



STOLEN JEWELS

R.S. Rowe

Stolen Jewels

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First Edition: August 2010

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 0-9779284-8-9

Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to my family. They have all worked so hard to help me get this book printed, and I appreciate all that they have done for me.

I thank Nathaniel Bronner, president of Hit-Books.com, for reading an excerpt of my work and deeming it special enough for publication.

I thank Stacey Bronner for diligently working with me and coaching me through the processes of writing.

I thank my mother for enduring my babbling about characters and plots. I thank her for her everlasting patience, love, and support.

I thank my grandmother who constantly gives me encouragement and prayer.

I would also like to thank my grandfather who has done nothing but constantly tell me that I could do anything-and be anybody-that I wanted to be. He has been my confidant ever since I can remember, and I am truly blessed to have him in my life.

I want to thank God for giving me wisdom and the opportunity to live out one of my dearest dreams - to be an author.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge a couple of people who made this book happen. I would like to acknowledge my editor, Grace Florencia Manalili, for editing my book. I would like to thank Mrs. Helen Gilbert for proofing my book and making sure everything was good to go. Thank you, Natalie Sims, for doing a phenomenal job designing the cover art. I would like to acknowledge Stacey Bronner again for being the ringleader of the book making process. I don't know what I would have done without you.

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Taken

My thighs rubbed together as the muscles under my mocha colored skin helped me run like a blur with the wind.

“Amber! I am going to get you!” My identical twin sister, Onyx yelled. I could hear her hard panting as we avoided hitting trees in the dense Georgian forest. I snapped a branch under my feet and felt the splinter hit my leg, but it bounced right off. I tried to look down and run at the same time but I unconsciously slowed down. I felt Onyx’s hand wrap around my wrist as she yanked me.

Then, she grabbed the 200 dollar cell phone that she had saved for. I had taken it to see what she and her crush, Jay Gunter had been talking about. To make the long story short, I stole it and began to run with it. I ran into the dense trees behind our house, planning on circling around, locking myself in our room, and reading every single text that she had sent or received.

“I told you to leave my phone alone,” she chastised me and pinched my arm.

“Ouch! I wish I had a twin sister that wasn’t so violent...” I said sarcastically rubbing my arm.

Onyx just rolled her eyes and shook her head.

My sister and I were the same height, same build, same skin tone... almost everything was the same.

Except something like - oh... my sister having eyes the color of flaming coal. Her eyes are the same hazel as mine around the edges but the rest is a pure burning red. My hair has the same shade in different places all around my head... I never got highlights, and

Onyx never wore contacts so I guess that our appearances are “natural phenomena.”

We both weren't really wearing much. It was summer in Georgia and as hot as the six shades of Hades. We each wore matching shorts and wife beaters.

“Now that I have my cell back,” Onyx glared at me. “We should head back. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Do you know how to get back? I wasn't really paying that much attention when I ran out here.”

Her face took on a nervous quality. She bit her lip and then pointed in a direction and I was itching to point in the opposite direction. I began chewing the inside of my cheek and decided to rely on Onyx to guide us to safety. “That way it is,” I smiled a small smile.

We held hands as we walked through the forest. It seemed to clear but then it quickly got thicker, and a lot more humid. As ten minutes turned into twenty and twenty into a full hour, the air between my sister and I became barely breathable.

“May-Maybe we should phone home,” Onyx suggested in a shaky voice.

I nodded, afraid that I would let the fear that I felt creep into my voice. I turned my head to look at Onyx who was going through her call list to find Demi - our godmother/adoptive mother's phone number. She attempted to call but there was no cell phone service where we were standing.

“We'll just keep walking where we think home is and see what happens when we find service, OK?” I tried to soothe us both.

“Okay.” She smiled through tears that had begun to spring into her eyes.

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It started getting dark about a half hour later as we were still roaming around in the dense forest.

“Amber, I am not trying to bring on the drama, but it is getting dark out...” she said gripping my hand harder.

“I know,” I said beginning to get frustrated and afraid.

“Well I just think that we need to get some he-”

“You are being irksome!” I snapped interrupting her.

“Sorry.”

“If you were paying attention instead of freaking out, you would have noticed that the trees are thinning out again... I think that we may have taken the right turns after all.” I said optimistically.

“I don’t even understand how you can see so well in this darkness,” she grumbled.

“For one, I don’t spend my nights trying to strain my eyes while reading books in the dark.” I pinched her arm.

“Ouch! You were right. That *does* hurt.” She rubbed her arm where I had pinched her. Then she stopped and looked as if she was adjusting her eyes in the darkness.

“Omigosh. Amber do you see that?! It is a sign! Read it!” she commanded.

It was my turn to stare at a tree with a huge sign. I read it aloud, “DO NOT ADVANCE, PRIVATE PROPERTY, VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED”

She sighed and began to turn around.

“No, we should keep going and see if they can understand that we are just two sisters who got lost.” I said

this, trying to be firm when I was actually scared out of my mind.

“Uh, no. Not an excellent idea, sis.” She checked her phone and broke into a full smile.

“Ha! I have some bars!” she rejoiced.

“Good thing too... I was *just* beginning to worry.” I joked.

Onyx dialed Demi’s number and got the voice mail. She called the house and got the same result. She left a message on the house phone.

“Demi? Joseph? Joey? Mike? Yeah, it is Onyx and we sort of got lost.... You know in the trees behind the house? We need some help getting back to the house... or maybe even a ride home. We need some serious help... this isn’t a prank. Okay, call me back or Amber, it doesn’t really matter. I think there is this building that is like a weird... the address looks like 288-”

“Hands up! Phone down!” a deep male voice echoed through the sounds of the night.

Onyx didn’t put down her phone but whispered low to me, “He is to my left... run fast on three.” She breathed.

“What are you two whispering about?” There was a click. “I am armed and not afraid to shoot!”

“Three!” Onyx whispered urgently.

With our hands still joined together, we ran around the perimeter of the trees, all of which had gigantic signs, and then we ducked back into the woods.

BAM. Trees ruffled with the panic of birds scattering to safety. In our wake, I heard more than one person pursuing us. “I need some backup on the South wing.” It sounded as if this man had spoken into a walkie talkie.

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“Okay, we are sending them out now.” A voice replied.

“Amber, we have to turn on this guy,” Onyx whispered through clenched teeth.

“Are you crazy?!” I hissed back. “They have guns... Oh *and* not to mention we are black!”

“So? What the heck does that have to do with anything?” she hissed back.

“The black person never, *ever* lives through these types of things! The only black person to live in a horror situation was LL Cool J. And I am not a freaking rapper,” I whispered urgently.

Onyx just glared at me. “Amber, I think this is a serious matter.”

“Onyx, do you see me smiling? They have freaking guns and they have already shot at us! And I am not 50 cent. I probably won’t live if I get shot nine times,” I hissed.

She ignored my rant. “Okay, here is my plan. If you have a better one then you can say something, if not, keep your mouth shut. You go right and I will go left. We circle back and attack him from each side,” she offered.

I thought about the risks. “Once he goes down, one of us is going to have to get his gun. The other guy called back up and maybe we could use being armed as leverage.” Plus, at that moment in time, I doubted that they were regular security guards. I remember watching a show on one of those special channels about the history of guns. The regular guns that most businesses carry should be almost deafening, but aside from the sounds of the animals fleeing the trees I didn’t hear a really big bang.

“Okay we separate now. Keep an eye out for each other and the guy.” She ordered.

We separated and then ran in the direction of the voice. I was trying to stay right across from my sister. She was about twenty feet to my left and then we both saw the man. We were on either side of him and crouched behind trees that faced each other. I saw her mouth and hold up her fingers as I squinted in the dark.

1...2...3... And she flashed her fist indicating go.

We jumped out and attacked him at the same time. She went for his top half and I went for the bottom. Onyx jumped onto his back and had him in a choke hold and I began to kick him behind his legs. I stomped on his feet. Onyx had his mouth covered so that his screams wouldn't be heard. As a last resort I remembered that there is a way to get any man on his knees. With all the force I had in my body, I hauled off and back kicked him in the groin. Veins bulged in his forehead and tears sprang to his eyes. He fell over in folds. His knees buckled over and then he held himself. He was speechless. Then I saw Onyx kick him in the back of the neck. His eyes fluttered and he fell unconscious.

“Oh my goodness,” I smiled. “We are good.”

Our breath was ragged as I grabbed his wrist and dragged him into the thicker part of the forest. I sat him up against a tree. “Can I get some help?” I asked Onyx who was observing.

“What do you want me to do?” She asked me irritably.

“Hold him up...” I grunted while I tried to take off this gentleman's belt. I got it off. He was wearing a very expensive looking suit. I shook my head and put him in the criss-cross applesauce position and tied his calves

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together tightly with the belt. Then I took off his tie and used it to tie his hands behind him around the trunk of the tree he was leaning on. Without anything else to use I took off my shirt grateful for my sports bra and ripped my wife beater to gag him.

When I looked at what I had done, I nodded and then I bent back down to search his pockets. He had a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, the walkie talkie, and a pair of sunglasses. The man moaned and all I did was slide the sunglasses onto his face. I saved the scariest for last. I slid the holster off of his belt and held it gingerly.

“Come on,” Onyx urged gently pulling my arm. I followed her through the trees.

“I think that the deeper we hide in here, the less chance we have of getting caught or shot.” She said matter of fact. “We need to find a place that has a lot of shrubs and maybe even some rock.”

“Why?” I asked stupidly, flicking the fire on and off the lighter.

“We need a place to hang out while I make some calls and pull some strings...” she said fiddling with her cell phone again.

I looked to our right and, just our luck, I saw that there was a huge rock and it looked like it was surrounded loosely by trees and those trees had kudzu all over them. I tapped Onyx’s shoulder and then pointed. “Yeah, big sis, I am that good.”

So, we went over and made that space our hide out. I took the kudzu and made it as a blanket for where we were going to be sitting. The only light that we had then was the moon, the stars, and the little lighter. So, I immediately began to collect things that could be used to make a small fire.

While I was doing that, Onyx was clicking away on her phone. “I have one bar... so, I think that I can pull up that GPS thing that comes with this phone...then get directions home...” She murmured.

“Remember how we did girl scouts and the whole ‘nature thing?’” I didn’t wait for an answer. “They didn’t happen to mention how to eat in the wilderness did they? I am starved.”

“We could catch our own food. I was doing ballet. You were riding around or shooting things with bows and arrows.”

“Gross. You want to kill a cute, fluffy bunny?” I said in a six year old’s voice.

“Gut it and then cook the meat over a fire with a stick or something.” She said tampering with her cell phone.

“Fine, then I will go and catch a pretty little bunny,” I said sarcastically. I got up and ventured towards a tree about ten feet from where my sister was sitting. Quietly, I waited for a rustle that indicated that there was a small animal roaming around. However, instead of finding an animal, I saw a man that had a gun pointed in front of him. This man was identical to the other one leaning unconscious beside that tree. He had the same expensive silver gun, same expensive looking suit, and same walkie talkie clipped to his belt. I began to think quickly. I was already well-hidden behind the tree. I thought about what to do. I had only taken self-defense classes until the fourth belt and quit. I crouched down and quietly patted around since I couldn’t see. I found a dull rock and then I reached up to a low branch that felt strong. I felt up above me and grabbed onto another sturdy branch and hauled myself up. Then I held onto

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the tree trunk until I saw him directly under me. I was about eight feet off the ground and he was about 6 feet tall. I was standing roughly two feet above his head. I clenched my teeth so as not to make a battle cry and jumped. My feet slid down his back as I was going down. I wrapped my legs around him and held on while covering his mouth. This man probably outweighed me by eighty pounds and was taller than me by about a foot, so he put up one heck of a fight. He was trying to pry my arms from around his neck. Then I tried whacking him with the rock. He began to grunt but kept up with me. I pounded him harder and harder until he went slack and kneeled over. I dragged him about three feet to the tree and tied him up the same way that I had tied the other man. I took everything out of his pockets and gagged him. I took away his gun and I took away his walkie talkie. I slid on his sunglasses so he couldn't see in the dark. He began to struggle as I brushed dirt off my sweaty stomach. All I had on was a sports bra since I had to rip up my shirt to gag these men. He began to grunt and I kicked him.

“Goodness gracious! Stop it before I knock you out,” I warned.

It sounded like he was saying, “Knock *me* out?! Wait until I get up!”

I sighed and pinched his ear, “Listen, I could've shot you... but I tied you up instead. Hopefully, you are important enough for your buddies to look for.... Anyway, just calm down and take a flipping nap or something.”

He began to violently struggle so I pulled my fist back and punched him really hard. He went slack immediately.

And then, just as if the sun had come out, a plump little rabbit bounced into view. I smiled and jumped up and down. I had always wanted to go hunting but Demi never really let me. The rabbit flinched at my jump so I tried to stay still. Then I aimed and shot it. I didn't mean to but I shot it directly in the eye. I was glad that I had such great aim because the man's leg would've had a nice bullet hole in it.

I tried to pick up the rabbit but it was bleeding and it looked so sad, now that it was dead. Grossed out, I picked it up by the paw and brought it back to our hideout.

When I sat back on the kudzu blanket Onyx was fuming silently. "Demi won't answer her dog on phone. Gross - you actually killed something?"

"Um, yeah," I said very sarcastically. "Did you want to starve?"

Onyx shook her head but looked at the rabbit like it was, well - a dead rabbit. "As long as it is clean. Hopefully it will rain and you can wash it off or something."

Thunder cracked.

"How 'bout that." She smiled.

It began to rain really hard. Well - the rabbit got rinsed, and I ended up getting drenched. When I felt that the rabbit was rinsed off, I reached for the top of my shoe where I hid my pocket knife. This was one of the things that I inherited from my father.

If you're an animal lover you probably won't want to read this next paragraph.

I skinned the rabbit and threw that out in the forest. I cut out the plump stomach and then looked at the carcass. It was filled with bones and all the rabbit's vital organs. That's when I threw up. I went over to the

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side of camp and finally disposed of the rest of the body. Then I collected some kudzu. I remembered somebody saying that it was very edible. I pretty much threw the meat into the fire. Onyx looked sort of fascinated through the whole process. She began to talk about the time we had to dissect a frog in science class and how different these two animals were. She also said that they should let us dissect animals that are mammals so we could relate their bodies to our own, better. I looked at her like she had fallen on her head. Yep, she is the girl whom I call my sister.

“Why are you cooking it like that? It is going to burn.” Onyx said matter of fact.

“Any luck finding out where we are?” I ignored her question.

“Nope, but I can get GPS and then it will point out where we are and then we can direct ourselves back to the house,” she said brightly.

“Have you reached Demi?” I asked hopefully.

“No, I have not,” Onyx answered tartly.

“So how does this GPS thing work?”

“Well, I sort of hit a brick wall. See Demi doesn’t exactly have the program activated, so I am doing those agreement things that state all that contract stuff,” she explained. “It may take a few hours.”

That was when the fire got drenched by the rain enough to go out. I huffed out a loud sigh. I collected some leaves from around us and dried them off. They didn’t immediately burst into flames. I tried crushing up a cigarette with the rock and sprinkling that on top. That is when the ground burst into flames before me, and the meat continued to cook. When it began to smell slightly burned, I stabbed it out of the small fire with my

pocket knife. I then roasted the kudzu at the end of my knife like a marshmallow. When it looked crispy I took the rabbit meat and cut it on top of the giant slab of rock in front of me after I wiped it off. I cut the meat in half and put some kudzu on top.

“Voila!” I smiled a very proud smile. “Dinner is ready.”

Onyx eyed the meal in front of her oddly. “Do you mean that we are actually supposed to eat that?”

“Yes, this is what I worked on; this is what we will eat.” I said stubbornly. I was so proud of myself and the flame was growing higher. It was providing an excellent source of heat. Onyx jumped up. “Jeez, first you killed a rabbit and now you’re trying to start a forest fire!” she whispered loudly.

“While it is raining?” I said. “We may be lucky if it doesn’t go out again.”

Once we stopped bickering, we both eyed the meat skeptically.

“Ummm...” Onyx looked at me next trying to see if I was serious.

“It cannot be that bad...” I replied with the same tone.

“You should try it first,” she said in a wobbly voice as she tried to persuade me. “Since you cooked it, you deserve the very first bite.”

I picked up one half and prayed over my food, eyed it one more time, and bit into the crispy rabbit meat.

The meat had a really good texture but the taste wasn’t exactly chicken. All in all, the meat didn’t taste very bad.

“It is not that bad,” I told Onyx. She picked up hers and bit down.

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“Huh, my sister is an adequate cook. This doesn’t taste nearly as bad as I thought that a bunny would.”

We then continued to eat in silence. I ate the whole thing because I was hungry. Onyx ate all of hers too. The rain didn’t cease and my shorts and bra was soaked through. Not to mention, the rain was coating my skin.

Onyx looked down at her phone when it made a noise and broke into a smile. “Do you want to take a hike?”

I looked at her like she was crazy. “Did you know that a lot of the world’s deadliest predators are nocturnal? ‘The freaks come out at night’ was not a song that lied.”

“Amber, we need to get home. For some reason, there are people coming after us. They probably went back to that building because they don’t think that we will last out here. Plus, it is raining. We have a pretty good chance of getting home safe.”

“Did you not hear my speech?” I emphasized.

“Yep, and all I know is that when I start heading home, I hope that you are with me. Now, let’s put out this fire before somebody notices we are here,” she wiped rain out of her eyes.

“Too late,” a deep voice sounded just as he pressed a gun to my temple.

My blood chilled and I shivered. I reached behind me and pulled out an identical gun and pressed it to his forehead.

“Try me, and I will blow your brains out before you even figure out how to use that gun,” he growled and I heard his gun click.

I mimicked the motion that he made with his finger and I heard my gun click... I gulped as I pulled the gun back and thrust my arm forward. I hit him square in the forehead.

Hard.

His eyes fluttered and he dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Unconscious people were beginning to become an all too familiar thing.

“Onyx, give me some help and get the lighter. I need to be able to see.”

I did to him what I did to the others except I made it a point to make him more uncomfortable.

I was mad that this moron had the audacity to press a gun to my head. I dragged him by the ankles letting his head bounce about on the ground. I did this quickly remembering how the other man had recovered after only a few minutes. Onyx held him up as I made him hug the tree. I had already gotten all his things out of his pockets so I simply secured his ankles with his own belt, gagged him with his own tie, and used thick strands of my shirt to tie his arms around the tree. I put the sunglasses on him and started to grab the tail of his expensive suit and ripped it straight down the back. I ripped his sleeves and took his shoes off and threw them into the forest in two completely different directions. I told Onyx to go directly back to camp and she used her cell phone light to get back and she gave me the lighter.

“When you wake up, I just want you to know that I was crazy enough to try you. Playing with fire only gets you burned.” I was bending down as I whispered in his ear. I got up to go back to camp just in case some more people were coming.

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'Too late,' I thought as I heard more footfalls nearby. I didn't go right back to our little site because I didn't want to lead them to Onyx. When I took a sharp turn behind a tree I saw a dark skinned, tall boy wearing nothing but an undershirt and khaki shorts, and sneakers. He was following me.

I tensed and silently cursed. I flicked off the lighter and reached for a very low branch and pulled myself up. I heard what sounded like a curse in a foreign language. I reached up again and thanked God for all the afternoons that I spent climbing trees with my best buddy Collin. I heard a scratching noise as I felt my way up, dangerously going higher and higher. My stomach dropped as I looked down. I could see the ground in the faint moonlight and my distance from it was frightening.

The boy had been scratching a match and when it finally caught ablaze he looked up and sang, "Come out, come out wherever you are..." his face looked sinister because the fire was making shadows dance across his face. He had a thick accent that let me know that English was not his first language. He sounded like he was just off the boat from another country.

He chuckled and walked around the area in which I had disappeared. I squeezed my lips shut and tried not to be afraid. "Why are you making this so difficult? I just saw you a second ago... I am tired and hungry and father won't let anybody eat until you are caught." He whined.

Then he paused. His breathing was the only audible noise. So, carefully, I threw the rock that I had gripped in my hand all night. I threw it in the direction that I wasn't in. I was thinking that maybe he would think that I began to run in that direction and that I had gotten that far away from him. He did turn toward the

lonely sound and I saw his mouth come up at the corners.

I had to catch my breath as he very slowly began to look up and circle *my* tree. I couldn't breathe. I flinched as a branch under me made a sound.

The boy made a low and long whistle. "You must be pretty high up there you little monkey. What comes up must come down, correct?" he laughed. "Ah, do not fret. In about five minutes I will begin to shoot in that general vicinity," he pointed just around where my kneecaps were. "Hopefully I am accurate. I cannot see you in this darkness."

I pursed my lips and thought very quickly. The stars and moon provided enough light to allow me to see and move around safely. I adjusted my eyes and looked around for another branch. There was one about three feet above me but I couldn't reach it. I grabbed one of my shirt's pieces and wrapped my arms around the trunk. I wrapped the shirt around each of my hands. I had only seen gymnasts do this but I began to scoot my butt right up the tree. I got up there quickly because my strength was running out and I didn't want to slide back down and risk breaking my neck. Or worse. When I was right above the high branch, I stepped onto it tentatively. I felt it bend in protest but the branch remained steady. Then about one minute later, I saw part of the tree below me disappear because he had shot at it with the same type of gun that I had concealed on me.

I noticed something. I couldn't hear the shot... weren't silencers illegal?

He cursed - clearly disappointed that I had not been shot. He sighed then said, "Okay, game over. I will not hurt you, just come down here and we'll just talk."

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I rolled my eyes, 'Yeah and the sky is purple.' He began to pace. As he did that I began my silent descent. As I scooted down I almost fell. I had to do a lot of maneuvering to get from branch to branch. On the second to last branch he paced back my way. I squatted and held so still that I felt my insides clench. He paused for a second and listened. I held my breath and he started talking again.

"Did you know that as I was following you all I could think of was how pretty you are? Come and speak to me please. So that I can tell my father that this is all a misunderstanding and then I will be able to eat and you will be able to go home."

I kept silent and he paced again. I retreated quicker this time so I could beat him on his pace back. I stepped through a spider web on my way back. It was horrible, I almost screamed. I headed quietly to camp to be with my sister because it was becoming imperative that we got back home. I walked a little bit before I even considered flicking on the lighter in the view of the gorgeous and dangerous boy. After about five minutes of walking I flicked on the lighter so I could see. I was going in the right direction for my sister but I pretty much tripped over the huge rock.

"Ouch," I thought as I waited to hear a smart remark from my sister that didn't come. So I curiously peeked behind the rock thinking that my sister had fallen asleep. "Onyx....?"

Instead of finding Onyx, sitting on the floor made of kudzu, there sat the attractive boy from below the tree. "Hello," he smiled.

That was the exact moment that I heard foot-falls very close behind me. I heard a scream that

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sounded muffled by someone's hand. I didn't even have time to look back before I felt the worst pain of my life and a white light flashed behind my eyelids. There was a lot of pain and then I blacked out.

Meeting the Family

When my mind started to clear, my sister immediately popped into my mind. Fear washed over me like the rain that was pounding over me earlier. The next thing that registered to me was that I had a huge bruise on the bone that lies between my neck and my back. That is probably the spot that one of the men whom I didn't get a chance to tie to a tree hit me. When I finally got the courage to open my eyes, I was lying on a high bed looking right into a fluorescent light. I wasn't in my lack of clothes or soaking wet but in a long white dress with a green rope belt tied around my waist.

I swung my legs around and my head spun. I began to get lightheaded and my vision began to blur and change colors. I assumed that I must have been lying down unconscious for quite a while.

I looked around and I saw a table with a single pitcher of water and a glass. For that moment, I ignored it and continued to look around the room. It was open and about twelve by ten feet. It looked like a cleaner version of an interrogation room on a show like Law and Order. I looked at myself and figured that another source of my wretched headache could've been the tight bun that was set tightly on my head. The creases around my eyes had lines... Almost as if I was a cat. A better description popped into my head but got caught on my tongue.

I pulled my legs up under me and I put my face in both of my hands and I took in a haggard breath. There was absolutely no reason for me to make a

spectacle of myself for whoever was watching. And I could tell that there *was* someone watching. I could feel it.

I began to think about Onyx again. Where was she? Did she get away? Was she stuck in a room just like this, just like me?

That aroused many other suspicions. Where was *I*? Not in a jail cell obviously. Why was I in a dress? Shock and panic made my back stiffen and this made me wince when I felt pain on the area where I had received the hit.

I stepped down from the high pallet and my bare feet slapped against the floor as I paced. I usually could think better while walking or running. The strange thing was that I made a conscious effort not to think but to just relieve my stress by just pacing. I remember stopping to sit cross legged on the floor to stretch. I did the butterfly and just touched my forehead to my ankle and stayed there. I became very relaxed and calm.

After a little while the feeling of being watched went away but quickly came back. When the feeling came back I stood and walked over to the glass curiously. I slid my fingers across it and then began to gently tap it. I smiled wryly when I heard the faint sound of tapping on the other side and it stopped at the place that my palm was spread out on the glass. I heard a mechanical noise and I saw the same boy from the forest who had shot at me and trapped me in my own game. He looked down at me and smiled. I jerked my hand back and frowned deeply. He mimicked me and crossed his arms and stuck out his hip. I pretended to yawn and sat cross legged in the middle of

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the floor but continued to look at him. He thought for a minute and tried to mimic my stretch. I smiled at that one. The boy stood back up and rearranged his clothes, looked to his left, and abruptly the mirror went opaque. I was getting thirsty and the sweaty pitcher was more inviting than words could describe. My throat began to get dry and itchy and all I wanted to do was pour a glass of water. I refused to let my mind lure me to that pitcher. Only God knew what they may have spiked that water with.

About a minute later I heard the door open. It took a lot of effort not to turn my head too quickly. I first saw the boy. His chest and shoulders were bare and glistening with oil. He was wearing a white skirt, and had on golden sandals. His head had absolutely no hair on it and his eyes were lined in black eyeliner. He looked absolutely beautiful. He had a couple of gold bangles going up each arm. A girl had come in right beside him. She was dressed elegantly from head to toe. She had on a purple silk dress that was sleeveless. A thick necklace made of gold, silver, and diamonds adorned her neck. She had gold and silver bracelets going all the way up her arms and the same type of golden sandals that the boy wore. Her face was beautifully made up with eyeliner and golden shadow that looked like sparkles and her lips were painted a beautiful red. Her hair was also beautiful. She had shoulder length black hair with bangs, that didn't exactly go with her light skin tone, but complimented it so well. I was sitting down on the floor in complete awe but quickly rearranged my facial expression to look more suspicious.

I stood up and crossed my arms. The two were standing and looking at me curiously. I looked at them with the same curiosity and at once the word that had escaped me before hit my mental wall like a barricade.

Ancient Egyptian Heirs.

‘Cant be,’ I marveled. ‘That era died *eons* ago with the fall of Cleopatra.’ Of course there was the more practical part of my head saying, ‘This is all probably some joke.’

The only thing was that the attitude that they exuded was definitely not fake. I mean, they stood there shoulders back, eyes level, chin up, and radiated confidence like I had never seen before.

I began to feel uncomfortable so I shifted my weight but held my ground.

“Her attitude is a lot like her sister’s,” the girl said. However, she wasn’t really a girl at all. She was too old and mature to be a *girl*. She may have been around eighteen to twenty years old.

“You took the words out of my mouth. Though, you should have seen the other girl when we captured her. She fought like I had never seen before. I wish that we could have knocked her out also.”

“This one single-handedly tied our *guards* to *trees*. She hid them well. One of them is still missing.” She mused. “Oh, and of course the one found hugging the tree! I heard that his suit was ripped to shreds and his shoes were still missing...” she giggled.

“One of the men tripped over one shoe,” the boy reminded her.

They looked at me with amusement in their eyes.

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“He made me so upset,” I said plainly. “All I wanted to do was return the favor.”

“You do have a valid point,” the young woman said smiling.

I sighed and reluctantly spoke. “So... I guess I am not in jail... So is this just like a joke maybe. Am I being *Punk'D*?” I ruffled the dress.

They exchanged a look and turned around and left. They didn’t even say one word. They just walked up to the door, had it opened, walked out, and let the door click shut behind them.

“Wait!” I went after them but they were already gone. As I had expected, the door was locked when I tugged on it in desperation. I thought to myself ‘Jeez they must have it wired like a prison. The warden locks and unlocks the doors at his leisure.’

I shook my head and went back to the make-shift bed. At the exact moment that I did that, the man that I had bear-hugged to a tree came in.

I cursed inwardly and jumped up. “Hey, dude, I am so sorry about the whole ‘tree thing’ but...uh... I had you know... freaked out,” I emphasized, using my hands to make my point.

“Hey, it is fine. I applaud your will to survive... though you made it very complicated to find us all...” he trailed off. His voice had a slight accent like he lived and talked a language when he was a kid and still spoke it a little.

“Did you? Find all the men all the men I mean.”

“Unfortunately, no. Come. I have things to do and I have to escort you to the throne room first.”

“Huh? Wait did you just say *throne room*?”

“Yes I did,” he answered very patiently.

I could feel the disbelief and shock paralyzing my face. I quickly rearranged it and nodded. My eyes were still wide and untrusting.

He paused at the door, waited until the door was unlocked, and it opened. He led me down a hall that had similar rooms to the one that I was in. I didn't see Onyx in one so I wasn't interested at all in the rooms after I had passed by them.

"Don't show any form of disrespect," he advised. "Then again, all you Americans are so ignorant." He scoffed. "And if you think that what you may have said was unforgivable, put your head down while on your knees and say something like 'Sire, Please forgive my ignorance,' okay?"

"Understood..." I said but I was so puzzled. Why in the heck would I call him sire? There are no monarchs in America.

The door was golden and it looked very heavy. It had a very intricate design of a jackal lying next to a grand golden throne with turquoise and red and green. It was beautiful.

The guard paused and looked at me, smoothed back my hair, righted the dress and belt, then made his own flawless suit more perfect.

"If you do not wish to die, or live horribly, you will aspire to be a perfect personal servant," he said severely.

He held up his large hand when he saw my mouth open. "I am not permitted to say anything else... I wish I could... you seem different... willing to fight for your life. That takes courage."

I nodded. "Thanks."

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“Smile when you go in... it can be very fake, but smile nonetheless.” He said sternly.

He held the door open for me and I was shocked.

Thrones were situated at the front of the room. Six people sat at six different thrones: A young girl, the young lady, the boy, a young man, a man, and a woman. As directed, I took a deep breath and smiled a timid smile and nodded trying to once again keep the fear and awe off of my face.

The guard dipped his head.

The man sitting directly in the middle nodded. He sat in the largest throne and seemed to be the most powerful one. “I shall take it from here.”

My smile was beginning to fade and I didn't want to appear too fake. The room was absolutely quiet while they all analyzed me.

“Walk forward,” the man commanded. “I am Pharaoh or King Osiris,” he pronounced. “This,” he motioned, “is my family.”

I noticed that he was in the center. On his right side was the young man who was the oldest and next to him was the boy. On the man's left side there was the woman who appeared to be his wife, then to her side sat the young woman, and then the girl.

“My youngest son and eldest daughter say that you do not speak much... you did not act a fool trying to get out of the room. Do you think that you are just too smart for us? Do you know something that I do not? You come in here smiling like you have bested me and I would like to know why.” He was not very happy. He looked livid.

I tried to keep any kind of expression off of my face because when I think of something about a person my face doesn't hide my thoughts. I was thinking that this dude was absolutely crazy. I thought that maybe he had hit his head to declare himself a King... then, I thought back to when the guard told me to smile. He had totally set me up!

I stood silently, taking all of this in. I was trying to decide what the heck I should do. Apologize and get my head chopped off? Or use the things that I had learned in my mandatory public speaking class and get my head chopped off? I stood silently, opened my mouth and closed it.

"I don't think any of those things, sire," I whispered, looking down.

He said something in another language and I kept my gaze down.

"I said look up! Did I not?" he said angrily.

I looked up very quickly. "I am sorry. I just don't speak that language." I felt that it was time for me to fall on my knees, and I simultaneously began to cry. "I'm sorry!"

The powerful man made an angry noise.

"First you come into my presence with a disrespectful smile on your face and now you mock me by trying to cry those fake, meaningless, All American tears! There is nothing about you that convinces me not to have you beheaded at this very moment!" he bellowed.

My cries stopped with a hiccup. Behead? As in *kill*?

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“The only thing that makes me hesitate is that my son needs a personal servant... and a plaything.” The man smirked.

Servant? Plaything?

My whole body began to tremble violently. “Sir, wh-what do you mean?”

The man ignored my question and frowned deeply. “You, little girl, need to learn when it is not your place to speak.”

“Bu-”

“HUSH!” the man erupted. “Son, are you *sure* you want her? She seems...like a burden.”

The boy looked at me appreciatively. His eyes seemed to bore into mine as he nodded. “Oh, yes.”

My face heated and I turned my face away from him. What did he want with a skinny, tall, gangly, girl with a semi flat chest? At least that is what my best friend Collin’s friend Adam said about me.

The man nodded and an idea seemed to hit him. He smiled sadistically.

“This girl seems to stand too tall,” the man spit. “She looks as if she’s had too many admirers in her time. She needs to be knocked down a peg.”

The man laughed evilly. “I suppose some time in the steam room will do your oversized ego some good.”

The young woman gasped. “Father, I do not wish to offend you, but the steam room is only a place for men!”

The man looked at me and laughed. “Yes it is. Don’t you see as clearly as I do that this is a person of no curves? If I was not sure that she did not have a

tail dangling between her legs, it would not have taken me so long to banish her to the steam room.”

My jaw dropped. Oh no, he did not! I opened up my mouth to say something defiant and got a glare from the boy who was my age.

“Father, she will no longer look appealing if she spends time in the steam room. I ask you to reconsider your plans for this one.”

The older boy studied me from head to toe. “Brother, there is nothing special about this girl. Just let her waste away. I can show you a plethora of young women who are much more appealing than this common wench.”

My anger was beginning to get the better of me. In a minute I was going to bolt, find Onyx, and run out of this place.

“I agree,” the small girl sneered. “There is nothing special about her... except maybe her hair.”

The man smirked. “Are you still sure that you want this one?”

The boy nodded. “I am positive that I want her, father.”

The man grimaced towards me. “Very well. Guards, escort her out of my sight, and have somebody escort her to the steam room.”

I flinched away from the men who had ebony colored skin who stepped towards me. They wore nothing but a skirt and leather thong sandals. On their hips they had long, strong looking swords. They looked at me with cold, uncaring eyes.

“May I quickly ask you a question first?” I stammered as the men took more menacing steps towards me.

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“No.” the man said.

“Please,” I pleaded.

The man’s face twisted in disgust. “What do you want?!”

“My sister, she’s okay, right?” I asked.

The man laughed. “Dead. We killed her right before you came before us. Guards, will you please get this hussy out of my sight?”

The Steam Room

The men led me out of an identical door and into a hallway that looked almost identical to the last, minus the interrogation rooms. I shivered as one guard looked at another and nodded at the other before loping off. The tall man watched as my body shook with sobs. I guess I must have flinched in a threatening way because he put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

I stumbled away from him with fear and his mouth hardened into a thin line.

“I no hurt you,” he said in a thick accent. “I no touch you if you no move.”

I couldn’t listen to him. Onyx was dead! She was gone! I couldn’t wrap my mind around the idea. My eyes began to feel heavy and my mind went blank for a second. I felt a strong hand on my shoulder and I looked up into a pair of dark brown eyes.

“You okay?” he asked with concern.

I ripped my shoulder from his grasp and hissed. “Stop pretending like you care you evil bastard.”

The guard’s eyes hardened and he turned away and breathed out heavily. “You get yourself killed here. You die if you talk like that to anyone.”

I shivered. “Why does it matter?” Onyx was the only real family that I had left and now she was... gone. I hoped that God would end my misery.

“It matter because you sister no dead. You sister is servant for Ramses,” he said fiercely. “King is sick man. King take joy in harming people.”

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I choked back a sob. Onyx wasn't dead? The man lied to me? I thought that that was a good and bad thing. The good part was my sister still living and the bad part was being lied to. I calmed myself down.

Warily I looked at the guard who was standing very still and silent. "Why do you work for him then?"

The guard looked down at me with sad eyes. "King visit my country one year. He stole my sister away from our village along with many other girls and young men. He say I look strong. He promised my people protection if I guard him. I say yes. My sister and many my people live to this day."

My eyes widened. How awful. "Seriously? How old were you?" He didn't seem much older than me.

The guard's mouth hardened. "You same age I was when forced here."

We both heard footsteps approaching and he looked at me suspiciously and bent down. "My sister name Iman. Find her tell her Ishmael sent you."

I looked at him questioningly and he pushed me a little bit away from him so it didn't look like we'd just had a short conversation.

"She cooperate?" the man asked in an equally as heavy accent. He looked at me suspiciously but I saw a flicker of compassion and sadness in his eyes right before it disappeared.

"Yes." Ishmael said.

There was also an annoyed looking boy who looked slightly uncomfortable in the skirt he was wearing. His skin was as pale as paper and his hair shaggy and brown. He looked relatively strong to be so pale. There was a twinkle in his eye.

“Can I take her to the steam room or not? I got things to do before her highness gets done with whatever the heck it is that she does.” He said in a deep southern drawl.

Ishmael tried not to smile. I could see his lips twitching. “Simon you straight to steam room and back to throne room before you continue tasks, yes?”

“Yes, mister big scary guard, sir,” Simon saluted and looked at me and waggled his eyebrows. “You gotta make sure to show all these goonies here some respect.”

“Come with me,” Simon said to me and when I didn’t move he gently grabbed my wrist and tugged. “We have to go before you get us *both* in trouble.”

I stumbled after him and bit my trembling lip.

“Hi. My name is Simon,” Simon said. “I’ve been here for about a year and you can consider me your... inside man of some sorts.”

I looked at him then quickly looked away. I didn’t care who he was. All I wanted to do was find my sister and go home.

He steered me to a dim, long hallway and his voice lowered. “I’m the guy whom you see rebelling against all the bad guys and smiling to their face but ruining their lives behind their backs,” he winked. “You’ll live longer that way.”

I shivered and wrinkled my nose. As we walked deeper into the hallway I noticed that it was a dead end. The hallway smelled musty, damp, and simply horrible.

“What the heck’s going on,” I mumbled as I slapped my hand over my mouth and nose.

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Simon looked at me sympathetically and cleared his throat. "You'll find out soon enough. I've only heard rumors, but if you make it back up, make sure you tell me what it was like."

"If?"

Simon looked away. "I said I've heard rumors."

I looked up at him and felt the tears welling up in my eyes. "The rumors are pretty bad, huh?"

Simon nodded as we came to a stop in front of a thick-looking wooden door. The door had two thick bars that could be used to lock it from the outside. On top of that, there were thick, metal chains that would hinder you from pushing open the door very wide if you happened to get past the thick, wooden bars.

"This is where I must 'throw you in and let you rot'," Simon said uneasily. "Do me a favor."

I watched as he unbarred the doors and slid the heavy metal chains off their tracks. "What?"

Simon looked down at me. "Make sure when I come back for you that you are here for me to come back for."

Simon opened up the formidable looking door and the stench from below made me gag.

He gently reached out for me and I tried to back away. He shook his head and gently tugged on my arm. "Watch your step."

I lowered my bare foot onto the metal stair and almost slipped. I could barely see anything. The room was so steamy. Now I see where it got its name from. I looked up at Simon.

"C-can I ask you a question?" I asked quickly as he began to close the door.

Simon stopped closing the door and met my eyes. "Sure."

"D-did you h-happen to see a girl who looked like me?"

"Except for the red eyes?" Simon smiled warmly. "Yes. I'll watch out for her as best as I can. Now, I gotta shut this door. What's your name? You never told me."

I was surprised that he'd even realized that I hadn't told him what my name was. "Amber."

Simon smiled a little. "Nice ta meet cha Amber. Good luck."

I watched as he closed the door and heard the bars being lowered and the door chains being slid on again. I shivered and my stomach rolled at the smells that were coming from below. Once Simon closed the door, the smells became stronger and the noises became louder. I watched my step. The steam was evaporating on the stairs and it would make it very easy for me to slip and break my neck while tumbling down the stairs. To make the situation better, there were no railings!

My eyes began to sting as the steam, more like smoke, began to get thicker and made it harder to breathe.

"Did you hear that, boys?" an accented voice yelled. "We must have a new boy coming down."

I stopped my descent and tried to catch my breath.

"Come on down, boy!" the same arrogant voice called. "You have work to do!"

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I held my breath. Partly, so I wouldn't have to breathe the vile air and partly hoping to be as quiet as a mouse.

There was a loud cracking noise. "The new ones always have to learn the hard way, huh?" Then I heard the sound of heavy boots clambering up the stairs and I tried to scramble up but ended up slipping. With a cry, I fell right into the arms of a tall, light skinned fellow with a muscular build and a sneer on his face.

"What do you want girl?" the man asked and roughly pushed me off of him.

The tears in my eyes welled over and he laughed. "Well this is a first. A woman sent to work in the steam room. What did you do, girl? It must have been something bad."

I didn't answer and he laughed throatily. "Maybe the king is finally starting to care about his faithful gentlemen. Have you been sent down here to be our personal whore?"

My eyes widened with fright. I'd heard of boys flirting with girls but this man was considerably older than me... and he was frightening and seemed to be in cahoots with the insane dude upstairs who claimed to be a king who wanted to behead me, but instead, banished me down below. I gulped.

"I asked you a question, girl."

I opened my mouth and no sound came out. The man's face twisted in disgust and I flinched backward away from him and quickly said. "The m-man upstairs told me that I'm s-supposed to work in some steam room."

“The ‘man’ upstairs that you speak of is a king, girl,” the man in front of me laughed. “And you are one of his servants. Now let’s go. You have wasted a lot of time already. Get in front of me and begin to go down the stairs.”

I backed away from him and he reached out to roughly grab my upper arm and set me on the step in front of him. “Walk girl, now!”

I gulped and began to walk slowly as not to slip. I began to be able to distinguish the noises below.

“... Row you filthy animals! The baths will not heat themselves! If the king isn’t happy because he has to bathe in cold water... who do you think he yells at? ME!!! Then guess who would take it out on you lazy bastards? ME!!!” There was a loud cracking noise and a weak cry.

There were still a lot of steps that I had to walk on and I could feel the man behind me becoming irritable and impatient.

“Hey fellows! Look who’s dropping in!”

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I felt a heavy hand shove me in between my shoulder blades and I screamed as I tumbled down the stairs. I felt every part of my body hit the metal stairs. Luckily, my hands reflexively came up to guard my face and the only place on my face that was hit was my cheek. My arms, legs, stomach, and not to mention boobs, would be bruised pretty badly soon. I sobbed as I tried to grab the various places on my body that were throbbing.

The man on the stairs laughed. I couldn’t help but think that he had the vilest laugh that I’d ever heard.

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I looked around me and coughed. Large plumes of black smoke were rising from a large furnace that seemed to be the center piece of the room. Large, strong men with whips in their hands were standing guard around other large men who still looked strong but seemed weak and tired. I saw one of the large watchmen crack a whip and a working man hollered and attempted to do his job faster.

“Look what we have here,” a man who could have been in his early twenties sneered. He squatted next to me where I was still laying in a pain. “Miss sweet and innocent has come to play...”

I panted and looked up at him with confusion in my eyes. What in the world was going on? I was locked in a... dungeon, pushed down a set of stairs, and now some creep was asking if I came to ‘play’? I shivered even though it was at least ninety degrees due to the large furnace.

The rest of the watchmen turned to look at me and the man squatted over me. Most of them frowned or looked at me with unconcealed curiosity.

“The king has sent us a girl?” one of them sneered. He was in his teens I could tell that much. “What are we to do with a girl?”

Another watchman who seemed to be the same age as the teenage boy laughed and leered. “Hmm, I know what we could do with a girl...”

Many of the watchmen laughed and I cringed.

“Get up,” the man over me commanded. I stared up at him in confusion. He frowned at me and before I could even fathom what he was doing, his arm moved up and down sharply and I felt a sharp pain on my legs.

I shrieked and scrambled to hold my throbbing calves. When I looked at them, a long line snaked up my legs and I even saw blood oozing from the welts. The whole room seemed to fall silent.

“I said get up,” he said in a guttural, menacing voice.

I scrambled to try to get to my feet. When I saw his large arm twitch I cringed away from him and tripped over the stairs that were right behind me. He laughed.

“Oh, she’s a funny one,” he said. The man from the stairs stood directly behind me and kicked me with his heavy boot. It didn’t hurt a lot, but the idea of getting kicked while I was already weak on the ground was humiliating. I scrambled to my feet again.

“What is a pretty girl like you doing in the steam room?” the stairs man asked.

I stammered. “I-I d-don’t k-k-know.”

The man who whipped me twisted his mouth up into a poor version of a smile. “It must have been pretty bad, eh, Scotch?” he referred to the man on the stairs.

“And you know what we do to all the bad ones right, Komla?” Scotch whispered behind me. I felt his hot breath on my neck and flinched.

Komla snapped the whip inches from my arm. “We whip ‘em, Scotch.”

My mouth opened but no words came out. Whip? Me? What? My brain was working slowly from fright. It seemed as if everything around me wasn’t real. But the pain in my legs convinced me otherwise.

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“What is a girl to do in the steam room?” Scotch asked and walked in front of me and stood next to Komla.

“We could keep her on her back,” one of the younger ones suggested and all of the watchmen guffawed. I wrinkled my eyebrows in confusion. What in the world were they talking about?

“She looks confused,” Scotch stuck his bottom lip out. “Does anybody wish to clear up the girl’s confusion?”

The first teenager that spoke walked over leisurely and said. “I’d be happy to oblige.”

He wrestled me to the ground as I screamed and then he settled in between my knees and tried to pull up the dress I was wearing. Suddenly, I knew what they meant and I began to panic. I began scratching at him and he cursed and attempted to grab my clawing hands.

“That’s quite enough, Lionel,” Scotch said with amusement.

Lionel reluctantly stood up and I closed my legs quickly and wiped away the tears on my face. My whole body began to tremble with the weight of what almost happened. I screeched and launched at the boy Lionel who had his back to me. By the time he turned around to see what was going on, I was latched to his neck. I was going to choke the *life* out of him! He grunted and fell to his knees.

“I’m gonna kill you,” I said in a wild voice.

He clawed at my arms that were squeezing the life out of him. His nails were dull so he could not get a good hold on me.

I heard an exasperated sigh and I heard a whip crack. Pain rippled through my back at the realization that I'd been whipped. Another crack sounded and I shuddered and groaned. I refused to let go until this Lionel guy at least passed out. I felt the rope hit my back twice more before the pain radiating through my body became too much to bear.

Lionel hopped up with rage on his face. "She is absolutely insane! I should throw her into the furnace!"

I writhed in pain on the floor not registering- nor caring- about what this guy was saying. He was saying that he wanted to see me burn alive. First, he attempted to rape me and now he wanted to watch me die a horrible death! There was something wrong going on here.

"Get up, girl!" Komla yelled and pulled me up by my hair. The pins ripped at my scalp and I cried out weakly. "Attacking your leaders is a definite no-no. You'll just have to learn by living." He chuckled. "Now go with Lionel and do what he says."

He pushed me towards the heartless teenager and Lionel roughly grabbed my arm. I tried to tug away from him but I saw his biceps flex and I got nowhere.

"What are you going to do to me?" I asked in a frightened voice.

He spit on a man who was throwing coal into the large furnace. "I am going to do what I want with you."

"Wh-what's that?"

He smiled a cruel smile. "Right now, you're going to be chopping wood until you have so many

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splinters in your hands that you won't be able to feel them. Later..." he winked at me and ignored when I cringed. "Who knows what I'll want."

He walked me further into this dungeon and I saw huge trees in a large clearing and haggard looking men chopping at the large branches and tree trunks with sharp axes. I smiled. They must be dumb to give someone who despises you a sharp weapon.

Lionel shoved me with the hand that he had wrapped around my arm and made me stumble into a boy that couldn't have been more than two or three years older than me. Already, he had a long beard on his chin and he looked as thin as a stick. However, he had a toned body. Every wiry muscle that he had on his body was visible since all he was wearing was a thin, white skirt. I would have laughed in any other circumstance, but I could not find anything remotely humorous about this situation.

Something was shoved into my hand and I noticed that Lionel had given me an axe. I tested the weight in my hand and imagined hitting him in the head with the dull part of the axe. It wouldn't kill him, but I'd wager that it would hurt one heck of a lot.

Lionel licked his bottom lip when he saw my face. "You shouldn't try to do anything stupid, girl. I'd hate to have to send a bullet right through that pretty head of yours."

He fingered a holster on his hip and I blanched. Who in their right mind would give a teenage imbecile like this dude, a loaded gun?

"See those trees?" Lionel asked sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes and he frowned deeply at me. “Do you know how much I feel like ripping those beautiful eyes out of their sockets?”

My eyes widened and I looked at him, frightened.

“Those trees over there need to be chopped. Just to be cruel, I want you to hand pick each and every leaf off those trees and put them in a large pile. After that, you will help chop the trees. If you stop for one minute...” he cracked the whip and I flinched.

“What are you waiting for?” he snapped and cracked the whip near my face. I jumped and went over to one of the many large trees that were just laying dead in the westernmost part of the large ‘steam room’. I noticed that my eyes were beginning to water. Not because I was crying, but from the smoke that curled around me. I wondered how they breathed down here. All I could smell was bile, smoke, and wood. I bent over to pick my first leaf off one of the trees. I smirked. This was not as bad as I thought it was.

Angel and Aden

I didn't know exactly how long it was before I noticed how hard it was to pick every leaf off of a tree and put it into a pile until I actually had to do it. I was constantly bending over and I noticed how sore my back was becoming. I was also confused. Why was I even doing this? I bet that I could just walk out of the door of this fake Egyptian Empire and not get reprimanded. I was very tempted by the idea. I was American. I lived in a free country, not enslaved in a fake place. I found myself grumbling and becoming more tired and angry by the minute. I stood up and stretched my back. I heard it crack and I then rolled my shoulders. I was in serious need of a break. I peeked over at Lionel who was busy yelling orders off at the top of his lungs. I stood up straighter and planned on taking a break. Lionel wasn't paying much attention to me so how much trouble could I get into?

I rested a minute. I really was in a bad mood. My legs were throbbing from the whip that made contact with flesh. The bloody welts on my legs now looked like they were angry, puckered, and downright gross. I began to wonder if I could get an infection. Having my legs amputated was not a very appealing idea. I also noticed that my eyes were constantly watering and I was coughing a lot. Being smothered to death by the heavy, black smoke that seemed to curl around my face did not seem exciting either. Just as Lionel predicted, I now had scrapes and cuts all over my hands from picking each individual leaf off one of the large trees that I supposed fueled the furnace. I

also had scrapes and cuts on my bare feet where I had snapped branches while I was walking back and forth. I could also feel dozens of painful splinters in my hands and feet. Some were so large that I could clearly see the pieces of wood lodged in my skin through the darkness. I shivered in spite of the sweltering heat.

I heard a whip crack right before I felt it slice through the thin fabric on my dress and make contact with the tender flesh of my back. I cried out and dropped to the ground.

“You think you can get out of working, girl?!” A loud, deep, and angry voice yelled over me. “Stand up!”

I was still writhing in pain on the dirty ground. When the whip cracked again this time, it added more pain that overlapped the throbbing on my legs. I shrieked and felt tears begin to ooze out of my eyes which were squeezed together tightly.

“Up!”

Fearing another brutal hit, I slowly staggered to my feet and my legs almost gave out from the pain radiating from my calves.

I looked up into the twisted face of a man who seemed to be in his mid-twenties. His skin was as white as a ghost and his eyes looked eerily black in contrast. I found out why his hits hurt so much more than the other's. He was built like a rock with some of the largest muscles I have ever seen. I was surprised that my legs were still connected to my body. The force of whipping is excruciatingly painful, but the extra strength that this man could put behind his strike would be unbearable. I had the burning pain on my back and legs to prove it.

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“Do you think that just because you are a girl that you do not have to work like the rest of the men in here?” he asked.

I looked at nothing in the distance to avoid eye contact with his dark, black eyes. I was trying not to break down in hysterical sobs from the pain on my body.

“Answer me, girl!”

I shook my head quickly when I saw the muscles flex in the arm that held the whip.

“You’re right, girl. So, while the rest of these hard working men get to take their beauty sleep, you are going to be working another shift with a different group of hard working gentlemen. But would it be fair if I sent you to go get some sleep with the second group of men that worked?”

I didn’t know how to answer so I shrugged and cried out at the pain that radiated through my back from moving my shoulder muscles.

“I don’t think that would be fair either, girl. So what I am going to do is let you work *another* shift so that you can get your rest with the group that you are supposed to be with! That sounds like a good idea to me.”

I thought back on the words that he was saying. He was saying that I would have to work three of these shifts before getting some sleep. I felt like shrugging but my mind rejected the idea because of the pain in my back.

A loud whistle sound echoed through the steam room and many of the men that had been working at chopping wood around me dropped their tools and routinely followed Lionel into a dim hallway that I just

saw at that moment. Lionel was not the only one who escorted the men into this hallway. All of the men that seemed to be in charge led a hoard of men into the hallway. They all came back with a different group of tired-looking men. Some of them didn't even seem to be that much older than me. Some I would wager, were probably my age.

Lionel passed by the large, imposing man and sneered at me. "She causing trouble, Amery?"

"Yes, why is there a girl down here anyway?"

Lionel shrugged. "I don't know. But I plan on finding out. Are you ready to take on the next shift?"

Amery nodded. "Enjoy your rest."

Lionel smirked. "I will. Keep an eye on this one," he pointed to me and laughed as he departed.

"Oh trust me..." Amery glared at me and then smiled menacingly when he saw me cringe. "I'll be keeping an eye on her."

"I have half a mind to strike you again, girl," Amery warned as I tried to hurry up. If I went any faster, he would not be able to see me anymore. Despite the pain in my back and legs, the pile of leaves on the floor was getting taller and wider at a break-neck pace. It really was pretty exhausting. I estimated that the last time I slept was more than twenty hours ago. My head hurt worse than I could fathom. My coughing fits were becoming more frequent and thick mucus was coming from my lungs.

I had stripped around three trees bare of leaves and Amery was about to tell me to pick the leaves off of another tree when he saw how large the pile of leaves already was.

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“Pick these up! Carry them to the furnace! Hurry girl!”

I glared at him. “How am I supposed to carry all of this?”

He snarled. “Figure it out!” Before snapping the whip mere millimeters from the skin on my arm.

I grabbed armfuls of the leaves and began walking towards the furnace. There was another group of men who were standing by a large pile of coal and wood. They seemed to have the easiest job. As I made various trips to and from the furnace I grew irritated. They loitered around as all the rest of the men broke their backs working.

That was what I thought until on one of my trips to the furnace one of the watchmen barked out an order and the men all grimaced and began to shovel coal and pick up blocks of wood. One man, who had dozens of scars on his back and legs from the whips, wrapped his hands around the handles on the door to the furnace and he opened it. Flames jumped out of the large furnace and some of the men jumped back to avoid getting burned. Others were too slow and cried out as the fire licked their skin. The smell of burning flesh was strong.

They shoveled coal and wood into the large furnace until the watchman barked more orders and the man closed the furnace. I observed the men and noticed that many of them had severe burn marks on their skin. If they did not have new ones from that moment, they had scars from previous burns. I changed my mind about their seemingly easy job when I accidentally brushed up against a boy my age. He looked at me and I gasped.

One half of his face was beautiful. I could tell that he was a boy that I would definitely have a crush on if he went to my school. However... the other side of his face was twisted and puckered with skin that had been horribly burned. His sparkling green eyes stood out from the ravaged side of his face.

He smiled ruefully at me and unconcealed curiosity sparked in his face. I turned away from him and scurried away. I heard him chuckle without humor as I walked away. I was glad that that happened to be my last trip to the furnace.

But it was not the last of the work that I was forced to do. I was forced to begin chopping the trees. If I thought that leaf picking caused splinters... chopping wood was a whole different ballpark. My hands seemed to be *made* of wood. The swinging motion of my arms caused the skin to shift on my back and I had to grit my teeth every time I swung. After what seemed like forever, another loud whistling noise sounded and the men dropped their tools and followed Amery and other watchmen into the small hallway. I saw the same handsome boy again and he seemed to stare right back at me. I sort of shifted from foot to foot. I heard clanking noises coming from the stairs and grimaced at the image of Scotch and Komla and Lionel among others, coming back down looking clean and well rested.

“Are you just standing around, girl? While you are supposed to be working?” Lionel asked sarcastically.

I swung the blade in my hands angrily at the tree in front of me.

“I asked you a question, girl,” he snapped.

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“No.” I answered tersely. Did I mention that I had not been asleep in a while... I was tired beyond belief.

“I am pretty sure you meant to say ‘no sir’. Didn’t you, girl?”

I nodded. “Yes sir.”

“Yes sir’ what?”

“Yes sir I was not just standing around when I was supposed to be working.”

He laughed. “I thought not. Now get back to work you lazy girl.”

I swung the tool in my hands with more strength than I knew I had. “Yes sir.”

I was surprised to see the boy again. He was walking out with the familiar group of men that I had been working alongside before. Somehow, he managed to break away from the furnace group and eased his way into the group that was chopping trees. I found myself taking peeks at him as he made his way near me and picked up a tool. He swung at the tree and that’s when I looked away. I could see the left side of his face- the clear side- and I decided that there was nothing interesting about watching him chopping the same big tree that I was hacking away at.

A couple of hours later, the tree was completely chopped up and Lionel instructed me and the boy to carry all the blocks of wood over to the furnace. I glared at him with what I assumed were bloodshot eyes and opened my mouth to say something smart when I was lightly pushed from behind.

“You may not want to do that,” a soft, deep voice said. I looked back and up to see the boy.

I was about to snap at him, but I took a deep breath and bent over to pick up an armful of wood. He did the same thing and walked alongside me and I could feel him looking at me. I sighed. I was not in the mood. I was tired, in pain, the pins in my hair hurt and my feet were sore and numb. I couldn't stop coughing; it was taking me multiple blinks to see things clearly. I was a wreck and this dude was looking at me.

"What do you want?" I asked him on our way back to the huge pile of wood.

He jumped a little and chuckled. "You seem a bit irritated."

I turned my head slowly to him. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes. I bet you were rich. Hmm, maybe even an only child. Are you a mama's girl or a daddy's girl?"

I snorted. "Could you be any more wrong?"

He grinned. "I am fallible, you know. Everyone is."

We bent over to grab another armful of wood. "You must be a nut case. You're smiling. Yep, you must be insane. I'm gonna have to watch you."

"I am not insane," he argued. "What would be the point in sulking? I've seen too many die from losing hope. I am on the optimistic side."

I threw my armful of wood into the growing pile near the furnace. "I think I lost hope when I was thrown down those hard stairs over there. See? Look? They're right over there."

His shoulders shook with laughter. "You're funny."

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“Glad I could be of service. Now, can you stop talking to me?”

The boy shook his head. “Nope, talking feels too nice.”

My eyebrows shot up. “When’s the last time you had a conversation with somebody?”

He pursed his lips in thought as he bent down for another woody armful. “Maybe about two or three months, but that’s an estimate. It could be longer, it could be shorter.”

“Wow! Sounds fun. How long you been here?” I asked.

He whistled low. “Hmm, can you tell me the date?”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s the um, eighth of June. School just got out.”

He smiled. “What year?”

“It’s 2008.”

“Ah... I was captured while in Alabama on a boring school fieldtrip in ‘06. I wandered from my group for just a second to get some Skittles from a vending machine at a museum. You see, I really love Skittles. I remember seeing them and begging my teacher to be able to get out of the theater for *one second*. He sent me and my buddy to go to the vending machine. The next thing we knew, we have these sacks thrown over our heads and they dragged us to a car and we disappeared. A couple days later, I find myself here and the big man upstairs threw me and my friend down here.

“He’s in your shift. That’s part of the reason I came over here. The other reason is because I was curious about you.”

I laughed without humor as we quickly did our task. "There is nothing to be curious about."

"Well, I wish I knew your name..."

I narrowed my eyes at him. He couldn't be flirting with me. None of the boys in my grade flirted with me. I was a stick with no boobs or butt. I mean, I was pretty, but most of the girls in my grade were already filling out. Heck, *Onyx* wore a B cup. Compared to my measly A cup, her boobs were cantaloupes and my boobs were grapes. "I don't have one."

"A what? A name? Come on, everybody has name. I have a name."

"What is it?" I asked mechanically.

"Angel."

I laughed. "Funny."

"My mom really wanted a girl. I would kill to have a masculine name. I'm not so fortunate though. Now, about that name of yours..."

I looked at him. "Amber."

He smiled down at me. "It's nice to meet you, Amber."

I grunted. "Right... nice to meet you too."

Hours later... hours and hours and hours later... the whistle blew and my sore shoulders sunk with relief. Sleep... glorious hours of wonderful sleep. It seemed as if the other group had been sleeping forever.

"Come on," Angel urged. "Cover your nose before you get into the hallway."

"Why?" I asked and then my head practically jerked back when we got within five feet of the threshold. My hands flew over my mouth and I brought the dress up to my nose. Of course, I could smell my

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own B.O., but it was a heck of a lot better than smelling the odor that was traveling from the hallway.

Angel grabbed my arm when he noticed that I was not about to walk. He gently tugged me in and I stumbled after him.

“I don’t want to go in there,” I whispered.

He gave me a look that said ‘too bad’ and gently tugged again. This time, I followed.

I noticed that the hallway was not really a hallway. It was a corridor with many long cells in it. I gasped as my feet splashed in wetness. I looked down and I felt my stomach lurch. The liquid under my feet was brown and chunky. I jumped and shuddered. They had people from all walks of life down in this cellar. I saw not only men, but women and children in the cells. They looked dead, like zombies. One woman held a sleeping child in her arms and cried at the same time. A boy who was running as loose as he could while chained to the floor in the cell, was crying ‘mommy, mommy, mommy’ like he’d lost her.

My heart ached for the boy. I wondered where his mother was.

I made small observations. Like how on both sides of us there were large cells crowded with people. Another observation I made was that the cells were slightly elevated and that we were walking in a valley of some sorts. I shuddered when I realized why. A dead looking woman that had to relive herself was sitting in one of the cells. A stream of urine traveled down the incline and settled in the valley. My stomach finally lurched and I vomited right on my own feet. Once I saw where my vomit landed, I vomited again. Oh my God, I was sure that all the sustenance that I

ate before being kidnapped - there I said it - was about to end up right in the same waste-filled valley that I was standing in. To make matters worse, I saw something skitter through the sludge on the ground and an easily recognizable rat's tail flicked out and hit my leg. My stomach heaved again but I was all empty inside.

Angel tugged on me again and I noticed why. One of the watchmen was right behind us and he had his whip poised to lash out at me. We were led into one of the cells and there were a series of chains protruding from the ground. One of the watchmen was in the cells unlocking another group of men from the cells. I didn't see any that looked familiar from the second group. I was relieved to see two watchmen take a series of buckets and dump them into the cells. The faint smell of bleach filled my nose underneath the smell of bile and I smiled a little bit.

However, I did not smile when the group of men was unchained and squeezed past us out of the corridor and into the steam room. I knew we were next. I shivered as our ankles were shackled to the chains protruding from the ground.

A boy scooted over to Angel's side at the last minute and was chained right near us. The next thing that happened was also surprising. The watchmen grabbed more buckets and threw them at us. I was drenched in soapy water. At first I was sort of stunned but after the buckets kept on coming... I learned that it was sort of soothing and at least I had the illusion of being clean. The other plus was that we'd been chained more to the top of the cell which meant that when the other men urinated and excreted, we would not be the ones they did it on. This reminded me of a

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book I read for school earlier in the year about slavery back in the day in America. Only this time, I saw a little bit of everybody. I saw white faces, black faces, brown faces, red faces. There was no discrimination here. Just a group of victims that the big guys upstairs accumulated for free labor.

I wondered where all the watchmen were getting the things they were giving us. It seemed like they were Houdini. They had dozens of water bottles and handed one to each of the people in the cell.

When Lionel got to me, he grimaced and handed me two bottles of water. “Amery said that the king said we had to give you double rations because we made you work too hard. Apparently, we cannot harm the prince’s future ‘play thing’. I may not be able to whip you anymore, but remember that I have one heck of a backhand.”

A shudder rippled through my body as he shoved two bottles in my arms. When they came back with a dehydrated meal, I frowned. Lionel shoved two packs of the dehydrated food into my arms and when he and the rest of the watchmen walked out and closed the heavy iron bars behind them every man in the cell seemed to sigh. Many of them dropped to the ground and began to rip open their packs of food. I did the same and groaned when the weight of my body was eased off of my feet.

“How’d you get here, Angel? You could have gotten whipped if you got caught,” the sneaky boy whispered.

Angel shrugged. “It was pretty easy.”

I sat back and took a healthy swig out of the brand X water bottle. I swear, the plastic was so cheap

that when my pinky finger touched the bottle it almost caved in.

"I would have been a nervous wreck," the mystery boy whispered. "I would have slipped in a puddle of my own nervous sweat."

"That," Angel said between gulps. "Is nasty."

The boy smiled and punched Angel in the face lightly, playfully. "Whatever, Skittles."

Angel blushed and grumbled. "I told you not to call me that, Aden."

I looked at them like they were insane. They were chained down to the floor like animals and *smiling*.

They were definitely insane.

"What's your name?" Aden said. My gaze flickered to his face. He looked so pale. What I really wanted to do was get a bottle of sunshine and pour it all over him.

"I don't have one."

Angel scoffed. "Her name is Amber. Or so she says."

Aden nodded. "She looks like an Amber."

The boys were tearing apart the packaging on their dehydrated food and poured a little bit of water onto it. The food seemed to rise to life and they slowly began to eat. I was still sucking down on my bottle of brand X water.

"You're gonna get sick if you keep on chugging that water like that," Aden said a matter of fact.

I shrugged. "Leave me and my water alone, Aden."

Aden jumped. "You know my name?"

I nodded. "Angel just said it."

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“How’d you get here?” Aden asked.

“You know those stairs?” I asked.

Aden nodded.

“You walked down them, right?”

Aden nodded again.

“Well, I was *pushed* down them. Funny story, right? Not nearly as cool as being abducted from a museum.”

Aden chuckled. “You’re funny. You are going to be a lot better company than the rest of the boring men that drag themselves around down here.”

“Great.” I mumbled. “That’s just great. I get to be your entertainment for the rest of our stay.”

I followed their lead and poured some water on my dehydrated meal and watched it grow. “Cool. Only, I wish I knew what this sludge is supposed to be.”

Aden looked at the packaging. “Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and vegetables. There is even a little pack of brand X flavored drink powder. When you add it to your water, it’ll taste like ‘berry blast’.”

Angel laughed a little bit and choked and coughed a little bit on his food.

It felt weird eating with my hands, but I was too hungry to complain after a while. Plus, the sludge did not taste so bad. Well, not on an empty stomach at least. I found myself to be full after eating the large helping of dehydrated food. I noticed that I had an entire package left. I looked at Angel and Aden who were still speaking in hushed tones and chuckling. They looked so thin. I knew how much my two brothers Joey and Mike ate now... they never seemed to be full no matter how much they ate.

I leaned closer to the two. “Do you want my extra thingy? I am absolutely stuffed.”

They both looked at me like I was insane for giving up the food.

“We couldn’t,” they both said simultaneously.

I shrugged. “Fine,” I whispered back. “I’ll just tell Lionel to throw it in the trash. Of course, he’ll probably force feed it to me...”

A flicker of desire came into Aden’s eyes. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I know it’s not much, but you and Angel could share it...”

I handed them both the package and they blew out a heavy breath simultaneously.

“Thank you,” they said in synch.

“You’re welcome,” I said with a small smile.

I don’t remember much after that because I am pretty sure I fell into a deep sleep while watching them eat. They definitely looked a little bit more upbeat.

I do remember waking up feeling very well rested. The pins in my hair had loosened up quite a bit so I lazily reached up and began picking them out of my hair. I cursed when I felt one get tangled up in my untamed curls.

“Let me,” Aden said and reached over and expertly untangled my hair and flicked the hair pin away. I sat up and realized I’d been slouched on the wall behind me. “I have a little sister. I had to perfect the art of detangling hair when my mom learned that she had a girl and couldn’t do hair to save her life.”

“How old is she?” I asked.

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“Two years younger. So she’s probably eleven or twelve now,” He answered.

“I have a twin,” I whispered. “She’s up there.”

Aden frowned. “At least you’ll see her again. You know you’re gonna get to go back up to be the prince’s servant.”

My mouth twisted in a frown. “You mean as his personal plaything.”

Aden looked at me without understanding. “I don’t get it.”

“I didn’t either,” I said in a low voice. “If you think about it for a while...”

Aden sat quietly for about ten minutes before comprehension flickered across his face. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Oh’ is right.”

Angel chose that moment to yawn and wake up. “Look at the bright side. At least you know you won’t die down here.”

Anger flickered inside me. “Don’t say that.”

Angel shrugged. “It’s true. There is only one way in and no ways out. I already know what’s gonna happen.”

I shook my head and laughed dryly. “I’m never gonna lose hope. Angel, trust me, I’m getting out of here.”

Aden smiled. “Do you know how many people have said that? Too many to count. Do you know how many have made it out? None.”

My mouth hardened. “There is a first for everything, Aden.”

Angel decided to be the peacemaker. “Hey, hey, hey, if Amber wants to keep hope alive, let her.”

I nodded tersely and smirked over at Aden. “Ha!”

“That’s not nice,” Aden said in a falsetto.

I stuck my tongue out and reached for my second water bottle and took a swig. “Thirsty?”

They both looked at each other and shook their heads.

“I don’t have mono if that’s what you’re thinking,” I said reassuringly.

They both laughed and each took a swig of the water I offered.

“Thanks,” they both said.

Aden looked at me curiously. “Why are you being so nice?”

I shrugged. “I’m a sucker for lost causes.”

Angel chuckled. “Seriously, why are you so nice? Especially after you saw my face, I thought you were going to stay fifty feet away from me at all times. That’s part of the reason I switched groups.”

I smiled. “*That’s* part of the reason?”

Angel nodded. “Now answer Aden’s question.”

“I’m a nice person. Sometimes... when I like the person I’m being nice to. At least that’s what my best friend says.”

“Oh,” Aden said. “You’re not a spy for the king are you?”

I laughed out loud at that one. “Um, no.”

“She just talked about breaking out, Aden,” Angel laughed.

A thought popped into my head. “By the way,” I said. “When I *do* break out, I’m coming back for you. You never leave a man behind right? Plus, it’ll be fun to prove you wrong.”

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They both laughed and nodded. "Right."

Aden leaned back against the wall. "I'm going to catch a few more Z's before it's time to go back to work."

Angel leaned back. "Good idea."

I yawned. "Follow the leaders."

Angel laughed. "Stop being funny and go to sleep."

"Yes sir," I said playfully. I fell asleep to the sound of laughter. The soft chuckles seemed to drown out the sounds of agony from the other people in the cell. Who knew a little bit of sun could shine through the overcast?

I awoke to somebody unshackling me. It felt good to be able to twist my left ankle around in a circular motion. It was hard to stand up since I was so comfortable by just sitting on the ground and lounging around. I groaned audibly when I was led out to work more in the steam room. On one hand, the air was much cleaner when we were led out of the corridor.

I frowned as I picked up a sharp tool and was pushed by Komla towards another large tree.

As I was chopping away and finding a rhythm, a sad murmur spread through the whole room. The guards had gone back into the hallway where the men were being shackled like animals and were emerging with bodies slung over their arms.

"Oh... my... are they-"

"Yes," Angel said gruffly not looking up.

Dirty, haggard looking dead men were slung over the watchmen's backs and were being brought out of the hallway.

A man was yelled at and he obediently began to open the furnace.

I shrieked and jumped back as they began to throw the dead bodies in the furnace. I dropped the tool and thankfully it did not hit my toes because they would have been chopped off. My shaky hands covered my eyes as I heard the fire crackle and howl around the new fuel.

I raked my hands against my face as I heard the furnace door close. I shivered as they went back into the corridor and came back with even more bodies. I gasped and noticed that they were no longer just male bodies. The woman... the woman with the dead expression on her face... Amery had her slung over his back and hadn't even bothered to close her eyes. Her dead eyes seemed to follow me and I noticed something: she looked happier dead than she did alive. I felt my whole body tremble. When was this madness going to end?

Departure

The answer was around six days. Six days of torment at the steam room. Or as I liked to think of it: Hell.

I became one of the most humble people in the world over the course of that horrible week. I did what I was told without comment. I chopped wood until my arms burned and then chopped some more. I helped to keep the fire from dying by throwing the wood blocks and coal into the large furnace.

I learned that bad things happened all the time in the steam room. Everyday they seemed to haul dead bodies over their shoulders and throw them into the furnace. Everyday there seemed to be even more people thrown down the stairs to Hell and forced into a life of hard work and inescapable death.

On the fourth day I was there, a man threw himself into the furnace and we all had to hear his loud, agonizing screams until they cut off. The watchmen were all so angry that they went around whipping random people. Aden got harshly slashed across the back by an older man and I did my best to keep my face impassive and not to scream.

I believed that the fifth day was undoubtedly the best. Apparently, the 'royals' upstairs were going somewhere which meant that the bathing pools did not need to be heated by the large furnace. The watchmen said that it was clean up day. They brought down large buckets of bleach and many rags and such. I noticed for the first time the drains that were all over the ground. In the holding area, there were plugs

in the drains to keep the captives from storing things anywhere they could. It had happened before.

They unplugged the drains and unshackled and escorted out the captives. Then, a large group of the men -plus me - were made to scrub the floors and the iron bars of the holding cells. The path was cleaned all over and by the time we were all done, the holding area smelled clean and strongly of bleach instead of bile.

When we were escorted out of the cleaning area, I saw men on tall ladders scrubbing the walls and I watched black soot course down in large streams. I actually got to see the gray color of the cement walls. Some of the men at the top of the ladder scrubbed at windows that I never saw before because the black soot on them made them blend into the walls. The men were instructed to crack them open and cool wind began to blow into the steam room. We were all permitted to sit on the ground and rest. It was incredible.

The next thing that happened shocked me more than anything. Large rubber pools were rolled out of the holding area and placed in the middle of the steam room. The men unraveled several hoses and began spraying water in the pools. They periodically added a whole bunch of soap and dropped what seemed like hundreds of clean cloths in the different pools.

“Separate by your age!” Scotch yelled. He was the obvious leader. “Men who are ages eleven through seventeen, in this pool! Eighteen through twenty-five in this pool, and twenty-six and up in this pool. Chop chop!”

I walked over to the pool that I was to go to and faced a problem. All of the other boys seemed to be

able to easily pull themselves over the side and into the pool. I, however, was too short. I was also wearing a dress and very conscious of the fact that I had on the same icky underwear and bra that I had worn since I got here. I was just about to attempt getting up there when I felt strong hands on my sides and I was hoisted over and thrown into the pool. I made a big splash and I came up sputtering and treading water in the deep pool. Grasping a cloth I looked about and saw Angel and Aden laughing hysterically.

“You should have seen your face,” Aden laughed.

“Priceless,” Angel agreed.

I was still trying to catch my breath. On top of that, my eyes were stinging from the soap. I shivered at the coolness of the water and looked down at the huge puddle of dirt and grime that seemed to spread and float away from my body.

I was filthy. I also got the chance to scrub off the heavy make-up which I had been sweating into my eyes over the past couple of days. When I felt like my skin was free of the heavy stuff, my skin felt so much better. My pores could *breathe*. I then began to scrub vigorously at my skin all over until it was raw. I noticed that I was the only person who was actually taking the effort to wash herself. Most were leisurely stroking around in the soapy water and relaxing. Maybe it was just the female in me but I *needed* to get the grime off of every inch of my body before I got out. I even washed my hair in the soapy water even though I knew the soap would not do any good except to clean my hair. While it was still wet, I wrung it out as well as I could and used the pins that I attached to the

straps on the dress and pinned my hair comfortably out of my face.

I sighed when I was content. I had to tread in the water the whole time because my legs were too short to reach the ground. The wounds on my back and legs were burning from the soapy water, but all in all, this was the best day I had while being incarcerated.

“Are you enjoying our ‘free day’?” Aden asked as he floated over.

I shook my head and whispered. “I won’t be enjoying myself until I am out those doors and back at home, Aden.”

Aden shook his head at me. “You should get your head out of the clouds.”

I pushed his floating form away from me. “I prefer cloud nine to this hell hole.”

“How can this be a hell hole when an angel is here?” Angel asked as he swam in front of me.

“The Angel of Death,” I joked. “Is in our presence.”

“No,” one of the boys near me grumbled. He seemed to be sixteen or seventeen. I couldn’t tell because he had so much stubble all over his chin. “I am pretty sure Amery is the Angel of Death. You know he whipped a man to death yesterday? For accidentally tripping over Amery’s boot. Then, he just casually tossed the bloody, dead man in the furnace.”

Angel agreed. “You’re right. Amery is pretty evil, and that is definitely saying something.”

I nodded my agreement and used the cloth that I was holding, to scrub my ears inside and out.

“What did you do?” Aden asked curiously.

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I continued to scrub around my ears until I noticed he was talking to me. “Hmm?”

“What did you do to get banished to the steam room?” Aden asked.

“My sister and I caused a ruckus and then when I got here I ‘disrespected’ the ‘king’ or whatever. As I said before I am not nice to people I don’t like. I did not like him at all.”

Many of the boys in the bathing pool chuckled. I did not see what was so hilarious. “What?”

“You’re so...blunt,” Angel pointed out.

I shrugged.

“And entertaining,” another boy said amiably. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen a girl? *Three years.*”

“Oh the horror!” I exclaimed sarcastically.

There was more laughter and I actually cracked a smile.

“Okay, okay,” one of the men peered over the edge of the rubber pool and glared. “What’s so funny?”

Your face. “Nothing, sir,” I answered humbly.

The man glared at me. “Really? Nothing? You don’t want to share the laughter? Come on, I want to know what seems to be so funny!”

I looked down at my hands which I was twisting frantically under the water.

“Well, girl. Aren’t you going to answer me?”

My twisting hands picked up their vigorous pace. “I don’t know how to answer you, sir.”

“You can begin by telling me what was so funny.”

I gulped. “It was a joke...”

“About...?”

“About this book that I read once,” I lied. I didn’t want them to know that we’d been discussing Amery’s cruelty. I didn’t even want to think about what this man could make me do if he heard about the fact that these boys hadn’t seen a female in a long while. Probably something perverted and cruel.

“What was the name of the book?”

My hands began to wring the cloth in my hands under the water as I looked up at him. “I-I think it was called-um- Flowers for um this rat. I can’t remember what the rat’s name was, sir.”

“What was so funny?” he asked.

“They were experimenting on the rat and it bit the guy. It was f-funny, sir.”

“Hey fellows, was that funny to you?”

“No.” was the quick reply.

“Come here, girl,” the man crooked his finger at me.

I swallowed convulsively. I began to drift over to him and before I reached the edge, he reached out and pulled me to the edge by my hair.

I opened my mouth in a silent scream.

He placed his mouth to my ear and I could feel his hot breath on my ear. “I didn’t think that joke was funny either. If I hear you cracking any more jokes the only thing that is going to be cracking is my whip over that pretty backside of yours. Do you understand?”

“You can’t whip her, Marsh.” Lionel grumbled. “King’s orders.”

Marsh laughed into my ear. “If I can’t whip you, then I’ll have to come up with a creative punishment. And I can be *very* creative, girl. Think about that. Now, I’m going to let go of you and you are going to

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float back into the pool and keep those full lips of yours shut aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yes sir," I whispered.

He let go of me and I floated as far away from him as I could.

At the end of the fifth day when one of the groups was working, we were shackled to the floor as usual and I was eating. Aden and Angel were sharing my second pack of food when Angel's curiosity got the better of him.

"What did Marsh say?"

I shrugged. "You heard him. He said he'd whip me."

Angel shook his head. "He was whispering. I couldn't hear a thing."

"Oh, well that was the threat," I lied.

Angel looked at me with suspicious eyes. "Mm, hmm."

I nodded slowly.

"Well, I for one think that Amber was smart to lie," Aden spoke up. "Who knows what those jerks would have done if they knew what we were talking about. 'Not seeing girls in a while' could be misconstrued into something that probably would have made Amber uncomfortable. Plus, there is also the fact that Amery would have beaten the snot out of her."

Angel nodded reluctantly. "I just don't like being lied to."

"How do you know I'm lying?" I challenged.

"Your hands," he pointed to my wringing hands. "You pull at your fingers and wring things in your hands when you get nervous or mad or in this case lying."

I smiled ruefully. "I'll have to work on that."

"Yes," he looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "You will."

The sixth day was probably the best and worst. I went through a whole day's work and got all stinky, sweaty, and gross. I did not look like I had just taken a bath the day before. The guards gave me three water bottles and two meals and an extra packet of 'berry blast' for 'energy'. I could tell that the time was coming when I was going to have to go back above ground, and it was approaching quickly. My heart quickened in my chest as Lionel walked away and slammed the bars behind him and locked them shut.

"I think I feel sick," I clutched my fluttering stomach.

The boy who was slightly below me on the elevation flinched and I laughed. "I'll try not to get sick on you."

He looked up and humor sparkled in his dark eyes. "Thanks."

"It feels like you're time in the steam room is coming to an end," Aden pointed out.

I nodded. "It seems sort of scary, you know? Like, I know that it is pretty darn bad down here, but-

"Up there is the unknown," Aden nodded. "Yeah, I got cha."

"Just don't forget us, alright?" Angel smiled wryly.

I looked away when I surprisingly found tears in my eyes. "I don't think I ever could."

From the corner of my eye, I saw both boys smile.

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I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes and purposely pushed both dehydrated meals over to them.

“You should eat,” Aden protested quietly.

“If I was hungry,” I yawned and peeked at them through my half-closed eyes. “I would eat.”

And with that last word, I fell asleep curled on my side on the hard, dusty floor.

Personal Servant

“Wake up, girl!” Amery hissed and he tugged on my wrist.

I woke with a jolt. I was sweating and my hair was matted all over my face, in my mouth, and in my eyes. “What?”

“Up, girl, up!” He tugged on my wrist and I stumbled over a sleeping body and the boy who I’d made laugh earlier that evening.

Amery seemed to be waking everybody up as he tugged me out of the waiting area. I looked back one time to see Aden and Angel wave slightly. I smiled once before I was roughly jerked again and the iron bars were slammed roughly.

“Don’t you try anything, girl.”

I nodded feebly. “Yes sir.”

He sneered at me and mimicked. “Yes sir.”

I felt like knocking his head up against the iron bars he was locking. I had a slight smirk on my face as he grabbed my wrist in his iron grip and practically dragged me through the sludge under our feet and out into the steam room. It didn’t stop there. He shoved me *up* the stairs this time. At least for a step.

“Walk, don’t try anything funny, girl.”

I walked up the stairs thinking that it was too good to be true. But the door was cracked open and I could see light! Light! By the time I reached the top step the nosy boy Simon was standing there.

“Well, howdy,” he greeted me in his deep southern drawl. “You don’t look - or smell - too good, Miss Amber.”

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I nodded and blinked against the light and stumbled out of the steam room. I breathed in my first clean breath of air for the first time in what seemed like forever.

“My goodness,” Simon gasped. “Your back...”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He looked away from me and led me down the long hall and we twisted and turned in a series of hallways.

“Where are we going?”

Simon cleared his throat and said. “To a private bathroom. They said that you were gonna need it and they were right.”

I slumped over and wiped some sweat off my face as we walked. “Oh, it’s over. It’s really over.”

Simon shook his head. “Sorry to break it to ya, but it has barely begun.”

Simon dropped me off in an immaculate and shiny, clean bathroom. I looked around and stopped abruptly.

I saw myself in a mirror and wanted to cry. The once white dress was now a dingy grayish black. My arms were coated in grime and my hair looked like straw. The red strands looked dull, dead. My skin also seemed two shades lighter. I looked down at my grimy feet and noticed that the hem of the dress I was wearing seemed to be caked with disgusting looking grime.

I turned around and looked at my back. The dress was shredded in the back from being whipped. It was stained red and brown from my back which was broken and welted up. There were about five or six long, puckered, angry looking welts on my back over-

lapping one another. I wondered if they would ever heal.

I looked at the back of my calves which I hoped were in better shape. They were... slightly. The welts looked angry and red and seemed to wrap around the whole back of my skinny calves. I shuddered.

The door opened and two people walked in. One looked like me and the other looked sort of familiar.

“Oh, Amber,” Onyx breathed and her hand flew to her mouth. “My God, what *happened?*”

I was facing her so all she saw was the front of me... ‘wait until you see the back’ I thought.

“We have to get her clean before she see the doctor,” the girl said in the same heavy accent as Ishmael. They looked alike as well.

“Is your name.... Iman?”

She nodded. “Yes. How you know my name?”

“I met your brother, Ishmael.”

Iman smiled. “He’s doing well, yes?”

I shrugged. “I saw him almost a week ago.”

“He spoke to you, yes?”

I nodded.

“I no allowed to speak to Ishmael. They say we be up to no good if we talk,” she said solemnly.

“That stinks,” I grumbled. “You can’t speak to your own brother.”

She shook her head no. “We have to help you clean before you see king.”

I gulped. The ‘king’. “I see...”

“Yes,” Onyx grumbled. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

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Iman walked over to the shower gracefully and began to twist the shower on. I lifted the dress off over my head and stripped naked.

“You need help in?” Iman asked and I shook my head. When I turned my back to Onyx I heard her choked intake of breath and tried to ignore it.

“Amber...”

“Please don’t, Onyx,” I shuddered as I stepped into the deep shower with a lot of difficulty. My legs seemed to be wooden, stiff.

Iman handed me a cloth and a foreign bar of soap. Whatever happened to *Dove*? I scrubbed my skin again and grimaced as I watched black suds fall off my body and it looked pretty horrible. Onyx helped me wash my back and I heard her breathing hitch whenever she would see me flinch when her touch would jar the wounds on my back.

“Why they do that to you?” Iman whispered.

“When you don’t work fast enough... or do something bad...” I explained.

“Amber, there is not that many but they look *horrible*,” Onyx whispered. “I could k-”

“Shush,” Iman hissed. “Eyes and Ears everywhere. They hear all. You get beaten or worse.”

Onyx’s teeth were grinding audibly. “It’s not fair, Amber. It’s not fair.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“What’s wrong with you?” Onyx snapped. “You sound dead.”

I looked back at her and blinked at the brownish red cloth. “I feel dead.”

Onyx’s frown deepened. “Don’t say that.”

I shrugged. "Whatever, I'm just glad that I'm here with you."

Onyx sniffled. "I missed you too."

"We dry her off, yes?" Iman asked.

Onyx nodded. "Yeah, its-uh- time to get you dried off."

I watched Iman turn off the piping hot water and they both helped me out the shower this time. It was a wonder I wasn't having a fit. Normally, it was a blue moon when I changed stark naked in the same room with my sister. Now, I couldn't care less that they saw me naked.

They both helped me dry off and Onyx looked underneath the sink and took out a big tub of nasty smelling goop.

"One of the girls told me to use this if you had any wounds," Onyx explained and smoothed the cool goop all over my back before she tightly wrapped a long, thick bandage around my back and torso. When I actually began to feel the goop I sucked in a breath. It stung. Badly.

"You have wood in hands," Iman muttered. "It hurt?"

I shrugged. My hands had gone numb a while ago.

"And your feet too," Onyx whispered.

I shrugged again.

"Amber stop!" Onyx whispered. "You're scaring me."

I looked into her red eyes which were filled with fear. "How am I frightening you?"

Onyx shuddered and looked away. "Never mind."

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After a few minutes of rummaging around in drawers and under a sink, they came up with a nail kit. In the kit, they found three tweezers.

“We take out splinters,” Iman said gravely.

I shivered. I wished that they would give me more clothes than a bandage but I stayed quiet. I wondered what was happening to me. I was usually really outspoken... but... I just didn't feel like...talking. I stared as they removed huge splinters of wood. Sometimes, my hands or feet would bleed a little, but I didn't feel anything.

“Is that all of them?” Onyx examined me.

“Yes, I think,” Iman said and smiled up at me. “Feel better?”

I nodded wordlessly.

“Good,” she turned to Onyx. “You need put salve on Amber's legs. They scar too.”

Onyx looked and grimaced. “You're right.”

Onyx bent down and applied the burning goop to the back of my calves then wrapped them in more bandages.

“You must be in so much pain,” Onyx whispered.

“It's not so bad,” I lied and tried not to wring my hands.

“We wash hair now,” Iman instructed. She seemed to keep us moving. There was a hardness to her but she also seemed like she used to be carefree and lighthearted.

Onyx made me bend over the sink and I felt their slender fingers working in my hair and scrubbing away.

“You should see the nastiness coming out of your hair, Amber,” Onyx informed me.

“I washed yesterday,” I mumbled against the sink.

“And for the rest of the days?” Onyx asked.

I grunted in dismissal.

When they were done washing my once dirty hair, they wrung it out as well as they could and Iman began to pin it up in the same bun that I had been wearing before. I winced as I felt a bobby pin stab my scalp.

“You pretty hair,” Iman complemented.

“Thank you,” I smiled weakly.

“Welcome,” Iman said. “Anything we need do before Amber go see king?”

Onyx laughed. “We can start by dressing her.”

They eased a dress over my head and Onyx helped me put on a pair of clean underwear.

“We’re lucky they have panties,” Onyx frowned. “Too bad they don’t have bras. At least you don’t really need one.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, thanks, Onyx. I can *really* feel the love.”

Iman smiled and observed quietly. “We should go.”

Onyx reached over and grabbed my hand. I held on to her.

“I was so scared that you wouldn’t come back,” Onyx admitted. “When Simon told me that he was going to get you and he needed two girls to help clean you up... oh I was so relieved.”

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I felt tears in my eyes. “No matter what, I’ll come back. From anywhere. From anything. I promise.”

Onyx opened her mouth to say something and closed it.

“I promise. Even though we don’t know what’s going on... or where we are or what’s happening... I’ll find a way, Onyx. We’ll find a way,” I corrected.

Onyx cracked a smile. “I hear that never happens here. Amber, this might be for life. Forever. We might be stuck here forever until we die. We have to face the truth.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going down without a fight.”

Onyx frowned. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

“Live free or die hard,” I set my mouth into a grim line.

Onyx frowned deeply. “You promised me that you’d come back to me every time. That you’d stay. You cannot come back from the dead, Amber.”

I laughed dryly. “I could try.”

Devilish Girls

“You have to look your best,” Onyx whispered to me on our way to the throne room. “Apparently, he looks at you to see if you’re suited to be one of his successor’s personal servants.”

I shrugged. “I really don’t care, Onyx. As long as I’m close to you.”

Onyx huffed impatiently and hissed, “I am Ramses’s servant, dipstick. So, if you were Horus’s servant, we’d be *really* close to one another.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh,’” Onyx looked at me like I was dumb. I cracked a smile at her and she grinned back.

“There’s another thing,” Onyx coughed into her hand. “He’s freaky religious. He has his ‘visions’. It’s scary. Try not to look like a demon, please.”

I laughed out loud on that comment. Now, the guy who said he’d cut off my head was *crazy*. I mean, I knew that he was ‘crazy’ when he said he was an Egyptian king. Now he had *visions*. This dude had fallen off his rocker.

Iman shook her head at us in disapproval. “Like I say, eyes and ears everywhere. People hear everything. You no talk about family like that unless you wish to die.”

We arrived at the door of the throne room and Ishmael stood outside with the same two guards from before. Ishmael reached out and squeezed Iman’s shoulder tightly. She looked up at him with a lot of affection and love. Sort of how I looked at my older brother Joey when we were getting along well.

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Ishmael spoke to her quickly in a language that I could not understand at all. Iman replied back quickly. The other guard who'd looked at me with sadness and compassion quickly asked a question and Iman hesitated and then answered. The second guard seemed to look unhappy but... it seems that he'd already come to terms with the bad news.

Onyx and I just stared at the trio with wide, confused eyes. They ended their conversation and looked back at us with heavy stares.

"I go alert king that you here," the second guard said gruffly and disappeared into the 'throne room'.

"What's his name?" Onyx asked.

"Imara," Ishmael stated. "They make jokes. They say we trio of I's. I no think joke is funny."

Iman nodded with a scowl on her face. "I no think it is funny either. I think it annoying."

I smiled. "They're probably just jealous they don't have names as cool as yours."

Iman and Ishmael smiled wryly and Imara made his appearance.

"King will see you now," he looked at me. "No one else."

Onyx squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek. "Good luck."

I nodded and my breath quickened as I was ushered through the 'throne room' door. I stumbled into the room and felt a lot of eyes on me. I couldn't look up. I looked down at my hands. My fingers were pulling at each other. I remembered what Angel said and used my shaky hands to smooth out the dress I was wearing and tried my best to keep my hands at my sides.

“So... father... what do you think?” the boy asked excitedly. I held back a scowl and shifted from foot to foot... anything to keep my hands from frantically pulling at each other.

“Look at me, girl!” the man bellowed. I shuddered and tentatively looked up.

“Look at those eyes,” the king whispered. “Filled with devilish spirits.”

I looked back down at my ravaged feet which I noticed had also been bandaged. How had I missed that? My splintered palms were as well. I observed as I stared at my fingers pulling at each other. Maybe that was why I wasn't able to pull as well as I usually could.

Oh. Wait. I was supposed to be quitting that habit.

“Father,” Ramses scoffed. “The girl does not have eyes filled with devilish spirits.”

The man's voice quivered as I felt his heavy gaze on my face. “Look up, girl! Did I not tell you to look up before? In the steam room, you get lashed for disobedience, girl! You should know that.”

I looked up at him. My whole body was quivering slightly and I blinked at the man. I still had not forgotten that he could get my head chopped off. I was the hostage. This was more frightening than the time I fell off my bike while speeding down a hill on my street at night, flipping over, and being rendered unconscious. I woke up seeing in black in white. However, a week later, I woke up and blinked. I was no longer color blind. I'd rejoiced. Then again, the doctor said I would regain all of my sight. Still, that was pretty scary.

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Well, and there was that other time... with the boat and my parents. I blinked and got the image out of my head. I didn't want to think about that. Not now.

"It may just be her visit to the steam room," the teenage girl said with amusement. "Maybe you should beat the devil out of her, father."

"NO!" the boy exclaimed. "Father... please? May I please have my servant now?"

The man shook his head slowly. "She shall have the devil drawn out of her, Horus."

I opened my mouth and closed it. What?

"The doctor knows how to draw the evil spirits from this girl," the man said with assurance. "No worries, my dear son."

I noticed Ramses scowl in his younger brother's direction.

"Okay, father," Horus nodded and sighed. "As long as she does not perish in the process."

"Guards! Escort this bewitched girl to the priest's quarters. Be quick about it, men! Keep her from breathing the air! Cover her mouth with a cloth! I do not wish for my servants to be condemned with the same evil spirits that live in her!"

Quicker than I could comprehend, Ishmael was behind me and was pressing a clean rag across my mouth and nose. I clawed at his hands and arms in a futile attempt to breathe. I felt a subtle rub on my arm that made me calm a little bit and I let him and Imara drag me out of the throne room.

"Calm down, Amber," Imara hissed as they half dragged me out of the throne room. "We no hurt you. We let you breathe. Calm down, Amber."

I calmed down a little bit and let them pull me along. Again, I was shocked at how easily they dragged my small, skinny frame along. I frowned. I was small. Weak.

When we got out of the throne room, they kept the cloth over my mouth and nose. I looked up at Ishmael questioningly.

“We follow orders. King kill us all if we no listen,” he answered.

I nodded and continued to breathe in and out slowly.

“King crazy,” Imara muttered under his breath.

I choked back a laugh and Ishmael shook his head disapprovingly.

“You small girl,” Ishmael commented. “You smaller since you stay in steam room.”

I harrumphed and Ishmael cracked a smile. “You get a little bit smaller. They no feed us well here.”

“We here,” Imara declared and Ishmael released me and pushed me into a room that had lights that were too bright and a table with restraint straps on it. I felt my blood run cold in my veins.

“Why hello there,” a crazy looking old man greeted me. He had a strange accent. One I only heard from the ‘King’. “Oh no, no, no! It seems that we have a demonic little girl in our midst, don’t we?”

“King say you no beat demons out her,” Imara said forcefully.

“I would never beat a girl unless she was fully possessed!” the crazy old man said loudly.

“But I’m not... demonic... or possessed,” I said slowly as I looked in fright at the table.

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“Oh hush, girl,” the old man said. “Now, go over to that comfy looking bed.”

“I won’t.”

The old man glared at me. “I ordered you to go and sit down, girl. That was not a request.”

“I won’t. I will not let some crazy old man lay one hand on me.”

The old man had a truly angry glint in his eye. “I have half a mind to strike you to the ground we stand on. I will not repeat myself again: sit down.”

I glared back at him and reluctantly walked to stand in front of the bed.

“Good girl,” the old man smiled menacingly. “Good day, boys,” and with that, the old man slammed the door in Imara and Ishmael’s faces.

“Now... we shall start,” he sung. “Lay down, girl. Close your eyes.”

I hesitated and he made grumbling noise in the back of his throat. He took a step towards me that was meant to be threatening. I saw the wiry muscles in his arms coil. I scrambled on top of the high, uncomfortable table. It looked and felt an awful lot like an operating table. I swallowed as he began to strap me down. I could not budge an inch.

“Wh-what are y-you doing?” I asked frantically as he turned away from me and whistled.

“Hush, girl,” he murmured.

I shook as he grabbed a bowl and a vase. He poured water from the vase into the small bowl and dunked a yellowish colored rag into the bowl of water. He wrung out the rag and tied it around his face, over his mouth and nose. He then placed a very modern looking face mask over the rag and nodded to himself.

He walked around the room and lit at least a dozen odd looking candles with a golden, jeweled lighter. I stiffened as he went over to the wall and cut off the light that was too bright.

“Okay, girl,” the old man said. His face looked eerie as the shadows from the candles danced across his old, wrinkled face. “Breathe in and out slowly, deeply. Smell the candles, girl? I know you do... now... breathe... deeper... yes... drift, girl... Go to sleep...”

I woke up with a jolt. Ugh... where was I? I almost called out to Demi, my foster mother and god-mother... but then I remembered where I was. I remembered that I was in a nightmare. I was in a worse place: reality.

I tried to get up but I was still strapped down to the bed. I breathed frantically. I looked around in the dim candle light. Now, instead of a dozen orange candles around the room being lit, a dozen blue candles were lit.

In truth, I felt really good. I could see better, my hearing was more sensitive. My sense of smell was stronger. I was no longer having violent coughing fits. I wondered what the crazy old man had done to me while I was out. I cringed at the possibilities. Though, I was sure that he did not rid me of any demons.

I tried to pull against the restraints once more and gave up soon after. Where was the crazy old man, anyway? When was he going to let me up? I could feel

the restraints cutting the circulation off on my ankles and wrists. Ouch.

The door opened and I swung my head over to the sound.

“Ah, good, she is awake,” the old man sighed. “Sire, I assure you that there is no sign of a demon in her body any longer.”

“I can see that,” the ‘King’ said. “So if you take the restraints off?”

“She shall be completely in control of her body, Sire.”

“Good, good.”

The crazy old man unrestrained me and I sat up slowly when vertigo hit me. My head swam and I wondered how long I’d been knocked out. Hours? Days?

“Stand, girl,” the ‘King’ ordered.

I swallowed and an odd taste sat on my tongue. I hopped off of the high bed and stood before the ‘King’.

“You shall be my son’s personal servant. You understand me girl?”

I nodded.

“You will listen to his every command. *Any* command. If he asks you to do a dance you will. If it is the middle of the night and he is parched, you will rise and fetch him some water. I don’t care if he asks you to lie with him. You will do so.”

My eyes widened. Was he insane?

“Oh, you oppose being a personal servant? Fine, I could always send you back to the steam room. I bet Lionel would appreciate the permanent placement of a pretty girl like you...”

“No, no!” I blurted. “I’m perfectly fine with being a personal servant or whatever!”

“Are you sure, girl?” the ‘King’ asked with amusement. He took pleasure in watching me grovel!

“I am positive,” I said with conviction.

“Good. My son will be pleased. Now, you will bow to me and be off to find my son.”

I raised a brow. Bow? To this nutcase? Ha!

“You will bow to me,” he growled this time.

I narrowed my eyes and bent my head down a little in a ‘bow’.

“Now off with you!” the ‘King’ yelled

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