

## I

She couldn't believe it. She was tough as nails— tougher even— but he wouldn't give her a second look. "*Overqualified?*" *Overqualified my ass...* she thought. *How can you be overqualified for kicking ass? I'll show him overqualified...*

She walked into Chima's dripping with rainwater. 87th was home to Olin Bedevere's chunk of the pleasure district. Bars there were known hangouts of Olin's thugs. Chima's was practically a second home to all his favorites. She used the jacket of one of his best boys— Carl Sanchez— to dry her face. He was still wearing it when she grabbed him.

"Yo!" he said, stepping away from her, "Qué tu problem, eh?" She promptly punched him in the face. He fell back into his buddy Rafael's lap. Rafael quickly pushed Carl off of him and back onto his stool. He stepped up to the newcomer.

"Você não tem *any* idea who you're fuckin' with dollface."

She smiled at him with half her mouth.

And you do?" She wiped a springy, wet strand back from her eyes.

"*Mira* I don't know who you think you are, but you may wanna turn your ass around. The man you just hit— Imma let you in on a little secret— is one of the top picks for Bedevere's new bodyguard, *personally* recommended by ol' Loveless hisself. The rest of minhas *colegas* and me, mais, we don't take kindly when pendejas como voce nos molestas us when we aren't even working." Rafael smiled and gestured to the door, "Now why don't you go enjoy your night. Maybe play out some of this here *agresão* with your *boyfriend*." His smile darkened. "Before you get hurt." She looked down at his hand and spit on it.

"My 'boyfriend' was killed last week. By six of your *colegas*." Then she grabbed his forehead and hit it with her own. After knocking two strongmen unconscious in under five minutes, she left the barroom stunned. No one knew whether to rush her or try not to piss her off any further. Most of the room chose the latter. Three of the newer--and cockier-- thugs decided they could take her. Tommy "Bananas," Chet Corby and Donny. Bedevere's freshest pick from Loveless's ranks. It's doubtful they knew they were still in their testing phase. By challenging this ballsy woman they had already failed. She had Donny bent over the bar with his arm twisted behind him when one of the onlookers stepped up to her.

"Look, as annoying as Donny is, breaking his arm isn't gonna get you anywhere." She stopped snarling at the back of Donny's head to glare at the onlooker, who held out a hand, saying

"The name's Lawless."

She grabbed Lawless's outstretched hand and started another fight. This one lasted a good ten minutes. She chipped her tooth and nearly broke Lawless's arm. The only thing that stopped her was an assurance that Lawless had no affiliation with Loveless or Bedevere— didn't even like the guy.

"I'm a PI— detective privado?" She took a step away and crossed her arms. Lawless was a familiar name, but she couldn't place it. Somebody her mom had known maybe.

"I like a woman with spunk," Lawless grinned and pulled out a cigarette as a peace offering. She didn't smoke, so she nodded to the bar instead. Five stools cleared as they walked towards the counter. She asked for two whiskeys— with a dash of hot sauce.

"What's your name anyway?"

She dipped her finger in the glass and let a drop drip from the end of her nail (they were only long on her right hand) onto her lip. She licked it off. The whole bar was watching. Waiting for an answer to who this powder keg of a woman was.

"Victory Starlight." She said it more as a challenge than an answer, a declaration of defiance rather than a simple name. She leaned back, elbow and forearm heavy on the bar. "What kinda name is Lawless anyway? Pretty silly for a detective." She waited for Lawless to take the bait, make a crack about Victory Starlight not being a real name either, give her any excuse to finish breaking that arm. Lawless grinned and took a shot. Didn't even have to shake off the burn.

"As I was saying earlier, beating up Donny here ain't gonna help. Or any of Bedevere's men, who we all know are just Loveless's castaways. Neither of them lookin to hire someone like you, ya know, with real *bite*. You're better off seeing the Madame." Victory's arm twitched in preparation for a slap. "As a *bodyguard*. She likes women close, likes that they think too much." Victory eyed Lawless suspiciously and downed her shot, maintaining eye contact.

"So, *detective*. You seem to know a lot about a lotta things. Know where a young lady such as myself might get in touch with the Madame?" Lawless's head tilted back and to the left.

"That corner." The night Victory met her new boss was ten years ago. She was 19 at the time.

## II

"The Madame" was short for The Madame of Mingles Lane. She also went by Myrtle Schafer— although only in comfortable circles. Victory Starlight was in her most intimate. From the moment Schafer and Starlight met, Victory's life changed. She went from one underworld (the cramped housing under the old river) to another.

The bar was still tense, but cooling down. The bartender watched the injured men warily, he didn't want any more trouble. Myrtle smiled warmly as Victory sat down.

"Not many people can rough up your new friend. Looks like you made a good impression."

"Ya'll buddies or somethin'?" Victory asked. Myrtle raised an eyebrow.

"Or something." She chuckled slightly. "Done some work for some of my... *people*. Tried to get Lawless to work for me, but some people just don't like contracts. That was a few years back... the position I was trying to fill is still open. Nobody's been quite the right fit. Until now."

Victory liked working for the Madame. She paid well— with *benefits*. She liked all her workers to be healthy; after all, disease was bad for business. A hefty paycheck wasn't the only reason Victory had looked for work with one of the Big Three, or even the most significant one.

While the Madame didn't require any specific uniform, Victory had her own. Unless she had to wear something specific, everyday she wore a crop top, combat boots and cargo pants. If it was cold or rainy she wore a long, black coat with a tight weave to keep out moisture. The jacket was the older than she was; her mom had given it to her as a present when she turned 16. She was wearing that jacket when she met Trin. And it kept her warm and dry at his funeral.

"Darling, are you daydreaming vengeance again?"

Victory raised her head up from the desk as the Madame came in. She shook her head, distant memories fading from her mind.

"It's not good to linger on the past," Myrtle Schafer warned, "at least not on an empty stomach. Let's say we get some breakfast. We've got a big day ahead of us." Victory nodded with a slight grumble and got up.

Although the Madame had been initially impressed with Victory Starlight, she had needed to make sure Victory would be perfect. For the first month, Victory worked at the Madame's least guarded Pleasure House. It was also the wildest. After that, she was a personal bodyguard for the Madame's middle-aged nephew— who everyone knew was brat, the Madame included— for a year. For the next four she was

in the Madame's personal team. She'd been the Madame's personal bodyguard and closest confidante for the last five.

They always had breakfast at a certain Turkish coffee shop— a small place on 284th. A steaming coffee, a tall glass of hot tea, two pastries. Victory sipped the steam from the lip of her cup, letting the vapor flow down her throat. The Madame had already drunk half her coffee. Watching her bodyguard savor her tea, she said,

"We're gonna visit an old friend today. A couple friends, actually. Dwight and Olin have some 'pressing' news to share."

### III

"Why is it that you want to work for Bedevere, of all people?" Myrtle had asked Victory after they left the bar. It took the Madame two years to get the whole story. She was quite sympathetic. She didn't like her other "colleagues" much. Dwight was a keen businessman, but cruel. He had a sharp double-edge that she couldn't trust. He was also pretentious. Olin on the other hand was simple. He got people high. Low. Drunk. Faded, twisted, diagonal, upside-down, cross-wayed. Everything, anything, you name it. He was the only member of the Big Three that didn't command the respect of the other two. He was also powerless without them. Loveless supplied all his thugs. The Madame bribed and blackmailed the right people. Olin just gave them money for a job well one. He was a lazy brute, and his men were just as bad.

It was a group of Olin's men that Victory needed to find. Unfortunately they were his favorites. Over the past decade she'd found all but one—and a reason why. If it wasn't for the Madame she might not've found the first five.

"Face to face?" Victory asked. Madame Schafer hadn't met directly with both her partners in crime in two years. Which was usually for the best. If someone was smart, they could take out the heart of the city's crime in one blow.

"Yes. It's about time, and some... *issues* have been arising. Some things that have the fellas a little shaken."

The Madame and Victory left the coffee shop, the green eyed owner sending them off with the end pieces of fresh-baked bread. It was always good to have influential patronage. However, no one really knew what the Madame looked like. The coffee shop owner only knew due to intuition and a few humid afternoons with Victory. There were plenty of rumors—that she had skin paler than milk with hair like flames which red color was only rivaled by her scarlet eyes, that she was an Amazon, a sprightly excuse of a woman, bald, eyes like onyx—and she let them bubble and burst. In reality, she looked like your average black southern grandmother. She liked to get around on her own (old habits die hard, after all) and the rumors provided the necessary camouflage. The only thing anyone knew for sure was how long she'd been in power. Just shy of twenty-five years, when she'd taken over a small mob that ran non-regulation brothels and became the most popular name in the business.

Their bullet-tram capsule shot them to the City center in about five minutes. Then they took the Main Street descender and hopped off at what looked like a maintenance exit, but was really a smuggler's tunnel. They followed it to the basement of Olin's compound. He'd refused to meet anywhere else. He hadn't left his house for two weeks. His strongman and butler, Ramón, met them in the basement, which was lodged in the base of a small hill. Victory had always liked Ramón, and she

suspected the Madame did as well. He was the one they usually dealt with in place of Olin. He had a sense of humor unique to his style of communication.

"This way" the nodding motion of his head and slight bow beckoned, with a touch of sarcasm at the formality. Two elevators, an escalator and a spiral staircase later, they arrived at Olin's parlor. Dwight was already there, watching Olin pace. Normally he would've been enjoying Olin's agitation (the way a cat stalks a fish in a tank), but this time he looked worried. He'd even brought his bodyguard, Tiger, who normally kept tabs on his daughter. After the Madame sat, Victory walked over to the wet bar with Ramón and Tiger.

At 5'8" Victory was neither the tallest or the shortest, although her fro almost reached Ramón's brow line. Tiger was tiny, barely breaking five feet. She was the only woman Dwight had ever hired as personal muscle (after he saw she could drink all his men under the table) and probably the only person he fully trusted, including his own family. He liked Tiger because of her enormous potential to be underestimated. Myrtle liked her because she wasn't Dwight. Victory appreciated her for more *personal* reasons.

Olin stopped pacing. Ramón's face tensed, drawing the three rings running down the bridge of his nose closer together. Olin turned and faced the room, his eyes bloodshot and ringed with dark circles.

"I assume you've all heard about Mirshka?"

## IV

Mirshka was one of the few people who brought out the compassion in Olin Bedevere. Olin's sister Greta adopted her when she was five years old; she couldn't have her own children because she was infertile. The same condition that caused Greta's infertility later took her life. Olin had always helped his sister raise Mirshka, and had been taking care of them since Mirshka was ten.

"I was getting ready for her wedding." Olin's voice was grave and shaky. "She was so happy... excited to be starting a new life with Ethel." He shook his head, a single tear flying from his face. "I just can't help feeling like this is my fault. How could anyone want to hurt such a beautiful soul?"

*Good question*, Victory thought, resisting the urge to glare. It wasn't the time to bring up her old grief, but she couldn't help wondering if Olin's grief could come in handy. Maybe it would create some empathy between them. Or at the very least weaken his resolve to protect a man he hadn't seen in two years.

"Won't do any good to blame yourself." Loveless said softly. He looked almost as shaken as Olin, but as usual far more composed. He was Mirshka's godfather, after all, and his own daughter was around the same age. He motioned for Tiger to bring him a drink. He swirled the amber liquid around the snifter, looking at it but not focusing.

"It doesn't get any better. And besides, it isn't just you. Whoever this is— he's hurting all of us." He made a circular gesture, indicating all of the Big Three. "Some of my men's daughters, some exes... even my waitress... JoAnne." Waitress was Dwight's codeword for bookkeeper, he ordered breakfast from the same diner everyday, communicating with JoAnne through menu items and specials. He always paid her through his tips. Tiger squeezed his shoulder lightly. He reached up to squeeze her hand back. None of them had ever seen him so raw, and no one else could.

"You should go see your daughter," Olin said, leaning against a cabinet.

"Excuse me?" Dwight sat up. "What are you suggesting? That I can't protect her?" Olin shook his head.

"Just that you should cherish what you have. Before it's too late... whenever that is."

"*Cherish?* What do you know about our relationship?" Dwight's eyes narrowed and darkened.

"I know you have Tiger there watching her instead of going to check in on your own—" Dwight started to interrupt, but Olin went on. "But. I also know that she didn't stay in Istanbul with her mother." Dwight stared but didn't respond. Victory looked over at the Madame, who was lounging on a chaise across from Dwight. She'd been quiet. Her brow was slightly crinkled in concern, but not on the conversation. Ramón went over and handed her a V.S. (Whiskey with hot sauce) on the rocks. She took it absentmindedly and sipped it.

"What about you, Madame?" Myrtle looked up with a start. Olin and Dwight were looking at her with tired eyes, almost hopeful for something. "Have any of your people been—"

"No," she answered. "Not yet."

"Well if they haven't found you..." Olin started.

"Then maybe there's some hope," Dwight finished. "No one knows who you are. Which means no one knows who's close to you, who really matters... who can really hurt you." Olin nodded in agreement.

"What can we even do with that, though?" Victory interjected. "Hide out 'til this sick motherfucker gets bored or gives up?" The Big Three were at a loss for words. The men hadn't though it all the way through and the Madame was still thinking. Tiger shook her head, her rosy curls bouncing together.

"No. We keep safe what we can and *find* this murderous cunt." Her deep scottish accent grew thicker when she was determined.

"I'm not risking you," Dwight said softly. Tiger's grey eyes lightened.

"You don't have to," the Madame said firmly. Ramón raised an eyebrow. "Look, we get the cops to get someone to look into it. Someone good. That they don't care about losing."

Olin looked skeptical. "That's *good*? The cops and their inspectors are jokes. *We* made sure of that." Olin almost sounded bitter.

"Then we find ourselves a mate who ain't a cop," Tiger suggested.

"And who might that be? We can't risk any more of our own," Olin scoffed.

Victory and the Madame both opened their mouths to speak.

"Lawless."



## V

"We should talk about this over dinner," Olin said, "you're all invited to stay. I'll have rooms prepared."

Victory lounged on her bed, staring at the ceiling. The room Olin set aside for Victory and the Madame was ornate to the point of being grotesque. Victory felt hazy. She didn't bring her meds with her. She hadn't expected to spend the whole day *and* night here. She was gonna have to get a shot in the morning with an extra concentrated dose.

There was a knock at the door. Victory groaned and rolled off the bed. *What do you want?* she thought impatiently. The Madame was busy sampling wine with Ramón, so it had to be someone else. She opened the door to Tiger's mischievously bright eyes. Victory was almost prepared for what came next.

Tiger's lips burned like an iron. The intensity of her energy was more than Victory had been able to handle for a long time. As much as she liked Tiger, she only lasted til Tiger got her half-way on the bed.

"I can't," Victory breathed, "not today." Tiger pulled away and pouted.

"Why not?"

Victory looked at her and sighed.

"You know why. You deserve more from me than just a physical relationship." Tiger groaned and flopped backwards onto the bed. Victory reached over to push a rusty spring from Tiger's face. Tiger gave Victory a look, then shook her hair back in front of her eyes.

"It's been ten years..." Tiger did little to hide her exasperation. "Don't you think it's past time to let yourself *try* again?"

"I swore an oath to myself, you know that. I can't be with anyone else like *that* until I find *everyone* responsible."

"You mean you can't move on. Do you even want to?" Tiger challenged.

"Of *course* I do. It's not like I want to hold onto all this pain." Tiger rolled her eyes.

"Bullshit."

"What?" Victory's voice got quieter when she was trying to control her anger. Which she had never been good at.

"You've been so focused on finding these guys that you haven't even tried to get over it. Have you even dealt with your emotions?" Victory avoided her gaze. Tiger shook her head, and laughed slightly. "Of course you haven't. All your energy has gone into finding the people who gutted your world so you can make them pay. But then what? What happens when you have to finally *feel* your grief? Look. at. me!"

Victory's turned down towards Tiger.

"What the fuck are you going to do when you're done with your oath but are stuck in the same goddamn place you were ten years ago?"

"You don't understa—" Victory started. Tiger stood up to face her.

"Fuck you. *Fuck* you! You were *not* the only one to lose him. I respect that you didn't wallow—you were never pathetic—but the rest of us at least *dealt* with it while you've been hunting ghosts. And it hasn't been easy. I'm not gonna pretend I know what you're going through, I didn't lose my soulmate. But don't you dare act like you suffered the most. I lost my other half. My *twin*." Tiger's voice shook and tears dampened her face. Victory reached over to dry Tiger's face with a handkerchief.

Trin and Tiger had had the same fiery hair and energy, freckles popping against their brown skin. They were practically identical (most people assumed they were genetically designed that way) except for their eyes. Trin's deep brown countered Tiger's silver. Victory met Trin first, when she was 16. She met Tiger a couple years later, after Tiger finished her degree at a University in Dublin. Tiger had wanted to drop out and backpack the world, but Trin urged her not to. Another couple years of working plus Tiger's degree would mean they could do anything. While Tiger was studying, Trin worked. As a bouncer and concert venue security. Although he was only 17, Trin was tough... and had a fake ID proving he was old enough. They met one night when Victory had gotten kicked in the face while crowd surfing, nearly losing her eyebrow stud. She was so dazed Trin had had to carry her to the medical station.

"I just don't think it would be right." Victory said softly. Tiger stood up and rubbed the back of her neck.

"If anyone is the least wrong for you to be with after Trin, it's me. We shared a life. We have the same blood. Who would he trust more than his sister to take care of the heart he cherished most?"

"It's just—"

"Just what? That you don't want me? If that's so then you shouldn't have touched your lips to mine, not five years ago and not today. And you should *not* have let me into the warmth and shelter of your bed."

"But that's not it either. I—" Victory was interrupted by another knock at the door.

## VI

"Whaddya want?" Victory demanded. Tiger rolled her eyes. Victory'd packaged her sensitivity back inside her bravado. There weren't going to be able to discuss the insecurity of their relationship any further. The door opened a crack and Ramón stuck his nose in.

"Is it dinnertime already?" Tiger asked. She pulled out her pocket watch. "It's only five-thirty. Isn't it a wee bit early to be eating? Grief has turned Olin into an old man..."

Ramón shook his head at Tiger's black humor, lowering his face to hide a slight smile. However, he was too tall to hide it from Victory and Tiger. He looked up, taking in Victor's slightly flattened hair, rumpled crop-top and unbuttoned pants. She raised an eyebrow, daring him to comment. Instead, he nodded his head towards the door, beckoning his fellow bodyguards to follow him into the hallway. As they approached the dining room, they could hear voices from behind the closed doors.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you," they heard the Madame say brusquely. That was her way of saying she wouldn't put up with any further haggling. Victory almost felt sorry for whoever thought they could milk the Big Three. When they did business together, Myrtle Schafer did all the bargaining, under the name Mrs. Jones. As far as anyone was concerned, Mrs. Jones was just a lowly accountant, confined to the dirty work of settling prices.

"We'll send the money tomorrow, along with someone to inspect the product. 3 o'clock. Down at the docks." Dwight's voice carried softly through the mahogany doors. "Good day."

After the shuffling footsteps died down, Ramón opened the doors and guided Victory and Tiger to their seats. The organized formality was intentional and unnecessary, but Olin liked to pretend to be a product of high society.

Dinner was a mixture of Old World American luxury. Classic French-Japanese fusion for the appetizer course (an array of decadent foie gras and delicate sashimi), "rustic American" vegetable soup for the second, Lobster prepared three ways for the main and dessert was deep-fried, molten lava-cake ice cream. If the meal hadn't been drawn out over three hours, Victory might've burst. Even though Olin grew up poor, his French mother always made their supper last for several courses. It was her way of making it feel like there was more food than there really was. In her honor, Olin continued to have long dinners. He rarely ate alone, often dining with his closest staff when he didn't have company.

At the end of the meal, the Madame and Dwight went back to their own rooms to go over the business they'd done that day. Tiger followed her employer out, glancing briefly at Victory. Ramón went to fetch Madame Schafer the best scotch in the cellar. That left Victory and Olin at the table. With the conversation gone, Olin stared absently at his after dinner coffee.

"Mirshka used to come to dinner every Friday— her and Ethel. Now me and Ethel dine together every Tuesday. The day we heard the news." Olin was looking at the halogen-crystal chandelier in the center of the ceiling, but Victory supposed he was talking to her. "It's not fair," he said, "She didn't deserve that kind of brutality... no one could."

*Tell me about it*, Victory thought. "I know she didn't, she was sweet," she said, instead of what she was thinking. Olin nodded.

"Ain't nothin' that prepares you for *this*— losing someone."

"I know." Victory's voice was soft, with a hint of frostbite. Olin looked at her, almost amazed that someone else could sympathize.

"You do?"

Victory stared him straight in the eyes and nodded.

"December 8th. About a decade ago. A man in his 20s was walking down Riversedge at after work. 3 am. Some drunk assholes approached him. Maybe they'd just finished a job and wanted to release some tension. Maybe they wanted to prove how tough they were. Maybe they were just sick, fucking assholes. For whatever reason, they decided to harass him. Called him short— scrawny, puny, a leprechaun (even though he was Scottish). Made fun of his accent which led to asking why he didn't stay in his own country... America didn't need more people. They laughed at how he managed not to drown on his swim over here. What they didn't know was that he was a bouncer. Who didn't take shit from anyone. They stopped laughing when he pushed them aside and walked through the group. They let him walk five feet before jumping on him in drunken rage." Victory swallowed, her stare growing from icy to boiling. "They were only able to identify him by the his ID chip, which had been ripped out. "

Olin stared in slight shock. "Was this your brother, or...?"

"His name was Trin. He was 20 years old. The six men who killed him were yours. I still don't know the real reason."

## VII

Olin just stared.

"Hornell Lewis. Brady Kumar. Taj Jones. Kai Johansson. King "Candy" Smith. Those are the five I've... taken care of. They only worked for you for a couple years, so you probably don't remember them. The last one though, is special. Or at least was. I think he's retired by now."

"If you know so much then why don't you know if he's retired or not?" Olin asked, his hand shaking as he picked up his coffee cup. Victory smirked.

"That's the thing— I *don't* know. I've narrowed it down to a couple options. Jinx Cassidey and Butchie Stone." Olin paled. "And before you deny anything, I *do* know that they were your top men, at least until two years ago." Shaking his head, Olin said,

"We had a... falling out, of sorts." Victory's expectantly raised eyebrow prompted him to continue.

"They got into some trouble that I couldn't (and didn't) wanna take care of. I've cleaned up enough of their messes. I only helped them hide out for old times sake, and in exchange for them leaving me out of it."

"Do you know how I can find them?" Olin nodded.

"Tell me."

Victory Starlight left the dining room feeling more hopeful than ever. But something was off. As the finale of her vengeance drew closer, she felt slightly uneasy. She'd been on this path for so long she hadn't even been sure the journey would ever end. She was halfway down the hall before she started shaking. Her extremities trembled uncontrollably and she sat down against the wall before she could fall. This had happened once before when she'd been too busy to take her medication— but it wasn't nearly this bad. She felt like her feet would fall off. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was a shadowy figure with red hair, seemingly floating behind Olin's worry-tinged face. The last thing she heard was him calling for Ramón.

She woke up alone, her skin still tingling. Her throat felt calloused, it was so dry. She looked at the clock by her bed— 2am. She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she woke up again three hours later to find a man and woman wearing lab coats entering her room.

"This is Dr. Gloria and her assistant. They've come to give you an extra concentrated dose of your EPS meds," Olin explained soothingly. When the doctor approached [her](#),

Victory instinctively jerked away. Doctors always gave her the creeps, and Gloria here looked a little too excited to prick something into Victory's skin.

"Shhh. It's okay, mon petit chou," Olin said softly. His unexpected kindness shocked Victory's attention away from the doctor and her assistant.

"How'd you get them from the hospital at this hour? They have a strict stay-in policy from midnight to dawn," Victory asked. Olin smiled warmly, the first time Victory had ever seen an expression like that on his face. Tender emotion aged him, and she wondered how old he really was.

"They're not from the hospital. They work for Pharmtech Inc., research doctors or something. They—"

"Done." Doctor Gloria cut him off as she began packing up her bag. "She'll be fine in 30 minutes. But now she needs rest." Olin walked to the door to let the doctors out. As he was about to turn out the light, Victory asked,

"How did you know?"

"Mirshka had the same condition. She had a similar episode two days before she disappeared." He smiled sadly at the memory and closed the door, forgetting to extinguish the light.

As Victory drifted back to sleep, she felt soft pressure on her forehead. Scarlet locks brushed her cheeks and she looked up into dark eyes.

"Shhh. It's okay I'm here." His voice seemed to quiet all her pain. When she woke again, the light was out.

## VIII

Victory clicked her nails on her desk in the Madame's office. The Madame was lounging on the couch, placing orders for specialty items for her brothels and sex clubs via kinknet. Victory heard her mutter things like "asphyxiation grips," "leather and neoprene restraints (yes, the softest available)," "sterilized needles," "synthetic-feather pillows" and "lube." *Lots* of lube. The madame liked to keep things safe. It was more fun that way... and caused less trouble. While Victory wasn't in the habit of paying much attention to her employer's business dealings other than generally knowing *who* and *what* the Madame was dealing with, Victory's mind was trapped somewhere a decade ago. Her fingers were smoothing over the letters on Trin's ID chip, which she always kept in the pocket on her right thigh. She hadn't even need to see it to know it was him. Even caked in blood, the red of his hair shone like no one else's. Although his face was caved in from the force of so many fists, she could see the sharp arch of his full brows. While the shape of his body was distorted, the agile form framed by slim, toned muscle gave him away.

Victory shook her head out of her bittersweet reverie to find the Madame staring at her with knowing sympathy. She quickly took her hand out of her pocket and placed it on the table.

"So," said the madame, placing her interweb visor on the table, "it seems like you and Olin bonded last night."

Victory shrugged, glaring slightly at the thought of him. She always glared when she was confused to disguise any weakness.

"He tell you anything?" Victory nodded. "You wanna share?"

"Well..." Victory began, "he didn't know exactly where they were. If he did, Loveless'd have his ass."

"What do you mean?"

"Butchie and Jinx, they stole from Dwight. Or at least tried to."

Dwight Loveless was a big collector of vintage robotics. Parts, bits and pieces, full bots-- anything of interest. He had the largest stock of Roombas (circa early 2000s) in the city, which he secretly let his cats ride on. He also had the earliest surviving model of android that was fully intact. His greatest prize was what was left of the Mars Rover Sojourner, launched by NASA in 1997. No one really knew when it was recovered from the red planet, but it was big deal when Christie's auctioned it off— and Dwight Loveless was the highest bidder. There were rumors that he had other Rovers, but no one really knew.

One night, Butchie and Jinx decided to find out. Olin wasn't sure how they managed to break in, but Dwight had been *very* curious to find out for the past two years. They didn't steal Sojourner, but they did take one of her parts. Dwight was not pleased. Butchie and Jinx tried to convince Olin to blackmail Dwight for its return, but he refused. He immediately fired them. To keep them from involving him, he helped them hide with a generous severance and new ID chips.

"Wow." The madame let out a low whistle. "I knew he was dumb enough to help out someone who'd cross Dwight, but I didn't know he was smart enough to refuse a shot at holding something over him." Victory chuckled from behind her long-nailed hand.

"It gets better," Victory said.

"Oh?" The Madame was equal parts curious and amused.

"The names he gave them... are, well..."

"Are well what?"

"Pretty fucking obvious. Casey Chieston and Binx Jidey."

"They sound like something a teenager would make up," the Madame cackled. "Too bad we don't have their account numbers..."

Victory smiled slyly. "Who says we don't?"

Jinx and Butchie lived in a high end loft on 300th. Olin had been generous enough to land them apartments on 90th. But Jinx was smarter than he acted and invested his severance. He and Butchie had several joint accounts dedicated to the profits from their stocks, most of which were from bionics companies. While their loft had a balcony, a climbing-car park and a view, it's doubtful they saw Victory coming. Her name may have been Starlight, but she could blend in like a dull shadow.



## IX

Victory perched on the rail of the balcony, taking in the city below. The breeze was cool and light, pushing her hair into an oval. She reached out her hand to feel briskness sliding across her fingers— instead she felt a warm, slight squeeze, the cool imprint of a ring almost like a shadow flicking across her palm. When she looked down the pressure was gone. She sighed, the memory of Trin's ring a dull ache blending into her pulse.

The balcony was more like an elevated patio. There was a UV cover running above it, made of long streams of ruby colored fabric. There was a cold-fusion grill in the corner, along with a new set of chrome furniture. Chairs, table, lounges. Victory smirked. Bad guys always liked shiny things, especially when they grew up in tarnish. She listened for sounds inside the loft— she could hear heavy footsteps approaching the liquid-diamond door. She heard a soft *woosh* as compressed air pushed open the door. She was so close to finally being finished, but she wasn't nervous. After a second though, she was slightly confused. Standing in the doorway was a pair of bionic legs.

They were high quality, with what looked like soft simulated flesh. As she stared at them, they seemed to stare back, beckoning her inside. Victory walked quietly inside, careful not to make any more sound than the bionic legs. When not worn, bionic legs were hooked together so they wouldn't fall over or get lost. The pair was a faint tan color, almost imperceptible under the layers of tattoos. There seemed to be a storm scene spread out in Japanese Traditional style across them.

The legs guided her to the living room, leading her to a chair in the corner before heading down the hall. Victory smiled. Whoever was piloting the legs was clever. The patio door was still open, and the air still floated playfully around Victory's hair. She hoped it was covering one of the security cameras. Victory looked up at the ceiling of the room, which was made of one-way reflection glass— you could see out, but no one could see it. It looked like the rest of the ceiling in the loft was shiny black vinyl. She was admiring the strength of the upholstery under her nails when she heard the legs coming back. This time the steps were lighter, more controlled.

"And who might you be?" The legs were now attached to a large man, about 6'5" with waves of black hair running to his hips. His voice was deep, but soft.

"Someone who appreciates a nice view and good ink." Victory stared straight at the scar beneath his left eye. It ran all the way across his cheek. He shook his head and sat on the couch across from her.

"Miss, do you have any idea whose home you just tried to break into?"

Victory nodded. "Officially, the home of Casey Chieston and Binx Jidey. Who are actually Jinx Cassidey and Butchie Stone." The man rubbed his wedding tattoo nervously. It was a small pink bow laced around and through his left ring finger.

"Since you know who we used to be, you probably also know that we'd kill anyone who tried to steal from us or wreck our stuff. Lucky for you, we ain't about that life anymore."

"Speaking of your new life, when did you two tie the knot, Jinx?"

"After we retired. We decided that if we were finally gonna do this, we'd do it right. Decent men show commitment to their partners. Though shouldn't I be the one asking you questions since you've broken into my house?" Victory grinned.

"Technically you let me in."

"Well whatever you came here for, you're wasting your time. Like I said, we don't do that kind of business anymore. I work in biotech and Butchie builds gardens at community centers. I don't know what you heard about our past or how you found us, but we can't help you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to rest. I'm picking Butchie up early from the airport in the morning. He was visiting his sick mom in Brooklyn."

"Actually," Victory said before Jinx could get up, "you can help me. What I'm looking for is a little information."

"About what?"

"December 8, 2175. Do you remember it?" Jinx's face darkened and he nodded.

"Yeah," he said somberly. "Butchie and I got in a big fight. We'd been going steady a couple of years and I thought we should get a place together. He sorta freaked out, asking if it was because I felt like I needed to keep an eye on him, control him. He said he was hurt that I didn't trust him enough to let him have his own space. So then he went out drinking with some of our friends from work. He came home to me completely sloshed with blood up to his elbows. As I was cleaning his arms, he said he was sorry. He told me the last guy he moved in with was super controlling and one night he almost killed Butchie. I never found out what happened that night before he came over. I wasn't sure he even remembered the next morning until he said to me 'I did something last night. And it made me realize that people get taken from you. I don't want anybody to take you from me.' We found a new place the next week."

If Victory hadn't known what Butchie had done that night, she might've felt something other than anger at him. She did feel a pang of sympathy for Jinx, however.

"Would you like to know what he did that night?" she asked quietly. Jinx nodded. Victory stood up. She shrugged off her jacket and removed her shirt to reveal her fully tattooed upper body.



## X

Victory's tattoos took up almost her entire torso, stopping below her breasts in the front and spreading up her back, spilling from the top down her arms. She turned slowly so Jinx could see the full extent. There were 5 scenes, one on each arm, and three on her back and sides. In the middle was a macabre portrait of Trin.

"This," Victory said, pointing to her abdomen, "is how they found my lover's body." Jinx stared, his face almost horrified. "This is what happened December 8, ten years ago." The volume of her voice did nothing to shield the intensity. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a chain. Reaching her hand out she said, "They were only able to identify him from this." Trin ID chip dangled from her fingers, it's movement somewhere between a pendulum swing and shaking. "His name was Trin." While Victory explained how he died—the taunting, the senselessness, not sparing a single detail—Jinx was quiet. Victory was impressed that he kept eye contact with her the entire time.

"What are the others? The tats I mean," Jinx asked. Victory looked at her hand, now clenched with the anger of her memories. She looked at the swirling waves on her wrist that began the sleeve on her right arm. She could almost see them moving. Out of the waves was a stormy scene where a giant Pacific Octopus battled a tank. The octopus appeared to be winning.

"This arm," she said, releasing her grip slightly, "is for the first man I found. Hornell Lewis. I see you recognize the name." Jinx nodded.

"It took me two years to find him, with a little help. The tank represents Hornell, he was a big, stubborn guy. Oafish too and sorta gropey. If he been more cooperative he might not've ended up with a fear of water. Which the octopus here represents. After nearly drowning him, he gave me enough information to find the next man, Brady Kumar. I have to admit, I nearly lost my nerve with him. Never seen a man cry so silently in my life." She twisted her arm so that Jinx could see the flames running up it, designed to look as though they were singeing holes through her flesh. If he hadn't known better, Jinx would have thought she was ablaze.

"I told him I'd burn 'murderer' into his tongue if he didn't help me find the others. He refused. So now whenever he opens his mouth, everyone knows what he is."

"If he didn't tell you anything, how'd you find the other four?" Victory sighed and perched on the edge of the coffee table.

"I had a little help from a detective friend and my boss. I was lucky enough to find Taj, Kai and Candy in the same night. They were on a job, in the warehouse plaza. After, they all crashed in the Madame's closest club, the High Mile. I paid their entertainers to drug them and drag them to the top. Blindfolded, I set them by the edge, their bare

toes grazing the empty air and the cold piercing their naked flesh. I convinced them they were on a narrow strip of the club sign, that any movement would send them toppling down to the street. I heard they lasted three days before falling onto the balcony directly below." Victory turned to show Jinx the three scenes on her back, of tightrope walkers and trapeze artists performing in a gothic circus for the undead.

"A-are you going to kill Butchie?" Jinx asked quietly, with a touch of nervousness. Victory shook her head.

"I didn't want to kill anyone, that's not who I am. I nearly drowned Hornell so he would feel my tears, the endless sobbing that nearly choked me. I burned Brady so he would know my anger, that tore at me like an oil fire and nearly consumed me. As for Taj, Kai and Candy, I wanted them to feel helpless panic, the crushing anxiety that pounded into my heart when I would wake in the middle of the night realizing that Trin was gone. I don't know exactly what I'm gonna do to Butchie yet, but I want him to feel guilt. I haven't escaped mine yet, and I want him to *never* escape his."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because. I need you to understand."

Jinx nodded. "That's fair."

"I'm not going to ask for your help, I know you wouldn't be able or want to give it. Just tell Butchie I'll be here tomorrow at six." Victory grabbed her shirt and slipped its straps onto her shoulders. She picked up her coat and started heading for the patio door.

"Before you go," Jinx said, standing up, "I need *you* to understand something." Victory turned to look at him. "My real name is Jin Xu. No one could pronounce it growing up, and all my bilingual teachers here spoke Spanish. You'd think I'd get one who knew Mandarin well enough to pronounce names here in California. I didn't start going by Jinx until I met Butchie. We were at some sort of recruitment mixer (which sounds ridiculous, but that's what they did back then) and this douchebag, named Cassidy, was gettin' on me about how he couldn't pronounce my name and if I was sure I was really from here. Then Butchie comes up, sees my name tag and tells the guy he's reading it wrong. That it actually says Jinx, a '*true American name*'. You see, Butchie isn't all bad. He's a brute, but I love him. And I can't lose him. I know you have to do what you have to do, but I will not let you take him from me."

Victory cocked her head to the side, taking in the man she now knew as Jin Xu. She reached her hand out for him to shake, and then dissolved into the shadows.

## XI

Aurora Black was the official owner-proprietor of Aurora's Salon for Sensual Touch, specializing in de-stressing nerve-work, acupuncture and erotic massages. Aurora was also the Madame's niece and her business served as one of the numerous fronts for Myrtle Schafer's smuggling operations. While the salon offered a variety of services, Aurora's specialty was nourishing the bodies of modified people, including many of the Madame's sex workers. Victory Starlight was one of her favorite clients, who always left a good tip even though the service was free.

Victory's last couple days had been tiring and Aurora's hands felt like they could melt away all her tension. Victory's entire body was bare, the cold steel of her navel piercing catching the candlelight and her ink standing unapologetically on her skin. She took her time covering herself with the sheet.

She'd gone to see the Madame after her visit with Jin Xu and told her everything. The Madame had sent her straight to Aurora's and told her to take the next couple days off. One of the Junior guards would have a training session in Victory's absence. Victory's body was buzzing. She was excited. Nervous. Scared. What she needed was to be calm, on the edge of cold and calculated. Her emotions had to wait until she was finished. She swallowed to push down the guilt that had hit her since Trin's murder. She should have been there.

Victory usually picked him up from work, and grabbed early morning coffee before snuggling into bed and falling asleep as the sun rose. They didn't need the caffeine to keep them up—they drank coffee for the taste and shunned extra shots of CaffExtract—all they needed was one another's energy.

Trin would throw himself at Victory, nearly knocking her down onto their small hoverbed (sometimes she let his weight pull them down, making the bed bounce) and she would rip off his shirt. He'd slide his hands from her exposed belly up into the shadows beneath her crop top as she held him close and breathed heavily into his ear. As she wound his ginger curls around her finger she'd dig her teeth into the skin of his neck, he'd unbutton her pants—occasionally fumbling or losing concentration as Victory bit into him harder, providing a pleasant distraction.

As soon as they were naked Trin would run his tongue up her torso. Victory would return the favor by flipping him onto his stomach and send shivers up his spine with *her* tongue. During all this, they usually didn't spend more than 3 minutes without their lips attached. When they were ready, Trin's tongue would travel below the stud underneath Victory's navel and explore the delicious crevices between her thighs. Some days, when Victory was feeling especially ferocious (which was actually most days), she'd press herself tightly against Trin's face and ride it. She loved the way they both moaned when Trin was inside her and their nails scraped each other's skin.

If Victory had had her way, she'd spend every night (and morning and day) with her bare skin sweaty and slick against Trin's. But she'd been working late that week, and Trin wanted her to rest up. There wasn't a day that went by when Victory didn't wish she'd argued more, insisted that staying up another hour wouldn't kill her. She should have protected him. Instead she was safe and warm, while he was beaten to death on a rainy night.

As Aurora's knuckles pushed into Victory's tense traps and shoulders, Victory's mind began to clear. As Aurora's knuckles moved down her spine, Victory's mind moved further and further away from her troubles. Aurora moved swiftly and carefully down the back of Victory's body, helping her energy flow down to her toes.

"Turn over," she said gently. It was time to draw the energy back up. She pulled it up through Victory's shins to her knees, up her thighs into her pelvis. From there, up into her core and further through her chest and let it pool in her fingers before lulling it back up the arms through the collar-bone, neck and forehead. Then caressed it back into her core. For once, Victory's mind was clear.

## XII

Victory slept without dreaming for the first time in years. Maybe she'd finally broken in the new hoverbed she bought after Trin died. It had always reminded her of a black bowl filled with plum colored cushions, and she woke to the sun shining through her window, melting the dark purple of her bed into something lighter. If she hadn't known better, she would've believed the space next to her was indented with the warmth of a second person. Shaking her head, Victory yawned and stretched, taking in the time on her clock. 8 am. She hadn't slept in this late in five years. Usually she woke before dawn, just before the Madame got up in the adjoining apartment. This time she could hear the Madame chatting with Dulce, the guard who would be training with the Madame today. Dulce was from Los Angeles, where her mother was an organizer for Poder del Pueblo, a community policing organization. Ironically, when she came up to the Bay, she ended up with the Madame.

After staring at the ceiling for five minutes convincing herself it wasn't a bad idea to leave the coziness of her bed, Victory figured she should give Dulce the code word of the day, which was "peaches." Victory made a new one up everyday, and it was to alert the Madame of potential danger.

She smiled, remembering how she and Trin had code words for just about everything. "Pancakes" was for working an overtime shift ("We're having pancakes for dinner again, sorry love," he'd say before kissing Victory goodbye), "sunshine" was a sort of panic word, to mean "let's get out of here (Victory would come up behind Trin and hug him, saying "Can you believe we haven't seen sunshine in three days?") and "coffee" was for sex (Trin would pull Victory close and leave the words "How bout we get some coffee?" in her ear with a warm whisper). Victory opened her eyes, realizing she'd been squeezing her biceps. She let her arms go and shrugged on a robe. It was time to say good morning to the Madame and to start her day.

Victory had to make sure she stayed busy enough to keep her mind occupied but her body calm. She could die that evening— she was confident enough that Butchie couldn't beat her, but he had some warning and time to prepare. If this was going to be her last day, she was going to do it right. She wore her old black coat with a rouge, cropped tank-top and cargo pants that matched her coat. The first thing she did was visit Trin's grave. He was buried in a subterranean garden on the northern part of the city. Tiger and Victory paid extra to plant a small magnolia tree over his remains. She'd brought a small lantern to hang on the tree's branches. Like the other five, it glowed a steady liquid-crystal lavender. After hanging the lantern, Victory sat down across from it and the gravestone at its roots and began to talk.

"I miss you."

Victory left the cavern, wiping tears from her eyes. She checked the time on one of her watch-faced nails— 1 o'clock. She was late for lunch. She met Tiger at one of the city's hovering cafes while it was docked near the old library. If Victory had been a



minute late, Falafel Heaven would've drifted away from the library without them. And Tiger would've been pissed.

"So," Tiger said, her mouth full of falafel, "you're almost done. See anyone else today?" Victory paused just before shoving a handful of french fries in her mouth.

"You know the answer to that." Tiger shook her head, knocking a few of her curls loose from her messy french braid.

"No, I actually don't. And before you stick those fries in your mouth—" Victory put her fries down, thinking they didn't have enough ranch on them anyway. "All those other blokes, they were nothing. Right pricks. Butchie isn't exactly sweet either, but he isn't quite straight in the head. He has an unpredictable streak that makes him dangerous. You could get hurt tonight. If there's anyone you need to see one last time, just in case..."

"I saw Trin. No one else."

"What about your da? Corine, Jacob, Owen..."

"I don't need to worry my father. And as for Corine and them, we haven't spoken in about seven years. I sorta kept in touch with Gwen— she used to hit me up every month— but I've only seen her twice the past couple years." Victory looked down at her food and poked at it. Tiger reached out sympathetically for Victory's hand.

"Hey, you've just been so busy and you can't really get far from the Madame. I'm sure they'd love to see you again. I can call them if you wa—" Victory shook her head and smiled sadly.

"I drove them away. You were right the other night, everyone moved on. Except me. and who wants to spend time with someone who's been stuck on their dead boyfriend for years? It's okay though. I'm fine. I'm not gonna lie to you, I don't know how it will be when this over— when it finally hits me that he's gone forever. But I will be fine again. Maybe then I'll call." Tiger reached over to hold Victory's face in her hand, stroking her cheek with her thumb. Victory reached up to feel Tiger's hand, staring into her eyes.

"I'll be with you. Now finish your food before it gets cold."

### XIII

Butchie was waiting for Victory on the balcony when she arrived. He was facing outward— away from Victory as she tread across the glass roof of the loft. She sat down directly above the door, contemplating the man who ripped apart her love. She was a little annoyed that a man who was only 5'5" had picked on her man for being short. His muscle was packed on his body like armor. He wore a black T-shirt and fitted grey flex-pants, fitted for aggressive movements.

"Where's the hubby?" Victory asked from her perch. Butchie turned around, piercing her with his ice-blue eyes.

"Out to dinner with his mother-in-law. He's showing her around her new home."

"What's her name?"

"Frannie."

"Do you love her?" Butchie nodded.

"Good." Butchie's face took on a slightly confused tinge. Victory smiled and hopped down from the roof, landing with solid grace. It was a windy night and her coat flapped behind her like the shadow of a massive wing.

"Before you do anything, I want you to know I don't really know why you're here. Jinxie told me about Trin, but not much. Will you tell me what I did?"

Victory nodded, noting the slight desperation in his voice. His dark blonde hair was starting to grey and fall out. She wondered how many other faces he didn't remember smashing in over the years. Victory couldn't imagine being that old and not knowing whose ghosts the skeletons in your closet belonged to. She walked towards Butchie and showed him the gory mural on her belly. He looked at it without flinching.

"Now, you didn't do all of this. But I had a friend of mine look at the forensics— and the killing blow, the one that forced Trin's left cheek bone up through his eye socket and into his brain, was yours. I was told it was the final blow after about twenty-five minutes of beating."

"I'm sorry." Butchie looked like he meant it, and that was more than she got from the others.

"That's not good enough." Victory stepped up and slapped him. He grabbed her hand and she laughed before pulling him towards her and sinking her teeth into his pinky. She bit half-way through it. He cried out and she kicked him in the stomach, sending him to his knees. She grabbed his shoulder to shove him to the ground, but he

wrapped his arms around her legs and pitched forward. There was nothing Victory good do to keep from falling and she hit the ground with a spine-jarring thud. Butchie knelt over her and said,

"I know you think it's not good enough. But it's all I got. I'm not the same man who got trashed and beat people up for money or just for kicks. I've reformed and you're gonna have to accept that. I'm not gonna let you bring him back out and ruin everything, but I ain't dyin today."

Breathing heavily, Victory laughed again. She couldn't help it. She'd waited ten years for revenge and what she found was this pathetic little man.

"I'm not going to kill you, you sorry fuck." She brought her knee sharply into his balls. He fell off her to the side. She got up and grabbed his hair, which was just long enough for her to grip. She dragged him to the edge of the balcony. "But I am going to throw you off this balcony. You'll hit someone's forcefield garden cover before you get to the ground, so you won't die. But you'll probably end up at least partially paralyzed, especially if the forcefield shocks your nerves beyond repair. If you're lucky, you'll get cyborg replacements. You won't feel what it's like to be a man ever again. Worst case, your sick mother will take care of you with as much help from Jinx as possible. You will be a burden. Either way, you will never forget what you did and guilt will cling to you. The coldness of your unfeeling flesh will steal the warmth from Jinx that you cannot return. He loves you enough not to mind, but you're too simple for that to ever fully sink in. If your nerves are too shot to accept new parts, you will never be able to take care of the woman who raised you. Now, before you fall, would you like to know what I'm gonna put on my body to remember you?" He nodded feebly, some of his hairs springing from his scalp. She pulled him up and whispered in his ear. Then she knocked him off the balcony.

## XIV

Victory didn't feel elated. She didn't feel sad. Remorseful. Empty. Or even purposeless. If anything she felt relieved. She almost felt bad for Jin Xu, but he was no angel and his worry was Butchie's problem. After knocking Butchie off his balcony, she went to see her tattoo artist, Pérona Porfiry. As she was leaving, she started to feel some pain below her abdomen. She figured it was just pms. She usually had no symptoms, but she'd messed up on her meds so her body could be doing anything. She just ignored it during her consultation with Pérona. By the time she left, it was nearly debilitating.

"You okay sweetie?" Pérona asked. Victory nodded.

"Just... uterus pains." Victory did her best to shrug it off. Pérona smiled knowingly.

"Ah. I haven't had those in ten years. Can't say I miss 'em. You take care Starlight, go rest up. Drink some mint tea with honey followed with pickles for those pains. You've got to be ready for this chest piece tomorrow." The older artist's eyes gleamed as they winked. They knew Victory's whole story and was excited to finish what she considered her greatest piece.

Victory made it two blocks before the pain brought her to her knees. The back alley shortcut she took home was in the dirtiest part of the Old Bridge Corridor. It was everything she could do not to scream. She nearly fainted just before seeing a small centipede chew its way out of her skin. The shock of it kept her conscious. She stayed alive long enough to watch more centipedes eat their way out of, across and through her pelvis. She had no energy to scream. Her eyes couldn't focus. If she didn't know better, she would've sworn someone was holding her hand and kissing her forehead. She looked over to see Trin's brown eyes blazing from beneath his rosy curls. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"It's time to go, dearie."

"I know." She closed her eyes and let him cradle her in his arms.

## XV

Victory's funeral was a small ceremony, held in the garden plot where Trin was buried. The Madame was there with Dulce. Olin was there with Ramón. Dwight was there with his daughter (coincidentally the owner of Victory's favorite coffee shop) and Tiger, who sported a fresh chest-piece depicting skeletons trying to outrun ghosts, only to find the ghosts were their own shadows. Pérona stood with Lawless and a tall person most people knew as Tim. In Victory's honor, everyone was sporting at least one of their tattoos in plain view. No matter what anyone could say, there was something hopeless about the way Victory died that left everyone shaken.

"You will fix this," Tiger told Lawless before the ceremony. "She was supposed to be an artist. She designed all of her tattoos herself, in collaboration with Pérona of course. She was going to go to school and then Trin died and she was *so* angry. She went out picking fights and well, *you* know what happened from that."

Lawless nodded and squeezed Tiger's shoulder for support. They stood in a circle around her grave where she was to be buried naked (per her request) so she could bear her body to the earth. They went in a circle speaking about Victory— laughing, crying, sharing stories and a poem from Tiger. They ended with Tim, who was holding a sapling to become Victory's grave marker.

"None of you know me very well, but I know you. I introduced myself as Tim, but I have many names. Starlight is one of them. It was Victory's mother's favorite and we gave it to our child. We were never married, but we never fought either. We both knew we were never meant to be. Victory lived with her mother but spent her summers with me in a small Tribal Sovereignty in the middle of Chumash country in Southern California. She stopped coming when she was 16, we couldn't afford it anymore. But she wrote to me every day. Sometimes she even sent paper mail or packages filled with small paintings and drawings. They always made me smile. We were very close, especially after her mother died. When Victory died, I could feel her slip away. I brought this live oak to grow beautiful from a strong woman." When Starlight Tim finished, a few tears ran down his face. He did not wipe them.

After the service, Victory's friends and family filled in Victory's grave and planted the oak her father brought. They left one by one until only the Madame, Tiger, Starlight and Lawless were left. The Madame and Tiger slowly pulled themselves and Tim away from the grave, the three people who cared about Victory the most retreating to cope with their loss in good company. Lawless bent down in front of the tree, a single tear falling into the soil.