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VILLAIN
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HUNT THE VILLAIN

Rina Kent is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, international and No. 1 Amazon bestselling author of everything enemies-to-lovers romance.

She's known to write unapologetic anti-heroes and villains because she often fell in love with men no one roots for herself. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of darkness, a pinch of angst and an unhealthy dose of intensity.

She spends her private days in London laughing like an evil mastermind about adding mayhem to her expanding universe. When she's not writing, Rina travels, hikes and spoils cats in a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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To the hunter who became the hunted.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you're new to my books, you might not know that I write darker stories that can be intense, unsettling, and even disturbing. My characters and their journeys defy societal norms and aren't meant for everyone.

The following paragraph contains content warnings and specific kinks that may spoil plot details. If you have no triggers, feel free to skip it.

Hunt the Villain contains depictions of parental abuse, homophobia, the death of a parent due to cancer, and scenes of violence and shootings. Please be mindful of your triggers before reading.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com

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PLAYLIST

Chokehold—Sleep Token
Saints—Echos
We never dated—sombr
12 to 12—sombr
Sucker—Arcane, Marcus King
The Emptiness Machine—Linkin Park
Pacify Her—Melanie Martinez
I Wish I Knew How to Quit You—sombr
Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High?—Arctic Monkeys
Good Luck, Babe!—Chappell Roan
Sugar—Sleep Token
Aqua Regia—Sleep Token
Substitution—Purple Disco Machine, Kungs, Julian Perretta
Feel Me Now—If Not for Me
The First Time—Damiano David
Kiss Me—Rob Vischer
Fallin'—Why Don't We
Ocean Drive—Duke Dumont
Wait So Long—Swedish House Mafia
Gethsemane—Sleep Token

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You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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CHAPTER 1
VAUGHN

AGE FIFTEEN

IT'S HATE AT FIRST SIGHT.

For this setting.

For these people.

For the entire charade, really.

I truly believe this is a waste of time, and I would like to leave immediately if possible. Please and thank you.

Unfortunately, that's not something Dad would appreciate, especially considering his parting words this morning.

You're my pride, Vaughn. You go out there and show them what the New York Bratva are made of.

So here I am. In this absolute clusterfuck of a place, exchanging pleasantries and empty words with one of the mentors overlooking this mess.

Sorry, it's called a *summer camp*.

The Adirondack Mountains aren't exactly my ideal location to spend the summer. Usually, I'd be off to Russia to stay with my maternal uncles and cousins for some intense training or somewhere in the Mediterranean soaking up some sun. Not this year, obviously, as I have

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to spend time in the mountains in what's being described as a "historical" moment for the New York and Chicago Bratvas.

Also known as the strongest branches of the Russian mafia in the States.

As the Pakhan's son, it's my duty to represent my family at this camp. The mountain is supposed to be a middle-ground location, picked by both sides.

Apparently, our "mentors" for these hellish summer months are older people who are trusted by my dad and the Chicago Bratva leader since they served both sides. They're "pure" Russian, as the house manager who's now leading me to my room insisted.

Aside from the security surrounding the cottage-turned-dorm with its wooden walls and outdated common area, we're not allowed personal guards or phones, and there's no electricity after dark.

It's a form of training—both physical and mental. A way to force us into relying on one another, to scrape at decades of rivalry that probably took root back in Mother Russia before my father even existed.

An old Russian ballad drifts through the halls from an ancient radio system, the melody warped by age. The house manager's voice threads over it, polished and deliberate, speaking about the facilities and the "opportunities" this place offers.

While his refined Russian seeps into the air, my attention catches on the corners, the hairline cracks in the untreated wood…and then I see them. Small blinking cameras, half hidden.

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Of course.

Doesn't matter that Dad sent me here—neither he nor the leader of the Chicago Bratva trusts the other side. And with their heirs shoved into cohabitation, they'd both want full access to whatever happens here.

I let my gaze slide over the thick slabs of timber making up the walls, the clean but worn carpets dulled by years of footsteps, the rural paintings in faded gold frames, showing a romanticized version of eighteenth-century Russian countryside.

The windows capture my interest next. Unlike the scaled-down comforts of the cottage, they're fitted with bulletproof glass. Too narrow for anyone to climb through—not that anyone could reach this place without an army.

The camp squats on an off-limits peak, far from any trace of human life, surrounded only by towering pines and an unbroken sky.

I can already tell this summer will be long.

And painfully boring.

Outside the large balcony doors, the grounds sprawl down below, with soldiers patrolling from both sides. I can tell they're as wary as the rest of us, considering how each group keeps to half of the terrain.

There will be a lot of testosterone wars this not-so-beautiful summer.

I can't wait for the hassle to be over.

In the meantime, I need to study the other side. If there's anything I've learned from my parents, it's to always be prepared.

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Whether this truce proves to be lucrative or not doesn't matter. The Chicago Bratva will always be a thorn in our

side for as long as I live, just like they've been in Dad's and the Pakhans' who ruled before him.

As much as I loathe this whole charade, I can't deny that it's realistically my only chance to get close to them and study their tactics.

While the house manager explains the facilities, I keep my attention on their men through the doors. All dressed in full-black combat gear, not suits like our side. While everyone is carrying precision rifles, theirs seem more sophisticated.

I need to figure out their weapon supplier.

The bald-headed one with a scorpion tattooed on the side of his head seems to be the leader, considering how the others stand behind him.

Hmm.

I tilt my head to the side to watch him closely. Blond beard, taller than average. Bulky, too. Scarred hands. Army background? No. Prison?

How do I find out more about him without garnering suspicion? Should I ask a guard to spy on them?

Dad specifically told me not to go into investigative mode and just enjoy this camp, but that's simply impossible.

However, the guards are under clear orders from Dad and won't listen to my instructions if I choose to infiltrate the other side.

I need to figure out a different method—

My feet still when a black ball rolls into view, stopping dead in the middle of the invisible line dividing our side from the Chicago Bratva's. The patrolling guards freeze mid-step, rifles snapping up, barrels tracking the harmless-looking object as it rocks lazily on the dirt.

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Bang!

The blast rips through the stillness, echoing off the wooden walls, rattling the air. I move before thought can catch up, striding toward the balcony, my hand sliding to the familiar weight at my waistband. My fingers graze cold steel, but I stop short of drawing.

I shove open the balcony door and am met with a burst of laughter—raw, unbothered, and out of place in the charged quiet that follows an explosion. A guy about my age darts out from behind a massive oak, a small wired device clutched in his hand.

His white sleeveless shirt, smudged with dirt and torn at the edges, has a ragged hole in the side, and his jeans are ripped at the knees. His dark hair is a mess of waves falling over his forehead, and his skin is marred with lacerations—on his elbow, his cheek, his hands. Like he rolled down the mountain. Or fought a bear and half won.

"Yulik!" The bark comes from the bald-headed leader.

A nerve twitches in his temple, the skin flushing red as his glare locks on the guy he called by the diminutive of his name.

Yulik.

Yulian Dimitriev.

I've heard the stories about the infamous son of Yaroslav Dimitriev. Didn't expect him to look like the human embodiment of a migraine.

"Sick new device, right?" His laugh—split by a busted lip—cuts through the air, sounding unfazed by the rifles still aimed in his general direction. "I came up with it. Cy helped a little."

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"A lot." Another guy leans against the tree, lazily chewing a toothpick.

I narrow my gaze.

I didn't hear anything about a Cy or even a Cyrus joining this camp. He wasn't on any list from their side. Which makes him something I don't like—

A variable.

Scorpion Tattoo Man's voice hardens, dripping with irritation. "We were seconds away from shooting at each other. Do you realize how reckless that was?"

My thoughts match his word for word. In a place that's strung tight over a fragile truce, his stunt wasn't just reckless—it was a spark in a room full of gunpowder. All it would've taken was one twitch of a finger, and we'd be stacking bodies.

"Nah." Yulian shrugs, his voice light, almost mocking. "No one's stupid enough to be the first to pull the trigger and blow up this peace." His grin widens as he calls out, "Cy! Looks hot as fuck!"

A black hole—that's what looks *hot as fuck* to this lunatic.

Might call my dad and tell him we're done here, and we should wrap it up.

"Don't mind Yulian." The house manager who's standing in the doorway tries to smooth things over, his tone apologetic. "He's…" He hesitates, his face tinting red before he finishes, "Never mind. He enjoys defying logic and gravity for some reason."

"For some reason," I echo, not caring what that might be.

"You should go change before we meet the New York kids," Cy says to Yulian.

The latter glances at himself—dirt, blood, smudges of black powder staining his fingers—then smirks. "I'm perfectly presentable."

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The sound I make isn't quite a laugh. More like a scoff edged with disgust. It ripples through the air loudly enough for both Cyrus and the guards to look up.

Yulian's head lifts last.

He stares up at me, and I look down from the balcony, standing taller because I was taught to always present myself as the most powerful from the get-go.

The most dominant.

Yulian's lips curve and it's lopsided, as if he's intrigued. Maybe entertained.

By what?

He holds my gaze, and I stare square into his creepy eyes. One is pale blue, and the other is dark brown, like a drop of ocean in the middle of a forest. A touch of mud on ice.

It's disturbing.

But somehow…slightly riveting. I've never seen such a mismatch before.

Of course, someone like him would be a paradox of epic proportions. I've done enough research on Yulian Dimitriev to know what I'm dealing with, and he seems to be an absolute wreck of a person in every sense of the word.

He runs toward the cottage at full speed, and I expect him to come inside, so I get ready to leave, which will force him to follow me around, begging for scraps of my attention.

Because that's how it'll be at this summer camp. I don't care that he's a year older than me; I'm the one who'll dominate this relationship.

Instead of coming inside, Yulian grips the wooden pillars, uses them for balance, and then leaps and grabs the railing of the balcony, pulls himself up with impressive strength, and jumps directly into my space.

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I have to step back so he doesn't crash into me and stain my perfectly clean clothes with all that grime.

To my dismay, up close, this dirty heathen is slightly taller than me, but we're about the same build, though his shoulders are wider. His face is less angular than mine, more square and defined.

He smells of musk and the actual woods and pine. Leaves cling to his skin and hair, one stuck stubbornly behind his ear.

He offers his hand—the one covered with dirt, dried blood, and multiple lacerations.

I stare down at it but make no move to take it.

"Ah! Sorry." He wipes his palm on his equally soiled jeans, rubbing it back and forth before he offers it again.

This time, I reach into my pocket, then drop a handkerchief in his hand. "I don't touch unclean things."

If my jab affects him, he doesn't show it on his face. He's still smiling, displaying an unsettlingly open expression, not attempting to school his features or mask his emotions.

Surely, he was taught how to control his reactions.

Though it does seem like he couldn't care less about the traditional ways of doing things.

Yulian scrunches the handkerchief in his grip, running his dirt-smudged fingertip along the embroidered initials at the corner.

V.K.M.

Now, I regret giving him a high-quality handkerchief.

"Vaughn Kirillovich Morozov." He stares at me as he reads out what the initials stand for, then lifts the handkerchief and blows his nose in it.

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My jaw grinds, but I force myself to remain calm and not allow his antics to get to me. My eye twitches, though, when he wipes at the blood in the corner of his lip.

"My name is Yulian. Dad told me you and I need to get along." He speaks in perfect Russian.

When I say nothing, mostly preoccupied with the view of my ruined handkerchief, he snaps his fingers. "Oh! Do you prefer to speak in English? Heard New York kids barely know any Russian."

"I know enough to call you a rabid dog," I say in Russian.

"Rabid wolf?" he asks in English.

"Dog."

"Wolf. You said *волк (volk)*, not *нёс (pyos)*."

"I said dog."

"Hmm. If you say so."

His grin has grown wider, stretching his cheeks as he tilts his head to watch me closely. "You have a bit of an accent when you speak Russian."

"I do not."

"Then your tongue prefers wolves?"

"I said it correctly the first time. Not my problem you have hearing issues."

He just continues to grin like an idiot, savoring his correction.

Fire blossoms at the center of my chest and tightens my muscles.

"By the way." He steps closer, and since I refuse to give up any ground to the pest, we're standing nose to nose when he speaks.

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He smells of cigarettes. Nauseating.

A headache is pounding at the back of my head due to interacting with him.

Everything about this prick makes my eyes twitch.

"Let's fight!" he shouts, bouncing in place like a hyperactive toddler.

I get distracted by a strand of dark-brown hair the wind has shoved into his eye.

The blue one.

The strand is damp, like his whole head of hair is, falling in long, haphazard locks past his nape and right above his shoulders, as if he dunked his head in a bucket of water.

He blows it away, his eyes gleaming, his grin widening as he shifts back and forth in place, almost as if he's an idling engine ready to go.

"What do you say?" He jumps up and punches the air. "It's a yes, right? Right?"

I just stare him down and say nothing.

"Come on! We have to know who's the top dog around here. Or wolf. See what I did there?" He bends down, clutching his stomach as he laughs at his own distasteful joke.

"No, thanks." I turn toward the door, noticing that the old man has disappeared, abandoning me to this heathen.

Yulian leaps in front of me, his arms open wide, forbidding me from moving. "But how will we figure out who's the top?"

"I'll defeat you at actual training, not whatever this absurd thing is."

"You won't dare fight me, will you? You know I'll drag you in front of your prim-and-proper friends, don't you? Don't you?"

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"Nice try, but it's not that easy to provoke me."

"Boo. New Yorkers are cowards!" he shouts for everyone downstairs to hear.

"Who did you call a coward, motherfucker?" someone shouts behind us.

I recognize the voice without having to see who it's coming from.

Before I can stop him, Nikolai, the son of two leaders in our Bratva, jumps at Yulian, and soon, they're wrestling on the balcony, punching each other on the floor.

Yulian hits Nikolai, then hops up. He shoves the handkerchief I gave him in his pocket and hooks his index finger in my direction. "Come join the fun."

Nikolai slams into him from behind, shoving them back onto the floor.

I walk inside, leaving them to bloody each other senseless.

Now I know who Yulian reminds me of.

Nikolai.

Both spring into action first, both are reckless, and both share one brain cell.

Only, I don't dislike Nikolai. I just think he's uniquely chaotic, and I actually have some form of respect for his authenticity. This Yulian, however, seems like an absolute nightmare.

I'd prefer our other friend, Jeremy, be here to rein in Nikolai.

Unfortunately, Jeremy is training with his father this summer.

Something I'd rather be doing instead of this. Hell, I'd like to be in Russia instead of this.

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Whatever *this* is.

"Wait!"

I come to a halt in the middle of the hall when Yulian catches up to me. He stops in front of me, panting harshly, his chest rising and falling chaotically, causing the scraps of his shirt to stretch against defined muscles.

"What do you want now—"

My words are cut off when he lunges at me.

I pull away, but it's too late, because the asshole is rubbing his palm on my face.

His *bloodied* palm.

The hygiene hazard is in my goddamn face.

I throw my fist in order to shove him away, but he's already stepped back, my hand barely connecting with his chest.

A dark glimmer shines in his mismatched eyes. "Hope that's clean enough for you, Mishka. You know, because you're such a baby."

Then he turns toward Nikolai, who's chasing him.

And I'm left behind, my fists clenched, my blood boiling, with literal blood handprinted on my face.

That's it.

I officially hate the bastard.

And I will make his summer hell.

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CHAPTER 2
VAUGHN

"GO, GO!"

I spit blood on the ground as the cheering intensifies from both sides.

Yulian jumps in place, half naked. His eyes are bloodshot, and he's sporting a black eye—not my doing.

What is my doing, however, are the lacerations on his chest. I pummeled the prick to the ground less than a minute ago, but he got me good with a punch to the cheek.

He's grinning, motioning at me to come get him, and as I catch my breath, I look at his left side, where a large bruise spreads along the skin.

Yulian is full of them. Bruises, scars, burn marks on his back—don't want to know the reason for those. Ever since the camp started over four weeks ago, he's been getting new injuries all the time.

The doctor on-site expects to see him at least once or twice daily. He doesn't go himself, so he's mostly dragged there by either Cyrus or Danil—that's the name of their chief guard on this convoy, the one who has the scorpion tattoo and seems to have been given clear instructions to keep this suicidal motherfucker alive.

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A difficult feat with someone who truly seems to love challenging every law of physics available.

The last thing I want is to fight him. He's entirely too unserious for my taste, and getting involved with him is a waste of my time.

But this is physical training, and I had to take part in hand-to-hand combat with the bastard.

Guards from both sides are circling our makeshift arena. Niko tries to fight Cyrus, who completely ignores him, so he moves to two other kids sent by the Chicago mafia.

The sun blazes down on what must be the hottest, most humid day of the camp. Sweat drips along my temples and glistens over Yulian's chest.

"Come oooon!" he shouts, holding up his barely bandaged fists. "Don't just stand there, Mishka."

I lunge at him and shove him to the ground. Then the force of gravity pulls me down as well, and I end up on top of him, my knees on either side of his waist. I pull at his hair, shoving his head back with the force of it as I snarl near his ear, "I told you not to call me that."

"But it suits you—"

I strike him in the face, and he grunts, but before I can bash his head into the ground, he shoves me away. In a blur of motion, he gets on top and punches my face as he grabs my collar and pulls me up.

"I can stop calling you Mishka if you quit being a baby."

"You goddamn—"

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I drive my fist into his face again, then he does the same to me. Soon, we're rolling on the ground, wrestling

and kicking, with everyone going wild. Niko's shouting, "Finish the bastard!" while Yulian's side cheers him on with renewed energy.

They actually call him a mad dog. I heard it the other day when they were talking about today's sparring match and how their "mad dog" would avenge them for my winning against them.

Mentors watch the match closely, not really expected to interfere unless there's a fatal threat. This isn't meant to be clean combat since that doesn't exist in our world anyway.

They're here to make sure we have the necessary skills, which is why I participated in the first place. Despite the world I come from, I don't fight unless I have to.

But I must say, I've been looking forward to bloodying this prick senseless.

He's had it coming.

For over four weeks, all he's done is challenge me to fight. I've refused every time, so he's fought Niko instead. Not that that's been a chore—they're kind of evenly matched in physical strength.

Problem is, every time I've said no, Yulian's dirtied my shit with blood. First my face, then my notebooks and pens, then my damn clothes and shoes.

I nearly killed him when I opened my closet to find most of my neatly folded clothes scattered all over the room, touched by clearly bloodied hands. As if he snuck in right after a fight just to leave his mark.

He was only saved by being on the mountain to fetch wood for a punishment—which is a constant occurrence with him.

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As mad as I was, I was glad he wasn't around. I would've played right into his hands by starting a fight. The whole reason he did it was to get me to use my fists.

Which I refuse to do.

Instead, I've sabotaged his already shaky relationship with the mentors. I make sure they know whenever he's sleeping during morning class, which is always. I signal every time he misses a chore, which results in him having to do double everything.

Due to his general laziness and unwillingness to put any effort into anything that doesn't involve his fists, he gets punished the most.

He's had to do more chores than anyone, has been sent to fetch wood from the mountain almost every day, and he's been voted the worst member for three weeks straight. And you can bet I voted.

The fourth week was snatched by Nikolai for starting fights.

Still, Yulian is the worst.

He's loud, brash, and a complete idiot in the academic field. He has average learning skills and is subpar at best when it comes to strategizing. In class, Cyrus gives him ideas and answers, otherwise his absolute idiocy would've shown through by now.

The only thing this guy has is perfect shooting sheets and sheer strength.

And chaos.

And pranks, which he seems to be pulling on his guards and friends all the time.

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Though "friends" is a stretch. The two other guys

accompanying him and Cyrus seem to respect him only because of his dad.

Actually, they don't seem to like him that much.

The only one who's always with him is Cyrus.

And Cyrus isn't the son of any of the other leaders. Yes, I asked my dad when I called him soon after the camp started, and he mentioned that Cyrus's origins are being kept under lock and key. All we know is that he's being fostered by Yulian's father.

When we finish wrestling and kicking each other senseless, Yulian and I are panting and barely standing. He looks rough, his mouth bloodied, his chest bruised, sweat dripping from his temples down to the veins in his neck, ghosting his collarbone and then slipping to his chest—

I snap my eyes back to his, an uncomfortable rattling sensation coiling in my stomach.

Revulsion. It *must* be revulsion.

We're eyeing each other as we come to a standoff. One of us has to tap out, and it's *not* going to be me.

"Is that all they teach you in New York?" Yulian pouts, blood coating his lips. "I expected more."

I charge toward him, but when I try to punch him, he grabs my fist and swings me around so that my back is to his chest while he still has a hold of my arm. Then he twists my other fist behind my back.

"Tap out," he whispers so close to my ear that discomfort rushes down my spine and into my veins. "Or I'll break your arm."

I fling forward to release myself, but he twists my arm harder, and I grunt as pain spreads and intensifies.

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"You can't win against me, Mishka. It's impossible."

I throw my head back and catch him in the chin. A groan fills my ringing ears as the pain sharpens in my arm.

Then, all of a sudden, we're flung away from each other.

By guards.

I think one of the mentors who was supervising the fight spoke earlier, but I couldn't hear anything he said when I was imprisoned against Yulian.

No. I couldn't hear anything when he was whispering in my ear.

I glare at the bastard whom I suspect was dropped on his head when he was an infant. We're both panting as the mentor, a serious guy with thick-framed glasses, says, "Both of you will be punished for not ending the fight when I requested, as well as intending permanent or semi-permanent bodily harm."

Fuck.

I *did* plan to bash his head in.

I shouldn't have had that thought during a mere sparring session.

"You never specified that!" Yulian protests.

"I did before the start of the match." The man sighs. "It helps if you actually listen to instructions."

"But that's a waste of time!"

I drag my gaze to Yulian as he fights with the mentor, my temples throbbing, my fists clenching at either side of me.

The motherfucker made me break the rules. *Me*.

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I actually deviated from a code of conduct because I wanted to see his brains spill on the ground.

For a minute, I forgot about the need to get along with the Chicago mafia that my parents drilled into me and that I'm here to represent them and our organization.

For the duration of the fight, I was consumed by the one thing I was meant to control and erase.

Bloodlust.

And it was because of this degenerate motherfucker—

He stops grumbling at the mentor and glides his freaky eyes toward me. Earth and sky, that's what they look like. Elements of nature that brighten at the same time.

He says nothing, just holds my gaze as he wipes the blood off the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

And I stare back, square into his bruised face.

He looks like shit, his lip busted, the black eye looking terrifying around his blue iris, and his chest is full of bruises.

I'm proud of my handiwork—of thrashing him—but I can also feel throbbing at my lip, my chest, and my cheek. We did a number on each other, it seems.

The silence stretches for a disconcerting beat in the midst of the chatter from the others.

The mentor says something about punishing us by having us gather wood together.

Alone.

Not even the guards are allowed to accompany us.

Just the thought of spending alone time with this bastard makes my skin prickle.

Yulian is the one who gets punished, not me. Whether for causing trouble or smoking or being caught watching porn on the big screen that's reserved for events.

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And I'm pretty sure he made one of the guards tattoo some stupid doodle he made in the dirt on him the other day.

He's a walking hazard pumped full of bad habits.

And I shouldn't be lumped in the same distasteful category as him.

But it's not the punishment that's making me clench my fists.

It's the way he's watching me with that blood on his hand. I'll be damned if I let him get his germs all over me again.

Besides, he's silent.

Yulian's *never* silent.

He's a goddamn yapper who doesn't shut up—as proven by the entire essay he directed at the mentor just now.

"What?" I grumble when he just keeps staring as if he's been possessed.

He lifts a shoulder. "No one won."

"And?"

"And we still don't know who's at the top, genius."

He rushes toward me.

And it's a *rush*.

He doesn't jog. He runs at full speed as if he's being chased.

I step back, expecting him to touch me with his bloodied hand.

But he doesn't.

Yulian comes to a halt as abruptly as he sprinted forward, then speaks low. "How about we continue later? Behind the utility garage or in the basement or… Oh! When we go to gather wood. I found a sick open space near the peak that would be perfect for a fight—"

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"No." I start to bypass him, not bothering to let him finish talking.

The yapper is back, and Yulian truly doesn't shut up unless he's cut off. The only one who seems to tolerate listening to his word vomit is Cyrus, but I suspect part of that has to do with their familiarity or the fact that Cyrus doesn't talk much.

A harsh grip pulls at my hair until my skull throbs as Yulian yanks my head back so that he's looking down at me, his smile gone, his eyes darker. "Hey, it's not good manners to walk away while I'm still talking. Your parents didn't teach you that, fake Russian?"

I whack the side of my palm against his windpipe. He gags, the sound echoing in the air like a choked sob, but he doesn't release me. If anything, he tightens his grip on my hair, so I kick his shin, and then he kicks my calf.

Fuck.

My leg throbs and my skull hurts, but I'll be damned if I give this moron the upper hand.

"Hit a nerve?" He speaks in Russian, his lips tilted with a mocking edge. "Do you even understand what I'm saying? Should I speak slower?"

"I speak flawless Russian," I say in the same language.

"Flawless?" He laughs, the sound rich and smooth and…disconcerting.

"Like a native, actually. It's not my fault you don't hear correctly."

"I heard wolf just fine."

"I'll have you know that both my parents are pure Russian. My mother was even born in Russia and comes from the aristocracy, and my uncle owns an empire in Russia." I don't know why I tell him all of this. In Russian. As if I want to prove a point to him or something.

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I speak five whole languages, while this prick only knows two and is barely literate in English. I shouldn't even want to prove anything to him, but I had to.

Call it a matter of pride.

Yulian leans down, his eyes peering into my face, and that's when I see the most curious view.

The brown flecks in his blue eye. Talk about rare and… *stunning*.

"Russian royalty, huh? Hmm. That makes sense," he whispers near my cheek, his breath spreading across my skin.

A shudder ripples through me as unease tightens my chest.

I loathe the guy so much, my body is revolting at his closeness.

I lift a fist and punch him, finally forcing him to release me.

Fucking prick got blood on my hair after all.

As I'm about to pummel him to the ground again, we're pulled away from each other by Cyrus, Nikolai, and the others.

"Come on, don't be selfish." Nikolai grins, his eyes brightening. "It's my turn to fight."

"Me!" Yulian shakes off the guy who was holding him and jumps into the middle of the arena. "I want to fight again. I'll beat you, Niko."

"You wish, motherfucker!" Nikolai screams back, laughing.

And so it begins—one of their daily fights that even the mentors don't bother to interfere in anymore.

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I stand there for a while, my arms crossed, occasionally darting my tongue out to lick my cut lip and tasting copper.

Not sure why I don't get out of there right away, but something's bothering me.

The discomfort. It still hasn't disappeared, even though Yulian's left me alone.

If anything, it's spreading in my chest.

I shake my head and leave, my eyes flitting back to Yulian one final time as he exchanges blows with Nikolai, both of them laughing like maniacs.

Why the hell would I care that he instantly directed his attention to Nikolai?

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CHAPTER 3
VAUGHN

I'M DOING HANDRAIL PULL-UPS IN THE GYM when Nikolai walks in, half naked, sweaty, and with his long hair damp.

I was hoping I'd have the gym to myself before I had to go up the mountain with the clown from Chicago.

And I needed to work out, because I'm still bubbling with pent-up energy from after the fight.

"Who won?" I ask Nikolai, unable to eradicate my curiosity.

"Me, of course." He laughs. "Guess I have to thank you for tiring the bull."

"Good."

"He wants another fight after he comes back later, so I'll be working my arms." He grabs a few weights, then stands in front of the mirror and flexes, showcasing the random scattered tattoos he's started to get. "Wanna spot me?"

"Give me a minute."

Nikolai continues flexing during the whole minute, rolling his muscles and tightening his stomach.

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Even though Niko and I are around the same age, we couldn't be any more different. Where he's too outward, I'm

too inward. The reason we get along, however, is because we're both loyal to the people we care about.

As I watch him, I wonder if his flamboyant personality is the reason he gets along with Yulian. If fighting all the time is considered getting along, that is.

Nikolai points at his reflection. "Looking good."

I pull myself up with a bit of a challenge for my fiftieth rep. "Is that important?"

"Is what important?"

"Looking good in this setting. It's not like you're crushing on one of them."

He grins at me through the mirror. "Maybe I am."

I go slack, my arms screaming under my weight, and then drop from the bar, my fall louder than usual.

"What the hell, Nikolai? If the wrong person finds out, you'll be in danger. This isn't exactly our turf, and your parents always told you to be careful around outsiders or those who don't belong in the close circle."

He lets out an exasperated sigh. "I know, I know. It's not like I'll be fucking left and right in public."

My muscles are still tense as I help him set up the weights, then I frown.

Why the hell am I stressing out anyway?

Yes, Nikolai came out as bi a year ago and even threw a party to celebrate it, but he didn't come out to his grandfather or uncles or even the elders in the organization. He needs to be careful about the places he announces he loves dick as much as pussy.

This camp is *not* one of those places.

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"Relax. It's just a harmless crush. For now." He laughs as he lies down on the bench.

"Who are you crushing on?" I stand next to him as he lifts.

He blows out a breath, his face reddening with exertion, but he doesn't say anything, completely focused on his task.

"Yulian?" I ask, sounding almost bored, but that sharp malaise settles at the bottom of my stomach.

"Yulian?" He hands me the bar, and I help him deposit it on the hooks.

"Yeah."

"What gave you that idea?"

"I don't know. All the fighting you guys do?"

"Fuck no. I wouldn't trust that crazy motherfucker anywhere near my dick." He sits up. "Also, pretty sure he's straight, and you know I don't fuck with straight guys."

"How do you know he is?"

"Saw him laughing when he was FaceTiming a girl in secret."

"He could be bi like you."

"Nah, didn't sense the vibes. Anyway, I'm not interested in him whatsoever."

"Good. He's bad news."

"I'm bad news, too!"

"Not as bad as he is."

"Cyrus, on the other hand…" He whistles. "I love guys who are so put together. I wonder what it'd take to make him crumble."

"How do you know he's not straight?"

"Just a hunch, I guess?"

I drop the barbell he's pressing, and he struggles to hold it up. My eye twitches, and a spark of agitation ripples through my stomach, spreading like wildfire.

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It takes me a few moments to regain my composure. "What type of *hunch*, Niko?"

"Queer men things. Not something you'd understand. Cy is queer, in a sense. Not sure what yet, but I'll find out."

"Did he give you permission to call him that?"

"Call him what?"

"Cy. Only Yulian calls him that. None of the others on their side dares to."

"It's cuter than Cyrus."

"Ever thought maybe that's the reason he wouldn't want practical strangers to call him by his nickname?"

"Meh. It's just a name."

I grab the bar from him and set it down with a clank. "Have you figured out why he's being fostered by Yulian's dad?"

"I know it started, like, two years ago, because he moved in with Yulian's family when he was fourteen, and he's sixteen now."

"Did he mention bloodline relations with the Dimitrievs or any reason why they'd take him in?"

"No. He changed the subject when I asked him."

Of course he did. It was a long shot to have Niko investigate anyway.

"Buuut, Yulian said Cy is his brother from another mother—figuratively, I assume." He sits up. "Also, the dad is here."

"The dad?"

"Yulian's dad. The leader dude from Chicago? He showed up when we were fighting, and everyone on the other side looked terrified. Maybe Yulian lost because of that."

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"Yaroslav is here?"

"Yeah, whatever his name is."

"Why the fuck didn't you say that earlier, Niko?"

"Didn't think it was important."

That tracks.

Nothing except for violence and sex is important to Nikolai.

I rush out of the gym, wishing I had access to my phone so I could message Dad.

Yaroslav wasn't supposed to show up at the camp. Neither is my dad.

Hell, even the upper echelons of both organizations shouldn't come here.

I have a bad feeling about Yaroslav's sudden appearance.

It takes me a while to reach Yulian's room, which he shares with Cyrus.

This camp might have been started to bring us together, but we've both kept interacting mostly with our respective sides of the fence. We even eat at separate tables. I work out either alone or with Niko. Yulian works out with Cyrus or their men.

We only really get together in classes or when Yulian and Niko are fighting.

My feet come to a halt near the closed door. Some muffled noises are coming from inside, but I can't really make them out.

So I head to the next room and sneak inside. It's a mentor's, but he's out grocery shopping today.

I slide to the balcony and jump across to Yulian's, careful and silent.

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Through the ajar glass balcony door, I can clearly see him standing in the middle of the room.

Yaroslav Dimitriev. The man whom even my dad thinks twice about before stepping into his territory.

He looks similar to Yulian, but his hair is a lighter blond, and both his eyes are pale, icy blue—like Yulian's left eye. A beard shadows his face, and he's unnaturally tall and bulky, his frame threatening to tear through the seams of his gray three-piece suit.

That's where the similarities end. Yulian's skin is warmer, his features sharper, his face undeniably more striking. From my research, I learned his mother came from a minority ethnic group in the North Caucasus, which explains the darker complexion, the almond-shaped eyes, the quiet beauty that sets him apart from his father's brutish presence.

I flatten myself against the wall next to the glass door and remain still.

This is risky, and Yaroslav will have my balls if he figures out I'm spying on him, but this will likely be my only opportunity to get some information about him and his Bratva, so I can't miss the chance.

Besides, he shouldn't be here, and I need to find out why he chose to ignore that rule and the consequences.

"Twenty punishments in a month." Yaroslav's gruff voice carries through the room as he counts on his hand. "Smoking, drugs, loss of focus, wandering around without security, not improving learning skills." He switches to the other hand. "Fighting without supervision, poor results on intellectual tests, average strategizing, spending too much time on meaningless activities."

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"Actually, I was making a bomb—"

Slap!

My muscles tighten as the harsh sound of flesh against flesh echoes in the room. Yaroslav hits his son so hard, he falls on the wooden floor, coughing.

Something in my chest twists when Yulian paints a smile on his cut lips and jumps up again, dusting his shirt off as if the hit were nothing.

That's not the first time it's happened.

Fuck. The black eye and the bruises on his side…?

Did Yaroslav come around last night as well?

"Have I or have I not told you to wait for permission to talk?"

"But it'd take a long time to mention everything I got punished for," Yulian says, then stiffens.

For a hit.

He knows he'll get hit and yet still runs his mouth?

What on earth is *wrong* with him?

His dad flexes his fist but doesn't hit him again. "What's with all the punishments? You have to do better than these lackluster results."

"I'm the best at shooting in this camp."

"That's not enough. You have to be the best at everything, or strive to be. But it seems you're trying to drag my name through the mud on purpose."

"I wouldn't say that." He lifts a shoulder. "You said I had to be here, not that I should be the best. You need to specify what you want from me, you know."

"I'm *specifying* that you need to do better. If you don't want to get Alina in trouble, that is."

Something curious overtakes Yulian's body language. Something that didn't happen when Yaroslav slapped him.

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A tightening of shoulders, a slight lift of lips, almost as if in a snarl.

It's the first time I've seen him angry. He's always clowning around, so I thought he lacked the capacity to be angry.

"Don't touch her." His voice is deep and raw, as if his vocal cords are ripped.

"Then stop being a fucking disgrace. You're my heir. Act like it, and stop glaring."

"I'm just looking."

Yaroslav drives his fist into Yulian's face.

Thwack.

It's stronger than the slap, and it sends Yulian flying against the wall. The moment he hits the ground, Yaroslav kicks him in the stomach.

"Fucking useless piece of shit. All you do is piss me off. Talentless, stupid, irrelevant motherfucker. Kirill sends a perfect son, and I have this fucking moron who only knows how to get injured."

"You're the one injuring me, though," Yulian grunts, sounding out of breath even as he tries to protect his stomach with his hands. His lip has busted open, and blood drips on the wood, forming a small pool.

"Shut." Kick. "The." Kick. "Fuck." Kick. "Up."

Yulian curls into himself, and I reach for the knob.

Fire tears through me like a volcano cracking from the core. Truth is, my muscles have been tight since the first time he slapped Yulian.

I don't give a fuck if I'm not supposed to be here. I don't even understand *why* I'm this worked up. I seem to

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end up in this state every time Yulian is around, but it's worse now.

My father never hit me, so this concept of beating children is foreign—so foreign, it makes my blood boil.

Or maybe it's the name-calling.

Or the way Yaroslav spits out hurtful words without an ounce of respect for his son.

No wonder Yulian seems messed up.

Maybe that's why I feel the urge to act—guilt. For judging him before knowing he's been his father's punching bag. Realizing maybe he talks too much because every time he opens his mouth at home, he gets hit for it.

Before I can step in, Yaroslav kicks him one last time and then steps back.

"This is my final warning, you worthless piece of shit. Mess this camp up and you'll never see Alina again."

He turns and leaves. Yulian struggles to sit upright, wincing as he runs his tongue over his cut lip, licking the blood away.

I take a step, then stop.

Because what the fuck would I say?

I'm sorry your father is an abusive piece of shit would make things worse, not better.

Someone like Yulian wouldn't want pity. I wouldn't either if I were him.

He stands, staring down at his feet, expressionless.

Ten seconds.

Twenty.

Sixty.

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He stays like that long enough that I find myself holding my breath, waiting for him to show a reaction.

I remain rooted in place, almost as if unable to move.
No—refusing to move.
He's looking at the floor.
I'm looking at him.

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CHAPTER 4
YULIAN

WELL, THIS IS INCONVENIENT.

Fuck me sideways.

This entire stupid camp is a waste of time and space and effort, but I have a feeling that if I'd voiced those genius thoughts, I would've walked out from under Dad's shoe with a broken rib.

Not the first time that would've happened, but the memory of the pain makes me rein in that very logical thought of just fucking shit up.

"Got a smoke?" I lie on the floor and prop my feet on the side of the bed, where Cy's lying with a thick book in hand and stares down at me like I'm a freak.

Okay, I am, but he doesn't have to make it so obvious.

"Your dad said if anyone is caught supplying you with cigarettes, he'll use the butts to burn their faces."

"Oh no, the formidable Cy is scared of dear old Dad?"

"Shut your trap. Cigarettes aren't good for you."

"Yes, Mom!" I do a mock salute. "You got them or nah?"

He watches me for a few more minutes, tilting his book to the side, which is…well, let's say shit has hit the fan if Cy finds anything more interesting than his boring books.

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His gray eyes scan my face as if he's trying to find the little freak he knows so well behind the bruises my dad left as a parting gift. Thank God Cy wasn't in the room when that happened, but as soon as he walked in a while ago, he noticed exactly what was up.

Sometimes, like today, I hate that he sees me at my worst. It makes me feel worthless.

Like a weakling, as Dad says all the time.

Finally, Cy reaches under his pillow and produces a Zippo and a pack of cigarettes, then throws them on my stomach. "You look like you need them."

"No shit." I slide a cigarette between my lips and light it as I fall back on the wooden floor while taking a long drag.

The nicotine hit doesn't quiet the chaos, but it dulls my senses to a melody of nothingness or some shit.

Anyhow, I'd love a drink as well. I'm about to bring it up to Cy so he'll make it happen—after some nagging, because he's an old man trapped in a teenager's body. Not that I can't play my useless Yaroslav's son card to make the guards do my bidding, but they report back to Dad in a flash, and he loves to make me see his fist and the sole of his shoe any chance he gets.

Cy can get any shit he wants just by sweet-talking his way through it or manipulating people into thinking it's for some made-up reason.

I stare at him, and he's still not focused on his book. Fuck me, that's an anomaly.

Cyrus has the face of someone trustworthy. Ethereally handsome with platinum-blond hair, gorgeous East Asian-shaped light-gray eyes, sharp features that bewitch

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girls, and a silver tongue that makes everyone fall for him instantly.

Truth is, he wasn't always so captivating with his speech. When I first met him a couple of years ago, when he first moved in with us, he didn't speak. At all.

We were already wary about the guy whom Dad dropped in our midst, telling us he was part of the family now. I thought he was his son—wouldn't have been the first time he'd spawned kids outside of marriage, since I already had two older half-brothers, but no, Cyrus clearly didn't belong to Dad.

Because Yaroslav abuses his sons, and he's always been more protective of Cyrus.

However, Cy didn't speak to us and refused to utter a word for weeks. He looked like he came out of a nightmare—or maybe was still living in one. The only evidence that remained of whatever had happened to him was the scar that slashes along the corner of his mouth, breaking up his fae-like looks a bit.

Mom and Alina tried their best to make him feel welcome, but he just *refused* to speak. During that time, he'd stand in front of the gate for hours as if he were waiting for someone to come pick him up. He still does that sometimes—just stands outside for a long time, staring at the horizon.

Dad made me take him to school and I wasn't thrilled, mainly because Cy was an antisocial freak who was hated by everyone. I was the opposite, quite popular—naturally—and was warned by my friends to stay away from him.

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No one talked to him, and in the beginning, I couldn't care less, but as the days went by, I felt bad for him, so I

sat with him at lunch and yapped endlessly about the most random shit. At first, he ignored me, but I grew on him.

The first thing Cy said, months after he was fostered by my parents, was, "You talk too much, Yulian."

After that, I adopted him.

No, really. I'm his only real friend. Kind of improved his image, too, which he's been changing over the past couple of years to serve his agenda better. Whatever that agenda is.

"What?" I ask when he continues watching me silently.

"What did your dad say?"

"Before or after he kicked me to near death?"

"Be serious."

I blow out a long cloud of smoke. "Same old bullshit about not humiliating him."

"Told you not to test your luck too much."

I shrug. "I was just acting normal."

"You were acting beyond normal, knowing full well he'd get reports of your behavior. Would it kill you to stay in line for just a few weeks?"

"Nah, not for me." I grin, then wince when the cut in my mouth throbs and I taste blood.

It's like a neuron snaps in my head, a current, a bout of electricity.

A goddamn spark.

I've always had this sense of restlessness. Ever since I can remember, I just can't *stop*.

Can't stay still.

It's just impossible.

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Hitting, punching, talking, being hit, being punched, being cussed out nonstop.

Well, fuck me.

Keeping the cigarette in my mouth, I flip over and do some push-ups, clapping my palms in between. This rhythm dulls the electricity to a spasm.

A throb.

A flare, maybe.

Cy releases a long breath. "At this rate, you'll go home in a body cast."

"Not happening," I speak around the cigarette, "you know how Mom worries and Alina cries whenever I get hurt."

"Then put more of an effort into this camp."

"I'm putting in effort."

"Fighting Niko and taunting Vaughn every chance you get is *not* effort."

I pause and tilt my head to the side. "No?"

"You're only hurting your case by going against a perfectly groomed mafia heir. He's already proved to be superior to you in every aspect."

I jump up, drag the cigarette from my lips, and put up a hand. "Not every aspect. I'm a better shooter, and he can't win against me in a fistfight."

"Seriously?"

"Oh, and he got punished for the first time with me." I waggle my brows. "I'll punch the shit out of him when we're in the forest… Speaking of which, I should work out and hit the showers before we take off. Wanna join?"

"No, thanks. Just…" He runs a hand over his face, looking older than the old man Danil. I mean, Danil isn't that old, but he acts as if he's ancient. Same with Cy. Got some telepathy thing going on between them.

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Danil should've been influenced by me, just saying.

"Vaughn goes by the book," Cy says.

"And?"

"And he's predictable. He won't cause a ruckus, wouldn't break rules he doesn't have to. He walks around like someone who already has the weight of becoming Pakhan on his shoulders. He's so mellowed out and level-headed because he has to be. He's *the* Kirill Morozov's son, after all, and someone like Vaughn will do everything in his power to live up to his father's legacy."

"I still don't see why you're bleeding my ears with nonsense. He's such a golden boy and barely Russian, what does that have to do with me…except that I want to humiliate him? Will totally fight him and win—"

"Yuliy," Cy cuts me off. "Focus. He can be an asset, not an enemy. The New York Bratva are different from back home. You have a rare chance to forge a bond with him and use it in the future when you need it the most. Namely, when you'll no longer be satisfied with being number two."

"Me? A bond with Vaughn? I'd rather punch him."

"Would punching him help you someday?"

"No, but it'll feel good."

He shakes his head. "Just think about it."

"I don't do that. You do it for me."

"We're all alone. You don't have to pretend to be clueless."

I lift a shoulder and leave the room so he'll stop bitching.

I swear to fuck, Cy has personally chosen to become the nagger-in-chief of my life, talking and whining and warning.

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If they could all shut up, I'd be having the best time ever.

Minus the hitting.

And the facade.

And my entire existence, really.

But hey, Cy, Mom, and Alina are the exceptions. Mom and Alina are the reasons I've survived thus far, and Cy is my bro.

Doesn't matter that we're not actually brothers.

Cy's dad had some sort of an empire, similar to the empire my dad married my mother for—to get a piece of the business and inherit my dedushka's power.

Snuffed my mother's light in the process.

But anyway, Cy being orphaned and fostered by Dad wasn't a coincidence and definitely wasn't done out of the goodness of my father's heart, if you can't tell.

Yaroslav only cares about someone when they have a purpose.

Mom, Alina, and Cy.

Me? Let's say he'd exchange me with one of my older brothers the first chance he gets.

If only they weren't illegitimate children.

And if only he weren't so set in old rules and traditional to the point of extremism.

So he's ended up with me—his only legitimate male heir.

The *wrong* one.

My brothers would make better heirs than I, but they'll never be allowed to, and I can't give them the chance, because they're like those tyrant kings from ancient empires.

The moment they take over, they'll murder all eligible heirs to snub resistance at the source.

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Well, good luck wiping me out. I'm a roach no one can get rid of.

But I have this grand plan only Cy is aware of, which includes me building some connections. Now, I'm not one for plans. You ask me about strategies, and I'll pretend to be an airhead with frat-boy tendencies.

You know, a hopeless idiot, as my dad loves to call me.

But this one plan? I'll carry it out as if my life depends on it.

Actually, my life *does* depend on it, and so does Alya's and my mom's, so it kind of needs to succeed.

Has to succeed.

It'll take years, but I'm nothing short of persistent.

A sea turtle, if you will. I don't care how long it takes. I'm crawling toward that finish line no matter how dangerous the path is.

Slam.

"Fuck!" I raise my fist, about to hit whoever's run into me, but my hand remains suspended in midair upon seeing the one person Dad seems to have a metaphorical hard-on for.

Vaughn this and Vaughn that. Kirill's son this and Kirill's son that.

I swear he'd transplant me into his shell if he had the chance.

Well, Vaughn, aka Russian royalty per his gloating about aristocracy links, is Yaroslav's dream all wrapped up in perfection.

He has perfect hair, always styled to precision, not a strand out of place.

Well-groomed, boyish features already sharpening into angular lines, high cheekbones, and the calmest, most undisturbed eyes I've ever seen.

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Nothing like my creepy eyes.

His are a blend of brown and green, that blurred edge where earth meets trees in a forest. But it isn't the color—it's the look. The untouchable, holier-than-thou weight they carry without effort.

The constant reminder that guys like him exist—perfect lives, perfect scores, perfect fathers.

Probably perfect mothers, too.

Perfect grades, perfect manners, perfect physical condition, even perfect combat skills.

So great.

So admirable.

So fucking *irritating*.

Vaughn Morozov looked down on me the second we met, and I'll never forgive him for it.

Yup. Call the petty police.

Anyhow, I'd love to rip Vaughn fucking Morozov a new one, so he'll stop shoving people into the tiny boxes he has in his head.

They're probably color-coded and in alphabetical order.

I let my lips curl in the wide grin he hates so much. "Oh no. Mr. Perfect doesn't have perfect vision?"

Now he'll say I'm the one who wasn't watching where I was going while looking down his nose at me.

Again.

Cy's right. This prick is predictable.

I wait and wait, but Vaughn says nothing. He has a hand in his shorts pocket, and his white shirt is wet at the top. Not sure if it's because he spilled water from the bottle he's carrying or he's been working out.

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Actually, uh, he was definitely working out. He wouldn't continue to wear a wet shirt if he'd spilled something on it. I know because I saw him remove his shirt the other day after Nikolai spilled some lemonade on it.

It was one of the few times he's gotten naked—half naked, to be precise.

I kept watching him that time as I licked the blood from my lip after a fight with Nikolai. The taste of violence exploded on my tongue while I took in the view of his lean abs glistening under the golden rays of the sun.

Once again, I find my attention zeroing in on the pulse that throbs in his neck.

His neck is coated with a sheen of sweat, and a droplet slides down it, gliding over his protruding collarbone before dissolving in the collar of his shirt.

"What?"

My gaze snaps back to his face at his question. No—actually, my eyes rest directly on his mouth because it's also glossy, slightly pink. Probably from the water.

And I'm just looking at it.

His lips, I mean.

It's like the most normal thing. Lips. Everyone has them.

And yet I can't help noticing how his lower lip is slightly fuller than the upper one, and that for some reason, now, of all times, a droplet of water is stuck at the dip at the top.

"Yulian?"

"Huh?" I say like a goddamn idiot, and Vaughn frowns, probably because I'm gawking at him as if I were caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

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Which might as well be the case.

What. The. Fuck.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asks, his tone not at all as abrasive or cold or disinterested as when he usually talks to me.

If anything, he seems to be a bit…flustered? Out of his element?

I must be imagining it, because the Vaughn I know would never be either of those things.

"Just checking to see if you're watching where you're going." I mask my inner disturbance with a grin, because seriously, my brain still hasn't told me what the actual fuck is going on.

I mean it, brain. What the actual fuck?

I'd be lying if I said this was the first time I'd found Vaughn's muscles or lips…fascinating?

Interesting?

Arousing?

Whatever it is kind of gave me a strange, titillating feeling when I fought Vaughn earlier today. It's why I held him against my chest and demanded he tap out while keeping my lower half as far away as possible.

Let's say it didn't help that his skin flushed a bit, and I was so utterly fascinated by the way his shirt stretched across his chest, how his abs flexed, and how he wore my blood so well.

Nikolai killed the feeling when I fought him, thank fuck, but I was still disturbed.

I'm even more unsettled now, because why the fuck do I keep wanting to peek at his lips?

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"You're the one who bumped into me." He points a finger at my chest.

His finger is *on* my chest.

The stupid discomfort floods my lungs until I can't breathe.

It hurts.

Not because of the bruises Dad gifted me, but due to the spark of electricity that races through me, then surges and heightens.

All of a sudden, it's like an earthquake that crumbles all of my insides.

I instinctively push back, wincing, because the lack of contact stopped the electricity, but it didn't stop the pain.

The fuck?

Vaughn visibly cringes, taking a step back and shoving a hand in his pocket.

He's *cringing* at touching me?

Fire erupts at the bottom of my stomach, and I don't understand why.

This asshole has always seen me as someone who's beneath him. A freaking rock in his shoe.

He ignores me most of the time and calls me names when he doesn't.

Irresponsible.

Chaotic

Unclean.

Imbecile.

Waste of space.

Those are a few of the colorful words he's used to describe me. So this shouldn't feel any different. He's cringed at my actions more times than I can count, and I gave him the metaphorical middle finger as I repeated those actions just to spite him.

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