

The Wimberley Chronicles

Part Three

A Violet Crown Adventure

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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 13

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Hotel Zephyr; San Francisco, CA

Internal Soundtrack: "Alphabet Aerobics" —Blackalicious

I was having a fantastic day, and tomorrow was going to be better because I was totally going to bring in the recruit who'd been avoiding me. I hated to admit it, but Wakefield had picked a good one—this guy had spec ops written all over him. He belonged on Rae's team, and I wasn't leaving until I got him there.

Arye and I had a beautiful dinner on the pier, took a great drive through the city, and now...the hotel's outdoor lounge. He sweetly, begrudgingly offered to stay in the lobby as long I was within viewing distance, and I was off to the races.

Obviously, one could hang out with no prospects at all, but the lounge area at the Hotel Zephyr was *hopping*. It was a cool outdoor space with an eclectic set up and several cozy seating areas centered around gas-powered firepits that were themselves works of art. All manner of beautiful men were everywhere, and there were a few temptations, but this would, hopefully, be my first sexual encounter since Christine, and I needed to start in more familiar territory.

At the smaller fire pit in the back, was an extraordinarily handsome woman. Short auburn hair with grey around the temples, black-framed glasses, smiling eyes that crinkled at the corners, slight faux hawk, rolled-up jeans and laced-up boots, white button down with a vest and a red bow tie. Dapper as fuck.

She was thick and muscled, which gave me pause—she was a bit of a gamble. There was also a gorgeous, bearded bear of a guy in one of the many shadowed seating areas who'd already started smiling at me. Salt and pepper hair with kind eyes. He was wearing a suit, but I'd bet my left pinky that he had a stash of Tommy Bahama shirts in his suitcase and some high-quality weed in his Dopp kit.

Lord a'mighty, the choices were delicious.

Screw it, I was in a gambling mood.

I'd purchased some new clothes for my field trips, and was feeling like a million bucks in my new outfit—pretty skinny jeans with a creamy, light cashmere

sweater and cute ankle boots. I walked up to the courtyard bar, passing right by the beautiful butch, delighted to see her head turn.

“What can I get for you tonight?” asked the guy at the counter, a man so young I seriously considered carding him.

“Can you make a snakebite?” I asked, rising up on my tiptoes to check out the taps.

He held a hand to his chest, mock-offended. “Why, of course.”

“Bless you.”

I was mesmerized as I watched him pour the ingredients with a practiced patience and fluency. He gave me a perfect line and presented the pint glass to me with a flourish.

I thanked him and tipped generously before setting back toward the beautiful butch, who was still sitting on the low stone wall that circled the fire. Her knowing look made my heart speed up.

“Mind if I sit here?”

“Not in the slightest. What’d you get?” she asked, gesturing to my drink.

Flustered by her question, I lost my balance as I went to sit and wobbled on the heeled boot, nearly spilling the drink.

“Whoa there. Are you all right?” she asked, looking genuinely concerned.

I blushed, which did not go unnoticed, and laughed. “Just some minor bruising of the ego.”

She grinned back, standing. “Here, let me help you.”

I looked up, entranced by her strength and height. The sweet butch held my arm as I sat, steadyng me as she unsteadied me.

“My savior!” I giggled. Noticing her nearly empty beer, I seized my opportunity. “Please allow me to buy you another beer. It’s the least I can do. And not just because I might need you to hang around and help me stand up without falling on my ass.”

Not waiting for her answer, I caught my favorite bartender's eye and signaled for another. He winked and approximately one-hundred-nineteen-and-a-half seconds later the perfectly poured pint was in her hand. Point Villarreal.

"I'm Hedy, by the way."

Her grin was fucking sexy as she tilted her head. "Hedy as in Hedy Lamarr?"

"Yep. Mom's a major movie buff."

"Nice. I'm Nicole," she said, holding her hand out to me. "My friends call me Nic."

I squeezed her hand with a smile. "Hi, Nic."

With that, I clinked glasses with her and delicately sipped my snakebite, happy that all of my jostling hadn't ruined the mix.

"That any good? Mixing Guinness with cider?" she asked, wiping a bit of the foam from my lip.

My cheeks went warm as did nearly everything else. "Actually, it's the only way I can drink beer at all. Here, try it."

Nic smiled and took the glass, taking a small sip. Her eyes widened, "Holy shit. I thought that was just some girly way to drink Guinness, but damn...that's actually good."

"*Excuse me*, what's wrong with girly?" I asked, flirting shamelessly.

Nic let her eyes wander down my body slowly. "Not a thing."

We both smiled, knowing, and the tension between my shoulder blades gave way in the heat of the fire, under the chilly night sky. After that, we talked small about our day and why we were both in San Francisco, and that we both traveled for our jobs. Nic got my second snakebite, and by the end of it, I was touching her shoulder and scuffing her hair. I declined when she offered to buy me a third.

"Too bad," she said, putting her hand on mine. "I was enjoying our conversation."

I smiled. "Me too. I'd be happy to get a water, or we—uh—could continue the conversation in my room..."

Shit. Was that too forward? I was allowed to be forward, right?

The smile which had been playing at the edges of her lips all evening broadened.
“That might be nice.”

We both left cash and did not wait for the change. Walking through the nautical-themed lobby together, I signaled the thumbs up to Arye. He joined us in the elevator and got off on the floor below, a jackass grin on his face. I grabbed Nic’s hand and laid my head on her shoulder, letting out a happy sigh. It’d been a long time since I’d done this.

We got to my door and I handed Nic the key. She opened it and cupped my ass as I walked past her. Following behind, she closed the door and grabbed me for a much-needed kiss. She pushed me up against the wall and kissed me again, then leaned in to nibble the spot behind my ear.

After a few minutes of necking and touching, Nic whispered, “So...how do you like to play? Soft? Dirty? Rough?”

She stopped when I smiled on *rough*.

“Not *that* rough,” I said quickly. “A *little* rough. I guess it’s more about control.”

“Mine or yours?” Nic asked, dark and sexy.

“Yours,” I answered shyly.

“Good.” She spun me around and grabbed my shoulder. Propelling me to the bed, she whispered in my ear, “I can be a little rough, if you want.”

She pushed me down onto my back and crawled on top of me for another blistering round of kisses. I wrapped my legs around her and pulled in closer, my nipples hardening against her weight.

She came up for air and unbuttoned my blouse before taking off my bra. Roughly holding both of my hands in one of hers, Nic stretched my arms up overhead.

“Say please.”

“Please!” I giggle-begged. “Please, please, please.”

Her grin was the devil’s work as she pinched one of my nipples while nipping at the other, smiling at my sharp inhale and shudder.

"Nothing crazy tonight," she said against my hardened nipple. "Say stop or pat the bed if you can't talk, okay?"

"Mmph, yes. Pleasure, not pain."

She whispered in my ear. "You've got it, sexy lady."

Pulling down my pants and underwear, she stripped them off with my heels in one go. She yanked off her vest, undressing with an efficiency that I personally appreciated. She was left wearing Tomboy underwear, her small breasts covered in a matching heathered bralette, her taught nipples doing things to my head.

Stretching my arms out again, she used her free hand to probe me with rough, talented fingers. I was desperately close to orgasm when she pulled away.

"Oh, no, no, no. Please come back. I'm almost there."

"What'll you do for it?"

"Anything. Anything you want."

Moving to my side, she knelt and ordered. "Open your mouth."

I did as I was told and was rewarded with her thumb. I sucked on it, tasting myself on her skin. She slid it in and out, smiling as I teased her with my tongue. Leaning down, she sucked on a nipple, then reached down with her other hand, slipping two then three fingers inside of me, rubbing my clit with her thumb. She was thumbing my mouth, sucking on my nipple, and absolutely mauling me all in perfect time. I squirmed under her, writhing in pleasure.

"No, no, no. You must lay perfectly still," she said, pulling out and away from me.

"Okay, I will. I'll be still," I panted, wanting her fingers back.

With a warning look, she once again reached out, thumbing my mouth and pushing her fingers into me. I wanted so badly to push my hips up, to grind against her, but I didn't. I remained perfectly still, going silently out of my mind as her thumbs swirled and pumped both areas in time. Satisfied that I was obeying her, she leaned down and delicately suckled on my nipple. Unable to move, I moaned softly.

Pulling away again, she whispered, "No, no, no. Absolutely quiet."

I nodded my head, silently begging her to continue. Seeing my pliant attitude, she once again put her fingers and mouth to my service. She started softly, not nearly enough pressure, but I kept my mouth shut.

Moments later, I was rewarded with a firm thumb against my clit, teeth grazing against my nipple, and her other thumb plunging deeply into my mouth. Unable to move against her, I reached out my hand, feeling the soft cotton of her underwear. She paused as I dipped my fingers below her waistband but continued when they found her wet curls and swollen pussy. I curled my hand into a fist, and she started to grind against it in time with her ministrations.

The orgasm came over me, hitting hard and fast. With no movement or sound to displace the concentrated sensations, I clamped down, pulsing intensely, almost painfully.

“There you go, baby. Come for me.”

A few seconds later her thighs squeezed tightly around me as she pulsed against my fist. I rotated it under her, milking her orgasm until she released me. I folded up into a fetal position on my side, shivering as I hugged myself, the remnants of the great coming still with me.

God, I wanted to keep going. I *needed* to keep going.

We exchanged a glance, hunger still unsated in our eyes, and she smiled, wicked in her intent. She pushed me back, running her hands over my belly and breasts before rifling through my bag. She brought up a pair of clean underwear and tucked the silky material into my mouth. Returning to the bag, she pulled out my sleep mask. Brushing her breasts against mine, she pulled the mask over my eyes, breaking several protocols in the process. I lay face up on the bed, listening to her continue to go through my things.

“You don’t have a scarf?” she asked, disappointed. If I had to guess, she was pouting. I berated myself as I shook my head. *Why the fuck didn’t I bring a scarf?* What kind of noob forgets a *scarf*?

“Not to worry,” she said, running a finger along my waist. “There’s more than one way to incapacitate you. There’s a bench at the end of the bed—let’s see if you can slide over and place your forearms on it.”

She held my legs as I slid over the edge, arching back to rest my forearms on the bench, just as she'd ordered. Yeah, that would do. While most of my body was still on the bed, the blood rushed to my head, my tits rolled back toward my shoulders, and the cold blast of air conditioning tingled my nether as I parted my thighs.

Half upside down, sightless, gagged, and fully spread, every follicle on my body stood at attention. I gasped when Nic positioned herself between my legs and let out a ragged breath when she wrapped her arms under my thighs for leverage. With her soft, warm tongue, she gently began to lick and suck on my clit and labia. Pleasure and something else collided in me and, for a moment, I froze.

Someone who was not Christine was going down on me.

"You okay?" she asked, lightly resting her chin on my mound.

I felt a little ridiculous, arched over the edge of the bed, my tits straining against gravity, underwear preventing me from speaking clearly. I let out a breath. "Yeth, justh...it'h been a while."

She kissed my pussy, her voice muffled by my thighs as she asked, "Do you want to stop?"

I vigorously shook my head, and she started again, lightly, delicately licking the bud, the sensation intensified by my inability to see. One kind of tension left my body in favor of another, more pleasurable kind. After a few moments, she tightened her grip on my thigh while snaking the other hand up to my breast, kneading the softness as she gradually increased the intensity of her licking.

Our rhythm began to pick up, and I moaned when she hard-flicked a dangling nipple. Stinging and sharp, she made each flick more punishing and luscious than the last. She did this in time with her soft, insistent licking and sucking until I was right at the precipice. I'd wanted to hold on, but the insistent flicking and her soft tongue pushed me over the edge. I came again, another hard and fast orgasm. A tear escaped and rolled backwards to my hair line.

Fuck, that was good.

Gathering myself, I wrangled my body back onto the bed, removing the sleep mask and the makeshift gag as I pushed her back against the pillows. She pulled

me on top of her, wrapping her legs around me as we kissed and touched. I wanted to satisfy her in the same way she'd satisfied me, but when I went to put the sleep mask on her, she shook her head and pushed my hand away.

"I want to see you."

I lowered myself down between her thighs, delicately pinching and rolling back her labia as I ran the pebbled topside of my tongue against her clit, nipping it between my lips. I moved further down, dipping my tongue deep into her pussy, reveling in her scent. I went back and forth like that for several minutes, spreading apart her labia while sucking on her clit, then entering her with my tongue. She grabbed handfuls of my hair, pulling me in closer, demanding more, thrusting against my tongue, over and over until I was rewarded with the tension then release of her soft, moaning orgasm.

I raised my head and grinned, catching her eye. She grinned back and pulled me up for another round of sweet kisses.

To say I needed that would be to dabble in understatement. After snuggling and briefly dozing together, Nic picked up her things, dressed, gave me one last sumptuous kiss, and then bade me farewell.

After a few minutes of delicious solitude, I received a knock at the door that connected my room to Arye's. Smiling and a little embarrassed, I opened the door with a flourish. Arye greeted me with a shit-eating grin on his face and Minnie under his arm. In my best Shakespearean accent, I proclaimed:

"Friends, Romans, countrymen! It is a beautiful evening. Soft—what light through yonder window breaks? A full moon over San Francisco and all is right with the world!"

A voice from inside the room called out, "Oh, for the love of god!"

This time, a little bit country: "Why, Captain RaeNita Archer, as I live and breathe," I said, holding my hand to my chest in a most dramatic fashion. "What are you doing here?"

"Regretting this decision," she grumped.

Arye smiled a bit more in spite of himself. "If it is all right with you, I'd like to check the room."

I waved him in with a sweeping gesture, "Enter at your own peril. The room is a tad disorganized as the sex was very, very dirty."

He laughed as he passed me. From inside the room, Rae proclaimed, "That's it! You are no longer allowed to have sex!"

I cackled and poked my head inside the room, "Ah, c'mon, Rae. Can't a woman have a little adult fun?"

Rae looked at me and smiled. Silently, she mouthed, "So, you're okay?"

I nodded with beaming eyes and a contented sigh. I slept deeply that night, and dreamt of a feather floating on the breeze.

Chapter 14

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The GreenHouse Collective

Internal Soundtrack: "Gett Off" —Prince

I woke up the next morning in a glorious mood. The weather was amazing, and I was looking forward to the day's recruiting stops. We started out early and checked out one of Etienne's Airforce buddies who'd served in the early days after 9/11 and had gone down to New Orleans to help with extrications after Katrina. I liked him, but we both agreed he was a little too long in the tooth for what we had in mind. No harm, no foul. After that, we made our way to the GreenHouse Collective, where I would finally convince that redhead asshole to join Rae's crew.

Er, that was the plan.

From the get-go the meeting was an unmitigated disaster, and I'm gonna be real honest—it was at least thirty percent my fault. My good mood was annoying the shit out of retired Navy SEAL Captain Edison Fitzwallace, who was looking at me like you'd look at a piece of gum on the bottom of your shoe. He was tallish, a little over six-foot, and a brawny, rock-solid two hundred and twenty pounds. He also had red hair that was beginning to streak with gray, especially in his beard and around his temples. That bastard had a look on his face that made me think he'd gone without sex longer than I had.

But *dios mio*, he was a tanned, broad-shouldered killing machine. He would be perfect for the Cave, if only he'd stop being such a judgmental dick.

Look, I get it. I was a short, chubby woman with freckles and nerd tattoos, not exactly a textbook military recruiter. I didn't even register the surprise when I visited new prospects anymore. Today, though, I would admit that his intensity—the stitched brows, the navy-blue eyes, the hawkish nose, and the red-bearded snarl was doing its thing. Point to Fitzwallace.

"Dr. Villarreal, as I believe I made clear to you on your many phone calls to me, I have a job. A well-paying job. Perhaps you didn't notice the view?" he said, imperiously sweeping his hand toward his enormous picture window.

According to my digging, this job had been a really generous retirement gift from one of his buddies who'd made good. Which was both hunky and dory, but even from my vantage point I could see that the office life was slowly draining his will to live, gorgeous view or not. Even as we spoke, he popped open a bottle of extra-strength Excedrin and downed four tablets without so much as a glass of water.

If he thought that would make me feel sorry for him, he was dead wrong. Wakefield specifically asked for this man, and when that bastard wanted someone, I made it my mission to get them. So, I moved in for the kill.

"Mr. Fitzwallace, you've adjusted your tie five or six times in the eight minutes I've been here. Office life will end you faster than anything I could offer you."

"As I have said before, I'm not interested in becoming a glorified bodyguard."

"That's not the job I'm offering," I countered. The "dickhead" was silent.

"Then what *is* the job?" he asked, clearly annoyed. But interested.

"Mercenary. Special assignments. Black ops. I can't promise a bay view, but I can promise the opportunity to kill lots of very interesting bad guys."

You see, kids, this is the point in the conversation where he should have realized that he was being called to the big show, and this is where he should have fucking paid attention. And maybe shown a little goddamned respect.

"I believe I've already given you my answer," he said as he adjusted uncomfortably in his ergonomic, Bluetooth-enabled office chair.

Oh, for the love. He had to be chomping at the bit; he just didn't want to admit it.

"Mr. Fitzwallace, did you not enjoy the work that you did?"

"No, I'm very proud of my service," he snapped.

"Weren't you forced into retirement based on, of all things, an algorithm?"

Fitzwallace stood to his full height, towering over me. "Dr. Villarreal, I think it's time for you to leave."

I assumed that sort of posturing worked well enough on the people under his command, but I'd just gotten laid, and he was just a civilian in a suit as far as I was

concerned. Hell, Max was way taller and more mean-looking than this *pendejo*. I reached up and grabbed his lapels, pulling him toward my face.

“Sailor, you are being called to serve. I don’t know what your problem is, and I don’t care because if the big guy wants you, you *show the fuck up*.”

The look of incredulity on his face was priceless. I let go of his suit and smoothed down his lapels, then closed on him like Alec Baldwin in *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

“If you want me to stop calling you, if you would prefer that I didn’t go up the chain of command—and I do mean all the way to the top—to find out why someone with a *Medal of Freedom* cannot serve, then come out to the Texas Hill Country. And stop dicking me around.”

Chapter 15

Edison Fitzwallace

The Greenhouse Collective

I had a splitting headache and couldn't believe I was being dressed down by this woman in my own office. I knew from that video conference that she would be a problem. In person, she was worse—big, wavy hair, freckles, petite with tits and ass for days. I had to go to an entirely different place in my mind when she grabbed my collar.

I, however, had not forgotten who she worked for. When she said “the big guy,” she was talking about Wakefield, a man nobody crossed. The world knew that Elijah Energy had its hands in oil, gas, wind, and solar, but I also knew that they dabbled in cutting-edge weapons and pharma as well. Wakefield was the muscle for this powerful conglomerate.

This was as dirty as it got, but I needed the wet work—more than I was willing to admit—and if I had to get dirty to do it, so be it.

But did it have to be with this woman? She had an incredible aura—bright purplish-violet—but she didn’t even know *what* she was, and she certainly didn’t know what *I* was. And I sincerely doubted that she had any inkling of the man she was working for. She’d used the word “serve,” but this wasn’t some noble mission to infiltrate and dismantle the Nazis. *This* was a goddamned nightmare.

I blew out a frustrated breath. She had me and we both knew it.

“If I go, will you stop calling me?”

“I’ll lose your fucking number and happily forget I ever fucking met you.”

God, she had a mouth on her.

“No strings?”

“I’m a fucking strapless bra.”

“Fine. When’s the flight?”

“In two hours.”

Chapter 16

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Shed

Internal Soundtrack: "We Are The Champions"—Queen

Edison Fitzwallace had been a huge pain in my ass, but as I sized him up on the plane, I decided that he was going to be an awesome agent. He looked pissed the entire trip and said not a solitary word to me the whole way. Every time our eyes met, he mean-mugged me like it was going out of style. The crew was going to love him.

Side note: the man smelled annoyingly good. I'd first noticed it when I grabbed his shirt—there was a subtle scent profile that started with apples and was followed by parchment and fresh earth. The scent was so light that even with my high-powered schnoz, I could only pick it up when very close. I couldn't tell if it was soap, deodorant, or the work of pheromones, but it was roughly the only pleasant thing about him.

After the briefest conversation with Rae, Edison agreed to a test of his physical skills at the Shed. I'd never seen the full test and decided to stick around. Still in his suit, Edison took off his jacket and tie, then proceeded to brutalize both Max and Etienne with astonishing efficiency. That asshole could have gone back into a boardroom looking no worse for wear.

Rae then signaled Max, who walked—limped, really—over to a large, rolling whiteboard about fifty or sixty yards from my vantage point. Max looked at me briefly, then rolled the board off to the side, revealing a small holding cell bolted into a steel-reinforced section of wall. I couldn't see the inhabitant of the cell very well, but he was darker in color and appeared to be sitting with his head bowed, as though he might be sleeping. Max took a dart gun from his side holster, pulling the trigger with a soft *thoot*. I moved closer to get a better look, but Rae held up her hand and motioned for me to back up. In short order, the occupant of the cell went from shaking off the haze to throwing himself against the door with such violence that he could not be fully human.

Rae said nothing to Edison, merely handing him a small ax and a knife. Edison asked no questions; his task was clear. Rae, Max, and Etienne backed away, then

Rae held up a stopwatch and clicked it. Edison took a Herculean swing at the lock on the door, busting it in one go. The creature flew out with such force that Edison was knocked to the ground. His neck and hands morphed into a bright green and two large, bony ridges split off from his nose to the back of his head. While his eyes were set forward like a predator, they each rolled off in independent directions, taking the full measure of the place. When one of his creepy eyes landed on me, I screamed bloody murder.

In retrospect, that was not the smartest move.

The beast's head snapped toward me, and he began a dead run in my direction. Fifty yards. Etienne held up his side arm, but Rae shook her head. Forty yards. I couldn't see Edison at all; only this *thing* running at me full speed. Thirty yards. Shaking, I dug through my purse for my gun. Twenty yards. As my hand hit the cold metal, I knew I wasn't going to be fast enough. Ten yards. I could see the orange-brown of his eyes when a flash of metal went across his neck and cold, stinking blood splattered across my face. The chameleon shifter, still in full stride, dropped and slid along the ground, stopping just short of my feet.

Edison, still completely spotless, stood there and arched judgment in my direction. My gun was in my hand, with the safety on, and lizard blood dripped from my chin. My worthless friends came running up, wide-eyed. Etienne quietly handed me a towel, and Max found an old gym shirt for me to wear.

Rae opened her mouth to say something, but I held up my finger, silencing her. Wordlessly, I wiped the blood off my face, tossed my ruined blouse into the garbage, and pulled Max's enormous, musty shirt over my head. Edison averted his eyes when I removed my shirt, which amused me to no end. Lizard-man he could handle without batting an eye; a little belly chub and he was beside himself.

Rae tried again. "Seriously, Hedy, I'm—"

I held up my hand. "I understand that half-killing the recruits that I have worked so diligently to bring to you is part of your vetting process. I now realize that I don't need to be here for the freakshow-slash-deathmatch part of that analysis. Ever. Are we clear on that?"

"Crystal."

I walked up to Fitzwallace and grabbed the top of his shirt, finally staining it with the residual blood on my hands. I pulled him toward me and said through gritted teeth, “And you. You *hesitated*.”

Silence.

God, I could strangle him.

Silently, I released his crumpled collar and walked outside where Rocky was waiting to take me back to the Cave.

“What is that *smell*? ”

“Don’t ask, Rock. Just...don’t ask.”

Later that day, Edison, call sign St. Louis, called in his resignation, sent for his clothes, and arranged to pick up his vehicle at another time.

Chapter 17

Edison Fitzwallace

The Shed

I sat in the dorm room they provided, very different from the comfortable condo I'd left behind that morning. It was well-lit and nicely appointed with its own bathroom and a supportive bed, but otherwise quite plain. There were no accent walls, no expensive coffee machines, and nobody here gave a shit that the entire building was coated in peeling asbestos.

With the minor exception of my freckled nightmare, it was fucking perfect.

And that was a problem. The people here were good people, regardless of how much money Seth Wakefield would make from our operations. In my brief walkthrough of the caverns I saw a few tightly held auras.

To all but the most practiced eyes, my black aura was nearly invisible, and the lights and shadows of the cave all but guaranteed my secret would stay safe. Happy with my recon, I laid back, letting the day fall away, letting my eyes and energy shift. Soon enough I'd smell first blood, and the anxious hum in my blood would settle.

Just as I began to drift off, the TorChat app notification went off on my phone. Stifling a growl, I unlocked my screen to find out what this guy wanted now.

ash74: hello balaur

balaur: Hello, Josh.

ash74: decided to take the job after all

ash74: thanks for the intel

balaur: You were right. The job has its perks.

ash74: i have another job for you

balaur: Send me the details

ash74: <job2.enc>

balaur: —has signed out —

I scratched at my beard, my lip curling as I reviewed the document he sent over. I had a decision to make.

Chapter 18

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "The Monster" —Eminem ft. Rihanna

I was scrolling through the NPR newsfeed, sipping on a delightfully frothed mug of coffee, when red hair came across my peripherals. Edison was looming in the doorway of my office, wearing workout gear and a sour expression on his face. He clearly hadn't forgiven me for saving him from a life of soul-draining abundance.

Dick.

"Good morning, Edison. Why don't you come in and sit down?" I asked, attempting civility.

He walked in and shut the door. "You have foam on your upper lip."

Embarrassed, I quickly wiped my mouth and sucked the sweet cream off my finger. Maybe I should have attempted dignity first. Or a napkin.

He cracked his neck and remained standing. "Rae said that I had to see the therapist before she would approve me for ops. She did *not* say that *you* were the therapist."

"Therapist is a bit of a stretch, I'm more of an ad hoc counselor," I explained.

"Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"What makes me uncomfortable is that you harangued me into a meeting, got a fat commission off of bringing me in, and now you're supposed to sign off on my mental readiness for combat. It's unethical."

Dammit. I *totally* should have asked for a commission. Way to fail at leaning in, Hedy.

"Clearly Rae hasn't explained to you how things work around here. None of us has the luxury of a single job title, and I'm paid exactly nothing for the work I do because, for all intents and purposes, I am in protective custody."

"Protective custody?" he asked skeptically. "How'd you end up here?"

"I'm the analyst who identified where Robert Pharaoh was hiding out."

His expression changed and I'd almost say that he was microscopically impressed. Almost.

"Okay, so why aren't you in Pikeville, Kentucky with a new name?"

"Because I was born in Kerrville fucking Texas, and this area is my home." I was about to tell him that my mother was his new boss, but decided that I'd let him figure out about the family connection on his own. "Now, I know it's been a while, but the questions come from this side of the desk. And Red, if you ever accuse me of being unethical again, I'll have Max and Arye take you out behind the Shed and beat the shit out of you."

His face twitched into a scowl. I didn't think he liked his new nickname.

"Now, sit *down* so that we can get this over with."

He grabbed the chair, debating. "I was planning on getting in a workout before lunch."

"Only thing delaying us is you, Red. *Sit the fuck down.*"

"This is unnecessary. You have already assessed me," he said while...oh, right, *sitting the fuck down*. I could not have rolled my eyes further back into my own head if I'd tried.

"Assessing you in your eco-bubble on the bay is one thing. Assessing you after you've been fully introduced to the Cave is a whole 'nother ball of wax, and you know it. But hey, if you don't want to kill bad guys with us, I'd be happy to send your sour ass back to San Francisco and let you pull down seven figures a year while trying not to choke-out the next vegan air-farmer who walks into your office."

He leaned forward, annoyed. "You've seen my record. You've seen me fight. You know that I am perfectly capable, mentally and physically, of doing the job."

"What I've *seen* is that you let a Jurassic man nearly kill me the other day. You were slow and you got lucky. Let's face it—sometimes I'm wrong. Maybe you *are* too old for this job."

He let out a grumbly sound from the back of his throat, and I shifted in my seat.

That was *not* sexy.

No, sir.

I mentally high-fived myself for remembering to toss in the good vibrator when I was packing under duress.

Leaning forward, he captured my attention again. “And maybe you don’t know enough about combat to say one way or the other. You were so busy panicking that he didn’t even know I was there. He never heard me and he never felt the knife.”

“That was a two-hundred-dollar shirt that you ruined.”

“A simple thank-you for saving your life would suffice.”

“At no point should my life have been in question.”

“It wasn’t. You’re welcome,” he retorted.

What a nut-sack. Sexy growl be damned, it was time to wipe that smug look off his face.

“You know what I really like about you, Fitzwallace?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“You’ve clearly always been a cranky old bastard, regardless of your age. I mean, look at you. You’ve got, what? A couple million liquid in a bug-out account somewhere...while wearing, I shit you not, a Casio watch and New Balance tennis shoes. They said that you were driving a nine-year-old truck in San Francisco, which I’m sure the locals found hilarious. I’d bet real money that you brought a sandwich to work every day, and that you work out using the same routine from your boot camp days.”

“Last I checked, being frugal was a good thing. And what’s wrong with how I work out?” he asked, looking down at his, frankly, drool-worthy physique.

“Nothing. Not a thing. In fact, I’m sure it’s a perfectly practical workout. Let’s talk about your fighting style,” I said while picking up an envelope and holding it to my head. “Could it be...Krav Maga?”

“How are *you* making fun of Krav Maga? And when did practical go out of fashion? Was it around the time people stopped picking up their own groceries?”

I tossed the envelope down, smirking. “I don’t know, Spock. Maybe it’s when people realized that there was more than one way to do a thing. But hey, practical is fine. Practical is good. But you—you’re a curmudgeon.”

“In what way am I a curmudgeon, specifically?” he asked in the most curmudgeonly way possible.

“You want to know how I guessed Krav Maga? Because it is the least artistic and most pragmatic of all the martial arts.”

“Again—what’s wrong with being pragmatic?”

Ignoring his question, I went in for another one. “Do me a favor. Lift your shirt.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Honestly? At this point it’s for my own amusement. But I do have your career in my hands.”

He regarded me defiantly, but stood up and lifted his shirt, revealing a chest full of dark auburn hair and a powerful—but not ripped—torso. The honest build of a man who enjoyed hard work. Gosh, I really do love my job.

“Ha. Sit down.”

“What do you mean, ‘ha?’” he asked defensively.

“You could have a six-pack if you wanted one.”

“So could you,” he said, looking at my round belly.

“Okay, sure. But let’s live in the real world for a moment. The reason that *you* don’t have a six-pack is because *you* would consider it an unforgiveable vanity.”

“I’m not cutting out carbs for some pretty-boy muscles. That’s stupid.”

I just loved how he argued even when he agreed with me. It was kinda cute.

“Preaching to the choir, dude. What I’m saying is that you are practical to the point of predictable. You’re so perfect, it’s boring. You have no room for joy or ego or fun. And one thing’s for sure. You haven’t had a woman in your life or in your bed for a long time.”

Edison's face subtly went from judgmental to angry. *Ding, ding, ding.* We had a winner. Honestly, I shouldn't have assumed, but this guy was so straight I could hang pictures by him.

"My personal life is none of your business," he said, gruff and low.

I interlaced my fingers and placed my hands on my desk, waiting.

"So you're, what, looking for my weak spot? Is that what we're doing here?"

"*Looking?* Darlin', I found it," I answered, then put the knife to his ribs. "When did your wife die?"

Again, he did a surprisingly good job of controlling his face. The vein on his forehead, however, started doing the Macarena.

"I don't talk about that. You can send me back to San Francisco, but I *will not* talk about *that*."

Eh, I didn't really wanna push his wife thing because I had my own wife thing.

"Fair enough."

Edison shoved back from the desk and stood up again. "If you're finished taking your pound of flesh, can I tell Captain Archer that I'm approved for active duty?"

"You'll get with Rae about your assignments. I have two or three recruiting trips coming up, and you'll be on my detail for those."

Edison crossed his arms. "No. I'll be on ops duty."

"No. You'll be on my duty. And then once I approve you for ops duty, you'll rotate in on my service about once a month, which is about how often you'll need to come back and see me."

"I'm not a babysitter. And *you* are not my shrink," he said, looking above my head.

"Wow, Red. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you didn't like me."

"I'd rather spill my guts to that guy with the head growing out of his neck."

"No shit. You and I don't exactly have what it takes to have a successful clinical relationship."

I paused to see if he had any witty comebacks, but I was met with stony silence.

“Fine, we’ll work out something else on that front. I just need to—”

Before I had finished my sentence, he did an about-face and walked out of my office. *Rude ass bitch.*

I should have had Rae keep him on my detail for the next three months, just to show him who was boss. Begrudgingly though, I had to admit that he was too good and ready out of the gate, and Rae’s team needed him right now. Fine. I picked up the phone and let Rae know that she could take her new killing machine out for a spin.

Chapter 19

Edison Fitzwallace

The Shed

I jogged from the Cave over to the Shed, then spent the better part of an hour brutalizing various members of the team in the practice ring.

“Damn, you have fast hands,” panted Pocket. “What is that, Krav Maga?”

I scowled and nodded curtly. “Spent some time with the Israelis back in the day.”

After seeing the last person off the mat, I went after the speedbag for another half hour, working through an unfamiliar sense of insecurity. None of the people I’d served with under this name had any idea that I’d been married before, let alone that I’d lost my wife. Hedy guessed it after five minutes alone in a room with me.

Hit after hit after hit, I wondered if I’d be able to keep my secrets as efficiently as I had before. I wondered why my eyes kept wanting to shift in her presence. Mostly, I wondered how someone with a violet crown could go through life without knowing who they were.

Chapter 20

Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Ponponpon" —Kyary Pamyu Pamyu

I found out that labeling Elliot and Bernard the "IT department" was the fastest way to make sure that my computer never ran efficiently ever again. Every time I turned on my computer, a new porn site would pop up. That in and of itself would not have been so bad if I were into the kind of scat play that they—probably Bernard—kept throwing on the screen. This morning I walked into their computer lab determined to put a stop to this nonsense.

"Hey, Sugar Tits. How's it hanging?" asked Bernard, his rheumy eyes smiling.

I tossed the laptop on the table. "Dammit, guys! If you're going to keep on porn-bombing me, I prefer Hentai. And I swear to you, if I see another dude fucking a sheep on my screen, I'm going to remove one of your heads."

"Hedy, he has more control over the left hand than I do," replied Elliot.

"Then with your right hand can you please make this better?"

"Sure, I'll see what I can do."

Chuckling, I decide to start an argument. "Nice beard 'do, by the way. What would you call the color of those ribbons? Baby blue?"

Elliot grinned, and Bernard swore loudly. Richard, a newer engineer, walked in as they started to really get into it.

"Hey, guys, I was tweaking some of the specs for the satellites, and...oh, hello, Dr. Villarreal."

"Hi, Richard. Please just call me Hedy."

"Okay," he said, looking unsure.

"Do I need to leave and let you speak with the Wonder Twins alone?"

"Um, I don't know."

"If you're adjusting the satellites to get a better look at that site in West Texas, you can go ahead and keep me in the loop."

Looking relieved, he continued. “Well, then...they’ve had some movement, and I was hoping that the guys could help me clean up the imaging.”

After a few minutes of bickering and determining that yes, Elliot had removed the ribbon from his beard, he and Bernard finally focused on the task at hand.

Working in concert, they pulled up the files from the secure network, decrypted them, and ran them through several filters. A time-lapse of the property showed several storage trucks going to and from the main building.

“What kind of building is that?” I asked.

Richard replied, “I hope I’m wrong, but I think it’s another abattoir.”

I agreed, and went to go find Rae and my mother.

Given the small window of time to work with, the fact that Rocky was visiting his mother in Lampasas, and my father’s insistence that I get my pilot’s license renewed—pretty sure Rocky loose-lipped that mine had expired—two hours later, I found myself flying my father’s Lear 55C, full of highly trained mercenaries, to the Kimble County Airport about twenty minutes away.

“That was an interesting landing technique,” remarked Rae as Etienne, Arye, Max, and Paula, my newest recruit, deplaned.

I smirked, crossing my arms over my chest as I leaned against the bulkhead. “They say any landing you survive is a good one.”

“Well, *they* are lying. And you should get the landing gear checked out because I’m pretty sure you left some of it back on the runway.”

“Yeah, but did you see we got here a whole three minutes faster than planned?”

“That might explain why my stomach is somewhere over Fredericksburg at the moment. Are you *sure* we weren’t doing barrel-rolls up there?” Rae asked, raising her brow.

“It’s the middle of summer! There are hot updrafts to contend with at lower altitudes. They push the plane up, not down. We were perfectly safe.”

As I said this, Edison came to the front of the plane, looking sour. His first two ops were recon missions, and he'd only gotten to kill one regular-old human being. This was bound to be a violent incursion with lots of shifter-on-human action, but—whomp, whomp—he had to accompany me back to the Cave. The rest of the team would drive back in a moving truck, hopefully, full of shifter specimens. He was high pissed, and I was loving it.

"Ma'am, does she actually have to be accompanied back to the Cave? To her point, it is a short flight."

She has a name, asshole. Whiny little bitch.

Only...Rae was looking at me, calculating. She'd clearly been thinking the same thing. I let my mouth hang open as I punched her shoulder.

"Seriously? You're going to let him shirk his duties so that he can play GI Joe?"

His face twitched.

Uh oh. *Did I just needle him by referencing a non-Navy branch of the armed services?* You bet your sweet ass I did. I might start calling him Sergeant, see how that flies.

Worry crossed her brow and she bit her lower lip. "I'm a man down, Hedy. We had to leave Pocket because he turned his ankle running the property line this morning. Another gun in the field would make me feel a little less twitchy. Our people didn't do so well the last time we were in one of Pharaoh's meat lockers."

Damn. I sure as hell wasn't going to be responsible for leaving her a dollar short.

"Do you want me to stay in case someone needs to double-time it back to the Cave?"

"Absolutely not, your mother would have my hide. I'll have Pocket meet you at the runway when you get back."

Rae said this knowing that she was going to get reamed anyway for sending me back without an escort. Her Spidey-sense was saying that their danger outweighed my danger, and that made me very nervous indeed.

"You got it, boss."

"Don't get out of the plane until he gets to you."

"Guess I'll have to do those barrel rolls all by myself," I said, snorting at my stupid joke.

Rae was not amused. "I'm serious, Gaia. Don't get out until you see those white teeth of his."

Oof, the call sign. I nodded.

"And make sure that you don't die mid-air on your way back."

"Yes, ma'am."

Edison silently made his way past me and down the steps, looking back at me as he put on his tactical Oakley's. Was that...gratitude? Probably not.

Either way, the act of putting on the dark sunglasses seemed to be part of his combat prep routine. In the run-up he'd be loose, almost convivial with the others, then, moments before go time, he'd put on the Oakley's, flipping the switch from comrade to predator. It was more striking in person—he looked like a raptor, ready, born to do this. I couldn't imagine how desperate he'd been in that West Coast office.

Once the crew was in the truck, I taxied out and headed back home. It had been over a decade since I'd flown a solo flight, and I'd forgotten how amazing it could be up there in the clouds, alone in one's thoughts. I was tempted to circle the area, but knew that any delay would cause a panic. I landed—more smoothly this time—and saw Pocket outside waiting for me, his ankle taped.

Jumping down from the plane, I immediately set my jaw to moving. "I have personally seen you kill bad guys—not just with explosives, mind you—with your bare hands. So, explain to me how it is that you get taken down by a fence run?"

Looking slightly miffed, he answered, "There was a fallen branch. Looked like a snake."

I clapped my hands, laughing as he and I double-hobbled it to the situation room to watch the raid.

Pocket and I got there right as Rae's team was beginning to enter the compound. My mother was sitting at the table, not happy to see me. She still didn't like the

idea of my being there for the operations, and was even less pleased when Edison showed up on Rae's body cam. She didn't have time to dwell on that, though, because the action started from the minute they crossed the cattle grate.

We had the split of all six body cams up on the screen, and the comms picked up the rapid gunfire pinging off the side of the truck. Rae was driving, and we saw her run over a hairy man beast, then make a joke about losing the deposit on the truck rental. The truck came to a stop, and the team burst out the back, guns firing on silent. Within the first thirty seconds, everyone had a kill on their record, and before they even got to the building, ten German Shepherd shifters lay in the blazing Texas clay in a half-shifted state.

These, however, were not the only bodies on the ground. From the cams, I could see non-shifter humans lying on the ground, disemboweled and melting under the hot sun.

With the perimeter secure, Paula silently breached the main door with one of Pocket's specialty explosives. I elbowed him when the doors swung open still intact. He smiled. Not even his best work. One by one the body cams went dark as the operatives peered into the black building.

Max found the light and flipped it on. I inhaled a shriek, forgetting for a moment that I was in the safety of the Cave. Even when I remembered my surroundings, I was more frightened than I'd ever been in my life. Every cam showed the same chilling scene. A dozen or so genetic freaks running flat out toward them, less than a yard away.

"Pocket—get her out of here. NOW!"

Chapter 21

Edison Fitzwallace

Junction Packing

Dead bodies hung from the hooks in the ceiling, though a quick check identified them as cattle. Rows and rows of skinned and gutted cow carcasses as far as the eye could see. That was not so disturbing as the wails coming from the middle of the cavernous room. A pack of the half-shifted German Shepherds were ripping into twenty or so heavily armed operatives—Pharaoh’s henchmen. As our team registered the horrifying scene, we were immediately beset by another dozen or so genetically altered shifters, each with teeth and claws enough to slice and dice every last one of us.

Paula was fighting off a muscle-bond kangaroo, who bounded up on her so quickly that all she had time for was a quick jab to the jugular. Thankfully, a knife did the trick, though, in doing so, she took a hit from one of his enormous feet to her ribcage. She wouldn’t be able to breathe right for the next three to four weeks, though there was no time to think about that because a man with a head like a cobra was coming at her, fangs bared. Rae ran up on him, hitting him four or five times in the neck and chest. His neck and face shriveled, black and dying as her venom reached into his brain and caused a spasm so violent that his spine sheared the connection to the rest of his body.

Etienne quietly took apart a woman, a half-shifted bear with furred extremities and a human torso. She twitched and slashed and twitched some more, her own nervous system at war with itself. To me she was the most disturbing, but for Etienne, she was a puzzle to be undone. She was strong, but weak at the places where the shift stopped, so he ducked in close with his short sword, arcing it five times before stepping back to see the arms, legs, and head brutally and beautifully removed from the torso, which finally lay still.

Etienne and Rae helped Max, who was fighting off another kangaroo shifter. This one was a woman, more fully shifted, enough to have a pouch with a joey sticking out. Rae removed the joey for examination later while Etienne and Max took turns getting kicked in the head. Finally, Rae held her gun to the joey’s head, and the mother laid down on the ground. It was an ugly maneuver, but they would be better off in the Cave.

Arye was confronted by an iguana shifter with spines like liberty spikes down his head and neck and a tail that knocked him to the ground twice before he had the measure of him. Thankfully, Arye was quick, and the second time he hit the floor he grabbed his ankle gun and put two in the reptile's eye.

While all of this was going on, I was circled by a troop of silverback shifters. They were like something out of a Maberry novel with grunting mouths and massive arms with leathery hands. Seeing that I was heavily outnumbered, I pushed myself against the wall. I wanted them to see me cowering. They moved in on me, spittle dripping from their elongated canines. With the wall now at my back, I used their lunging motion to my advantage, sliding to the side while pulling one of them down, causing two more to fall in on themselves.

Enraged and screeching, they tried to regain their balance, only to find that they were sliding and falling into a pool of warm blood at their feet. I stood there, free of the gaggle, my knife dripping from opening up one then another of their throats. Down to the last three, each leathery grab onto my arm or set of teeth latched onto my leg determined the next victim to gut or behead or filet.

In the space of a few minutes, an entire animal kingdom of shifters lay dead or dying on the floor. The small joey bleated, and his mother growled in her shackles, unable to kick without breaking her own neck. Several of the crew were nursing wounds, but Rae held up her fist, silencing the group. A galloping, growling sound filled the emptiness; the dog pack had finished with their victims and now sought out the group fighting at the front.

"Grab what you can and *move!*"

Despite our many injuries, the entire crew and our compliment of prisoners and dead specimens exited into the blinding sunshine. Max and I held the door while Etienne clamped a reinforced steel brace on the door handles. The doors jumped outward as a dozen beastly men hit the entrance full force. The brace held, and we raced to join the group in the truck. They gave Rae the signal, and she peeled out before Pocket's next trick could be deployed.

Chapter 22

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: shit, shit, shit, shit

Pocket had gotten up as quickly as he could, directing me to the door.

"No. No. I need to watch this. I'm sorry, it took me by surpr—oh shit. Oh shit. Okay. Okay, good one, Rae. Good lookin' out."

"If you're going to stay, *mija*, you have to shut up. We save the commentary for the debrief. Right now, we shut up and watch."

Slightly mortified, I motioned for Pocket to sit down and stifled myself for the remainder of the raid. The shifters, even in their half-shifted states, moved at a breathtaking pace, but our team responded with savage precision and skill. They helped each other without exchanging so much as a glance, perfectly in sync. Except for Edison, who stood alone against five truly terrifying beasts.

Arye's cam had a good line of sight to Edison, and from that vantage point, I fully expected to watch them rip off his arms and face. Within seconds, though, he had them sliding around in their own blood. I bit back a laugh when I realized that he'd used a pretty classic Krav Maga move to draw in then disentangle himself from the silver-backed horde. I might have felt a little smug about it if it weren't so impressive, or if he hadn't displayed so much pleasure in its execution. He was a stone-cold killer, and if he hadn't been such an asshole to me, that would have been very sexy indeed.

Once our team was clear of the building, my mother quietly switched the view from the body cams to the live satellite feed that Richard set up this morning. We saw our crew's vehicle fly out of there, dirt road spinning out from under their tires. Seconds later, a bright flash made the building glow as though it were hovering, then the roof caved in. I looked at Pocket in awe.

"What else did you give them?"

He shrugged in faux modesty, "Oh, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Flashbangs on steroids, if you will."

As we sat there, chitchatting about the various ordinances that Pocket enjoyed using, my mother was particularly tight-lipped. I was pretty sure that she wasn't concentrating on happy fun times, and it worried me to think about what would make my mother look that afraid.

Two hours later, our team made it back through the gates and my mother invited me to the debriefing with her and Rae.

"We'll be joined in a few minutes by Wakefield, but I wanted to speak with you two before they got here."

Oh boy.

"Hedy, am I to understand that you flew the crew to Junction?"

"Yes. Dad insisted."

"Does your father work here?"

"Uh, yeah. Er, maybe? I don't know."

"He is a consultant, but he does not work here. *I* work here. *I* run this place."

"Yes, Mom. I know."

"Good. And from now on, I don't allow unlicensed pilots to fly my highly trained, highly classified, expensive-to-replace agents around like we're some kind of third-rate operation."

"Then you tell him. I'm not going to be stuck between the two of you."

"I already have. And to be honest, based on what I've heard of your skills, I don't care if you ever fly again, you hear? Seriously, Hedwig—how could you let those years of training go down the drain? Your father is so disappointed."

Oh, she did not just go there.

"*Ama*. How can you say in the same breath that you don't want me flying and that you're disappointed that I haven't kept up my skills? First, *y eso es importante*, I was flying a full complement with unbalanced gear in a light plane on a hot day. That was never going to be a comfortable ride. That's not my fault. *Segundo*, you may recall that I have had difficulties in my professional and personal life that required my full attention. Flying had to take a back seat."

“What do you mean, professional difficulties? Whether you know it or not, your father always made sure that you were employed.”

Fine. Let’s rumble.

“Oh, I know all too well my father’s penchant for interfering in my professional life, starting with making sure that no intelligence agency would hire me. And those who can’t do, teach. There’s no flying on a professor’s salary, and I still had to supplement that by working as a consultant, leaving very little time for play. Then Christine got sick, and I spent all of my non-work time in doctor’s offices and hospitals and on the floor of the bathroom, holding her hair while she vomited and cried. Again, not conducive to expensive hobbies. So, no, I did not keep up with my pilot’s license. And yes, I’m rusty. But hey, *you’re welcome*. I was happy to help us act quickly on the intel that came in this morning.”

Mom clasped her hands and nodded as she listened. “Been holding onto that one for a while, haven’t you?”

My jaw ticked. “Yep.”

“Fine. But you are relieved of that duty going forward.”

“No skin off my nose,” I snapped.

Turning to Rae, my mother switched gears. “RaeNita, I’m going to say this to you once. I understand that you needed additional help today. I would even go so far as to say that taking Edison with you saved lives. But if you ever leave my daughter defenseless like that again, I won’t fire you; I’ll put a bullet in your head. Do I make myself clear?”

“*Mother!*” I said, horrified.

Rae waved me off. “Crystal, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

My mother nodded her head curtly, then pulled up Seth Wakefield on the video conference.

“Hedy!” exclaimed Wakefield. “Our woman of the hour! Not only did you put together an amazing crew, you delivered them to their destination!”

Still annoyed by the fact that my mother just threatened to murder Rae, I responded brightly, “Oh no, sir. I just pointed Captain Archer in the right direction. She’s the one responsible for the success of this crew.”

“You’re too modest. Well done. I can’t wait to see the work you’ll do with our other departments.”

“Thank you, sir.”

That out of the way, we looked through the body cam videos again. Viewing them again without the buffer of shock to soften the content made them that much more stomach-churning.

“Rae, can you pull up your bodycam from the beginning?” asked my mom. “I want to see the frames from when you hit that first shifter. Pause it right as he flies back from the truck.”

Rae nodded and expanded her body cam feed to full screen, then found the footage that mom had requested, pausing right at the moment of impact. My mother’s face fell.

“So, whatever we’re looking at—it’s bad,” I guessed aloud.

I looked at her, waiting for her to explain what had her so spooked. She remained silent, and exchanged a meaningful glance with Indaja.

Looking back at the screen, I noted a couple of interesting details. “A lot of those shifters were in bad shape. Looks like a failed experiment to me. And the man who came after me in South Padre had crosses just like those on his palms.”

“*Pinche Discípulos*, Seth,” my mother swore under her breath. “Did you know that we were dealing with Disciples?”

“No, Isabel. I thought that they were done for. We all did.”

“Do you think they know about...?”

“I don’t know.”

“They went after Hedy. Did you hear what she said about the man who broke into her condo?”

"Yes, Izzy, and we need to move quickly. We know for sure that the Disciples figured out the anomaly that unlocks the shift control, and now that we have the specimens from the raid, we should be able to reverse engineer their process."

"Correct," Izzy answered. "And since we have those, let's ground Hedy until it's safe again."

I wasn't totally keeping up with the conversation, but I did not want to be stuck in Wimberley. "Mom, I can handle myself."

"I can't do that, Isabel. We need the science personnel, and we need Hedy's nose for talent." Wakefield said, dismissing her concerns. "Tell you what, I'll add the budget for two additional operatives. Hedy will bring them on, and in the meantime, we'll ratchet down the operations and beef up her security until we're at a full complement."

Though she said nothing, my mother's concern was plainly evident.

Rae answered confidently, "We've got Hedy. Don't you worry about that. And I will happily take two more operatives."

"Sounds like a plan, let's get to work," said Wakefield, signing off.

Both Rae and my mother look at me with concern—no, *fear*—in their eyes.

I didn't know what any of this meant, and I had no idea of what was coming next.