

The Wimberley Chronicles

Part One

A Violet Crown Adventure

Kelly Fox

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Series Note:

This series was originally published under the name Violet Crown. The story has been re-edited and expanded into a dual-POV, eight-part series that was made available through my newsletter. To sign up for the newsletter and get updates on when this will be made available on Amazon, head over to my website: www.authorkellyfox.com.

For those familiar with my Wrecked and Wrecked: Guardians series, this is the back story of the mysterious Wimberley crew. These events take place in the year or so before the beginning of the Wrecked timeline.

Chapter 1

Edison Fitzwallace

Kerrville, TX

December 1973

In this life they call me Zeke.

Ezekiel Blackwell, Jr.

I held my wife's hand as the doctor's words landed like body blows.

Cancer, terminal.

Six months, maybe.

I sat in that ugly brown Naugahyde office chair, looking younger than I felt in my Sheriff's Department uniform, seething with rage. The gun weighed heavily on my hip, itching to be withdrawn. Scratch that. The gun was too easy. I wanted to rip out that doctor's throat with my bare hands. I closed my eyes and willed myself into control.

Keep it together, old man.

Keep it together.

Four and a half years. That's all we'd been given. After a combat career that lasted decades, killing whatever 'enemy' my country pointed me at, I'd found someone who I could love more than murder, and she was being taken from me. I was hardened, military to my core, but this will devastate me for years to come. We went home to our small house on a big piece of Texas land and held each other and reminisced about how it all began.

...

After my second tour in Viet Nam with SEAL Team ONE, I'd finally seen enough violence. Immediately after landing in Coronado, I had one of my buddies drop me off at the San Diego bus depot, and I headed for San Francisco, the epicenter of everything different from the life I'd known.

I'd ended up in Union Square, right next to the big Woolworth's, and it felt like I'd landed on the moon. There were men in business suits and young moms with kids

in strollers and unshowered hippies sitting and smoking in the plaza. None of that was particularly odd, but it was the first time in decades that I'd walked the streets as a civilian. Looking down at my uniform, I realized that I was the one who didn't fit in.

As I considered buying something more appropriate, I was approached by a beautiful young woman in a cornflower blue dress. She had a daisy in her hair, and one in her outstretched hand. Reflexively, I reached out and accepted the daisy. Her smile turned into a snarl and she hurled an egg at me with her other hand.

"What the-" I sputtered.

"You...*baby killer!*" she shouted, spitting on the sidewalk in front of me. "How can you walk around in that uniform, knowing that you killed innocent people in this meaningless war?"

I held back a laugh. Her anger contradicted the flower in her hair and the Texas in her voice. I'd studied a lot of regional accents before deciding on standard American, but the Texas accent was one of my favorites.

"Stop smiling at me, you jackalope!" she said, punching me in the chest.

She didn't see the street cop running up as she drew back to hit me again. The officer intercepted her arm mid-swing and yanked it behind her back, informing her that she was under arrest for assault.

She stared daggers at me as the officer cuffed her, then marched her towards his squad car. I, on the other hand, felt my heart go off rhythm. God, she was gorgeous. She had long, light brown hair, a beautiful mouth, and intelligent blue eyes.

And she was being dragged away.

Swearing to myself, I double-timed it over to them.

"Officer, wait. I won't be pressing charges, in the off chance that she'll agree to get coffee with me."

The officer's eyes landed on the new special forces logo on my uniform.

“Are you sure about that, Sailor? I lost a lot of friends in the mud, and I hate to see you heckled on the street.”

I smiled. “Yes, I’m sure.”

The officer looked at me for a minute, then shook his head and uncuffed her. “If you change your mind, I’ll be here.”

“Yessir.”

I turned to the pretty woman in the blue dress, but she was already walking away. Grinning, I jogged up beside her.

“Hi, I’m Ezekiel. Friends call me Zeke.”

“That’s a stupid name,” replied the woman, her drawl sharp. “And don’t think that I owe you coffee—or anything else—for not pressing charges.”

“I don’t —” I said, trying to keep up with her, “I don’t think that you owe me anything.”

“Then why are you following me? Are you a serial killer?” she asked, annoyed at my attention.

“Well, yes...but, only for the government.”

She whirled around, opening her mouth to let me have it. In that same moment, her eyes drifted to the space above my head, and her expression changed from contempt to curiosity, then recognition.

“Uh, miss, are you okay?”

The woman closed her mouth self-consciously, then stepped a little closer, peering up into my eyes. “Zeke, do we know each other?”

Her nearness made my belly go warm. “I’m pretty sure I’d remember you, ma’am. Where are you from, Texas?”

“Yeah. Kerrville.”

“You’re a long way from home, then.”

“Yeah, well...so are you,” she responded, mildly flippant. “So, you don’t recognize me at all?”

“No, should I?”

She stood back and examined my hairline. “No...maybe not.”

The exchange crackled with intensity, but was made awkward by the egg oozing down my uniform. I pulled the fabric away from my chest, letting the yolk slide out onto the sidewalk.

“You’re gonna need a new shirt, Sailor. And I don’t want to be seen walking around with a man in uniform.”

I smiled as I looked up at the Woolworth’s sign. “You offering to help me find a new outfit?”

She rolled her eyes, then started walking towards the store. I followed her willingly, and knew—the way you sometimes just know—that I’d follow her for as long as she’d let me.

Once inside, she walked around until she’d picked out the ugliest outfit I’d ever seen: purple polyester bellbottoms with a brown and yellow paisley shirt. I accepted her selections without comment, and headed directly to the dressing rooms. When I opened the curtain to model my new look, she had to laugh. The outfit was ugly as sin, to be sure, but my buzz cut was what made it truly ridiculous. Smiling down at her, I grabbed my wallet and started towards the cashier. She shook her head, doing a terrible job of covering her smile.

“Okay, no. I can’t be seen in public with you like that, either. Here, take this,” she said, handing me another, less obnoxious offering. My hand brushed hers as I took the clothing, and her breath caught a little as I walked back into the room.

When I opened the curtain this time, she bit her lip, trying stifle her smile. I did pretty well for myself in a pair of jeans and a crisp, white t-shirt, if I did say so myself. Seeing her approval, I paid the cashier right there, and put my neatly folded uniform in a Woolworth’s bag.

Walking into the sun, I asked, “Now that you’ve made me socially acceptable, it’s a matter of honor to repay the favor. Where might be a good place to get coffee?”

She responded with a smile, making me think she wasn't quite done toying with me just yet. "There's a café I like about three blocks away. Do you mind walking?"

"Not at all. I'll walk on sidewalks all day long."

"That's a weird thing to say, man," she said, starting out towards the café.

"Only if you've never spent weeks on a river delta with a fifty-pound pack on your back and mud up to your thighs. Killing babies is dirty work."

"Not funny."

"No, I suppose it isn't."

We walked in awkward silence for the first block.

"So...you did kill people, though."

"Yes ma'am. Armed combatants only. I didn't interact much with civilians."

"But I see how we firebomb these villages—it's on the news every day now—and everyone in those villages dies, whether they supported the Viet Cong or not. How is that fair? How can you be a part of that?"

There would be no way for me to explain how much I needed the combat, how the killing fed my soul.

"Ma'am, I do not agree with indiscriminately bombing villages. But when you're plunked down into some god-forsaken jungle with a crew of men, half of whom you know won't make it home, they become your family. And it stops being about the Viet Cong, and it starts being about getting you and your family out of there alive. I don't know if that makes any sense."

She looked down, her expression thoughtful. "It does."

Looking up at me, she scruffed my carrot-red hair. "How on earth were you able to sneak up on the Viet Cong with hair like that?"

It had been a while since I'd been touched by a woman in any capacity, and I smiled at the delicacy of her hands.

"Ma'am, the delta's so hot and humid, I always had a bandana, and usually a helmet, on my head."

Her cheeks pinked and she somehow became even more beautiful. “Do you always call people ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’?”

“Yes ma’am. It’s a sign of respect.”

“I just threw an egg at you and called you a baby killer. Why would you worry about showing me respect?”

“First, you *screamed* ‘baby killer’ at me. Second, you also punched me. Third, I joined the Navy to defend a person’s ability to speak their mind. You at least use your voice, and I do respect that.”

The woman smiled. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d prefer Lena to ma’am.”

“Okay, Lena.” My voice softened at the sound of her name on my lips.

She smiled shyly, as though she liked it, too. “Um, well, we’re here.”

‘Here’ was a small café run and patronized by lesbians. Everyone turned to stare when I walked in. I was more out of place in this tiny shop than I’d ever been, anywhere. Straightening my shoulders, I went up to the counter and ordered two coffees and a slice of pie from a woman who shared my same military buzz cut. I smiled at her, ran my hand across the side of my head, and gave her a thumbs up. The soft stud grinned as she pushed the slice of pie across the counter to me.

Lena shook her head. I followed her out to the patio, where they sat at a wobbly table on equally wobbly and uncomfortable chairs.

“So, Lena, is this your subtle way of letting me know that I should not ask for your number?”

She laughed, and I wondered what she knew that I didn’t.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Perhaps, but you can ask for my number now.”

I sat back, a small smile playing on my lips. “I might just do that.”

She leaned over and punched me in the arm.

“That’s twice. Now you have to go to dinner with me.”

“Do you find a lot of luck with the ladies, Zeke? Blackmail might not be the turn on you think it is.”

“Really? I thought women found it charming.”

“I’d prefer pay equality.”

“Touché.”

“But I do suppose that I’ll be hungry later.”

“Maybe we can be hungry in the same place.”

“Maybe.”

Lena sipped her coffee, covering a grin. I wasn’t entirely sure what she found so amusing about me, but I took it as a good sign.

“So, what are your plans this afternoon? Do you need to egg a few more vets, or have you met your quota for the day?”

“Maybe. What did you have in mind?”

“I’ve never been to San Francisco. It might be nice to see the sights.”

Lena looked at me again, her eyes assessing, almost sad. Plastering on a not-quite smile, she said, “You pay for the gas, I’ll show you around.”

After gassing up her rusted out ’55 Anglia, Lena took me to the Farmer’s Market, to the Golden Gate bridge, to the Castro, and finally, to Buena Vista Park. I didn’t say much, but listened intently as Lena talked about losing her mother, growing up in Texas, and moving out to San Francisco. As we watched the sun set over the beautiful city, Lena put her hand in mine. When the stars came out, I pulled her up into a kiss, and we didn’t stop kissing until we got to her tiny apartment on Page Street.

Still kissing, Lena led me to her bedroom. I was by no means a virgin, but this was different. It was the first time I understood what it meant to make love to a woman. I didn’t know that I could feel this way. Afterwards, we fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms, then woke when the morning sun shone bright. There, in the filtered light, I looked at Lena and saw her truly for the first time. She had a light about her, green and dancing, and at that moment, I remembered.

In our first life we were Josué and Manuela; in this life we were Lena and Ezekiel.

“I was wondering when you’d recognize me, chula.”

I had tears in my eyes as I caressed her face. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

The years of abuse, the solitude, the violence fell away; I was back in my beloved’s arms.

“I told you we’d be together again,” she said, her eyes assessing me. “I didn’t recognize you at first. I thought your soul would be orange, but it’s not.”

Unable to see anything in the shadows, I held my hand up to the light. A black smoke aura danced between my fingers. “I don’t know what this means.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I knew in my bones this had something to do with my unnaturally long life, my need to kill. Looking into her eyes, I made myself a promise: it ended today. For years I’d struggled against the violence, but for my beloved Josué...*Lena*...it wasn’t difficult in the slightest. In an instant, that part of me was dead, killed by my own hands. She would only ever know that I loved her.

And we were never apart after that day.

...

Lena grabbed my hand, breaking my reverie. It had not been a dream. It had really happened. And now we were back in our small homestead in Kerrville, parsing out how to spend the last few months of her life on this earth. All I could think about was how I’d walked off that bus, and she’d changed my whole damned life. And I didn’t know how I’d survive without her.

Chapter 2

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Port Aransas, TX

Internal Soundtrack: "Flower" by Liz Phair

I was having a shit day; I just didn't know it yet.

It'd started out well enough. I'd woken up early and taken a long walk up and down the beach with my dog—a weirdo, breeder-rescue dachshund named Minnie—and we watched yet another gorgeous sunrise on the Texas coast. I was enjoying a mug of strong, sweet coffee on my balcony and shooting the shit with my neighbor Edna when Jacqueline Taureau from the DEA's Houston office called my cell phone.

"Top of the morning, Jack! You see the overnight report?"

I'd consulted with the DEA to profile a regional drug dealer named Robert Pharaoh. Last night, an unnamed agency circumvented the DEA and took him out. Not that I'm going to complain too much about somebody taking out a bad guy.

Would have been nice if they'd have kept him alive for questioning, though.

"Hedy," Jack sighed, "I need you to switch over to your secure line."

She'd never asked me to do that before, and a chill settled in my spine.

"Um...Jack?"

"Hedy, go. *Now.*"

"Two minutes. I'll hit you up on video chat."

I put down the coffee and ran to the office as I whistled for Minnie. Once she was in, I shut the door and grabbed my laptop. I flipped off the Wi-Fi switch and plugged in the secure Ethernet connection. I accessed the DEA's instant messaging platform and double-clicked on Jack's name.

A few seconds later, her blonde head filled the screen. Jack's usual aesthetic was polished professional, but this morning her hair was pulled back into a haphazard ponytail, her eyes were dark from lack of sleep, and she wasn't wearing a stitch of makeup.

“Jack, the line is secure.”

A few seconds of nothing.

Jack finally broke the silence, “Okay, we’re clear.”

I asked, “What’s going on? Did we find out more about Pharaoh?”

“In a manner of speaking. After Pharaoh was killed we decided to go after his Laredo operation overnight. The local agents had a solid lead on a warehouse, and I gave the order for them to go in.”

“Okay...”

She shook her head. “The place was wired with explosives. They were gone the second they walked in the door.”

“Oh, god—”

The pained clench of her jaw confirmed the worst. “All four agents died, and the two support agents on the ground are missing and presumed dead.”

Goddammit. I knew those agents. “Jack, I’m so sorry.”

Jack shook off the consolation. “Hedy, they knew we were coming. We have to assume that everyone on the case is blown, including you. There’s an extraction plan, but it will take some time. Can you shelter in place?”

“Yeah...I’m in my hurricane room.”

Technically, it was a safe room with steel-reinforced walls, a private phone line, and its own air intake system, but she didn’t know that, and calling it a hurricane room gave me less anxiety.

“Good. Stay there until we come for you, and don’t call *anyone*. We don’t know where they have people, and we don’t know what they’ve bugged.”

“Understood.”

“I’ve got another dozen or so calls to make, so I’ll leave it at that and will call again within the hour. Keep your head down.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Despite my reassurances to the contrary, I knew that I'd just lied to my friend. I was going to make one more phone call. I unlocked the desk drawer, grabbing my emergency phone, an old Motorola Razr. It was beyond dead, so I plugged it in and prepared for what I'd have to do next.

My father, Jacob Richter, is a powerful man in Texas politics. He's a State Senator from one of the large ranching and oil districts in West Texas, and the son of a self-made land and oil baron. He also has a lovely family who doesn't know anything about me.

Tapping the phone to my forehead, I let out a shaky breath. He was the one who'd insisted on this room in the first place, and calling from this number would set in motion a number of things I'd have no control over. After another few minutes of trying and failing to figure any other way out of this mess, I hit the pre-programmed button for my father.

He picked up in the middle of the first ring. "Are you in danger?" he asked, his western drawl deep and steadfast.

I could hear cows mooing in the distance. "Is this line secure?"

"You know it is. Are you involved in the case with the dead agents?"

"Yes, but the agency wants to send people to pick me up."

"Hedwig Eleanor, this means that they intend to have you go into hiding. For a very long time."

Fuck.

The first and middle name.

"Dad, I'm just an analyst, is this necessary?"

"Are you just the analyst who figured out that Robert Pharaoh would try to go to Mexico?"

"Yes."

"And are you just the analyst who said to check for complaints by young boys in border towns?"

I threw up my arms. "Yes! Of course I am!"

The Senator blew out an exasperated breath. “Well then, congratulations, you get a brand-new life! I’ll make sure to tell your mother that you love her.”

I gripped the phone, sorely tempted to break it.

“What am I going to do?”

“Right now, you are going to sit there, and I will fix it. I’ll call you back in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes in that windowless room was a small eternity. I was actively freaking out, visions of bad dye jobs and worse Hollywood movies dancing through my head. Finally, the phone rang at ten minutes and thirty seconds.

“You’re late.”

“I’ll tell your mother to hurry up next time.”

He called Mom? Dammit all to hell. “*Fantastic*. I’m sure she didn’t overreact at all.”

“Hedy, focus. I assume that it will come as no surprise to you that there are agencies hidden from the American public and the world at large.”

“No, it would not,” I said warily.

“One such agency could use your skills and now is the right time to make a move.”

“To be clear, I’m still going into hiding, but with people you approve of.”

“Correct. And don’t sound so glum. This is the kind of work you’ve wanted to do your whole life.”

A flutter of excitement raced through me until I remembered who I was talking to. Rolling my eyes at absolutely no one, I retorted, “Shocking the timing of that. Prior to this exact moment, I couldn’t get a single agency, known or otherwise, to look at my resume, *Senator*.”

Fun fact: There is a one hundred percent chance he’d tanked my intelligence career before it began. I must be in a world of hurt for him to think that this is a viable option.

“Never mind that now, Hedwig. I’m not about to allow you to be taken to some unknown location.”

I tipped my head up, my chin tipped to the ceiling, jaw clenched. Guess this means I’m being taken to a *known* location. Yay.

“Well, okay then. Where am I going?”

My father hesitated. I checked the phone for signal.

“Dad, where am I going?”

“The Cave.”

I pull back the phone again and stare as though it has the answers to the questions I’m too afraid to ask.

The Cave was what Dad called his property in Wimberley, in the heart of the Texas Hill Country. It’s a gorgeous piece of land with an enormous cave system...and apparently a hidden agency that could use my skills.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it sounded like a black site.

“Hedy?” My father’s voice was small as I continued to stare at the device in my hand.

Oh, right. I put the phone to my ear. “I’m here, Dad. You know I’m going to have questions, right?”

He blows out a breath, clearly not happy with this turn of events. “It’s been a while since you’ve been out there. It might be best to meet you there in person to explain.”

My imagination going wild, I tried to gather myself. “So...what’s the plan?”

“Rock’s already got the Cessna on the runway with an agent. They’ll be at the Port A airfield shortly, and the agent will come get you. You should have Rocky let you fly her on the way back. You haven’t been keeping up with your hours.”

“An agent, Dad? An agent of what?”

It wasn’t the time to let my father know that I’d let my pilot’s license lapse. One argument at a time.

“I’m not taking any chances with your safety. Stay in your room and don’t let anyone in unless the agent has the password.”

“Which is?”

“Your dog’s name and breed.”

I looked at the phone again, and it remained utterly useless. He started to talk again and I put it back to my ear.

“...and this is critical, you cannot make further contact with Ms. Taureau. The DEA does not and cannot know where you are going.”

I scrub my face, hating that I understood why this was important. It wrecked my guts to keep this from Jack. She wasn’t just my boss; I considered her one of my closest friends. If my father was right, she might not ever know what happened to me.

After a pause, he continues. “For what it’s worth, I’m proud of the work you did.”

I needed to hear that more than I was willing to admit. Given the tenor of the day, I’m not shocked that he’d know the details of the things I did, even though I never shared them with him.

“Okay, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Stay safe.”

Knowing what I had to do, I opened the door to the safe room and ran to my bedroom, Minnie hot on my heels. I got ready as quickly as possible, then ran a wash cloth over my sweaty parts and changed into some fresh underthings.

I’d dragged my thick, unruly hair back into some semblance of a bun before the walk this morning, but the salt air had done it no favors. Meanwhile, living at the beach had intensified the already significant freckling on my face, which, as I checked myself out in the mirror, seemed incongruous with my worried expression.

I buttoned up my jeans. My fingers drifted to the delicate gold chain around my neck, which held a thin, hammered gold wedding band. I kissed the band before pulling on Christine’s old Boba Fett t-shirt, then shoved my feet into my tennis shoes. I spent a few minutes tossing things into a medium-sized suitcase, hoping I

didn't forget anything important. From the kitchen, I grabbed a bag of dog food and made for the safe room. I whistled for Minnie to follow me, and set the lock on the hurricane door.

Chapter 3

Edison Fitzwallace

The GreenHouse Collective, San Francisco, CA

This was not a new life, but a new name: Edison Fitzwallace. Leaving Ezekiel behind was both difficult and easy. Difficult because it was my only connection to her. Easy for the same reason. Either way, it had to be done; I aged too slowly in this life to keep the same identity.

I stood at the window, looking out over the Bay of San Francisco. The morning fog had burned off, leaving a bright, cloudless day to view from my office. I preferred the fog and the clouds—the sun gave me headaches.

Ralph took up his daily post in the park across the way, asking for money. In about two hours I'd be bringing him a sandwich, and if I were honest with myself, it was the only thing I looked forward to on any given day.

I certainly didn't enjoy my job, but since the Navy forced me into retirement, this was the best option. The perks were good, the money was ridiculous, and if I had to sit in yet one more meeting with an over-privileged twenty-six-year-old tech guru talking about how I wanted only recycled water in his home, I was going to kill someone. *It's all recycled water, you bleeding idiot.*

Worse, and something I could scarcely admit to myself, was that I looked forward to talking to Ralph because at least I got to speak to another vet. Someone who'd seen what I'd seen and who knew the human cost of war.

My thoughts were interrupted by a notification on my phone, and the clouds around my mood evaporated immediately. The sound of the bicycle bell meant that this was from my TorChat app, a convenient little portal to the dark web. I pulled up my account, username Balaur, a dragon in Romanian folklore. It was a nickname of sorts, given to me by my adopted parents many, many years ago.

The nickname was not a term of endearment, and for me it was a form of armor.

pier69: Hi, B.

balaur: Tell me you have something for me

pier69: Sadly, no. Just a head's up.

balaur: Oh?

pier69: Someone's been sniffing around for you.

balaur: They got a job?

pier69: Yeah, but it don't smell right. It ain't on the up and up, you know?

balaur: I know, and I trust your judgement

balaur: Thanks for the head's up. Check your account.

I pull up my Cash app under a fake name and send him a couple grand for the tip.

pier69: Ah jeez, that's generous. Thanks, B.

balaur: Most welcome. Keep up the good work and watch your six.

pier69: Always.

I slipped my phone into my pocket just as a woman in a PETA T-shirt walked in. I let a bland smile slip across my lips and stuck out my hand in greeting.

Fuck, I needed to kill something.

Chapter 4

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Port Aransas, TX

Internal Soundtrack: *screaming*

The fifty-seven minutes waiting for the agent to arrive was torture. Jack made several attempts to contact me on the laptop, then on my regular cell phone. The notifications set my teeth on edge, so with a guilty conscious I turned off all the devices. The faint smell of mold in this cramped room pushed me over into migraine, and I was glad that I'd remembered my meds. I laid down on the floor with my arm draped across my eyes, waiting for it to do its thing.

Finally, I jumped at a faint popping sound. Hauling myself up from the floor, I checked the view screen, surprised at the squat, shady-as-fuck man entering my apartment. He wasn't even trying to pretend to be one of the good guys. Minnie's incessant barking led him directly to the safe room door. I watched as he pushed the intercom button. "Um, Dr. Vila-reel, I'm here to pick you up."

I should have been more afraid, honestly, but my head had me in a foul mood. Plus, I was essentially in a bomb shelter, so fuck that jock douchebag. And who the hell in South Texas doesn't know how to pronounce Villarreal?

I pressed my thumb into my eyebrow as I punched the intercom button. "Hey asshole, what part of PhD in Psychology are you not understanding?"

"Um...what?" His befuddlement was almost amusing.

I rolled my eyes. "For fuck's sake—you're like a comic book bad guy. There is no way in *hell* that I am opening this door for you."

Seriously, how did these ass clowns kill six of our agents?

I could see the man's face turn red with anger. "Open up the door you fat cunt, or I'll come in after you."

Oh, he's going to drop the c-bomb?

"Fuck you, dick splash."

I'll have you know that I get my elegant wit from my mother. The man cursed something else, which I couldn't hear.

“You forgot to hit the intercom button, swizzle dick.”

The man grabbed his gun.

“You don’t wanna do that, man. The bullet is gonna ric-“

The gunfire was muted and short-lived. From the monitor, a dark hole appeared right between the man’s eyes. I held down the button one last time.

“...ricochet and kill your sorry ass. Dammit, that was an expensive rug!”

Just as I finished shouting at the dead man, another man ran into my condo through the busted door. As he cleared the room, I got a good look at him on the monitor. He was the tallest Mexican I’d ever seen in my life, and he was built for battle. He had broad shoulders, jet black hair, dark skin, and the squarest jaw this side of the Rio Grande.

He stepped over the dead body, his face registering no shock, disgust or surprise. Once at the safe room door, he pressed the intercom.

“Dr. Villarreal, your ride has arrived.”

Pronounced ‘Vee-ya-rree-ahl’, the way you’re supposed to.

“What’s the password?” I snapped, a sharp ache pulsing behind my right eye.

He looked pained as he responded. “Minnie Wiener.”

If it weren’t for the dead moron in my hallway and the pounding in my brain, that would have made me laugh. I bet my dad didn’t even know that was funny. I swung open the door and looked at my enormous savior. Dayum.

“Do you have your cell phone with you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to need it.”

Sighing, I handed over my beautiful mint green iPhone. He hit a few buttons, then removed the SIM card and the battery. He ground up the SIM card in my sink disposal and crushed the phone with the heel of his big combat boots.

He gently took Minnie from me as I stepped out over the dead guy, who had painful-looking slashes burned into his hands.

“You ever see that kind of slashing on the palms before?” I asked my rescuer.

He shook his head, then grabbed the large bag of dog food while I grabbed my case and followed him out of the condo. I looked back at the view one last time, trying to capture in my mind a memory of the sun shining over the water. Setting my lips in a thin line, I shut the door.

“Where’s your car?” he asked as we hit the parking lot.

“Where’s *your* car?” I countered. “How did you get here?”

He didn’t look at me when he answered. “I took an Uber from the airport to the bar next door.”

“You *rideshared* my rescue? What kind of two-penny operation are you run—”

He pulled me aside as a bullet whizzed by my head. Minnie was still tucked safely in his arm when he raised his silenced pistol and put three in a man across the parking lot. He then took out a woman on the third-floor balcony.

Silently he grabbed the keys to my Civic, popped the trunk and threw in our things. He motioned at me to go to the passenger’s side, and I complied, swallowing my protest. As I sat down, he gently handed Minnie to me, scratching behind her ear before locking the doors and starting the car.

He gunned the little turbo and we peeled out of the driveway and head to the airport, only a few minutes away.

“So...yeah, I’m Hedy, and you are...”

“Call sign Sabado,” he said, not breaking eye contact with the road.

“Call sign? Do you really have to use a call sign to take some fat chick to the airport?”

He kept his eyes on the road, but a grin tugged at his lips.

“All operations require the use of the call sign, ma’am.”

“Oh, goody. My call sign’s Gaia.”

He chuckled, pointing to what appeared to be a body cam. “That one’s gonna stick, for sure.”

I looked into the body cam and waved. He smiled again to himself, and then resumed his silence. After a few moments, I cocked my ear, thinking that maybe he had more to offer, like where he was from, or who he worked for, but I got nothing else for the rest of the ride. Several questions and witty observations registered, but the set of his jaw made me think that maybe now wasn't the time for knock-knock jokes.

He wasn't shy with the accelerator, and we got to the hangar in under ten minutes. He followed me to Mabel, my old Cessna 310R, and tossed my bag and the dog food in the back before climbing in.

Rocky, my father's ranch boss-slash-doer of shady deeds, followed me in and shut the door.

Yeah...this was going to be unpleasant for all involved.

"How long has it been since you've flown this thing?" he asked as I settled into the left front seat.

"Um...since before Christine died," I said as I put my headset on.

Yeah, about seven years before Christine died.

"You know, I do a lot of scary things for your father, but this one takes the cake."

The pain began to press in behind my right eye again, but I could still see well enough, and remember the buttons I needed to press. I communicated with the tower, then taxied out to the designated runway. The tower said that I was cleared 'for an emergency take-off'. I'd had a pretty awful start to the day, so...I hit it.

"Woah, there!" Rocky looked a little green as the wheels left the ground and the air introduced us to the sky.

"You're not going to hack in my plane, are you?" I asked, trying not to smile.

"Depends. You're not planning on doing any barrel rolls in this thing, are you?"

"Nah, I'm out of practice."

He looked over, not entirely sure that I was joking. Sabado remained stoic.

"Settle down, Rock. This is a nice, easy flight. No need to get anxious."

Minnie licked his face, and he had the good sense to laugh at himself. It was a beautiful day for flying, and once I got the vents to bring in some fresh air, we settled into a comfortable silence as the miles flew by beneath us.

About an hour later we were coming in for a landing at my father's private airstrip in Wimberley. I'd only landed here once before, and from the sky I could see that things had changed significantly since my last visit.

My father's property was a jewel in the heart of the Central Texas Hill Country, a landscape abundant with green, rolling hills and limestone bluffs. It sat close to a winding two-lane highway known to locals as the Devil's Backbone. He was waiting for us on the tarmac, and I landed with a huge smile on my face. I made my way down from the cockpit and ran over to him.

"Wow, Dad— a lot's changed since I was last here! What are those buildings? And when did you pave the runway?"

"Not now, Hedy. We need to get you inside," he said, gripping my arm as he walked me to his truck.

"What about Minnie? My bag is still in the pla—"

The Sabado fellow sidled up next to me as I was talking. Looking up at him, I realized that he towered over my dad, who came in at just under six feet.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to get into the vehicle."

This was less a request and more a command, so I grabbed the handle and climbed up as best I could. He came in right behind me, forcing me into the middle seat. My father joined us on the driver's side, and jerked the enormous truck into gear.

"Rocky has her. She'll be fine for now."

"What?" I asked, looking back and forth between Mexican Rambo and my dad.

"Minnie. Your bag. Rocky has them. He's right behind us."

"Why didn't we wait for Rock? And why are you going so fast?"

I hadn't even put on my seat belt, and my father was already doing sixty on the long driveway.

“It’s not safe out here.”

“Whatever, this guy here,” I said, thumbing at the big Mexican, “he took an—”

I was brought up short as we stopped at a heavily guarded gate. When the hell did we get a guarded gate?

“Senator, Daughter, and Sabado here.”

The man at the gate looked me up and down with a not-small amount of suspicion. “Is Daughter the same as Gaia?”

My father raked a calloused, freckled hand through his hair before giving him a sharp nod. Seriously, what the good god damn was going on here? I turned to ask him that very question, but his lips were pursed in a way that did not invite curiosity.

“That was a joke, Dad.”

“Yeah, well now it’s your call sign. Better get used to it.”

With that, we peeled off again, and my father turned to me. “What were you saying?”

I raised my eyebrows. Bitching about my escort was starting to seem awfully petty.

“Go on.”

Smoothing down my runaway curls, I cleared my throat. “Um, he took an Uber to my rescue. It’s just...”

My father cut me off with a gesture.

“It let him get the drop on the agents waiting for you in the parking lot. He’d already taken out one before he got to you. You took out the one in your apartment, and he took out the final two. Four agents. Four agents were after you today, Hedy. I should’ve had her send the whole damned crew.”

He punctuated this by skidding to a halt in front of a gorgeous limestone cabin. It looked like the product of an AirBnB—Pinterest tryst. Noticing the trees and the enormous rock outcropping off to the left, I realized that I was familiar with the

location. This was no cabin. It was the entrance to the largest privately-owned cave system west of the Mississippi.

We were immediately met by two other people—a stout, muscular black woman a little younger than me with her braids pulled into a severe bun, and a shorter, wiry white guy with military-shorn dark hair. They were both wearing black tactical gear and carrying automatic rifles. 30-round magazines if my eyes didn't deceive me.

Grabbing his shotgun, my father warned, "I know you want to know what is happening, but I need you to trust me. And I need you to shut the hell up."

This was twice my father had cursed in front of me, and in my forty-two years I'd never heard him say as much as 'darn'. I pressed my lips together and held my tongue.

Silently, we made our way to the cabin. The agents and my father took up a diamond-patterned protection detail around me as we crunched over the path I'd played on as a kid. As we neared the door, the familiar long, low outcropping came into view. It had been altered. There were about a dozen large squares of mirrorpane glass cut into the stone; I couldn't see in, but I was pretty sure that the people on the other side could see out. The cut and angle of the panes suggested that each was set to have a view of the natural green pool at the back of the property. We entered the cabin and were greeted by a large, glassed-in elevator occupied by another impressively large man. As we piled in, Rocky pulled up in another truck, Minnie at his side.

The doors closed in front of us, and I turned to my father, questions pulling at me. He shook his head. We started to descend through the limestone, which opened to the large cavern my father had shown me as a child. It, too, had undergone a significant change.

After all these years, the cavern was still jaw-droppingly huge—it was the size of a football stadium with gargantuan columns and stunning formations all throughout. We were looking at millions of years of geology, and it appeared to be seamlessly integrated with computers and servers and the kind of tech I'd never seen before.

As the elevator descended, I noted the changes with awe and sadness. Cave ecosystems are sensitive, and this space had been scooped out and carved to provide broad walkways, buffed to a modern shine. Delicate light fixtures and beige-colored wiring were tastefully strung in the far reaches of the room, an attempt to maintain the cave's natural beauty, but they were still a visible reminder that humans had taken over.

The mess was set up on the cave floor, and there was a group of geeks looking up as we exited the elevator. We stepped out onto a metal walkway that skirted the entire circumference of the cavern. Looking across the expanse, there were a dozen or so doors spaced out along the entire walk way, relative to the windows I'd seen outside.

"Let's use the office," my father said, using a palm print reader, tastefully embedded in the million-years old rock face, to open the first door.

As we shuffled in, my father pointed to the woman who ushered us into the building. "Hedwig, this is Captain RaeNita Archer, director of operations here at the Cave, call sign Sissy. RaeNita, this is my daughter, Dr. Hedwig Villarreal."

Archer was powerfully built and her eyes held a sharp intelligence.

"Dr. Villarreal, nice to meet you. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Uh, I don't...think so," I answered, unsure of myself. My stomach rumbled in protest. "Oh, yeah. I haven't eaten since last night."

"Tell you what, Dr. Villarreal, I'll bring you something after you're done here."

"Thank you, Captain Archer. And please, call me Hedy. Rhymes with Eddie."

The Captain nodded. "You got it, Hedy. And around here, people call me Rae or Archer, depending on how much their hair is on fire."

"Thanks, Rae. Or...maybe today is an Archer kind of day."

"Maybe," she said, smiling.

With that she turned sharply on her heel and beat a hasty retreat.

The office was a nicely appointed space, not too big, not too small. It was clear that my father's wife had never been here because there wasn't a swatch of

chintz or a single silk plant to be found anywhere. What he had was leather furniture and limestone walls and hewn planks of wood for flooring. Watercolor paintings of cowboys and army men dotted the walls, and I recognized the big oak desk from my mom's house. A box of Tiff's Treats sat on the small conference table, and sitting at the table itself was a familiar, stern-looking man.

"Hedwig, you already know Seth Wakefield."

Wakefield was my college roommate's father, and that was about the nicest thing I could say about the man.

Wakefield stood up from the table and waved me over. "It's nice to see you again, Hedy. Please, sit down; you've had a long morning. And take as many cookies as you'd like."

I disliked it when shitty people were cordial—it felt like a lie. I was starving and still on the edge of a headache, plus I didn't want to embarrass my father, so I sat and selected a Snickerdoodle. Rocky walked in with Minnie, set her on my lap, and left without saying a word.

I put Minnie at my feet and chewed as I analyzed Wakefield. He was older than I remembered, maybe early seventies, average height, still quite strong, and his salt-and-pepper hair was in a close military crop. He had on a light jacket, embossed with a familiar brand. Elijah Energy. My father, whose oil company had always been independent, went into business with Wakefield sometime after I graduated from college. In the few times I'd met him, he always struck me as someone who was unpleasant with his power. I did not like this guy, and was uneasy that he was here, today of all days.

I held his gaze for several seconds and then raised my eyebrow, as if to ask, "What now, asshole?"

"Tell me about Max."

"Who's that?"

"Sabado."

I turned to the Senator. "Dad, what is this about?"

He shot me a look and then gestured for me to answer the man.

“I’m sorry, what? Sabado or Max or *whatever* barely spoke to me. What am I supposed to tell you about him?”

“Your father tells me that you’re something of a profiler.”

“I’m a criminal psychologist, so I do alright.”

“Based on your time with him, how would you profile him?”

I snorted, “Oh Max? He’s completely sane. Rainbows and puppies, that one.”

Wakefield munched on an oatmeal cookie and waited.

“Oh, you want a real profile?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Based on the two brief interactions and ten words between us?”

“If you would be so kind,” he said with a painful-looking smile.

I swear, I really thought that this was going to be a good day. Water, sand, sunshine, the works. I was having a hard time pinpointing how all of this could have gone so badly. I mean, two hours ago I was on the beach, and now I was sitting in my family’s secret cave with a twitchy eye lid and a man who was once described by the Wall Street Journal as the ‘oligarchy personified’. I give you a dollar if you can explain that one to me. I not-so-subtly eyeballed my father again, eye brow almost to my hairline.

The look on his face chilled me to the bone. My father, an honest-to-God oil baron, a state senator, and a man who likely had a fully loaded .45 hand cannon in his desk drawer looked...nervous.

Seriously, what the entire fuck?

“Umm...okay. Here goes. On very little sleep and half a cup of coffee, and given the fact that I’ve always regarded you as a kind of Bond villain,” I said, ignoring my father’s distressed look, “I’m guessing that you’re the corporate envoy around here. Which makes him some kind of mercenary-slash-body guard. I’d guess that he’s got a lot of blood on his hands.”

Wakefield put down his half-eaten cookie. “That’s his job description. What about the man?”

Okay, fine.

“Let’s see—he’s a dog lover. He kept his cool with the dead guy outside of my safe room. He didn’t go in, guns blazing. He also took out the two, and now I’m learning, three bad guys with silence and precision. His accent is slight, but still enough to make me think that he didn’t come to you from an American agency.”

Wakefield’s look seemed to confirm my theory.

“He’s...definitely not FES. Maybe...Ixtoc-Alpha...no. No. Different skill set. And his accent is...norteño, maybe la frontera.” The northern Mexican border.

I paused again to examine Wakefield, not sure if I should even say what I was thinking. He gestured for me to continue.

“Okay, fine. I’m going to feel like a real jackass if I’m wrong, but...I think he’s Old School Zetas. And yes, I know the Zetas have a lot of ex-military with them, but honestly, with all of the sex-trafficking, I’d bet real money we’re looking at the bastard son of one of the leaders. Born and bred into it, raised with steel for a spine.”

A small smile took residence on the rich man’s lips. “It’s nice to see that your father wasn’t stretching the truth.”

My father looked relieved and queasy, which bothered the hell out of me. First the cursing, and now this? What the holy hell was going on here? I should have asked more questions before leaving the island.

I squared up and smoothed a stray hair behind my ear. “For what, exactly, am I perfect, Mr. Wakefield?”

He waved away my question; Wakefield was not a man of particulars. “Rae is going to handle the details on that. She’ll get you up to speed with our operation.”

Looking at my father, I shake my head. “Can’t *wait*.”

Right then, the guy they called Sabado darkened the door. My father piped up. “Don’t worry about that now, Hedy. Plenty of time for that later. Max here will take you to your quarters.”

I am a little on the short side, and it cricked my neck to look up at the man who'd come to collect me and Minnie. He looked like a movie bad guy, or a very large wall.

"So, you're Max."

"Yes, ma'am. Well, Maximiliano, but..."

I laughed, "Max it is."

Minnie pawed at Max's pant leg, and he bent down to scratch her ribs. She closed her eyes and rewarded him with a pretty adorable row of teeth.

"Dude, stoner dog. Awesome."

He led us down the walkway that wrapped around the entire cavern, all the way around to the warmly lit alcove at the end of the line. There were two doors in the alcove that faced each other. The one we were entering was on the same outer wall as everything else, but the second door led to an apartment that had been built directly into the interior cave wall, with no visible windows. Talk about the butt end of the loaf.

Ignoring my curiosity, Max turned the key, placed my hand on the palm print reader, and opened the steel-reinforced door.

"Home sweet home."

Like the office, it was a nicely furnished place with lots of light, an open plan living space with a full kitchen and a separate bedroom. The light colors shone with the incoming sunlight from the massive (I assumed bullet-proof) one-way picture window. The whole place smelled of Murphy's Oil Soap and Clorox wipes, which reminded me of home.

I walked over to the window, marveling at the stunning jade-green pool and waterfall at the back of the property. The furniture was a mix of rich oaks and leathers, and the kitchen had beautiful brushed steel and white appliances with a large farmer's sink. Very cozy. My suitcase and the twenty-five-pound bag of dog food sat in the middle of the living room, rather pitiful in comparison.

Minnie bounded in from behind and jumped onto the leather couch.

"Sorry about that! Minnie—down!"

Minnie looked at me, sniffed, then sat down and began licking her paws.

Max laughed, “No need, Dr. Villarreal. We’re a dog-friendly crew here. Also, I uploaded everything from your old phone, and your new one should be here shortly.”

“Thank you. Uh, so...what’s the deal here?”

“I’ll let Rae handle the particulars,” he said, smiling brightly. “But I can tell you that you and Minnie are welcome to all the areas in the main cavern, save for the printing area. We’ve got a situation room that doubles as a TV room when there isn’t an active operation. Most of us live in the Shed, which is just down the pathway from the main entrance. That’s where our gym is, and you can access it twenty-four-seven. You can join us in the mess for three squares or request whatever supplies you need to cook here.

Beyond the cavern, we ask you to stick to the metal walkways. If you encounter any walkways painted blue or red, you do not have clearance in those areas and will be turned around by an armed guard. And finally, we play poker most Saturday nights, and would love to take your money.”

Looking up again, I asked the question I’d wanted to ask since the ride to the airport. “Max, is your call sign Sabado because you’re Gigante?”

He let out a rich, warm laugh. “Yes ma’am. Eso es.”

“Que bueno. And Max? If you call me ma’am again, I’m going to punch you in the knee cap. Hedy is fine.”

He laughed again. “Noted.”

“Also? Never invite a profiler to a poker game. ‘Cause I’ll get you drunk on my killer margaritas and take all of your money.”

“Challenge accepted, *Hedy*.”

In a surprisingly gentle move, Max clapped his enormous hand on my shoulder. “Seriously though, take a minute to get your bearings. Rae is about five minutes out with your food, and she’ll explain everything, I promise.”

From his expression, I couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Chapter 5

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave; Wimberley, TX

Internal Soundtrack: "A Whole New World", Aladdin

Rae showed up a few minutes later balancing two Styrofoam boxes and two sodas in her hands. Opening the door, I grabbed a box and a soda from her, joking. "I was about five seconds away from slurping down an old packet of ketchup I'd found in my purse."

Rae laughed, showing a beautiful smile. "Wouldn't want that, Dr. Villarreal, now would we? I hope burgers are okay."

I gave her a thumbs up, already munching on some hot, crispy fries. We sat in the small dining nook, and she placed a napkin on her lap.

"So, Max get you all squared away here?"

Half way into my first bite of a juicy, mesquite- grilled hamburger, I answered with my mouth full. "Yes, thank you. This apartment is great, and I know to stick to the metal walkways and stay away from anything painted red or blue. Though you should prepare to lose a lot of money if you want me to play poker with y'all."

She cocked an eyebrow as she picked up her burger. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. You're looking at the most recent winner of poker night."

"Rae...you know that I profile people for a living, right?" I asked, wiping mayo from the corner of my mouth.

She finished her bite and nodded. "Your father said that you did a number on Max."

"I'm just sayin'—I've got a pretty overwhelming advantage. Bring extra cash," I brag, slurping on the ice-cold Dr. Pepper.

Putting down her burger, Rae wiped her hands and asked, "If you're so smart, why don't you do me?"

"Do you?" I asked, raising my eye brow.

"We've been here, what—five minutes? Do me."

She said this with a fair amount of self-confidence, which was a damned shame. Wakefield definitely had a type.

“You sure about that?”

“Do your worst.”

I tried hard not to smile as I swiped a fry from her box. “Alright, let’s see...You don’t have a regional accent, so you either moved around a lot as a kid or grew up abroad, probably a military brat. The tattoo on your arm means you’re Navy.”

She tilted her head, which I took as confirmation.

“You’re super intelligent, which is why Wakefield hired you.”

Rae chuckled and shook her head. “I’ve worked with Wakefield for a number of years, but he wasn’t the person in charge of hiring me for this team.”

“My father, then.”

“You’ll meet her by the end of the day.”

My ears perked up. “Her? Intriguing.”

Rae took on a Mona Lisa expression, happy to know something I didn’t. “I think you’ll like her.”

“I am bound to like her more than Wakefield. But I’m not quite done with you yet.”

Rae’s smile flattened a little, and she gestured for me to continue.

“Like I said, you’re sharp, but you’ve got a soft underbelly.”

Her eyebrows scrunched together. “What makes you say that?”

“Max,” I said, grinning. I’d known *that* before she walked in the door.

The dark cast of her cheeks reddened slightly. “What about Max?” she asked, coolly.

“If you two wish to keep your relationship a secret, then you should stop smiling when you say each other’s names.”

She shook her head again and cursed under her breath.

I grabbed her forearm, hoping I didn't alienate a potential friend. "Look, I don't want you think that I just go around psychoanalyzing people for their every tic and gesture. Hell, I still have sand in my shoes from walking on the beach this morning."

She nodded and went silent for a few more moments. "Don't know if your dad told you about what we hope you'll do with us, but it's good to see that you've actually got the skills."

"Instead of rampant nepotism?"

"Something like that."

"He hasn't told me anything yet. Not exactly sure what I've gotten myself into."

"You should probably know that our team has been shadowing your investigation of Pharaoh."

I'd gathered that from my conversation with Dad this morning, but I wanted to know more. "Shadowing how?"

"Your data is very, very good." She shrugged at my disgruntled expression, not particularly contrite. "I just follow orders."

Guess I just figured out the unknown agency who took down Pharaoh.

"What the hell is this place?" I ask, rubbing my eyebrow.

"We are an R-and-D site," she answered matter-of-factly.

"You're a lab coat operation with a special forces team that *just happened* to take out a major drug dealer? What *exactly* are you researching and developing?" I asked, highly skeptical.

She shook her head. "Can't say. For now."

"Seriously, why am I here?"

"Everyone here wears more than one hat. We have some gaps with analysis and personnel, and you might be the right person for the job."

"How do you mean? I don't have a background for any of this. Whatever it is."

“First of all, you’re a damned good analyst. The shit we stole from you was the most helpful of all of the information that we fed into the computer. We might use you for that in the future, but right now we’re short on personnel.”

“So, you need my profiling skills for, what...new hires?”

“Yep. We need scientists, security operatives, and engineers of all stripes.”

“Tricky when it appears that this operation doesn’t even have a name.”

“Noticed that, did you? And you’re right—it’s fallen to me to find people on the ops side, and I need help figuring out who to trust. We’re stretched thin, and we’ve had a few bad incidents in the last couple of months.”

“Incidents?”

“We recently found out that one of our scientists was working with Pharaoh. There was a confrontation, and he was killed.”

“Which agent killed him?”

The set of her jaw told me everything I needed to know.

“Okay, but...how can I help you find and retain people if I have to stay off the blue and red walkways?”

She shook her head, resolute. “We’re not going to give you everything all at once, but we’ll get there. We’ll start by having you meet the staff. That will give you plenty of information. I know it’s not a lot to go on right now, but I need you to trust me.”

Yeah, *right*. “If I’m to trust you, then you have to trust me. Give me something. *Anything*. Start with your call sign. How the hell does someone who looks like you get stuck with the call sign Sissy?”

Rae went still for what seemed a long time. Studying me, she answered carefully. “It’s short for fā sī sī sheng, the Chinese phrase for hissing.” While speaking she used her fingernail to draw a series of Chinese characters on her Styrofoam container from lunch.

“You speak Chinese?”

“It’s my first language,” she answered carefully.

“You don’t look Chinese,” I said, nervous with her demeanor.

“I’m not.”

I sat there for a moment, processing the conversation. I realized that Rae’s accent wasn’t neutral; it was masked. “Do I want to know why your call sign has to do with hissing?”

Rae looked at me, attempting to gauge that which can only be proven in real time. “Probably not.”

“Try me anyway.”

She pinned me with a look that I shrugged off. After deliberating a few moments, she agreed. “This is going to look scary, but I promise that I will not hurt you.”

I doubt anything could be scarier than having to flee one’s own home with people shooting at you, and I already did that today. I gestured for her to continue.

Watching me carefully, she began working her jaw. Within seconds her lower mandible appeared to unhinge itself. It allowed her to open her mouth wide, and a pair of curving, incredibly sharp canines came into view.

My ears pulsed with white noise, and my hairline grew cold. Mutely, I shot up from the table and stepped back, putting the chair between me and her. Minnie saw my reaction and raised her hackles, snapping and growling.

My atheism didn’t have anything for me in that moment. I couldn’t cross myself or bless some water or ask for forgiveness. I was, in a word, screwed.

Rae held her hands up, her jaw retracting to a somewhat normal state. “I’m not going to hurt you,” she lisped.

“The *fuck* you aren’t. Back all the way up away from me. Do it *now*.” I said this with more confidence and anger than I felt. In reality, I was desperately trying to not piss myself while contemplating death by—what? Vampire? Minnie began barking in earnest, putting herself between me and Rae.

Rae complied, getting up from the table moving backwards towards the door. As she did this, her hair began to move on its own. Her bun disintegrated into a slow tangle of black and brownish-black...tails. Smooth-scaled...tails. They rose up all around her face, slowly rattling. After a moment, she drew her jaw back into

place, and her tails rattled back into a tight bun at the back of her head. Ah, yes. Hissing equals snake. *Fuck me sideways.*

I was beginning to understand how that scientist died.

“I’m venomous, but I’m not poisonous,” she explained. “And I won’t turn you to stone, I promise.”

Her body language was relaxed—likely because I posed no real threat—but her expression seemed sincere. Though, who the hell knows what sincere looks like on a Medusa, or whatever she was. Minnie had stopped barking, but she continued to growl, teeth fully bared. Not sure what else to do, I tried conversation.

“So, you grew up in China?”

She nodded. “In an American-run black site, south of Shen Yang. When I turned thirteen, I killed the four people on my detail, then snuck through North Korea into Seoul.”

“*Through North Korea?*” I asked, impressed.

“It took three months to make it to Seoul, and another two to make enough money to come to the States.”

Blowing out a breath, I responded, “Well, *yeah*. What else is a half-woman, half-rattlesnake supposed to do?”

“I am not half of anything. I am a shifter.”

“A whowhat now?” I ask, angling my ear toward her as if that might make any of this make sense.

“A shifter. A person with the ability to change from a human form to an animal form.”

“And you’re a...”

“Rattlesnake shifter.”

“Of course you are,” I said, snorting. “Why wouldn’t you be? I mean, I’ve read a few bear shifter romances in my day, but...”

“Actually, do you know the Bee Cave Honey shop?”

“Yeah...”

“Bear shifters. One of them just mated with a jackalope of all things.”

I hold up my finger. “Not actually making this less surreal. Just sayin’.”

Two of her tails twist around each other. “Sorry.”

“Look, maybe it’s just cause I’m reading the wrong kinds of paranormal shit, but...why aren’t you fully human? Why don’t you have human hair?”

She pauses, tapping on the table. “I was part of a genetic experiment that was run out of the Chinese black site. They wanted more control over the shift, but the best they could ever do was this,” she said, gesturing to herself. “I’ll never be fully human or snake. I’ll remain in this half-shifted state.”

“And the hair...tails?”

“An unexpected side effect.”

“How did you survive all of that?”

“I was the only one who ever passed for human.”

I sat back down at the table and gestured for her to do the same.

Raking a hand through my hair, I think out loud. “So, we need scientists, engineers and operatives who can handle working with a rattlesnake shifter.”

“That would be the least of their worries, but yeah. They do need to be able to work with people like me. And...not everyone on our team can pass for human.”

People. Plural.

To say that this was unexpected is to absurdly understate the obvious. Profiling bad guys was one thing. But profiling the people who could deal with these kinds of secrets...well, I wasn’t even sure that it was possible. There are very few people who could stand here with Rae and not shit themselves, and I’m not entirely sure that I could count myself among them.

After taking a few steadying breaths, I asked, “Of your original recruits, what percentage wash out?”

“Eighty.”

“And why do they washout?”

“They usually don’t pass the fang test.”

“Yeah, well...I don’t think I did, either.”

“No, you passed.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

“You maintained control of your body, you put an object—a chair—between yourself and perceived danger, and you spoke in directives. You recovered quickly, but maintained a safe distance. Even though you are freaked out, you are doing all of the right things.”

She said this without judgement, I assume because being freaked out was the rational response to clear and really fucked up danger. I felt a bit exposed that she could so easily sense my fear, but I supposed that turnabout was fair play.

Trying to maintain the façade of calm, I continued. “I have some levels of clearance. Can you share with me some of the things you’ve done the last couple of years?”

Rae hesitated, trying to get a read on me. “Let’s leave that for later.”

I believed her. “Fuck, I need some chocolate milk. Think they have any in the mess?”

Rae thought about it. “Maybe. But then again, we don’t cater to five-year-olds.”

“I was on the beach like, two hours ago, and now I’m being made fun of by a woman sporting a hairdo that rattles.”

“Ain’t that a son of a bitch.”

“I’m not too proud to admit that leaving the Xanax at home was a grave underestimation of where this day was actually taking me.”

“I don’t know if this helps, but we could use you here—I could use you here. And I need your A-game.”

I sighed, moderately overwhelmed. “Then you shall have it.”

“Good. Because we’ve got a meeting to get to.”

I had a feeling that the day was only going to get weirder.

A set of steps right off the alcove lead us to the ground level. We passed by the mess, miraculously found some chocolate milk, then walked along more metal grating through a few smaller caverns. Finally, we arrived at the situation room. The chocolate milk was calming, and I was oriented enough that I could remember my way over here with only one or two wrong turns.

We walked in and I nearly tripped over myself when I saw who was waiting for us.

Indaja Wakefield, my old college roommate, was sitting there, glorious as all get out. She’s larger and taller than me, with ample...everything. Tits for days, a big, luscious belly, and an ass that could not quit if it wanted to. The effect that she had on men (and a fair few women) was legendary on our campus. Her self-possession, her glorious chestnut-colored waves, her wise and probing hazel-green eyes—she was worshipped wherever she went.

Praise the baby Jesus, I was saved.

“Indaja Maharajah! Hot damn, lady—I am so glad to see you!” I said while giving her the biggest hug.

“Chocolate milk, Hedy?” she said, smiling at the bottle in my hand. “No need to ask you how you’re doing this afternoon.”

“Yeah, well they were fresh out of rolling papers. So, you work here with your dad?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice strained. I wasn’t the only one who thought her dad was a piece of shit.

Indaja looked over at Rae, who gave her one sharp nod. Returning her attention to me, she asked, “Tell me, Hedy...what kind of a day are you having?”

Glancing at Rae, I answered with a smile. “S-s-s-surreal.”

Rae rattled one of her tales. I blew her a kiss. Indaja laughed at the two of us.

“Humor. That’s a good sign. But how are you doing, *really?*”

Fuck if I knew. “I don’t know enough to give you a full report, but if Rattlesnake Annie over there is any indication, I’m going to be treading water for a bit.”

“Head still above water though, right?”

“More or less.”

“Let me know if that changes.”

“Um, sure, but...I thought you worked with my mom. Was I wrong about that?”

She cocked her head at funny angle and looked at Rae. “She doesn’t know?”

Rae shook her head.

“She doesn’t know what?” I asked, looking between the two of them.

“Hedy, I just...” she started, and then thought the better of it. “Look, I’m gonna have Captain Archer bring in a couple of folks from the science team, and the level of surreal is going to go up by a lot. I need you to have an open mind and know that you are safe. Okay?”

I forced a half smile and braced myself.

Rae got up and let in two people. There was a white guy, tall-ish and burly, with a ZZ Top beard. The second person was a woman, also very tall. Like Rae, she was a shifter who was stuck in a half-shifted state. Unlike Rae, she could not hide it. She had gray-and-white dappled skin and amethyst-colored eyes, and was wearing a white cotton eyelet dress and gray (nude?) sandals. She appraised me, I suppose looking for judgment or fear. I met her eyes and smiled, though I’ll be honest, it may have been more of a grimace.

Indaja made the introductions. “Elliot and Dr. Fisher, this is Dr. Hedwig Villarreal. She’s researched criminal behavior for a number of years, and most recently has consulted with the local DEA. She’ll be helping us to profile additional talent. Also, while her specialty is not in therapy, she has taken multiple clinical courses, and will be available for mental health support.”

Wide-eyed, I whispered to Indaja out the side of my mouth, *“I understand people; I can’t fix ‘em.”*

She smiled and side-whispered back, "You surveyed all of those counseling classes at UT."

"That's because I was sleeping with the professor," I said through my teeth.

"Close enough."

I turned to face the two people and waved.

"Hi. Please call me Hedy."

"Hi Hedy," they replied in a discordant combination of high and low tones.

The acoustics of the room made it sound like I was talking to a crowd, and I'll admit, it set me back on my heels. To revisit the treading water analogy, my chin was starting to dip below the surface. I looked over at Rae, grateful for the chance to freak out privately. She nodded reassuringly, perhaps indicating that she had some confidence in me that I did not yet have in myself. Whatever her meaning, our silent exchange helped me to pull myself together. Might as well start with the...dolphin(?) in the room.

Walking up to the woman, I decided to keep it simple. "Hi. I like your dress."

"Why thank you."

Her voice had a lovely, mellifluous quality to it that echoed throughout the room. Standing at full height, she seemed kind-hearted and smelled of salt water and jasmine. Her face was not typically pretty, but was at once odd and softly beautiful.

"Can you say what it is you do here?" I asked, trying to act professional while looking at the info on her security badge.

Fisher looked over at Rae, who tilted her head in agreement. "I'm a general physician, but I specialize in people who've been genetically altered."

"Makes sense," I remarked, though, to be honest, none of this made any damned sense at all.

"Your file tells me that you are a universal donor." Her eyes twinkled with this information. It was kinda cute, actually.

"I've got the ten-gallon mug from the Blood and Tissue people to prove it."

“And you don’t mind donating regularly?”

“No, Dr. Fisher. I do not.”

She clapped her hands and made a clicking sound. I looked at Rae and Indaja. They gave me the thumbs up. Maybe I didn’t want to know why a place like this would need regular blood donations.

I moved on to the burly bearded man, who smelled of beer and pot. He looked to be in his mid-20’s and had a sweet face with stunning blue eyes. His (mostly obscured) security badge was held by a purple lanyard. His handshake was timid, almost delicate, and he mumbled the slightest ‘hello’.

Upon closer inspection, I could see that the beard covered up some kind of deformity under his chin. I smiled as I shook his hand, but seeing his discomfort, I hesitated.

“Why do you have to be so fucking shy? Come on, Elliot. Might as well show the good doctor now—she’s going to find out sooner or later.”

I looked up at the big guy, who hadn’t moved his mouth. “Did you say that?”

He looked down and shuffled his feet.

“Elliot—get this fucking hair off my face. You know I hate it when you cover up my face!”

Okay, that came from his beard.

“Bernard, shut *up*.” This was Elliot, now red-faced, seemingly shushing himself.

Is it wrong to hope that someone has both a dissociative identity disorder and the ability to throw one’s voice? Asking for a friend.

“Don’t you tell me to shut up. You get everything. I get this face. So move your fucking beard before I start eating it.”

The guy who was being called Elliot by his own neck looked at me with embarrassment and...pity. Removing a pony tail holder from his pocket, he pulled his beard to the side and secured it. When he moved his hands, I just...really tried to think of the beach.

And not the face on his neck.

More specifically, a sunken, dark-eyed replica of Elliot's face. On his neck.

Unfortunately, the face was now talking to me, and there was a whooshing sound in my ears, but I didn't want to be rude and not...look it in the eyes? Him? In the eyes? I don't know. I give up. I really fucking give up.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm Bernard; this mute asshole up here is Elliot. We take care of the technology here. And before you ask, yes we're twins."

They start to argue again about beard logistics, and Indaja leans over to whisper in my ear. "We have no idea the kind of shifters they are. The genetic manipulation failed and they've never shifted."

When I refocused on the people in the room, I caught the face—Bernard—looking me up and down, appraising me.

"Man, you've got a big ass. Nice titties, though."

Wow. Just...*wow*.

If anyone ever wondered about the power and absurdity of the male gaze, I would—if it weren't completely classified—point to this exact moment in time. My actual human body was being judged by a...goiter. An unshifted, completely unmagical goiter.

A small titter tickled the back of my throat, and I swallowed hard to stifle it, but the more I contemplated the preposterousness of the situation, the funnier it got. Fisher started making clicking noises with her sonorous laughter and I lost it completely. By the end of it we were all laughing-slash-wheezing.

Even the quiet Elliot seemed to find that amusing.

Indaja, meanwhile, stood in the corner of the room, shaking her head.

"I can't believe it—we may have actually found the perfect therapist for this group of whack-jobs."

"So, Fisher—at what point did Bernard stop freaking you out?"

"It was at least three weeks before I could look him in the eyes."

“Hey, I do have ears.”

I snorted. “And the mouth of a sailor, which I appreciate. But you do realize I can’t take you seriously with that side pony tail / beard combination you’ve got working there? Because that is hella distracting.”

“Dammit, Elliot! Stop doing that with the beard—it’s weird!”

“Weirder than a mouthy Goiter Head?” I asked.

As I said this, Elliot wordlessly pulled another rubber band from his pocket and rearranged the beard like pigtails around Bernard’s head. Elliot looked at me shyly, then cracked a huge smile.

“You did the pigtails again, didn’t you? Didn’t you? Goddammit, Elliot. Do the man bun and stop fucking around!”

I had never laughed so hard in all of my life, and to laugh like that with strangers—of the strangest kind—was to have instant friends. I was still weirded out, but like my wife used to say...it’s only weird the first time.

I was facing away from the door when it slammed open, startling me.

“Que estan haciendo aqui?! You were supposed to wait for me to arrive before introducing her! And Rae, why are your tails out? This is not a party!”

The voice and tone were familiar, but I had to turn around to verify.

Yep, that was my mother.

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