while I chew. It’s hard for me to not like anything covered in sugar syrup. I nod.

“Yeah, this is great. Good job.” Papa’s face splits in a grin while he pours me my second glass of shine.

“How’s everything, Kyra-mou? Staying out of trouble?” He asks me.

“I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Eh, I know you can take care of yourself. But city is dangerous place.”

“Not if you’re not afraid to fight back,” I pat my SIG tucked in my holster. Only Greenes are allowed to openly carry. But like most things I do in the day-to-day, it suits me so I do it anyway. Between bites of my pastry I ask,

“So how is Yia-Yia anyway?”

“She’s a pain everyone’s ass, that’s how she is!” Maria shouts from the kitchen with her colicky voice. Papa yells back something in Greek.

“Well damn,” I reply. He looks back at me and says,

“All she wan’ is for her grandchildren to be happy. Is that so bad, Kyra?”

“She obviously doesn’t think anyone’s happy unless she’s bitching about something,” Maria comes out of the kitchen to join Papa and I.

“If that old bat asks me when I’m getting married one more god damn time, I’m gonna blow my head off.” She says to me. Her and Papa start going at it for a few minutes. Maria’s tight jet curls bounce around while she talks and gestures in frustration. My eyes dart back and forth between the two of them while I finish the last of the... Shit what’s this thing called again? The office phone rings and Papa goes back to answer it. Maria lets out an exasperated hiss and runs her slender, olive cream hands over her face. Maria and I had become friends over the years I’ve spent drinking and bullshitting in her dad’s diner. She’s the straight girl I pursue to no avail, like every good lesbian does. She’ll play along and flirt back with me sometimes, but we both know that’s all it is; just play. I try and take it in stride, but I doubt I’m that convincing. Either way it’s good fun and she’s a damn nice girl anyone would be lucky to know. I point to my empty plate and ask,

“What was thing called again? It’s magnificent,”

“Hmm?”

“This cream thing Yia-Yia made?”

“Oh, galatko-boureiko. You like it?”

I nod.

“It’s satisfying.” I say after my last bite.

“Glad you like it. Believe it or not, it’s easier to make than the baklava. But y’know good cream is hard to get a hold of and whatever.” She sighs and leans forward on the counter.

“You’ve got a good dad, y’know.” I say. Maria scoffs.

“Right.”

“You do. He takes care of you guys and keeps up this place if only to give you and your brother work.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she made a cute kind of defeated face.

“So you’re having troubles with men?” I ask. Maria’s eyes roll.

“Ugh, Greek men are the worst. They’re all chauvinistic pigs,” she hisses.

“How does your dad keep finding them? Your brother and your pa are the only Greek men I’ve ever known,”

“All Greek people know each other. We have special noses for finding our kind out in the wild,” she sniffs the air like a search dog and points out the window, “Twenty kilometers in that direction, there’s a forty-year-old Greek lady.” I laugh and ask,

“What color is her hair?”

“Light brown... I think it’s greying,”

“Does she have kids?”

She sniffs the air.

“Two... both boys,”

“What’s she gonna do today?” I ask. She sniffs extra hard, licks one of her fingers and waves it around like she’s checking for wind direction and says,

“She’s washing chick peas... I think she’s gonna make... hummus. No!” she makes a face of shock and awe like she’s about to come or sneeze and whispers, “Falafels,” before pretending to pass out on the counter. I give her a tasteful opera clap and she flourishes a bow.

“Thank you, thank you. No really, it’s nothing. Oh go on, go on,” she says in a sort of pompous drawl. I chuckle at her. God damn, she’s just too much.

“You ever think of being with a woman instead?” I bob my eyebrows at her. She giggles, “You jest, but that doesn’t sound like a bad idea, considering my other options are limited,”

“Really? So I can take you out sometime then?” I hold her hand up and place a suave kiss to it. She smiles.

“Well, my dad does like you... Baba!” She shouts over her shoulder. Papa answers from his office,

“Eh?”

“Kyra here wants to take me on a date. Whaddya think?”

“Ha! You think mahna complains now? Theehmou, she’d have heart attack!”

“I dunno, Papa. Kyra’s pretty buff. She could pass for a guy if she cut her hair a little shorter,” Niko pipes in from the kitchen.

“Gee, thanks Niko...” I shout back.

“What? You’ve got bigger arms and shoulders than most guys I’ve seen. It’s a compliment!” He says. Papa replies from his office,

“She should marry you, Niko. Keep your ass in line, eh?” Papa laughs. I shout back,

“I’m more interested in Maria, Papa. I mean, look at her, she’s adorable,” I take her left hand in both of mine, “I’d treat you right, doll,” A light rose flush prickles across Maria’s cheeks and she laughs.

“Oh, I’m sure you can. Tell you what, why don’t you buy me a drink sometime and we can see where that goes.”

“Be still my heart, are you serious?” I ask putting one hand to my heart.

“Can I, baba?” Maria shouts.

“Sure. Kyra keep you safe,” Papa replies.

“Are you shittin’ me? Maria can be a lesbian but I get my ass beat if I skip church?” Niko starts rattling off what I can only assume are swears in Greek. Papa comes out of his office to help Niko finish prepping the stoves. Papa scoffs and scrunches his face,

“Malaka, they just having fun. They friends, Niko.” Papa smacks Niko upside his head. Maria and I laugh.

“Seriously, Maria, I’d love to take you out. Romantic intentions or not.” I reassure her. She smiles and says,

“That sounds like fun. I need a night away from these malakas anyway.” She points her thumb over her shoulder to Niko and Papa.

“What does that mean?” I ask and knock back my neglected shine.

“Malaka? Idiot, more or less.”

“I like it.” I nod, fishing out a few bills from my pocket and set them on the counter. “Well, I wish I could stay and woo you some more doll, but I just came for a quick breakfast. I’ve still gotta go train,”

“What, you don’t have food at home?”

“Of course I do. But I’m a lousy cook,” Maria laughs. She hugs me goodbye over the counter. I stand up and call out,

“Papa, I’ll be back later to pick up Maria,”

“Okay, Kyra. Be safe,” he replies.

“Will do. And Niko?” Niko looked back at me. I smile at him and say,

“Don’t be mad that I can pick up girls better than you can.” He scoffs and goes back to work. I wave and walk back out into the city.

The air in Oz is always boggy with the mints’ smoke. The whole city smells like freshly printed dollar bills and smog. I walk as quickly as I could manage to my place to escape the heavy atmosphere. It’s a few blocks away from Papa Nick’s: roughly a twenty-minute run, or a thirty-something minute stroll. Most of the buildings sport varying degrees of disrepair, mine included. One could probably pick out which ones were still open for business or have people living in them, via a quick poking about. But on the surface, they all sort of bleed together, a gritty, corroded blur of earth-tone and man-made materials. The only way I can tell my place from every other building is because of my dog, Doogie guarding the door. He doesn’t wear a collar, so people probably think he’s a stray just guarding his little swatch of territory. Home for us is an

abandoned red brick gym with communal showers and a shell of a studio apartment in the upper floors. The plumbing still worked when I found it despite it being long since forgotten, so I dropped a mattress on the dusty floor and haven't been bothered since.

Doogie's lying by the front door, with his rosy tongue flapping in duo with his panting. He sits up and trots to me when he hears my heavy boots on the pavement. I kneel and pat his coarse furry head. He stands on his hind legs and hugs me while I rub up and down his brown ticked back.

"You're probably hungry, huh Doog?" I ask. He barks in agreement. The front and back door only open from the inside, so we get in through the windows. We walk down the side alley of the building to the iron fire escape. The ladder groans in rusted protest as I pull it down. Doogie climbs up first and I follow him up to a second floor window. After I slide it open, he and I jump in. Once we get to the actual flat space, I feed him and I start downstairs to the gym.

CHAPTER II

WHEN I found this place, the heavy bag and random weights were wearing a layer of dusty, elapsed time. But, weight doesn't stop weighing. The chains holding up the bag appeared to still be intact, but one good punch and they came apart, whopping the bag onto the pale wooden floor with a translucent plume. I made a tape rope and rehung the bag. Since then, the floor has creaked and moaned more with age and my constant movement. The iron bars and plates have grown larger five o'clock rust shadows. And the bag has a silvery black tape t-shirt covering its stuffing scars and bullet wounds. There's a shooting range a few miles from here, but I only head there if I think my aim is slipping. I'm a better shot in combat than standing still. But the empty field is sort of soothing to me. I can still roll and tumble around before shooting, but there's nothing for me to punch out there... kind of detracts from my training. No one really cares to report shooting noises anymore, seeing as it's the Greene more often than not. So, my noise has gone unnoticed the last few years that I've been here. I stretch for a few minutes before I start lifting.

The west-most wall is a giant mirror so I have no choice but to watch my body flex and swell with each movement and set. The scorpion tattoo covering my upper right

arm moves along with me. The more I move, the more alive it becomes. The claws hinge open and half close as my arms curl and fall open. The blood-ebony ink darkens when I start working up a sweat. When I row my shoulders, the stinger moves back and forth slightly, readying for a sting. When I start throwing hits, the claws strike with me. Its jointy legs skitter and jump around when my bulging, long limbs bob and throw. When the recoil of my SIGs travels against me, the stinger lurches forward in a blink.

After some two hours of lifting, shooting and sparring I can feel tendrils of fatigue starting to pull on my body. I throw a last bout of punches before stopping. I steady the bag, sweep away the bullet shells and re-holster my SIGs. I stretch my arms over my head and draw a long, spent sigh before making my way up to the showers.

The shower floor is actually in pretty decent shape in comparison to the rest of the building. Whoever owned this place before either took great care of the showers, or they were just never used in the first place. The metal shower heads, toilets and sink fixtures weren't rusted. All of the little matte red and white tiles were still in place. The caulk and grout wasn't molded over or even noticeably discolored. I'm not a super tidy woman, but I can appreciate a clean bathroom.

I kick off my boots, peel off my eye-patch and strip my sweaty clothes off into a damp pile in one of the sinks. I run the hot water over them for a few minutes and dash in some detergent before walking myself under a shower head. My traps and biceps melt against the hot water. It takes some concentration to not just nod off under soothing water torrent.

I grab a towel after I finish cleaning up and run it roughly around my head. The shaved half of my head is still short enough to be rubbed dry, but I wring out the excess

henna stained water from the longer half. I shuffle my damp hair around in the mirror for a minute to try and set it in a decent position. I can barely tell when I get my hair right thanks to my bad eye. My mismatched cataract grey left eye gets greyer and cloudier every year. When I'm not wearing my eye-patch, half the world looks foggy. I can't remember the last time I could see any of my coffee brown left iris. My eye-patch is still damp, so I cover my eye with my hand and give myself a once over in the mirror. My forearms and delts have gotten a little bigger. I'm still halfway between flat breasts and strong pecs... my square jaw seems to get squarer the older I get, or maybe my nose is getting rounder, making everything else seem more angular. I seem to have a few new creases in my forehead and around my eyes. My hair is a worn in auburn save for a lone patch of white in my bangs and dark roots peeking up from my scalp. I make a mental note to touch up my dye job. With that thought, I just wrap my hair in the towel and walk upstairs for some clean clothes.

I walk into the studio to find Doogie curled up dead center in my bed in the far left corner of the room. He perks up when he hears me walk in. I pat his soft head and check the time. It's five twenty-eight. Maria and I never decided on a time, but the Greenes starts prowling around midnight. I should have Maria back by then.

I walk over to the table in the center of the studio to clean and reload my SIGs. I shouldn't have to use these tonight, but I can't leave home without them. I feel naked when I don't have them or am at least in close proximity of them. I take great care when it comes to my 1911 Scorpions. I've had them for a few years now, but their clean lines and sculpted curves always leave me in awe. It takes me a half hour to get them ready. It'll only take me a few minutes to get myself ready. I pick through my paltry wardrobe

in my duffle bag before deciding on my least beat-up pair of black jeans, a white undershirt and a grey blazer. I never have a real reason to wear this damn thing anymore, but I can't bring myself to get rid of it. It's the closest thing to formalwear I have anyway. It barely fits over my shoulders anymore, but it'll have to do. I only have my one pair of boots, but they should be aired out enough by the time I have to leave. Maybe I should dust 'em off before I go... I put on my last clean pair of socks, grab some cash and holster my SIGs before walking out the door. Doogie barks from the bed before I make it out. He tilts his head to the side in that silly shepherd way.

"Alright, you can come too," I say. He practically skips over to the door as we leave.

Papa Nick's is in its pre-dinner rush quiet. Of course, the dinner rush for them is a whopping ten or eleven people around eight pm. I make Doogie wait at the door as I step in. Maria sees me immediately from behind the register.

"Kyra, you're early," she chirps.

"I wanna have you back at a decent time. I can come back or wait if you want,"

"No, no, it's okay. Lemme freshen up real fast." She smiles at me and walks back into the kitchen. I hear her say something to Papa in Greek with my name peppered in between alien words. Papa peeks out from the kitchen window. I wave,

"Hey Papa,"

"She be ready in few minutes. You two have fun, eh?" he asks.

"Of course. I'll have her back before midnight." He nods in approval and comes out to replace Maria behind the counter. I lean against the doorframe and idly listen to the little din of the diner.

Maria reappears before I space too far out. She gives me a hug and one of those Greek greeting kisses on each side of my face.

“Is this okay?” she asks me while gesturing to herself. All she did was remove her apron, let her hair down and put on some red lipstick, but she looks more put together than I do. She’s wearing the same long sleeved striped shirt, slacks and flats she was this morning. The various fabric looks comfortable, yet they still manage to hug her slender body so nicely. In another life, I might’ve envied girls like her; the ones who can look perfect with next to no effort. My looks were a luxury I decided to ignore in favor of survival. But that does little to ease my sudden pinch of self consciousness. Maria is way out of my league... but then again, she doesn’t think of me in her game at all.

“You look beautiful, as always. I hope it’s okay if I brought my dog,” I answer. I hold the door open for her and she walks out. Doogie looks up at her, but doesn’t move from his sit.

“I didn’t know you had a dog.” She says.

“Yeah. He needs some air and I figured he could be an extra set of eyes for us.”

“That’s just fine. He’s so cute!”

“Doogie, say hello,” I command. Doogie barks and puts up his paw at Maria.

Maria giggles and shakes his paw.

“Well hello Doogie,” Doogie licks her hand before putting his paw down,

“Oh my, what a gentleman,” she laughs. I pat Doogie’s head. We start walking to the park.

The city’s green glow becomes a little more visible as the sun sets. The lavender orange swirled sky is flossed with wispy, grey green clouds. When night falls completely,

the moon is a phlegmy, sick green against a lime speckled ink sky. I wonder if the moon and stars are different colors in the other cities. I bet the Haze's purple moon is beautiful.

Maria and I shoot the breeze on the way to the park. Doogie pads on in front of us. Her mahogany eyes flicker with light as she speaks. Her words flow honey slow and sweet. She once mentioned to me that she was a little self conscious of how her colicky voice made her sound abrasive. I just think it's sexy. Her springy black curls bounce about as she walks and moves her head. Her red, pouty lips press and curl with her words. She could've been reading names from a phone book and I would be equally as entranced. I didn't realize she was asking me something until she stopped talking and furrowed her thick brows.

“Huh?” I choke out.

“Were you listening?”

“I'm sorry, I uh... you just look really nice. You're like a breath of fresh air.” My voice buckles under my embarrassment. She just smiles at me,

“You're sweet, Kyra. But-”

“I know, I know. You don't think of me that way. It's okay,”

“Well, I never said that,” She reassures me. I chuckle,

“Maria, don't lie to yourself or me for my sake. Lemme guess, you were gonna say that if you weren't straight, I'd be your first choice?” She blushes,

“Well uh. I-I mean.”

“Exactly. Look, I know you just wanted to get away from the family for a bit and that's all I intend to do with you tonight,” I touch her shoulder. She smirks shyly at me,

“You're sure about that?” she asks with a small voice.

“I know this isn’t really a date. But, I do intend on keeping you safe while we’re out,” I wasn’t lying, but a part of me hurt to say that out loud. She still looks embarrassed but offers me a hug. I pull her close and hold her for a few beats. Doogie barks and we break the hug.

A group of three dudes in cheap suits are walking our way. They stop a few feet in front of us. Doogie flicks his ears back and holds his growl. The one in the middle whistles and says,

“You ladies need a room? Or maybe a hand?” His friends blow slimy kisses at Maria. Doogie barks.

“Why don’t you ease your pooch and we can go get some drinks?” The middle one says, taking a tentative step around Doogie.

“How about you three keep walking so I won’t have to have my dog rip your dicks off?” I hiss. They laugh and continue walking around the three of us. Doogie’s eyes never leave them. The taller, skinnier one tries to slip his arm around Maria’s waist on his way around. Maria shoves him off and Doogie barks.

“Easy doll. You know this dyke can’t give it to ya like you deserve.” He flashes his yellow and fake toothed smile at her.

“She’s more of a man than any of you pricks,” she spits. They all hoot at her. I put my arm around her and hold my glare at the three of them.

“Well, she definitely looks like a man, I’ll give ya that,” the middle one says. His friends snicker. “What happened to your eye there, butchy? You get skull-fucked by-”

“You want a matching eye patch, too, slick?” I snap a SIG to his eye. His friends go to get out their guns but he stops them.

“Easy boys. This dyke ain’t worth it.” They put their little six-shooters away. I hold my aim. He puts his hands up.

“We’ll go. You comin’, Doll?” he asks Maria.

“Thanks, but I’m taken care of,” she wraps one of her arms around my waist. I hold her closer. The three slimes snicker and walk away. Doogie growls after them until they’re out of sight.

“You okay?” I ask Maria. I could feel her heart kick up. She nods. I go to pull away before she does. She seems reluctant to break the embrace. Eventually we do. She exhales sharply and smooths out her shirt.

“Do you want me to take you back?” I ask. She shakes her head and says,

“A drink actually doesn’t sound bad. Is that okay with you?”

“I mean, if you’re okay, sure. Obviously I’m here for you.” Doogie barks and touches his nose to Maria’s hand. I add, “And so is Doogie.” She chuckles and nods.

“Yeah, let’s go.” The three of us walk to find a bar.

Eventually we come across a bar on the border between the Bougier part of Oz and wasteland Downtown. If Oz has a middle ground, this place would be it; Greene kids and the affiliated civilians hang out amongst the clean clubs and smart-casual restaurants. We settle on a kept looking place whose neon lights read “Montague’s”. The windows are tinted, but the building itself looked decent. The neutral earth stones were laid pretty neatly in clean white grout with a graffiti mural surrounding the black door. I open the door for Maria, and Doogie and I follow behind her. The inside is airy and modern with

minimalist black and white furnishings. The twenty-something girl behind the ivory bar looks down at Doogie when we walk up to the counter.

“You can’t have dogs in here,” she states. I point to my eye patch.

“I’m blind in this eye. He won’t bite.” Doogie sits down next to me. The girl shrugs. “Fine, just as long as he behaves. What can I get you ladies?”

“After you, ma’am.” I motion towards the bar.

“Do you guys serve ouzo?” Maria asks. The bartender peeks behind her shoulder at the random liquor bottles, scans for a minute and nods at Maria,

“I’ll have three shots and some ice water please,”

“Uh, I’ll have three fingers of whiskey on the rocks, please.” The bartender walks away to get our drinks. Maria sits down as I stare at her.

“What?” she asks.

“Bad day at work?”

“Yeah. Dad never has ouzo around, either.”

“What about that stuff he makes at home?”

“That stuff’s like paint thinner. I don’t know how you drink it so easy.” Our drinks get set down in front of us. Maria picks up a shot and hands it to me. “Try some.” I take it and knock it back. A sharp, acrid sting of black licorice creeps up through my throat. I must’ve made a disgusted face without realizing it because Maria laughs.

“No good?”

“You drink this? Ugh, it’s awful.” I cough and pick up my whiskey to wash out the taste. The familiar corny smoke soothes my palate. Maria keeps giggling at me. I can’t help but giggle a little back.

CHAPTER III

THE night was rolling on bourbon smooth. Maria knocked back ouzo and I sipped at my whiskey while we bullshit the time away. Bass fetish music pollutes the air as more people start filing in. Every now and then Maria and I would scratch Doogie behind his ears while he sits quietly at our feet. We even manage to earn a few laughs from the petite, ginger bartender. She talks with us between mixing and serving drinks to the other patrons. We found out her name is Joey, she lived a few blocks down from the bar and she was the artist who painted the mural on the door. Her pallid blue eyes flick awake when she talks about her art. I'm not usually one to care for backstory, but Maria coaxes it out of her so I really have no choice but to listen. I worried for a hot minute if she was getting bored of me or just being polite. That quickly blew away when I saw how much fun she's having just being out.

"I'm trying to scrape up enough to move to the Haze," Joey says.

"I thought the Haze was mostly musicians?" I say.

"Mostly, yeah. But turns out graffiti artists get paid to cover the city in murals like the one I did here,"

"You think someone from the Haze will see it and whisk you away?" Maria asks.

“Hopefully, but I’m realistic.” She starts pouring martini ingredients into a tumbler while keeping her gaze on us, “The competition over there is pretty rough so I’d feel better having a little tucked away in case I don’t make it, y’know?” She shakes the tumbler while she speaks but her voice stays stable despite her shaking. She finishes and empties the transparent drink into a waiting glass, “So, here I am. Mixing drinks for Mob kids, indefinitely.” She walks the martini over to its customer. After she walks back I ask,

“So, do you do anything besides graffiti?”

“Like other hobbies or other mediums of art?”

“Either or, I guess,”

“I hate to be a bore, but all I really do is art. My apartment is a giant portfolio at this point. I’m such a stereotype.”

“Your super lets you vandalize the walls?” I ask. She smirks at me,

“I don’t paint on the walls. I’ve got all kinds of canvases all over the place, sketchbooks and some sculptures, too.”

“I didn’t think people cared about art anymore,” I reply.

“Not in the Emerald City, they don’t.” She sighs. I notice a trickle of defeat in her face.

“It sounds amazing. Sounds like you live in the only museum in Oz. Wish I could get a look at it,” I say. Her face lights back up.

“You should swing by some day. You too, Maria,” she shoots her gaze at Maria and back at me. Maria nods and sips at her drink. I finish the last bit of mine. Before I could set it all the way to the table, Joey was ready to top me off. I wave my hand.

“I think I’m okay for now.”

“Don’t worry, it’s on me.” She fills my glass.

“Damn, what’s the catch?” I ask.

“No catch. You guys made my night,” She shoots her eyes between Maria and I, but gives an opalescent smile to me. Someone calls her from the far end of the bar and she saunters away. I see Maria’s smiling like a damn fool at me.

“What?”

“She was flirting with you,” she almost sings.

“Come again?”

“She invited you to her place, couldn’t keep her eyes off of you and she bought you a drink,” I scoff.

“She’s just trying to squeeze a bigger tip outta me,”

“Just cause she’s a bartender?”

“No, because she’s a bartender who wants to make money. She probably knows she’s cute and in my defense, she invited both of us.”

“Oh, she was just being polite. I have a feeling she’d be happier if I couldn’t make it.”

“You think I’m cute?” Joey chirps. I didn’t think she’d be back in time to hear that. Maria tries to stifle a laugh. I sigh.

“Well yeah. Who doesn’t love a blue-eyed red head?” Joey smiles.

“I thought you two were an item.” She waves her finger between Maria and I.

“Unfortunately, we’re just friends,” I answer.

“Ah, girls’ night out. That’s sweet,” She leans on the bar, pushing her breasts up to her immodest neckline. “I haven’t had one of those in a while,” I saw Maria’s eyebrow prick up and shoot me a curious look. I need some air.

“You can’t smoke in here, right?” I ask.

“Fraid not. It stains the upholstery or some shit.” Joey shakes her head. I stand up,

“I’m gonna step out for a smoke then. You wanna join me?” I ask Maria. She scrunches her face.

“I actually have to use the bathroom real quick. Go ahead.” She waved at me as she stands up to walk to the bathroom. I ask Joey to save our spots. She gives me a thumbs up as I walk outside with Doogie in tow. The bass gets diluted as I close the heavy front door behind me.

The sky became full ink in the time we’ve been here. Doogie stretches out and paces a little. The brisk air brushes around me while I pluck out a cigarette from my blazer pocket. I study the mural on the building while I light up and take the first drag. It’s a giant hurricane glass filled with crisp, colorful abstract shapes and swirls in front of a blurry, fallout zone. The glass’s outlines are clean and precise. The backdrop is that kind of runny, spray paint fuzzy, but I can still make out a nuclear bombshell and a broken Ferris wheel. A person in a hazmat suit and a gasmask is toasting a beer with a buxom woman in a slinky dress holding a martini glass of something nuclear green inside of the giant glass they were floating in. The irony abounds in the mural. I thought of Joey while I drag and puff on the last of my cigarette and study the painting more. I hope for a

moment that Maria was right, and that Joey was actually flirting with me. If this painting is even a glimpse into her mind, I want to know more.

Joey comes bursting out the front door making Doogie bark.

“Maria’s in trouble,” she says.

“What happened?” I demand.

“I heard some commotion by the bathroom and I saw her being harassed by some guy. She tried walking away but two other guys came over and pulled her away.”

Angry bile rises in my throat. It was probably those slimes from earlier.

“Where did they go?” I flick away my cigarette.

“They took her out the back.” I push past her and open the door, telling Joey before I go in, “Take Doogie around to where you think they’ll be. Sick him on anyone you find suspicious and get out. I’m gonna try and find ‘em before they make it that far.” Joey nods and strides around the side of the building,

“Doogie, follow.” I point to Joey. He barks and runs after her. I step inside and weave in and around people until I find the back door. I hear Doogie barking from outside. I take the safety off my SIGs once I pull them out.

I step out to find Doogie gnawing on the taller skinner Mob guy’s arm, but then starts ripping away at his guts. He screams in pain while his buddies hold Maria against the wall and try snaking their hands up and inside her clothes. She sees me and tries to scream, but one of the slimes covers her mouth. Her eyes are blown wide with fear as she tries to kick away at her assailants. I shoot the taller one in the sacrum. He yelps out in pain and loses his balance. Maria kicks him in the stomach. He stumbles as he goes down flat on his back. The other slime wraps himself behind Maria, keeping his hand over her

mouth. I can't shoot him without hitting her at first. He cranes his head over her shoulder and aims his pistol at me.

"Don't make any-" I shoot him in the mouth before he could finish talking. Cocky bastard. Flecks of his flesh blow around the bullet and into Maria's hair. She screams and shakes him off before running behind me. He uses the wall behind him to prop himself up. He tries to aim a shaky hand at me. After he misses his shot at me I step over, kick the gun from his hand and throw my fist across what's left of his face. He falls on his side. I push him onto his back with my foot and aim my guns at his chest. He tries to spit at me. His blood just gurgles and sprays forward in vain defiance. CRACK CRACK. Two shots in his chest and he goes out.

"You cunt!" the back-shot one yelps out. I turn my aim at him. He puts his hands up in surrender.

"Find Joey and make sure she's okay. If you can't, hide in the bathroom and I'll come find you," I tell Maria.

"No, I'm not leaving you,"

"Go!" I command. I hear her shuffle slowly away. After the door closes behind her, I walk closer to and kneel to face the remaining slime. This was the one who tried to pull Maria away from me earlier today. I think about his disgusting, yellow teeth. I keep my aim at his forehead,

"Tell me who you work for," I hiss.

"What's it to ya, bitch? We're everywhere. Ain't no way you're gonna gun us all down."

"Maybe. But I'm willing to try. One more time: who do you work for?"

“What’s in it for me?”

“I’ll end your misery right here. You know the Mob’s got no use for crippled
Greenes,”

“Crippled?”

“I’m willing to bet you can’t feel your legs right now, hoss.”

“Fuck you,” he spits at me. I shoot him once in the stomach.

“I’m also sure you know that a stomach shot is the slowest, most awful way to
die. Talk and I’ll make sure you don’t have to be awake for it,” I say. He holds his
silence. I shoot him again. He screams,

“We work out of the warehouse on Eight street!” I smile. CRACK, CRACK,
CRACK between the eyes. Doogie is still ripping his victim to bits. He’s just a puree of
carbon pulp and blood at this point. I holster my SIGs and tell Doogie to stop. He looks
up at me, his muzzle saturated iron red. He walks a few steps over to me. I scratch and
hug his sticky torso,

“Good boy, Doogie.” He licks my face as I stand up. I wipe the bloody saliva off
my face and start rifling through the three slimes’ pockets. A fat wad of hundreds, three
mostly loaded snub-nose Colts, and a decent amount of coke. Enforcers aren’t allowed to
carry and pack at once. These guys couldn’t have been in the Greene for very long. Or
they were just plain stupid. Maybe both. Either way, no great loss was had for the
Greenes. I can make sure no more of these rat slimes crawl out of their nest later. For
now, I have to find and get Maria back home.

Doogie and I slink back into the club. The patrons are still drinking and dancing
away. The heavy bass music probably drowned out the noise from earlier. If anyone was

onto me, they didn't care to make it known. I make my way to the women's bathroom. I command Doogie to guard the door as I walk in. It matches the rest of the modern looking club, but the sink basins and counters are black marble. The music softens a little behind the door.

"Maria?" I call out. She comes out of the farthest stall and runs up to me. I hold her close while she shakes. "You okay?" I ask

"Yeah, I'm fine. No one seemed to notice me running back in. What happened out there?" she looks up at me.

"Don't worry, they're all dead. Did you find Joey?"

"I'm in here," Joey walks out of the same stall Maria hid in.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"Yeah. One of those guys tried to come after me but Doogie jumped him before I could say or do anything. I booked it back in here after that,"

I nod.

"Do you have anyone to cover your shift? I can get you home."

"What? No, you don't have to do that."

"Can't you tell your boss what happened or something?" Maria asked.

"This is a Greene club. I'm used to this kind of thing. I'm fine, really." Joey reassures us. I don't buy it, but I know there isn't anything we can do. Even if her boss cared about misconduct, he'd probably just look the other way for Greene kids. I sigh.

"If you say so. But try to get someone to walk you home tonight, yeah?" She nods. I pull some of the pinched money out of my pocket and hand it to Joey.

"Keep the change." I say. She waves the money away,

“Don’t worry about it. Just get home safe.” she says. I don’t move my hand, but she doesn’t take the money. I put it away.

“Fine, but I’m coming back to see you home safe. Deal?”

“I told you, yo don’t-”

“Either you take the money, or I walk you home,” I say firmly.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll be here all night until you get back.”

Maria is dead silent the whole half hour back to Papa’s. Only the sounds of Doogie’s breath and our feet clipping against the sidewalk vibrate the air. When we finally make it, it’s around one a.m. A couple of people are sitting in a booth having coffee. I walk her inside while Doogie waits out front. Niko sees us from the pick up window and says something Greek to Papa. I can’t understand his words, but they sound unsettled. Papa comes out and walks up to us. Maria falls into his arms.

“What happened?” he asks not letting go of her.

“Some Mob guys tried giving us some trouble. I took care of ‘em but Maria should probably lay low for a little while,” I say as flatly as I can manage. Papa asks Maria something. She straightens up and says something back in Greek. I hear my name pop in and out. Papa puts his had on my shoulder and asks,

“You okay, peethee-mou?”

“I’m fine, Papa. I got Maria out safe. That’s all I care about.” He nods and hugs me. He pulls away, says something to Maria and walks back into his office. Maria stays out with me.

“I’m gonna go back and make sure Joey gets home safe, too. Don’t go anywhere without Niko or your dad, okay?” She nods. I step outside. She follows me out and pulls

me away from the windows, “Maria, wha-,” she presses her lips against mine. Her now faded lipstick felt dry against my mouth, but her lips were holding mine tenderly. I’m too shocked to really enjoy it, but I’m still speechless when she pulls away.

“Thank you,” she says. I’m too gob smacked to say anything intelligent.

“You saved me. I’d still be back there if it wasn’t for you, Kyra,” she says.

“Y-yeah, of course.” I’m so thankful for the darkness hiding my blush, “I’ll uh, I’ll come check on you tomorrow, okay?” I stammer. She nods. I call Doogie over to me and start walking away.

By the time I get back to Montague’s there’s a line out the door of scantily and smartly dressed people. I walk to the front door. The doorman stops me.

“I’m here to pick up someone. I’ll be in and out in a minute,” I say as I try to push in. He still stops me and points at Doogie,

“You can’t have dogs in here.” I lift up my eye patch and show him my nimbus left eye. He cringes and lets us in. I stride in and around the assorted sluts and slimes until I get back up to the bar. I have to elbow my way to the actual counter, but Joey sees me immediately. She walks up to me while mixing a drink,

“I can’t leave yet,” she shouts over the music.

“I can stay until you can,”

“That won’t be until around five.” She pours and delivers the drink. I rub my temples. “Who do I persuade to let you leave early?” I ask after she comes back.

“Kyra, it’s fine. You-”

“Who?” I press. She sighs.

“He’s in one of the corner tables. Bald dude with round, wire glasses drinking a daiquiri.” I scan the far walls of the club for the guy. I see a solitary, shiny dome in a corner table. I make my way to him with Doogie in tow. He is indeed sipping on a pale pink cocktail-slush. He looks me up and down,

“Can I help you, sir?” I lean over the table to make sure he hears me.

“I’m here to pick up Joey,” he looks at me confused, “The bartender? Cute little red-head?”

“Ms. Cobain? She doesn’t have a boyfriend,” he says flatly.

“I’m not her boyfriend, I’m her girlfriend.” He raises his nearly invisible eyebrows at me.

“Oh... my apologies. Her shift isn’t quite over yet. Perhaps you can have a drink until she can leave.” He sips at his fruity slush. I square my shoulders and let my voice sink to a growl,

“Listen to me; she and a friend of ours were assaulted by some patrons of yours earlier tonight. I got our friend home safe and I intend to see Joey home too.”

“That’s very chivalrous of you. But as long as people want drinks, she has to stay. Besides, she doesn’t seem upset.” He waves his hand over to the bar. Joey was smiling at the male customer she was serving. I mentally force my gut to stay where it is.

“How much do you pay her?” I ask.

“I beg your pardon?” he replies.

“How much does she make in a week? I’ll cover her pay if she can come home now.” He laughs,

“How do you intend to do that, ma’am?” I pull out the wad of hundreds I pinched from the dead slimes,

“With cash.” I say. His grin pulls into a straight line. He nods.

“Five hundred. Plus tips,” he says. I pull away six hundred from the stack and place it in front of him. I pick out the bag of coke from my blazer pocket and toss it in front of him.

“Plus tips,” I say. He smiles wide and puts everything into his pockets.

“She’s all yours,” he says. He shoots the rest of his drink and slides out of the booth. I watch him go behind the bar, peel off his suit jacket and roll up his shirt sleeves. Joey looks confused until he says something to her and points in my direction. Joey nods and walks out from behind the bar.

I wait at the corner table until she comes to me. She doesn’t say anything until we’re outside in the quiet,

“What’d you do to him?” she asks.

“What else? I paid him.”

“He said I had the rest of the week off, though. How’d you manage that?” I pull the slimmer, but still impressive wad of money out of my pocket. She gasps.

“Were those thugs carrying it?”

“Cocky pricks probably had their first big job and wanted to flash it around tonight,” I say.

“Is Maria okay?” I feel my cheeks heat briefly at the mention of her name. I answer as calmly as I can,

“Yeah. Just a little rattled.” Joey nods but keeps quiet. “You seem to be holding up okay though,” I say.

“Tell you the truth, this isn’t the first time something like this’s happened,” she says with a small voice. I firmly touch her shoulder.

“Did someone do something to you?”

“No, no, but I see Greene kids rough people up here and there. I can’t really do anything about it though cause my boss is in tight with some Mob head.”

“Fuckers.”

“Yet another reason I want out of this shit hole. At least in the Haze there’s some kind of law.”

“If you want law you might be better off in the Mars. Or the Mel better yet. No one bothers to rough up anyone or anything.” Joey laughs at that.

“I suppose that’s true. But there’s no place for artists anywhere but the Haze,” she says.

“Fair enough. Whereabouts is your place?” I ask. She walks past me a few steps and says,

“This way.” Doogie barks and walks up ahead of us.

“I appreciate you wanting to walk me home but it’s really not that far,” she says.

“It’s okay. I wanted to,” I give her a little smile. She laces her delicate, porcelain fingers between mine as we continue walking. I’m not sure what to make of her trying to flirt with me at this point. But I really don’t have the energy to stop her either.

Her apartment is in fact, only three blocks from Montague’s. I start to feel a little silly for walking her home, but I would’ve felt worse making her walk alone or leaving

her at the bar all night. She lives in a complex, a little bougier than the district it was in, but not enough to be entirely out of place in the in-between area before the Emerald city and after the rougher parts of Oz. I make Doogie wait outside while I walk her up, up and up to the second-highest floor where her flat is. I feel a little winded by the time we get there.

“Please tell me the rent is cheaper the higher up you live in this place,” I pant out.

“Actually, it is. When I moved here I was about fifteen pounds heavier.” She fishes her keys from her pocket. Her cheeks do look a little sallow in the high lights of the hallway.

“Any idea what you’ll do with your week off?” I ask.

“I’ll probably finish up some works in progress I’ve got. Thanks again for getting me off,” Any other night I would’ve followed the line of that open innuendo. I just nod,

“Sure thing. Maybe try to lay low for the week?”

“Lay low?”

“Don’t go out unless you really have to. Even then, go during the day, watch your back, that sort of thing,”

“You’re putting me on house arrest?”

“I’d rather think of it as ‘protective custody’.”

“Are you gonna check on me to make sure I don’t disobey?” A sneaky smile creeps onto her lips.

“Do you want me to?” I ask flatly.

“You can if you want.” She toes a little closer to me.

“I told Maria I’d keep an eye on her, too. But, I’ll do what I can, okay?” I force my voice steady as she wraps her arms around my neck. Her malt whisky hair stands way out against the faded beige walls and her flecked, milk flower skin. She lightly pouts her petal lips. I put her hands back to her sides. She cocks her head at me. I say,

“Not tonight. Not like this. Get some sleep and maybe we can try another time.”

“Kyra, I’m fine, really.” Her eyes didn’t betray her words; they’re as blue and flat as pale sheet ice. She is fine and that unnerves me. Suddenly, I feel stupid for not just leaving her at the bar. She’s trying to play me for something. But I can’t be sure of what at this point. I just smirk and say,

“I’m sure you are. But, I’m not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. Right now, just get inside and lock up.” She crosses her arms and tries to look defeated. I stuff my hands in my pockets and start walking back down the stairs. She calls after me,

“What are you gonna do?” I thud down the steps without looking at her and answered,

“What I’m good at.” I’ve been out of the Green for a few years, but I know they haven’t changed much. The only thing that’s changed is the head. And I know exactly where, who and how she operates. But before I can get to her, I’ve got a little more work to do.

CHAPTER IV

IT'S Wednesday. The mob slimes should be heading to their warehouse to blow lines and stock up on bullets. At least that's what they used to do when I was still in it. Fuckers think they're so untouchable they'll do it in broad daylight sometimes. Despite my passion for offing these dregs of human life, I've done pretty good at keeping it to a minimum until last Saturday. No one really wants the low-level Greene miscreants dead anymore, so my mercenary work has been slow. The mob these days was headed by Maven Sontag. I knew her personally from my days in the mob, so I attribute the low level of mob assholery to her leadership. Good, firm leader with a badass poker-face. But there always has to be a few bad seeds that ruin the fun for everyone else, I suppose. I'm doing her a favor, really.

I followed the lead I got from that night to 8th street. Indeed, there is a warehouse there. It looks unassuming enough in concrete grey and a sign faded to illegibility. It's still early in the day so it's quiet and seemingly devoid of people. I keep my distance but do enough skulking around to confirm my suspicion. No one's around, but every entrance is padlocked tight and the windows are shut from the inside. All I can do was wait until someone opens up for business.

It only takes an hour or so before a group of five suits walked to the back side of the building and key the back door open. A few minutes pass and they crack a couple of the windows. I light and puff on a cig while I wait a few more minutes to see if any other guests were just trying to be fashionably late. By the time there's no more cig to be smoked, no one else had come. I stomp out the butt and make my way to, and crouch under one of the open windows. The only useful thing I hear is that Sykes is to show up around eight. Apart from that I hear coke being snorted, shots being drained and guns being taken apart or cocked in case of trouble. Good thing I showed up, otherwise this night might've been too dull for these poor bastards. But I'll have to be quick about it; if they were right, I only have about a half hour.

I make sure to stay out of the view of the windows and make my way to the building's garage door. There's a dumpster in the space between the garage and the stairs up to the back door. They didn't say anything about a delivery, so if I got their attention that way, at least a few, if not all of them would come out with heat. The rest would have to finish cleaning and putting their guns back together, but even then they should be carrying backup. I hope the ones who had a few lines would come out first. Maybe they'd loose a few misses, give me a window to return fire. Either way, I have to get them to notice me.

I toe up the stairs, bang on the door and jump over the railing to hide on the far side of the dumpster. I hear a few confused murmurs, but no one comes out. I peek out over the edge of the dumpster, aim at the door and shot two rounds into it. The bullets ping off the dense metal and leave dimples in the door. I hear more aroused murmurs and the sounds of feet shuffling to the door. I slink back into hiding just before they come out.

They file one, two, three down the stairs and pull the hammers back on their guns. I wait until I can get at least two of their backs in my sight. One goes farther left than I would like and the other is smart enough to check the dumpster. Before he fully faces himself my direction, I fire a round into his side and another in his face as he doubles over. A few shots fired in our direction before the standing two slimes take some steps towards their fallen friend. I get one in the side of the neck as soon as his head comes into my view over the corner of the dumpster. He tries to cry out but the shattered jaw makes it turn into a garbled splurt. When he falls over, he sees me and tries to fire, but my heel to his face stops him. I half pie around the corner to find the last guy ready to fire at me and the last two slimes coming out of the warehouse.

Slime three starts firing while the fourth and fifth start aiming. I close the little distance between three and me by running in a serpentine pattern up to him, knocking the gun out of his hand with my left hand and knocking him out with my right, all the while his friends were trying and missing us. I step behind him and pull him up so he could catch the bullets his friends do manage to fire correctly. Lucky for me, their back-ups are just six-shooters, so there's only a few more shots fired into three's torso before the hammers click on empty chambers. I fire two shots in each chest. While they stop to pull whatever else they're packing from their pockets, they fall back onto the door and I throw my human shield to the ground and run up to them to fire a final headshot into each. CRACK CRACK. Five little slimes dead, one big one to go. I see four has a watch, so I take it off him and check the time. 7:48... boss should be here soon. Whatever time I have left, I won't waste. I lift the dumpster lid open, loot and drag the five bodies into it. Good thing at least two of them were already close to it and gravity helped me get the

ones on the staircase down faster. I check the watch again; 8:03. I'm a little winded from the clean-up and still haven't heard or seen anyone pull up. I step into the room the slimes were in earlier to catch my breath.

The warehouse itself is empty except for three wooden crates and the table the slimes were sitting at earlier. I work open one of the crates to find it stocked with full mags. I replace the empty mags in my SIGs with a pair of fresh ones. The table is dusted with left over lime glitter and upturned shot glasses. I pull out the flask I lifted from one of the bodies and opened it. Empty. No wonder they were such bad shots. I toss away the flask and sit on one of the three chairs at the table to wait for Sykes. The name doesn't sound familiar to me, so he had to have climbed up the mob ladder pretty quick to be even a lower level boss. Maven must have been raising at least a few good boys since she's been the main Mob Mama. But that doesn't mean she's free of bad seeds like the gang from Montague's. I've been out of the scene so long, I start to wonder how many of us were left, if any at all.

Maven and I met when I was eighteen. It was an especially mundane Tuesday in November. The icy air was whispering through my clothes and pinching at my flesh. I stuffed my hands deep into my pockets and held my arms close to my body as I walked down the beat-up sidewalk. I think I was headed to get dog food. Or was it smokes? I got both eventually.

A high-pitched cry came out of a narrow alley between two grey-brown buildings I would've otherwise passed. I slowed down to listen for a minute; the cry rang out again, shrill and pained. It sounded like a young girl or maybe a really young boy. I quietly

stepped down the alley, looking for whoever made the cry. I heard something move for a hot second. Finally, I said,

“Are you okay? I’m not gonna-” A knife pressed to my neck cut off my speech.

“Give me all your money, bitch,” someone spat from behind me. Despite their attempt to mask their voice, I could tell they couldn’t be any more than twelve or so.

“Aren’t you a little young to be holding people up, kid?” I asked

“I’m old enough.” The knife was pressed closer to my jugular. “Take out your cash and hand it over.”

“Fine, fine,” I replied calmly. I reached my hand into my coat where I had my Smith and Wessons holstered. I could hear their feet shuffle a little to keep her balance. They must’ve been a good bit shorter than me. I snapped my elbow back into their chest which made them fall back onto their ass. I whipped around to face them as fast as I could. When they looked back up at me, I saw a girl. I had my S&Ws aimed at her head. Her face was twisted into a scowl,

“Now how ‘bout you drop that knife?” I asked. She extended her arm out and let her little butterfly knife clink against the pavement. She was wearing a beat-up, baggy brown utility parka, but I could still see she was hungry skinny. Matted blond hair dangled in chunks and wisps around her face. Her chalky skin seemed to be straining against her sharp cheekbones.

“So you gonna kill me or what?” She asked. Her cold mint eyes hardened with anger.

“Geez, what language. Didn’t your folks teach you manners?” I asked.

“I’m not scared of you, you stupid cunt.” Her voice was steady, but her words were hollow nonetheless. I chuckled a little bit and put my guns away. I reached out my hand to help her onto her feet. I was right, she was a good four or five inches shorter than me. She dusted off the seat of her ratty jeans and said,

“I thought only Greene guys were allowed to carry.”

“That may be, but this city’s dangerous. You’re gonna need something better than that little knife if you wanna defend yourself.” I picked up and flipped the knife closed before handing it back to her. She slowly took the knife back and her face twisted into a confused grimace.

“What’s your deal?” she asked.

“My deal?”

“Yeah... why didn’t you shoot me?”

“Why would I? You’re just a kid. Clearly, you’re desperate enough to try and rob someone twice your size, so I can only assume you’re broke as a joke. Why waste a bullet?” Her scrunched face softened under my criticism. She blew a wisp of corn yellow hair out of her eye,

“You were kinda hunched over when I saw you. You looked smaller. Besides, I just tried to rob you.” Her voice shrank and grew as she spoke.

“Yeah, but you didn’t succeed. So no harm done.” I shrugged.

“Because you knocked me over and almost shot me!”

“‘Almost’ being the operative word there, kid.”

“Quit calling me kid. You don’t look much older than me.”

“Well how old are you? Twelve? Thirteen?”

“I’m sixteen, thanks.” She crossed her skinny arms at me. I’m not gonna lie, seeing her heated at me was fucking adorable. She was getting noticeably more annoyed with me. I raised my hands up at her.

“Fair enough, you’re not much younger than me. But what else can I call you? You never bothered to tell me your name while you were trying to hold me up.” She raised her eyebrow at me in confusion, but eventually said,

“Maven... my name is Maven.” I gave her a half smile.

“Big name for such a little girl,” I joked. She returned my smirk with one of her own. “I’m Kyra.”

“That’s a pretty name for such a butch-looking girl,” she teased.

“Oh, we’ve got jokes now,” I returned. After a short, sticky silence I asked, “I take it you’re on your own?” She nodded and asked,

“Are you?”

“Yeah.” I reached into my pocket and fished out a twenty, “But, I’m not alone.” I handed her the bill. She looked down at it, then at me.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“I dunno. What were you gonna do with the money if you robbed me?” she hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Depends how much you had, I guess.” Her stomach moaned out in hunger. I laughed,

“Maybe you should get something to eat first, huh?” She laughed with me. I turned around and started walking back to the sidewalk. I looked back at her staring at me with her hands in her pockets. It wasn’t that long ago I was hungry, alone and scared. She

had some damn good puppy eyes despite how cold two dimensional they were. I figured I could always shoot her if she crossed me.

“You comin’ or what?” I asked. A tiny grin fought against her stubborn lips. Her worn sneakers clip-clapped on the pavement as she walked towards me.

Our first year together was easily the best. Maybe it was because we were young and even in a place like Oz, didn’t have a care in the world. Some of the people I worked for would let us crash on a couch or clear out a room and toss us an air mattress. Both of us were used to living day-by-day but Maven was overjoyed just to have enclosed rooms and semi-soft spots to sleep in for once. After a few months I managed to scrape enough together to rent out a one-bedroom apartment until further notice. The longer we stayed, the more work I came across. We ended up living there for somewhere around a year, until Maven got drafted into the Greene Mob.

Neither of us were really used to having a real friend. I had temp bosses, one-nighters, and ‘I-know-a-guys’, but never someone to really be with. She was kinda like a little sister for a while; she always wanted to know what I was up to, or what I thought about something. Slowly, but surely we came to know each other’s stories. She had an easier time opening up to me than I to her. She would sneak out in the wee hours before I woke up to pinch us some breakfast. One morning, she came in with a grocery bag full edible odds and ends: energy drinks, a loaf of white bread, violent pink snack cakes and some oranges. I was sitting at the table cleaning out my Smith and Wessons. She had a pretty smug little smile on. I kept telling her she didn’t have to steal anymore. “

Old habits, I guess,” she replied. “The drinks and cakes were out of a broken vending machine, so it wasn’t really stealing.”

“What about the bread and oranges?” I asked

“The clerk at the store was balls deep in a dirty magazine. He would barely notice someone who actually wanted to pay. Let alone someone slipping in and out.” I could hear the growing resentment in her voice.

“How much do we have left, anyway?” she asked. I peeled open an orange and shoved a few slippery slices into my mouth.

“A hundred and some change, I think. I’ll look around for another job today,” I said out of the free half of my mouth.

“Do you want me to look for one, too?” she asked as she cracked open one of the cans.

“Do you know how to do anything besides steal and look adorable?” I replied, still chewing.

“I’m actually pretty good at math,” she said defiantly. “Maybe I could keep someone’s books for a while,”

“I didn’t know people still did that. Shit, if you make a dollar more than the Greene wants you to, you have to hide it.” I open the second can.

“You’d be surprised. Some Greene guys have hearts,” Sadness honeyed her words. I raised my eyebrows in confusion. She took a swig of the sugary swill, “Some people keep books to show anyone who bothers to ask. My dad made a deal with some people that if their books said they were hurting bad enough, he’d look the other way. Provided they do something for him.”

“Like what?” I hesitated to ask.

“Set aside a box or so of clothes. Food. Bullets. Whatever.”

“Well, what happened? Why were you on your own when I found you?” Curiosity prickled into my voice. Maven shrunk a little in her seat,

“My dad tried leaving. He wanted to move us out of Oz. His brother was out in the Mel, I think. We probably would’ve ended up there. One of his so-called buddies caught wind of that and had him bumped off,” she fiddled with the pull tab while spoke.

“I’m not sure if they knew he had a kid. I hid in the closet the night they came. I didn’t try coming out until morning. I wish they would’ve found me. it’s my fault he’s dead. He was just trying to get me out of Oz.” A few tears started sliding down her face. She swallowed hard to try and stop them. She took a deep inhale and sat in silence for what seemed like hours. Even back then I was shit at emotional situations. But I leaned out of my seat and pulled her in for a hug. She clung to me and I could feel hot, bitter tears wetting my shirt. She didn’t sob, though. After a moment or two, she pulled back for a breath of air. I half suspected she was lying to me. It’s not like I had anything worth her time to con me out of. And the little I had I wasn’t opposed to sharing with her at that point. She’d really given me no reason to fully trust her. But she’d given me no reason to bear malice against her. She stayed out of my way, kept the place clean and stole enough for both of us. I had the means to defend myself if she tried to cross me. I felt responsible for her. At least until she was strong enough to be on her own. Part of me tried to be indifferent to whatever outcome came about. More of me hoped it we could stick together for a while longer. I broke the silence,

“You’ll have to forgive me for being leery to trust a thief. You can try to find some work if you want. But don’t be stupid about it.” She scrunched her face at me.

“I don’t wanna have to clean up your mess or worse, your corpse. Whether I trust you or not,” my words became coarse and heavy in my mouth. I took a lot for me to choke out, “I do care about you, Mave,”

After that Mave started working. She’d run packages between places or scrub floors. Sometimes we would go a few days without saying a word to each other because of the random schedules. But normally, I would take late day or still-dark-out morning jobs. Little by little Mave’s schedule became more consistent. She would be out by eleven am and back around nine or so. I didn’t think anything of it until my twentieth birthday.

The acrid April rain took a break that day. I was sitting at the table trying to unjam my one of my Smith and Wessons. Random city sounds and menthol filtered sunlight poured into the apartment. Mave came in with one of her hands behind her back.

“Hey Mave,” I said looking up from briefly and back down. I heard her skip up to the table. I looked up at her holding out a white shoe box wrapped in a twine ribbon.

“Happy birthday, Kyra,” she chirped. I looked at the box, then up at her.

“Are you serious?” She made a face and shook the box at me.

“Come on, open it,” she begged. I rolled my eyes and smiled as I took it from her. It was kinda heavy despite its size. I shook the box back and forth and felt something dense sliding around. I pulled the twine ribbon away and opened the lid. Two pistol shaped somethings were wrapped in a hearty layer of tissue paper. I peeled away the paper and found two gorgeous, off taupe SIG Sauer 1911 Scorpion pistols. I tried not to drool.

“Where did you get these?” I asked, not taking my eyes off the SIGs’ sleek lines.

“I’ve been setting half my money aside for a few weeks. These are the first things I’ve bought with money I’ve earned. Other than food, I mean. Do you like ‘em?” her voice sounded shy. I couldn’t find words. I shook my head,

“Maven, they’re beautiful.” I picked one of them up. It felt like almost too good in my hand. Amatory even. I weighed it and my old Smith and Wesson in opposite hands. The S&W felt alien and offensive compared to the SIG. I put down the S&W and picked up the other SIG. My hands had never felt so complete.

“I don’t think I’d have the heart to actually use these. They’re too nice,” I said.

“I’d say you’ve earned something nice. What else was I gonna get you anyway, a new dress?” she replied. I let out a loud laugh. I looked up to see Maven half grinning at me.

“I’ve noticed your old ones have been jamming up a lot, anyway. I kinda hope you won’t have to use them at all, but I’d feel better if you carried them from now on.” As she finished talking, my gut sank. She was hiding something.

“They’re amazing, and I’m mad grateful, Maven. But what kind of money are you making that you can afford these?” I asked as blankly as I could. Maven’s smile melted.

“What’s it matter? I’m making money and neither of us are dead.”

“Maven, what have you been doing for work?” I pressed.

“I told you, I’ve just been running packages,”

“Try again,” the volume of my voice went up a level without my consent. Maven shrunk away from me. I realized I was still holding the SIGs. I set them down. I stepped closer to Maven and apologized.

“Look, unless you’re a drug mule or hooker, I won’t get mad. Just tell me what you’ve been doing.” She closed her eyes and began explaining,

“I wasn’t lying when I said I’ve been running packages.”

“And you never pinched anything?” I asked.

“There was never anything really worth it. Or if there was, I was never asked to run it. A few months ago I had to run a few cartons of smokes to a slick penthouse on the ritzier part of the city. They were those posh ultra lights with the lady on the box. I knew you wouldn’t smoke them. The dude’s butler always answered the door when I delivered. After a while, the dude actually answered; some old prune with liverspots and a gin blossom. He said he just wanted to thank whoever was delivering the smokes because they never tried pinching any from him. He said he didn’t expect it to be a little girl and asked what I was doing running packages. I told him I was on my own just trying to make enough to keep up with rent. He asked how much I made running, I told him and he wrote me a check for double. He said he wanted me to work for him, he’d pay me double what I was making already and all I had to do was pick up only his packages from now on. How could I turn down double the money for a third of my work?” It all added up in an instant.

“He’s Greene, isn’t he?” I asked.

“Believe me, I wanted to quit the minute I found out. But it was too late by then.” She fell into the other seat at the table and put her hands in her face, “I’m so sorry, Kyra... I just wanted to help. You’ve done so much for me. I just wanted to pay you back.” She sounded so ashamed of herself. My heart broke under her shame. I sat back down in my seat.

“So, lemme get this straight; you’re making some decent money, and all you have to do is pick up this dude’s smokes?” I asked.

“And his groceries. He gives me some extra on those days to pick up stuff for you and me.” That explained the steady stream of good beer and chicken for the last few months.

“He doesn’t make you shake anyone down or anything like that?” She shook her head.

“I don’t know how to fight or shoot. Even if I did, I’m not scary enough to be an enforcer, Kyra.”

“You’ve got a point there.” I looked at the SIGs and S&Ws on the table. “Maybe it’s time you learned how,” I picked up one of the S&Ws and handed it to Maven. She looked at me with suspicious wide eyes.

“You’re not mad?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not overjoyed. But a job’s a job. Besides, the mob’s never caused me any trouble. As long as you stay alive, who am I to judge? But like I said, I don’t wanna clean up your corpse. So you need to learn how to defend yourself.” I put my hand on her shoulder.

Of the few people I’ve cared about in my life, I hadn’t shared as of myself with anyone more than Maven. To this day, I don’t regret it. Despite the different stratospheres we now live in, she’s never crossed me. She never mocked me, or judged me. She’s the only one that ever knew my story. Then again, she was the only one who I ever cared to tell... not to mention the only one who ever really cared to ask. I smiled at her. She returned the smile and thanked me.

Between Maven's regular pay and my come-and-go work, we ended up doing pretty well for ourselves. We hadn't worried about a place to stay or how we'd scrape dinner together in two years. She eventually got upped to keeping the old prune's books. He claimed his name was Mr. Carlisle. Apparently, he was one of the first few higher ups but got out-slimed by the head-Greene-the-time's dad. Carlisle was smart, but not heartless enough to stay at the top. He didn't think anyone would try to bump him off, but he didn't put it past anyone to try and steal from him. Hence why he kept books. I didn't get to meet the guy until a few months into Maven working for him.

I think it was sometime in October. I remember coming home with a wind chaffed face and making a salami sandwich I only ate half of. Maven came in some short time later, asked me if I was gonna eat the other half. I told her she could have it and out of nowhere she asked me before she took a bite,

“Wanna meet my boss?” I must've made a weird face because she laughed at me.

“What business do I have meeting the prune?” I asked.

“He just said he wants to meet you, what's the big deal?” she asked between bites.

“He didn't say why?” I absentmindedly drummed my hands on my chest.

“Something like, he knows I've got someone taking care of me and he wants to know who. I dunno, Kyra, what's the harm in cleaning yourself up and having tea with him?”

“None when you put it like that, but I don't think that's all he wants. Did you tell him something about me that might've made his ears prick up?”

“I told him I tried robbing you but you took me under your wing instead of painting the alley with my brains and that we're living together but that's about it.” She

finished the last bite and sat down next to me. “He said if you’re interested, just come with me and the three of us can just shoot the shit over some Earl Grey.” I scrunched my face and exhaled.

“Will it make you happy? Do you think it’ll make you some extra money?”

“Yes and I don’t see why not. For all he thinks, I could be lying about you and have been just conning a lonely old Greene guy out of some extra cash.”

“That’s true, I guess. You goin’ in tomorrow?”

“Yeah, you can just tag along, but-”

“But what?”

“You might wanna get some new clothes,”

“Excuse me?” I got offended for half a second, then I looked down at the white half t-shirt stained with grease from the mechanic work I was doing at the time, beat-up jeans, and even more beat-up boots I was wearing. Okay, she had a point. My face fell into a defeated smirk,

“I don’t really have anything nice, Mave. You know that,” I said. She hummed to herself and stood back up.

“Come on,”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s still early. Let’s go shopping,”

“Seriously?” She kept her face hard. I groaned as I stood up and followed her out the door.

CHAPTER V

CARLISLE'S place was about as nice as Maven made it out to be. The Chateau was one of the nicest complex buildings in Oz. It was by Greene invitation and money only. The building itself was kind of unassuming compared to the other earth toned scrapers in the city, but pretty far off from the hand-me-down flat we were living in. Carlisle was in the fifth apartment from the top. Not quite a penthouse, but still crisp and lavish enough to make me feel way out of place.

I eyed our distorted reflections in the elevator mirror on our way up. My hair was still long enough to look feminine, even pretty if I washed it and left it down. So I did, but I still looked more business casual than formal. Maven said it would do. We ended up finding a dark-grey blazer that actually fit over my shoulders and a pair of breathable slacks. Carlisle took the liberty of giving Maven a few sensible blouses and whatnot, over the course of her working for him. Something about not wanting her to wear rags to work anymore. She wore this kind of loose-fitted lavender top and a plain black pencil skirt. She had come a long way from the straw-headed mouse I picked up two years prior. Her cheeks looked fuller and her skin wasn't whitewash pale anymore. Her hair was clean and pulled into a cute, loose side braid.

“You okay?” she asked, effectively disturbing my train of thought.

“Yeah, I’m alright.” The elevator dinged when we hit the right floor.

“Y’know, you look really nice,” Maven said to me before we walked out. If anyone had ever said that to me before, I couldn’t remember.

“Thanks Mav. You do, too.” She smiled at me while we made our way to Carlisle’s door.

It was gloss-black with a cut glass knob. Maven knocked and the tiniest man I’ve ever seen opened the door and waved us in. Mave mentioned Carlisle having a butler or something, but failed to tell me he was smaller than she was. I think he came up to the top of my abdomen and would blow away in a large gust of wind. The apartment wasn’t as open as I pictured it to be, but it was decorated pretty posh; lots of antiques of varying materials, wood, glass, what have you. The walls were that Bougey standard off white and the furniture looked to be real leather. There was a lot of fine marbling in the hide and it was still fairly shiny. Obviously, this guy didn’t entertain much.

A cigarette worn voice crackled through the silence,

“Maven, my doll!” We looked over at the bald, squat source of the sound. He was clad in this fluorescent pink smoking robe and what I assumed to be black velvet sweatpants. Even from a distance I could see Maven was right about the gin blossom. He had his arms open in a welcoming gesture. Maven stepped up to him and curtsied.

“How are you today, sir?” she asked in a syrup sickly tone.

“Oh I’m better now that you’re here, my sweet.” I saw him cast a glance at me, “I see you brought a guest?” His voice pricked up at the word ‘guest’. I straightened up and walked to him as Maven introduced me.

“Yes sir. This is my friend, Kyra. She’s the one who’s been looking over me,” she said, making some space between the two of them so I could step in and shake his hand.

“Kyra, this is my boss, Mr. Carlisle.” She gestured towards him while I held my hand out.

“It’s good to meet you, sir,” I said. He took my hand with both of his and shook it quick and soft. His liver spots weren’t as bad as I thought they’d be, but still dark and sporadic enough to match his scar blob nose. I honestly thought his smile was going to crack his head open. His teeth had to be made of something other than teeth. Real porcelain, maybe.

“I cannot tell you how lovely it is to meet you, my dear,” he said, his voice crackle-popped like a radio. I looked between him and Maven.

“Maven wasn’t lying to you, sir. Whatever you’ve been paying her has been helping us both survive,” I said.

“Oh I never thought she was lying. But she did tell me that you spared her life. Damn it, where are my manners?” He failed his hands over his head and kind of, half shuffled and half sashayed over to his butler that was standing a few feet away.

“Aramy, is my tea ready?”

“Steeping as we speak, sir.”

“Oh good. I’ll go set an extra place at the table.” He shuffle-sashayed past us to where we were supposed to have tea. “I hope you like Earl Grey, Kyra,” he called back to us over the tinkling sounds of china. I looked at Maven with my eyebrows almost touching my hairline. She put her hands up and shook her head. I followed her as she

walked into the parlor. There was a small marble table with two and a half tea settings. Carlisle was finishing up the last one.

“Aramy, the tea, damn it!” he called.

“Coming sir,” said Aramy, coming in a moment later. He was holding a silver tray with a cubic tea pot and some kind of yellow cake with white glaze. He and Carlisle set everything on the table while Maven and I sat across from each other. Carlisle sat next to Maven while Aramy poured everyone’s tea. By now I would’ve felt unnerved by this guy, but he seemed so harmless. Maybe he was going senile.

“So Kyra,” he said while stirring not one, not two, but six cubes of sugar into his tea. “Tell me about the day you met Maven.” Maven was blowing the steam off of her tea. I began,

“Well, uh, I was walking down Fifth a few years ago. I heard this screaming coming out of an alley.”

“Alone?” he asked between sips of his tea.

“I carry in case of trouble.” I said. I waited for his eyebrows to prick up at the idea of a woman using a gun, but they didn’t. He kept his little, almost black eyes on me. I continued, “So uh, I went down the alley looking for who or whatever was screaming and Maven snuck up behind me, held a knife to my throat and tried to rob me.” I saw Maven shrink into her seat and bow her head down.

“I was alone and hungry,” she began.

“Shh, don’t interrupt, sweetness, it’s rude,” he cut Maven off. Rude, indeed.

“Right. Well, she didn’t realize how much bigger I was than her. She was kinda struggling to stay at my level so I knocked her down and asked her to drop the knife.”

Maven kept shrinking with embarrassment. And I thought I was the one who was gonna be uncomfortable today. “She did, so I put my guns away,”

“Yes, but why?” He asked me. Maven’s brow crinkled at this. “When I was your age, I would’ve blown her head to bits for trying to hold me up,” he said, very matter-of-factly. At this point, I was being unnerved by his cutsey behavior. It didn’t mesh well with his apparently low regard for human life. I tried to hold a straight face, but I don’t think I was doing a good job of it. Maven shifted in her seat and cleared her throat softly. I exhaled slowly and said,

“Well, she was desperate enough to try and rob someone. I didn’t think it’d be fair to kill someone just trying to survive.” He picked a piece of the cake and said,

“You didn’t think about how letting her live would free her to rob someone else?” He started noshing on the spongy cake.

“No, I guess not,” I replied. “But there’s bigger and scarier folks than me out there. If she couldn’t hold me up, I doubt she would’ve had much luck with anyone else.” I saw Maven scrunch her mouth in acknowledged defeat. Carlisle let out a loud laugh.

“Yes, yes, that’s true too, I suppose. I’m still having trouble seeing this little peach hurt a flea, let alone rob anyone.” He playfully pushed on Maven’s shoulder. She laughed a little mock laugh. I smiled a little fake smile.

“Well she did. I also figured she didn’t have anything worth pinching if I did kill her” I said.

“Ah a good point. Why waste a shell on a destitute street rat?” He pointed at me, then wiped the crumbs off of his eating hand. “I like you Miss Kyra,” he said through another face cracking smile.

“Thank you, sir,” I said, hiding my face in a sip of Earl Grey.

“Oh please, call me Carlisle, he held up the platter with the yellow cake on it up to me. I tentatively took a slice and placed it next to my tea. “Have you ever thought about doing work for the Greenes?” he asked very flatly. Maven sat up a little. I looked between the two of them quickly before answering.

“No sir. I’m not related to anyone in the mob.”

“So what? You’re practically Maven’s sister, aren’t you?”

“I mean, I guess so, but I don’t think-” He cut me off.

“Can’t what, kill anyone? I already know you can,” he smiled.

“Excuse me?”

“I can see it in you.” He took a sip of his tea, “Believe me, when you spend enough time with people who kill for whatever reason, you start to notice the little tells. Take Maven here, for example.” He motioned in her direction. “She’s simply reeked of nerves and shame this entire conversation. Her hands aren’t as sure and steady as yours. Her eyes don’t scan the room the way yours do. True, she might not want to harm anyone in this room, but I’d venture to guess she wouldn’t truly be able to harm anyone beyond a few gashes.” Maven grew noticeably more ashamed and annoyed as he continued. He was getting under my skin, too, but there wasn’t anything I could do. I scowled the tiniest bit to let him know he was making an ass of himself. He might’ve picked that up judging on his response.

“She’s exceedingly clever, of course,” he exclaimed. “Poised, charismatic and polite. But you, miss Kyra,” he turned back to me. “You have a trained ferocity behind those furry brows and mismatched eyes. Like a dog. You just need a target to rip to

pieces with your teeth. But I'm sure you know that already, right? At least, you know who's worth killing and who is not." His voice stayed in a cool, flat tone throughout. He was confident. Probably too much for the situation, but he continued. "Besides, it's a waste of those pretty Scorpions you have to just carry for self defense, you know?" He tented his fingers, looking at me.

"How'd you know what I carried?" I shot a look at Maven, who tried to hide behind her teacup. I started scowling in disappointment, but Carlisle piped in.

"Oh don't worry dear, she bought them from me, fair and square." I looked back at him. "From you? Were they yours?" I asked.

"Oh, once upon a dream yes. Maven said she wanted to start carrying because you did. She really thinks the world of you Miss Kyra. So, I showed her all of my old toys. I should've realized she just wanted to do something nice for you. Maven's not exactly the carrying type." I reflexively put my hand to where I had my SIGs concealed, and grimaced.

"I don't know what to say, sir,"

"Say you'll put those Scorpions to good use and work for me," Carlisle said.

"With all due respect sir," I took a bite of the cake. It tasted as yellow as it looked.

"I've put work like that behind me. And I'd like to keep it that way."

"Well what sort of work do you do now?"

"I go where I'm needed,"

"Such as?" Carlisle leaned forward, looking intently at me.

"Uh, I'll load or unload trucks. Paint. Tend bar. Weld. Whatever I can do that gets me some cash," I answered.

“I see. Is it wrong of me to assume that you make more money than Miss Kyra, Maven?” he asked, turning his head to face her.

“You pay me very generously, sir,” she said without missing a beat. He turned to face me.

“Have you considered how the two of you could be living if you made the same amount of money, Miss Kyra?”

“I uh... I mean, I guess not. But that’s not really a problem for us. We do fine.” I did my best to sound convincing.

“Yes, yes of course. But don’t you want to thrive? In a few years you could be living in the Emerald district yourselves.” I saw Maven’s eyes light up a little. “And besides, you’d be earning money doing something you’re good at and, dare I say, miss doing?” He sipped at his tea without taking his eyes from me. Fuck, he was good. Maven didn’t know I used to do mercenary work, so there’s no way he could’ve known beforehand. I guess I wasn’t as stone wall as I thought. I can’t believe this creep made me realize it. Worse yet, he thought I’d gone soft and he struck me as soon as he could. I pinched my eyebrows together.

“Sir, I appreciate your offer, but that line of work is something I’d rather not get back into. I’m sure you can find someone else to do whatever it is you want done.” A dense beat of silence passed before he exhaled.

“Very well. Why don’t we change the subject then?” His tone lit up sprightly again and held itself throughout the rest of the afternoon.

Once the three of us finished the pot of tea, Aramy saw us out of the apartment.

“I’ll have my driver get you two home, okay?” Carlisle called after us. We both thanked him before we walked into the hall.

Maven didn’t say a thing until the elevator door closed in front of us and we started descending.

“What did you use to do before we lived together, Kyra?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it, Mave.”

“Were you an assassin or something? You can tell me.”

“No. Well, kind of. What does it matter? It’s behind me now.” I shifted foot to foot. The elevator dragged slowly downward.

“After all this time you still can’t-”

“It was just a part of my life I’ve tried to move past.” The elevator chimed as we landed on the ground floor. Maven tried to smooth out her angry scowl. I sighed. “Look, we can talk about it when we get home, okay? Something about this place makes my skin crawl,” I told her. The door opened and we walked into the lobby and finally back out into the city.

We waited a few minutes, but no one pulled up to get us. A few random civilians of Oz shuffled around us, but the street was pretty quiet otherwise. Before I could get a better scope of our surroundings, a giant thug was behind me and had his hands over my mouth. I went to reach for my SIGs but his hands looped under my arms and had me in a full nelson. I heard Maven shout out my name, and saw her being restrained by a second thug. He was holding her by her hands that he had behind her back. She tried shaking free to no avail. People around us just started avoiding our path, afraid to do anything.

“What’s the meaning of this? I work for Carlisle!” she shouted. My thug was big enough that I couldn’t lift him far up. I barred my arms, threw some of our weight into a side step. He lost his footing for a minute and I threw him up against the wall of the Chateau. I glanced toward Maven’s thug while I pulled out and cocked my SIGs. He didn’t move or try to pull on me. I looked down at my thug and saw him try to pull a piece from the inside of his jacket. I crushed his hand into his chest with the heel of my boot, which made him squeeze onto his trigger involuntarily and loose a round against the side of his torso. He scrunched his face in pain and I shot two rounds into his open mouth and one between his eyes with my right SIG while I held out the left towards Maven’s thug. I snapped my other SIG towards the two of them. He moved his grip from her hands to where he was almost cradling her head in his forearm. He had a Colt pressed against Maven’s left temple. If Oz had law enforcement, maybe someone would’ve called them at that point. But the Emerald District folk just stayed away from the debacle.

“Put ‘em away or the girl dies,” he said flatly. I held my SIGs steady and tried to pick when or where to shoot. I had no way of telling how fast a shot he was or if there were more thugs lurking around for backup. Before I could make a choice, Maven jerked around in his grip enough that he looked down at Maven and away from me for a long enough. I made a quick step to his side and shot him in the temple. No one came to the fallen slimes.

Maven shrugged him off her back before he could crush her under his new-dead weight. She straightened her clothes while I holstered my SIGs. For a minute I was reeling on if Maven tried to set me up. Carlisle might’ve bribed her with something. She could’ve been too ashamed to admit she wanted more money to get a place in the city.

Maybe she wanted me in the Greene to make her feel safer. None of it was enough to try and fake me out.

“What’s your problem?” She asked. I didn’t realize I was scowling at her. Her face paled a little bit under my gaze. I relaxed my face and asked if she was alright.

“I’m fine. What are we gonna do now?” I looked up to the upper level of the building and back down at the dead thug slimes.

“Do either of these guys look familiar to you?” I asked.

“No. Carlisle might’ve just hired these guys.”

“I’m gonna go back up. Go through their pockets if you think they’ve got anything.” I pushed back through the front doors and grabbed an elevator back up to Carlisle’s suite.

Before I could decide how to bust down Carlisle’s door, Aramy pulled it open. I stomped in. Carlisle was waiting for me in this leather armchair with his legs crossed.

“Back already, Miss Kyra?” I kept one of my SIGs out for my own security. He’s old mob and I’m in his house. He could’ve been hiding an army in the cervices and closets of this place. I wasn’t stocked enough to pick off anymore than maybe five or six of his goons. I could’ve fought a few more off for a few minutes. After I finally gave out, he’d probably have me cremated alive and use the ashes for the eyeliner he probably wears when he goes out. He kept his face neutral while he spoke.

“Where’s Maven?” he asked.

“Cut the crap you wrinkly old fuck. What do you want?” I had the other SIG pointed at him, but I had a feeling he knew I wouldn’t actually shoot. Or if he didn’t, he was hiding it very well.

“I already told you what I want, Miss Kyra.” His voice was level enough to serve coffee on top of. “I want you to work for me,”

“Yeah, I get that. Sicking your slimes on me isn’t the best way to incentivize me, y’know,” I snarled.

“It brought you back up to me, didn’t it?” I hated how right he was. He continued. “I knew you were more than capable enough to take care of my ‘slimes’. Probably more than just those two. But that would’ve been overkill, don’t you agree?”

“Keep talking like that and I’ll show you overkill.” I pressed the front of my gun into his forehead. It wasn’t wet with nerves, but I guess that’s Greene Mob for you. He tutted at me and said,

“Think of Maven, won’t you?”

“You keep her out of this. She’s already on your side anyway,”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Miss Kyra. It’s like we discussed earlier, why waste a bullet? I’d venture a guess and say that killing or harming her would only piss you off, making you vengeful and cause you to come after me. What good would that do anyone? I’d be gone and after you’ve exhausted yourself killing slimes, someone would catch up to you and kill you as well.” He wasn’t wrong, but god damn I just wanted to just see him sweat. I wanted to see his fear. His life was at my mercy, yet he gave me no good reason to end it at this point. Maven would be safe, both of us would make good money if I started working for him. He held his hands up and cocked his head slightly.

“Just hear me out, will you? I think you’ll find my terms to be quite generous.” I let a few beats of silence pass before I answered,

“I’ve got two questions.”

“Go on.”

“What do you get out of me working for you? Your terms or not.”

“You’re smart, Kyra. I’m sure you can tell that I’ve got enough money to last me the rest of my life. What I want is to make a statement to the arrogant pricks that took me down. They forced me into retirement because I wasn’t willing to walk around like an opulent child flashing my assets.” He stood up, pushing himself out of his chair and walked towards one of the large windows. “Everyone in Oz already knew who was running the city. Why make a show of it? I’m all for having a bit of fun, but the current heads don’t agree that all of that power entails some structure and dare I say, responsibility.” He turned back to face me once he made it to the window.

“I want to show them that the party has to stop at some point, no matter how much money or firepower you back it up with. I need you to help me get back to the top of the Greene. Everyone’s heads are so far wedged betwixt their own ass cheeks that they won’t suspect a comfortably retired old dog like me would want to play this game anymore. Let alone, suspect that a mercenary would do anyone’s work but their own.”

“What do I care who’s at the head of the mob or not?” I said. “I’m hard pressed to believe you’d be doing charity work with that power.”

“Oh, because you’re so thrilled with the way things are being run now. I’ve said this before; with my help you and Maven can thrive instead of just live. And look at me, Miss Kyra. I’ve only got a few years left before I shuffle away into death. Who’s to say I wouldn’t name either of you my successor? With your muscle and Maven’s wit, you two could run the Greenes better than anyone has prior.” He faced the window and looked down at the city.

“What happened to ‘nothing lasts forever’?” I said, speaking to his back side.

“I never said you’d reign eternal. But wouldn’t you like to do something with your life beyond petty temp work and cleaning guns you’d seldom use?” Damn, he had a good point. I hated him even more for it. But I had no stable out to argue with. Even if he couldn’t guarantee Maven’s safety, I knew I could. Even if he turned on me, I could bring him down. And even if Maven and I didn’t make it far, we could still make more money that could keep us up for some time. He broke my contemplative silence.

“What was your second question, Kyra?”

“I still don’t trust you. If I keep my gun pointed at you, will you keep talking?”

“You can keep your guns pointed at me as long as you like. Your arm will tire at some point.” My aim would falter with a tired arm. I let my arm fall to my side. He talked at me for a few minutes about when and how I’d report to him, what I should expect as far as pay, and how I was to conduct myself during ‘business hours’. He assured me that I’d have the freedom to do my actual work however I saw fit, but since I was part of the Greene Mob, I had an image to uphold until the time for Carlisle’s ‘coup’. Civilians and more importantly, other Greene’s expected certain things of me that I had to play along with. People would fear and respect me. Carlisle correctly guessed I was already used to that kind of thing, so he assumed wouldn’t be much of a hurdle. I agreed to his terms so long as Maven wouldn’t get hurt, even if I left or stopped being useful to him.

“Of course, Miss Kyra. She’s got family ties to the Greene. Even if someone wanted to hurt her, it would be in such bad taste.” He kept looking out the window.

“Speaking of Maven, why don’t you help her clean up the mess you made? It’s hot out today and I don’t imagine you have long before those bodies start to smell.”

CHAPTER VI

I finally hear a car roll up to the front of the warehouse. This guy was probably a low level enforcer while I was still a Greene. It's not likely a fresh recruit would get to be a boss so fast. The last person who progressed that fast was Maven and she didn't stop until she was THE boss... maybe that's his game. Just to bide his time until the moment was right for him to take Maven's place. Not that I care who's running Oz at this point, but if it wasn't for his boys, Maria and I would've had a perfectly lovely night out so he still has to pay.

I wait until I hear the car door open and close. I get up out of the chair and cock my SIGs while the front door opens. Before I turn around, Maven's voice starts to bounce off the walls,

"I should've figured it was you, Kyra." I whip around with my SIGs pointed forward. I hadn't seen Maven for at least two years until now. She had either grown five inches, or was wearing those stilt heels. "There's no need for that, I'm alone," she says while her heels click towards me. Her voice sounded about the same, if only more echoey from the distance. The closer she got to me the more I could see how she'd aged. Her frozen mint eyes hadn't changed, but damn near everything else about her has. Her once

yellow blond hair is nearly white now, from stress or bleach, I'm not sure. The bun she has it pulled into makes her cheekbones look lethal. Her walk is much more severe than I remember it. She's put on some weight since I saw her, but in the 'Becoming a woman' way. If I'm right, she's at least twenty-four now. When she finally comes to face me, she can't meet my eye level.

"It's nice to see you," she says.

"Likewise, Mave." She lets her eyes inspect me up and down before talking again.

"I have a feeling you're not as happy to see me as I'd like you to be."

"Where's the head slime?"

"He's been let go."

"Let go?"

"Clearly he couldn't keep his boys in line, let alone punish them for falling out of line. I don't have time for that kind of thing."

"Those little shits of his were your boys, too,"

"By proxy, I guess you're right. But they're not our problem anymore. So why don't we just enjoy our time together? How long has it been?" She sits in one of the empty chairs while she speaks.

"I dunno. I haven't seen you since I left,"

"Right. So two years? Three?"

"Something like that. What are you doing here, Mave?"

"I heard you were doing some of my dirty work and I wanted to say thank you in person," she says, drawing a face in the leftover layer of coke on the table.

"*Your* dirty work?"

“Oh, how would you say it ‘Offing my slimes’? I have people in my ranks to do that, but I guess I don’t have enough. Or at least, not enough that are as efficient as you are.”

“I didn’t go out looking for these guys. They just made the mistake of being in my way,” I said, taking a step back.

“Of course. How stupid of them. I guess your name doesn’t have as much punch as it used to.” She stands up and straightens the skirt of her suit before she starts to circle me. “The Sting used to strike fear into the hearts of enforcers,” she says. I know she’s trying to bait me.

“Is that so?”

“Oh yeah. Not that I imagine you care, but you’re the first successful turncoat in Greene history.”

“I’m not the first who’s ever killed mob, you know that. Everyone knows that.”

“True, but you weren’t doing it for money. Greenes think they can buy their way out of anything, and I guess they’re not entirely wrong. But how do you bribe a merc who bumps off their brothers for the hell of it?”

“It’s not my fault they decide to behave like children,” I said, feeling a bit childish myself.

“Oh, I know. Frankly, I appreciate the help.” Mave says as she turns away.

“Really now?”

“Yes. In fact, I’d like to buy you dinner if you’d let me,” she says as she turns to face me.

“What for?”

“To catch up, to be nice, to try and poison you so you’ll stop killing my employees, take your pick. Regardless, I’ll have someone come get you at five on Friday. I’ll send some clothes with them,” She gives me another once-over, and a small shake of her head.

“Do you know where I live?”

“Not exactly, but I know where you hang out. Be at that greasy spoon diner you like so much at four.” She straightens the front of her clothes again.

“Or what?”

“Or you’ll miss the prime rib and bourbon I’ll have for you. You still drink bourbon, right?” She lifts her eyebrows. I half-expect her to smile at me. I just nod a response. She put her hands on my shoulders. “You never had to be suspicious of me, Kyra. And you still don’t have to,” she said.

“Then if you missed me so much, why not try and find me sooner?”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t bother to give me the time of day. I’m shocked you’re still listening to me, to be honest,” I shrug her hands off of my shoulders, holster my SIGs and turn away towards the back door. “Try to be on time, please,” she calls after me as I close the door behind me.

I haven’t trusted Maven in years. I don’t see that changing any time soon. But I couldn’t deny that under her lead, Oz was doing better than it ever had. The beat parts of Oz were getting smaller and save for the few groups of bad seeds, there wasn’t as much crime. Otherwise, I’d have more work. But none of that can excuse what happened.

Maven had been a Greene for four years, and myself three. Carlisle was right, we had thrived with all of the extra money. We got ourselves a flat on the edge line of the Emerald district. Not quite as cozy as where the bosses lived, but damn it all if it wasn't more posh than anything I ever knew. Maven got upped from just doing Carlisle's books to doing general finance planning for a group of the mid-level bosses and even one of the higher ups. No matter what we did, we still had to report to Carlisle. From what I understood, his plan was really just to get us as far as we could while he was still alive. Once we got into a high enough place, he wanted to stage something of a coup or an 'informal mutiny' as he liked to put it. He never wanted to be at the top himself if only because he was fucking ancient already and figured his little time at the top would be inconsequential. He just wanted to make a point to the guys who forced him into retirement. He spent a lot of his time grooming Maven to be a boss. Her dad got bumped off for wanting to leave the Greenes, but the heads still had respect, and maybe even some affection for Maven. They probably figured she could redeem her dad's shortcomings. Or maybe they just wanted to get in her skirt once she grew up some more. Maven loved her dad with all her heart and soul, so she found a kind of makeshift kinship with his old crew and anyone who claimed to have been friends with him, even if they were Carlisle's enemies. I was never sure if she even liked doing books regardless of her talent for doing them or even mingling with the Greenes. In spite of all that though, she always wanted to trail along with me, though.

I was kind of a floater between groups of enforcers. I had less actual 'work' to do than Maven, but we still made around the same amount. I could've re-fitted myself four

times over with new guns, but I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the SIGs Maven bought me. One of the bosses I'd worked for in my second year bought me some really slick Browning BR9s. They just didn't feel as right as the Scorpions. Thankfully, he wasn't offended, but no one ever truly tried to argue with me on anything anyway. I was already over six feet tall years before I became a Greene. My boobs decided to stay hidden behind my chest skin, but my hips filled out a little to compensate. My blazer always made my shoulders look broader, so I had the illusion of a half-an-hourglass when I wore it. No one ever asked me about my eye, but I guess it was for the better. I never bothered to make up a cool story for why I wore the patch at all. I was just born with a bad eye, but I wouldn't have been surprised if everyone thought I didn't have an eye at all. Maven had bought me a few new patches as a joke once. One of them had a brown cartoon eye painted over it. She thought it was hilarious, and I had to admit it was funny looking on my face. She was the only one who knew what my left eye really looked like. I almost never wore the patch when we were alone.

The good thing about both of us being Greenes was that our schedule's were almost identical. A lot of time, Maven did her work out of the flat and I didn't have to go back out until dark, if at all. We had a lot of downtime in the evening together. We'd go out, drink, have dinner, whatever felt like fun at the time. After a few months of it, the 'fun' started to pool around our stomachs and my hips. I tried making Maven come to the gym with me, but she insisted on dieting instead of working out. We both managed to shed some of the weight, but I started gaining some unexpected muscle mass in my arms and back. I was never one to care about my looks, but watching my muscles grow and

flex made me feel pretty good. I was usually around the same size as the guys I ran with, but I was slowly becoming stronger than any of them.

Carlisle had strongly encouraged me to ‘persuade’ a particular warehouse owner into keeping a stock of ammo and gear to the side for me. The gang and I crossed paths because they stocked up out of the same place. They called themselves “The Bugs”. There was Hornet, Honeybee and Spider. Hornet and Honeybee were a Mel escapee married couple and Spider was a gangly but wicked smart seventeen-year-old. They heard a little about me through Greene gossip and invited me out to their place for drinks one night. Maven was supposed to be rubbing Greene elbows at some posh banquet, so I had no reason to say no. Living with Maven for so long did help me become a more social person, but being with the Bugs was a whole different world. There was something almost comforting about being surrounded by other weird vagabonds. Honeybee jokingly offered me to come on a run with them the following night. Hornet sincerely agreed that it would be cool to see me in action. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt admired. The Bugs said they usually just kept the more dangerous pests from the other cities in line in lieu of doing more traditional Greene work. But they were kind of like mercenaries in their own right; they worked for whatever Greene paid the most, but their work was always efficient and prompt. If I had known that was an option in the Greene, I might’ve joined sooner.

Hornet was probably the only person I’ve met to ever make me feel small by comparison. He was a good seven inches taller than me and his biceps were about the size of my head. Oddly enough, he was a funny guy who only cared about protecting Honeybee. She had bleach stripes in her black hair and despite weighing as much as a

literal honey bee, she always insisted on ever using an old sawed off shotgun. I never bothered asking how she could withstand the kickback. She and Spider sometimes worked together as impromptu medics whenever one of us got hurt. Honeybee's tiny, delicate hands were excellent for minor surgeries and wrapping bandages. Then, although his talents were better suited to make poisons, Spider would whip up salves and tinctures for pain relief and extra energy so we could keep working. He and I would sometimes ready our gear together; he'd craft and apply poison to his knives while I cleaned and reassembled my guns. He barely spoke, but the few times he did, his words were always soft, yet purposeful. All in all, we made a pretty cohesive unit. Honeybee would make a good distraction while Spider would sneak in and do some covert crowd control. Hornet and I would barrel in and take the brunt of the more of the aggressive damage. If there was anyone left to be shaken down, Honey would mentally extort them for whatever information or goods we needed. Turns out the only thing Greene's hated more than civilians trying to make money in Oz, was foreign encroachers trying to make money in Oz. So the Bugs rarely ever had to shake down any 'domestic threats'. Carlisle wanted to jump on the opportunity to have them working for him before someone else could snatch them. Maybe he figured they wouldn't mind having a consistent boss as long as the money was good enough.

Carlisle told me to bring them over to talk about a trail assignment for the four of us. He just said it was a simple shakedown and shoot up. The target was a group of daddy's boys who worked for an ex-partner of his when he started making real money. The Bugs felt way out of place in Carlisle's penthouse, so I got to play ambassador when we had to talk to him. I was surprised he even allowed me to tail with them, much less

bring them to his place. Maven was there the day he gave us the assignment. He told us that they were the first and only line of defense for one of the older Greenes who helped force Carlisle into retirement. Once they were taken out, we could escort Carlisle right into the old Greene's place. He offered to pay us with one hundred percent of whatever loot we found in the target's lair as well as repair any damage we sustained.

“So what's in it all for you, old man?” Hornet asked.

“I'm sure Ms. Kyra has already explained to you all that I'm not interested in anything monetary. I just want to have a last laugh before I die. And nothing would tickle me more than seeing the look on that smug prick's face when I show up to take him out.” Carlisle's voice graveled as he finished speaking. Hornet bought it, but held his ground.

“I don't understand Mr. Carlisle,” Honey chimed in, “If you've got the resources to take power yourself, why do you need us?” Carlisle kind of giggled at being called ‘Mr’ I couldn't tell, but I had a suspicion that he genuinely liked Honey. Maybe he appreciated her infamous talents for mental warfare. The two of them would've made a perfectly lethal pair in another life.

“To be frank, I had originally planned on having Ms. Kyra be the sole instrument of my vengeance. She's clearly done perfectly well on her own, but when I discovered she had joined your ranks, I was ecstatic. The Bugs were already a well respected group within the Greene. You should all take pride in the name you've made for yourselves. But now that you have my official backing, the four of you could reach unthinkable heights.” I couldn't help but watch Maven's face. If she felt any kind of anger or disappointment in Carlisle, she didn't show it. She kept her eyes on Spider for some

reason. I couldn't really catch a glimpse of his face without being obvious about it, so I didn't know how he was reacting.

Carlisle gave the Bugs a similar monologue he gave me and Maven about the state of the Greene and how he wanted to shake things up before he was too wear or dead to do so. He added in how the Bugs were a good example how the Greene can use its power for a more practical use and that he wouldn't interfere with how they went about their business, if only because they already had a great thing going. Something about how "one shouldn't impede on an artist". Plus, they were already known for just roughing up outsiders, so the Greene wouldn't be too suspicious of them in the first place.

"But sir, how will you monitor them? Forgive me, but even you only have so much to pay them. What will you do when someone threatens to outbid you?" Maven asked. Carlisle's otherwise perfect poker face cracked under this little flash of vulnerability. I was probably the only one who really noticed, but I was probably the only one really looking for it.

"Hmm, I suppose that's a good point, Maven." He lifted his hand to his chin for a few moments, "I imagine whatever collateral they collect from all future assignments would be a fair compensation. In addition to the creative freedom to do each assignment as you all see fit, I'll extend to each one of you my word of both resources and protection. If any of you ever need extra firepower or just a safe place to hide, my doors will be open." Carlisle finished his offer with a placating smile. Come to think of it, he never really offered me or Maven his unabridged backing. I wondered what made him suddenly okay with going down with the ship should it ever sink. Regardless, he gave the Bugs a week to think about his offer and asked me to come back with the final answer. He still

wanted us to complete the job, but we were, according to him, under no obligation. I was willing to bet that he probably just meant Hornet, Honey and Spider. Not that I would've minded carrying on with working for him at the time. Either way, the four of us had an offer to think about.

"When'd you meet these guys anyway?" Maven asked as she was putting on some makeup. I was touching up my haircut, so I waited until I snipped a last stray piece to answer,

"I told you. You were at some fancy thing and I just bumped into them. I wanna say it was like a few weeks ago?" I said.

"I told you, you could've come with me to that party," Maven said. She was putting on mascara.

"And I told *you* that Carlisle wanted me to shake down that warehouse guy,"

"I don't understand why he didn't want you to come with me, or me to come with you," she messed up her eyeliner on her last word. She muttered angrily under her breath while she wiped it off and start over.

"He probably just wanted us to go where we were needed more." I snipped off more hair. "No offense, but I don't think I would've had much fun at your party," I said watching her.

"Oh. And you think I would've choked up trying to intimidate the guy at the warehouse? Do you remember I had to fend for myself on the streets for years before we even met?" Her tone started rattling a little.

“I remember you failing to rob me and I remember being on the brink of starvation.” We’d had this fight before. At that point, I had all the lines memorized.

“So, I should lick your boots for sparing my sorry ass?!” Maven whipped her head around to glare at me through her black lined eyes. She continued, “I’m sorry. I just-”

“Just feel like you might lose me to the Bugs?” I softened my tone and put down the scissors.

“I never said that.” She pouted.

“We’ve lived together too long for you to hide things from me, Mave,” I said. I walked up to her and pulled her in for a hug. She held onto me for a little bit before turning back to the mirror to finish her makeup. I watched our reflections in the mirror.

“Look, we don’t have to do Carlisle’s job for another few days. Why don’t you come hang out with us tonight?” We locked eyes in the mirror.

“I dunno, I’d feel like I’m third-wheeling.” She paused. “But, I guess I don’t have anything better to do.”

“Why are you getting made up then?”

“I dunno... I just like wearing makeup,” she flicked a new coat of mascara on her lashes.

“I think you look fine without it, y’know,” I said with a little smile. I meant what I said, but Maven knew what she was doing when it came to her makeup. She somehow always looked more powerful when she was wearing it. She smiled back and said,

“I figured as much. But honestly, I like doing it just for me. Makes me feel like the most me I can be, I guess. Is that weird?”

“No ma’am. You don’t have to tell me anything about being yourself,” I messed up my shaggy, red hair and stuck my tongue out at Maven. She giggled at me.

“You should let me do your makeup one day,” she said.

“For what? I don’t really care if I look pretty or not.”

“I know. And really you don’t need to. But who knows, maybe you’d like it.”

“Maybe. But it’s not like there’s much to work with here, anyway.” I pointed to my patch.

“Oh please, you’re not disfigured. You’ve got great eyes.” I raised my eyebrows at her.

“I mean, the shape of them is nice. I like your bad eye too, y’know. It’s unique. I think eyeliner would make it look even cooler, to be honest. You’ve got those amazing, full lips too.” She kept her reflection’s gaze on my reflection’s gaze in the mirror. I could tell she wasn’t lying, but I couldn’t tell if she was just being patronizing or not. Either way, I didn’t see the harm in humoring her.

“Fine. Maybe one day when we’re both bored out of our heads, I’ll let you paint me up.” She turned around to face me with a big, stupid grin.

“You won’t regret it. I hope. If you do, you can always just wipe it off. Can I still wear my makeup to hang out tonight?”

“Yeah, of course. Honey wears makeup too, y’know. But are you sure Carlisle doesn’t need you tonight or anything?”

“Nah, he’s okay. All he ever needs me for anymore is just keeping him company and making appearances,”

“Makes sense. What do you guys even talk about?” Maven let a few beats pass before answering,

“He knew my dad... sometimes we talk about him,” I wasn’t sure what to make of that. I didn’t like that Carlisle had that kind of leverage over Maven. For all I knew, the part of him that was just a wee old man was probably happy to have someone to just shoot the breeze with. But it was more than likely that he knew exactly what he was doing to Maven. Shit, maybe he was lying to her. I doubted Maven’s dad would be as old as Carlisle was if he was still alive, but it wasn’t impossible for the two of them to have worked together at one point. I had faith that she’d choose me over Carlisle if it all came down to it, but I didn’t want to have to even run the risk. Spending some time with her tonight sounded better by the minute.

“Well put on something business inappropriate and come out with me and the Bugs. It’ll be good for ya,” I said. “Prove you’ve still got your street stuff.” I lightly punched her arm.

“You think they’ll like me?” Maven asked. We were waiting for the Bugs to come meet us at the warehouse where I first met them. Maven was wearing some old jeans and the last hoodie and sneakers she had from her homeless days. It would’ve been like looking into the past had her hair not been clean and pulled into safety braids.

“Why are you so worried?” I asked. “Even if they don’t like you, they work with me. You won’t have to see them again after tonight if all goes haywire,”

“Yeah, but, I dunno. I’ve been working with corporate Greenes for so long now. What if they just think I’m here to spy or something?”

“Aren’t you though?” I tried to ask with a straight face, but couldn’t help laughing. She laughed with me.

“Don’t worry, Mave. Just be yourself. I know you’re still the same sneaky pickpocket I found. Even if you wear suits and drink martinis now.” She smiled a little half smile.

“Kyra!” I heard Hornet call out. He and Honey were holding hands while Spider shoved his deep into his pockets.

“Who’s this?” Honey asked as they stopped in front of us.

“Guys, this is Maven. Remember? The girl who works with Carlisle? She’s my best friend,” I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her to my side.

“Gaaaaaay,” Spider laughed.

“Takes one to know one, I guess,” Maven retorted. Hornet, Honey and I all ‘oooo’ed at this. Hornet laughed his throaty laugh and said,

“This one’s got you down already, Spider.” Spider made a face at him and smiled at Maven.

“Fuck, where are my manners?” I said. “Maven, these are the Bugs. Hornet, Honeybee and you already know Spider.” I motioned to each of them as I named them. Spider walked closer to Maven and offered his hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Maven.” His voice was sweet and sleepy. Maven gave him her hand. “Likewise,” she said.

“Kyra’s told us a lot about you,” Honey said. Her voice was way deeper than anyone might expect her to have, considering she was so petite.

“Well then I’m fucked already, aren’t I?” Maven said. Honey chuckled a little and said,

“Oh relax, she just told us that you’ve done everything together since you met.”

“Yeah, we’ll have plenty of time to get to know the girl behind the Greene suit tonight,” Hornet chimed in.

We decided to just relax at the Bugs’ place. It wasn’t a far walk, but it was enough for some conversation to start. The five of us were just breezing through small talk and some jokes. The Bugs and I were cut from the same cloth, but I was surprised at how easily Maven fit in. They lived on the line between the Emerald district, like Mave and I did. Maven’s face when she saw it was something between awe and an almost childlike wonder. The outside of the building they lived in was pretty unassuming; It was clean cut, if a little more weather-worn than most of the buildings deeper in the city. The inside was way cozier than any other Greene’s place I’d ever seen. They’d kept little mementos from all of their jobs and their lives from before they even joined the Greene. The walls looked like the inside of an old pub, and the whole place just felt lived-in. Honey and Hornet put up these propaganda posters from the Mel and Spider’s lab area was crowded with armies of different bottles and tubs for his alchemical work. Honey strung up some rainbow lights around the borders. Hornet practically lived in the kitchen area so the place almost always smelled like roast barley or simmering spices. Mine and Maven’s place was where I lived, but the Bugs’ place felt way more like a place I could feel at home in.

Spider immediately drew Maven’s curiosity with this lab. The two of them kept to themselves for a bit while Hornet, Honey and I bullshitted. I kept noticing Maven trying

to inch closer to Spider. His workspace wasn't huge, but she always managed to be in his immediate space. I trusted both of them, but something about the two of them together didn't sit right with me. Honey must've noticed because she invited everyone to the living area for a few rounds of drinks. Maven sat next to me but Spider couldn't keep his eyes off of her. The drinks and talking flowed freely as ever, which seemed to help Maven loosen up even more. Spider was relatively quiet which didn't help my unease, but I tried to shrug it off in good faith. Eventually, Honey asked,

“So tell us, Maven. What does Carlisle really want with us?”

“What do you mean? He already-” she started to answer, but Honey cut her off.

“I get you're probably not supposed to say anything negative about him, but I want your two-cents on his deal,” Honey said.

“Yeah, as much as I'm up for doing the job, what's he really getting out of all of this?” Spider piped in. His voice sounded like a scratchy record.

“He's getting three more competent people on his side. What else could he want?”

“We don't know. That's why we're asking you,” Honey added. If Maven felt uncomfortable, she didn't show it. But she did have a hard time answering the question. To be fair, I didn't think Carlisle wanted anything else from The Bugs other than their loyalty. But if worse came to worse, he could probably do away with anyone he didn't need. Maven did manage to answer after a terse moment of silence.

“Guys, I know this guy doesn't sit right with all of you. I understand, really. He never does at first. But it's like he told all of you earlier; he just wants his last laugh. And he thinks you three will help him get there faster.” I decided to chip in,

“Besides, it’s not like you guys are bound to him. If he didn’t feel like giving you a choice, he wouldn’t have,” I told them how Carlisle threatened Maven and me if we didn’t decide to work for him. The Bugs seemed to be a little placated with that. They decided to take the job and the five of us drank and bullshitted into the wee hours. Maven, Spider and Hornet ended up dozing off. Honey asked me to step outside for a cigarette and I accepted.

“How come you guys don’t smoke inside?” I asked.

“Hornet hates the smell. I made the mistake of ashing on the carpet once and I still hear about it,” Honey said out of the free half of her mouth as she lit up. I shrugged and lit up, too. We both had a few puffs.

“Who did Maven lose to the Greene?” Honey asked very flatly. I scrunched my face as I drew. “Whether or not Carlisle is working toward something else, he’s not gonna live much longer. And he doesn’t really have the power to rock the boat like he’d probably like to. He can’t touch us if we don’t let him. But what about Maven? Who’d the Greene take from her?” Honey kept her eyes dead on me while she talked. The cherry of her cigarette made a little glow on her face.

“I think she’s more afraid of losing me to the Greene at this point,” I replied.

“Duh. But she lost someone else, I can see it. She practically reeks of it,” she blew out some smoke.

“How?”

“She wants us to trust her, and that’s fine. She cares about you, that’s also fine. Carlisle wants to pay us to do our job, which is perfectly fucking fine,” Honey said.

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is what happens when she has to choose between you and the Greene?” Honey took her last puff and stomped out the butt. My chest tensed up without my consent.

“What makes you think she’ll have to choose? Need I remind you that I work for the Greene too? And so do you guys when the money’s right?”

“That all may be, but Maven’s the only one out of all of us that feels like she’s owed something. Whether it’s acceptance or revenge, I’m not sure. Frankly, it doesn’t matter. Either of them will make her have to choose between whether she wants it, or you. What happens if she chooses to leave you behind?” Honey’s voice never wavered. Her almost monotone was as unsettling as what she was asking. My face twitched and frowned. I stomped out my butt.

“I don’t think she’ll choose them. They’re the ones that practically left her for dead in the first place. I saved her,” I said with a bit of hurt in my voice. Honey put her hand on my shoulder. I wanted to back away, but she tightened her hand on me. I didn’t wanna think Honey had a point, but she did.

“She lost her dad. He was an upstart boss who got bumped off. Maven escaped and lived on the streets until I found her. So what do you make of that?” Honey thought for a moment. Her eyes moved around rapidly, like she was doing math in her head.

“Honestly, it depends on what she really wants out of this. If she thinks you’ll stop her from it, she’ll cast you off. If not, she’ll probably keep you around. Either way, it won’t be easy on either of you. But, if things get bad for you, you can always find me and Hornet and Spider. But I hope you stay smart about all of this. Don’t put anything past anyone. You’re strong, Kyra, but even that won’t be enough sometimes,” My stomach

was a roiling ocean of sadness. I didn't know who or what to be upset at, but Honey's sincerity kept me from losing myself. I exhaled sharply.

“Does it get tiring being the voice of reason all the time?” I asked. Honey scoffed.

“Only when you have to talk about the hard stuff.” She takes out another cigarette and lights it.

“So, are you guys gonna take up Carlisle's offer?” I ask. She exhales.

“Yeah, why not.” She shrugged, inhaled and exhaled another puff of smoke. “It'll be fun.”

CHAPTER VII

THE job itself was straightforward: Find and kill daddy's boys without making too much of a fuss. These particular slimes liked to spend their down time in one of the ritzier hotels in the Emerald District. Lucky for the Bugs and me, Maven was in the good graces of said hotel's owner. Graces so good, they landed Maven and I in his private suite. She booked the room for a few days so we could really scope the place out. The Bugs decided they wanted to just come in for the dirty part of the job. In the meantime, Maven and me could have a day or two vacation. The room itself was twice the size of our apartment and exponentially more luxurious. I think even Maven felt kind of shabby by comparison. The Bugs could've easily shared the room with us if they wanted to. Maven and I did what we did best in our downtime: wine and dine and did nothing of great importance. It was really nice to just be together like before things got Greene and busy. The first day came and went in a haze of bullshitting and expensive, multi-colored wines and some luscious desserts. The second day kind of got away from me and didn't really start until Maven woke me up from a nap. She came into the penthouse carrying some shopping bags, which she set down by the closet before rushing into the bathroom.

She barely acknowledged me, but I wasn't really articulate enough to acknowledge anything for a few minutes after Maven started showering.

Maven stepped out of the bathroom with her hair in a towel and said,

"You can have the shower now, if you want it," I was going to make a joke at my own expense before I noticed her pull out a black gown out of one of the bags.

"Sheesh, what's the fancy dress for?"

"Don't worry, I brought you one, too." She said. She pulled out a red, wider and longer version of her dress. "It should fit you fine, but it might be a little long if you don't wear the right shoes," she held up a pair of modest black heels that looked to be my size.

"Maven, what's going on?"

"We're going to a party tonight."

"We?"

"Yes, we. As in me and you." She sat down at the vanity and started messing with her hair.

"Any reason you didn't tell me about this sooner?"

"It was kind of a last minute thing," she answered.

"A 'last-minute thing' that you managed to find a dress for without my knowing?"

"I picked it up while you were napping earlier. What's your deal?" She half turned to me. I got out of bed.

"What's YOUR deal?" I had never raised my voice to Maven before that night. It wasn't even that loud, but it was loud enough that it made her pause and stare me down. She inhaled

“My deal is that while you’re here to do your job. I thought I could do mine,” I didn’t respond. Partly out of regret for snapping and partly out of curiosity at what she was planning.

“I’m sure you noticed that there were preparations being made in one of the halls for a cocktail party. Jones, the man who’s private suite that we’re standing in, the man who’s hotel your targets probably pay good money to spend time at, invited us to said party. I don’t know if he’s onto us and just wants to look the other way or not. But turning down his invitation would be in bad taste considering how generous he’s been, don’t you think?” Her icy, mint eyes held so still. Compared to the deep, velvety green the walls were, they looked practically lethal. She never put the dress down. It looked so incredibly red compared to all the green.

“So you think going to this party will avert suspicion. Fine, I get it. But why do I need to go? These are your people, Mave,” I offered.

“Exactly. They know me. They know I’ll come, make small talk, laugh at their bad jokes and be an otherwise perfect guest. They don’t know anything about you.” She looks between me and the dress.

“My reputation doesn’t precede me?” I ask.

“Thanks to Carlisle, you’ve been kept mostly a secret. If people know you, it’s because I’ve mentioned living with you. That’s it.” I was both relieved and a little disappointed. Mave probably did the right thing by keeping our life separate from her work, but I had no regrets sharing my work life with her. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t hurt a little.

“I know this isn’t your forte, Kyra. But sometimes you just have to play the part. For all you know, doing this might make your work in the future easier. Shit, maybe next time you have to kill someone important, someone else might be willing to look the other way. You’re a great enforcer, but there’s more to being a Greene than just being an enforcer,” she said. She looked down at the dress in her hand, “Do you at least like the color? I know red is your favorite. It’s called Roxanne red,” she added. I swallowed.

“Yeah, Mave... it’s a beautiful dress,” She motioned for me to take it out of her hand.

“Just leave it on the bed. I’ll change after.”

“Can you at least hang it on the door? I don’t want it to wrinkle.” I nodded and took the dress with a weak grip. I hung it on the outside half of the door. I walked towards the bathroom, if only so I could get out of her gaze, “I’ll have a shower and be out soon.”

I tried not to look at myself while I stripped in front of the giant mirror. As I took my eye-patch off, I couldn’t help but stare. I poked and prodded at parts of my body. I silently cursed myself for looking the way I did. I started hating myself for being everything that Maven wasn’t. She was lithe and fair and charismatic and feminine. My skin was uneven and calloused. The muscles I used to love watching grow and flex became amorphous, malignant tumors that deformed me. My flat chest and split ends and big nose and cataract eye all mocked me. I wanted to crush myself into the smallest space I could find and disappear into the city’s radiation. I settled for getting into the scalding hot shower. Maven’s words were ricocheting around my skull. I thought about her sitting outside, doing her perfect makeup and sliding on that black dress. She wanted to save

face by parading me around like her weird, exotic pet. I couldn't tell the tears apart from the hot water, but both of my eyes stung with salty pain.

“See, I told you, you have great lips.” Maven lined and filled my lips in with a brown so dark it was practically black. It looked pretty cool against my deep skin, I had to admit. I studied my reflection more and more each time she stopped applying makeup.

“Do you wanna keep your eyepatch on?” She sharpened a little stick of eyeliner.

“Am I allowed to?”

“You can't see through that eye, right?” she asked without looking at me. I nodded.

“Then keep it on. It's one less eye for me to do.” I couldn't understand why that hurt, but it did for some reason. I lifted the patch off my head.

“You sure?” Maven's reflection asked my reflection. I kept my stare on my bad eye.

“Yeah. Maybe I'll blend in a little more this way. I might need to leave early if I get a headache or something, though.”

“Yeah, absolutely. I'll follow you out if you want,”

“What do you mean?” She started lining my bad eye first. The eyeliner tickled the whole inside of my head. I tried not to back away from the pencil.

“If it all gets to be overwhelming, I can leave with you and we can just relax. If anything, you're kind of my plus one and it would be rude of me if I didn't tend to you first.” She finished lining my eyes and I tried to blink the tickling sensation away.

“Do you even wanna go to this thing?” I looked intently at her.

“Yes and no.” She started on my good eye. I tried to look up into my skull to ignore the tiny stick near my eye. “I’m not stupid. I know this makes you uncomfortable. I’m genuinely sorry about this.”

“But?” She stopped again and I blinked a mile a minute again.

“But, like I said, this is my job. I like to think I’m good at it. Plus, Greene’s throw a decent party. Open bar. Good food.” She flicked a little bit of mascara on my eyelashes. They didn’t feel as heavy as I thought they would with all the black gunk on my eyes. “And, I have to admit... I like dressing up.” Her voice rang like a little girl’s. She put all the makeup away. She was just wearing her usual rose lip and black eyeliner. She had her hair up in this tall twisted bun thing and wore long earrings that looked like thick, gold thread. The dress gave her this almost enigmatic silhouette.

“Don’t forget the shoes,” Maven chirped while she put her own shoes on. I didn’t think someone made heels big enough for my feet. But, lo and behold, they sat waiting for me on the bed. In all fairness, they were modest compared to the stilts Maven decided to wear. I wondered if she’d be taller than me if I stood next to her barefoot. I walked up to her while she was giving herself a final once-over in the mirror across from the bed. Our eyes met at about the same level, but I still had an inch over her.

“You look really nice, Kyra,” her reflection said to my reflection.

“Do I? I can’t really tell,” I slid my feet into each shoe. They were made mostly of straps and a three-inch-or-so heeled sole. They weren’t particularly uncomfortable.

“Well have a look at yourself,” she offered her hand to me. I took it thinking I wouldn’t be able to balance on the small heels, but to both our surprise, I stood up just fine.

“I figured you might be okay with those shoes since your boots have such thick heels,” I studied the shoes, and myself in the mirror.

“These definitely breathe more than my boots,” I admitted. I walked closer to the mirror. Maven got out of the way so I could have the whole thing to myself. I put my hand over my bad eye to finally have a decent look at myself. I didn’t feel like Maven did much with my face, but it looked like a cartoon version of itself. My lips looked and felt painted on. My eyes looked bigger despite having a deliberate black outline around them and my lashes looked like they could create a small gust of wind if I blinked fast enough. Maven had put my hair up in a quick bun that still managed to pull my face skin back far enough to force my cheekbones to show up. The dress was actually flattering. My hips looked in proportion to my shoulders and my waist seemed more cinched. I never really had a problem with belly fat since I started working out, but it was strange to see my waist look so small. I turned to the side to see if my breasts looked any different. The dress was strapless so I didn’t wear a bra, but it wasn’t without a small bit of support. All in all, Maven’s bust out-did mine, but my butt outdid hers. I ran my hands over the fabric that covered my waist, hips and thighs. I would never say it out loud, but I thought I looked really pretty. I didn’t look completely unlike myself, but I couldn’t help feeling like I was occupying someone else’s body.

We walked into the party itself nearly unnoticed. The hotel owner sort of escorted us in and urged us to eat, drink and be merry. After that, Maven and I split and reconnected at random intervals throughout the night. She was definitely right about the open bar and the decent food. I found myself a few fingers of good scotch into the party before I remembered what was actually happening. But by my third drink or so, I was

already feeling more comfortable than I had anticipated I would. I walked confidently around in my modest heels and tight dress. I smiled and made small talk with anyone who took the time to acknowledge me. Maven kept herself busy by mingling with random Greenes. She'd occasionally introduce me to a few. She referred to me as her room mate and right hand girl. She quickly rebuffed any assumed romance in our relationship. It occurred to me that Maven hadn't really talked about anyone in her time working for the Greene besides Carlisle or the odd executive she worked with. I wonder if people assumed she was a lesbian before tonight and bringing me was just the icing on the cake. I genuinely laughed each time someone assumed we were together. Maven was way beautiful for sure, but every time I looked at her for more than a few minutes, I always saw that same, matted waif I picked up years ago. It was both endearing and disheartening to think of her that way, when she so clearly wasn't that girl anymore.