

“Kendra Lea Bower, ’bout time you got your skinny ass down here. You been helping Father McKinley at St. Marks again?” Daeron’s rhythmic foot tapping signaled his pre-performance adrenaline rush, complete with an all-too-familiar hand gesture asserting, *today would be nice*.

“Yeah, and he’s still ragging on me to stay there.” Kendra darted up two steps at a time, her beloved and battered acoustic guitar thumping against her back and snagging her hair. Though the source of her trepidation eluded her, a wary foreboding sandwiched between hope and confidence dampened her mood. “Maybe you should pray for patience, Daeron.” Their band manager, Wes, indicated this might be a good break for them, but remained stingy with the details except that it would be a short night, more like an audition. *Money equals food*.

Jutting up from the serene landscape, immense castle walls portrayed a primeval struggle between the virtuous and immoral, the results determined by each individual passing through the remote gate to hell. Deep-set windows on either side of the arched, wood-plank doors beckoned the intrepid to press a curious nose against the stained glass and bear witness to the depraved activities occurring within the darkened interior. Wes had also warned them that this club was like none other, his ironfisted grasp of the details something no one could dislodge.

“If I prayed, it’d be for the strength to toss your sorry ass in the sea.” Slightly crooked front teeth gleamed white against Daeron’s sun-coppered skin to give him a certain backwoods charm. Aside from the worn threads, no one would suspect him to number among the teaming homeless.

Impatience stiffened his solid frame as he stood by the massive door, willing to tempt the fates that had tossed enough curves to enforce a demeanor exceeding his nineteen years yet failing despite the effort. A soft wash of silvery moonlight filtered through the adjacent oak leaves to add a layer of mystery to her protective friend that could neither be defined nor unraveled.

“Wouldn’t hurt you to stay there, you know.” A lopsided smile softened his admonishment.

“Hey, you won’t, so don’t hassle me. What is this place anyway, a retreat for the lost dregs of the Earth? How’d Wes get our first gig in a medieval joint like this? It’s already making my skin crawl.” Kendra hesitated at the top step, another doubt niggling the back of her mind.

“He wouldn’t say. But it’s five hundred bucks. A hundred for each of us this first night, less thereafter, but it’s steady work, which means a steady supply of food *if* you don’t give half of it away.” Daeron yanked on the iron door handle to reveal a wide antechamber lined with assorted jewel-toned tapestries, each draped over tightly mortared blocks behind gleaming silver suits of armor. Lifeless figures silently dared the stouthearted to enter, lest some dark prophecy from within awaken to subjugate their will. “Unless you want to sleep in a condemned building or at the church tonight, you sing.” Inside the door, a bull-necked man in black jeans and t-shirt nodded a greeting as they passed.

Focusing on music lent clarity of purpose despite her world having plunged into hell following her brother’s death. The band members touting her a strong-minded street rat belied the paradoxical evidence of her heart beat resembling castanets flavoring Spanish music. Stoicism was a trait not yet perfected and, like any art, needed practice.

“Yeah, yeah. Just so they’re not sacrificing virgins...” Three men wearing leathers stood near the end of the vestibule, each turning to give her a brief head-to-toe perusal that quickly morphed into blatant interest. Of the three, the closest one broadcast a stark hunger mixed with curiosity understood all too well, a shark sensing prey in murky chum waters after detecting her increased pulse and stilted movements.

*Not likely, asshats.*

“Ha! I knew it. That’s why none of the guys have put any moves on you.” Daeron’s innocent comment drew intensely inquisitive looks, like heat-seeking missiles locking onto target, her incrementally swelling anger.

“As if I’d fall for the likes of you guys.” Her playful biceps punch drew a round of silent chuckles

from the sudden admirers. “I prefer a man, thank you very much.”

“That’s our girl. Just chafe in that chastity belt ’til you find *the* one.” Daeron exchanged greetings, scowling in the face of the men’s appreciative grins.

She merely nodded a greeting, tense and waiting for the expected confrontation judging by the narrowed gaze and hooded eyes of the apparent ringleader. Her inexhaustible well of acrimony bubbled to the limits of her self-control.

“Well hello, beautiful. I’m Jenkins.” The harsh thread in his voice scored a universal tone in all men looking to score, regardless of the circumstance, boardroom or back alley.

*Here we go. Testosterone patch host number one.*

Kendra dropped her gaze, binding her increasing rage to the cold stone floor in an attempt to steady her waxing temper. A showdown could cost them the gig, money she desperately needed to survive, maybe even rent a room with the novelty of a lockable door to keep away assholes like the ones present. Those nights of blessed sleep were rare and always accompanied by the inevitable nightmares.

Light from the dragon’s head wall sconces flickered and dallied across the floor, tackled and blocked by Jenkins’ approach seen only in shadows on the stone. The shadow hand reached toward her, resurrecting one of her first lessons of street life.

*Never let ’em get their hands on you.* Fear became a separate organ, hammering adrenaline through her veins instead of blood, glazing her skin with sweat, clearing her mind, and strengthening her muscles to fight.