

Sky Ghosts: The Night Before

by Alexandra Engellmann

Sky Ghosts: The Night Before
(Book 0.5 of the Sky Ghosts series)

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Author's note

The short story that you're about to read is only a glimpse of the Sky Ghosts' world and the characters' lives before the events of *Sky Ghosts: All for One*. It's the most violent and dark-humored book in the series so far, and the reason is simple—when it comes to Marco and Pain, there's no such thing as too much bloodshed.

Aside from this short story, the series will include a trilogy and at least three side stories. Each book of the trilogy will be followed by a side story about one of the characters. While the side stories won't be part of the main storyline, they will give the reader more insight into the character development and plot. All *Sky Ghosts* books will be available in ebook and paperback at Amazon.

Thank you for downloading *Sky Ghosts: The Night Before*, and happy reading!

Sky Ghosts: The Night Before

“Your brother was a fine swordsman, Benji.” Pain nodded her head, finishing up the milkshake. “I mean, he wasn’t very bright, attacking me like that with Marco around and everything. But the two minutes that we shared were epic, I’ll give him that.”

She sat down on the rooftop with a satisfied sigh, looking over the glowing Manhattan. With its seventy-two floors, Trump World Tower provided the best view. She liked her mealtime to have a view.

“I almost wish Marco didn’t kill him so fast. It could’ve been a fantastic battle.” She rummaged in her Happy Meal for the fries, picking one and gesturing with it as she spoke. “Unfortunately, Marco doesn’t like it when people have their sword at my neck. And I don’t like it when you folk assault civilians right outside my doorstep. You two almost killed an innocent woman. You didn’t really expect me to look the other way, did you?”

Dangling her feet off the ledge, she leaned back on her hands. Her back sheath pressed into her shoulder blade, so she unbuckled it and laid the katana down behind her. The steel gleamed in the moonlight, and she reached out to wipe a bloody smudge off the hilt with a gentle touch.

“Now, if you just left after what happened, I probably would’ve let you go. But *no*, you had to threaten my friend with the promise of vengeance and all that horseshit... Ain’t nobody got time for that.” She stuffed the last of the fries into her mouth. “And Marco can get really reckless sometimes. I can’t allow people like you around him.”

She looked at the bloodied head that sat in a duffel bag at her side.

“And this is why you had to die. I hope there’s no hard feelings, Benji.”

Benji didn’t reply, and she shrugged her shoulders, packing up the leftovers of her meal. Her watch showed ten o’clock, and she was miles away from her destination. Scratching random Beasts off her list was great, but the real work was waiting, something she had been dying to do for months. Chuck and his squad were finally within her reach, and that meant Eugene and his Beasts were about to lose significant support down on the streets. The fact that raiding their hideouts wasn’t even her job never really bothered her.

She gathered her long black hair up into a ponytail, put the sword back on, zipped up her gear jacket, and raised her mask, covering her face up to her eyes. Then she grabbed the bag and stepped off the roof.

The gravity did its job, bringing her to the tenth floor level in a matter of seconds. There, she stopped the fall and darted in Brooklyn’s direction, the wind howling around her as she flew. It only took her a few minutes to reach Greenpoint Terminal Market, pass its charred ruins, and spot the right building—a low, black warehouse that sprawled among the smaller ones like a spider. She flew past it and landed in a dark corner, hiding the bag under a dumpster to free her hands.

As she walked through the smelly gap between two low buildings, she heard muffled voices and paused. Her senses were dulled by the flight, the noise of the wind still loud in her head, and her eyes watery. So she stood there for a minute, motionless, getting used to the dark and quiet surroundings. Some of the streetlight filtered down the narrow alley before her, but not too much, so she could go and look around.

She stepped forward and felt her skin prickle—someone was behind her. Her katana left its sheath just as her attacker slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. She rolled over and jumped to her feet, parrying his blow and cringing at the clatter their swords made. In a few seconds, all the Beasts in the area would be here.

“Sneaky,” she praised the man whose blade kept trying to reach her, only to fail again and again.

To make it even more hopeless for him, she reached into the well of energy inside her and let some of it spill out into a shield, allowing the shimmering cocoon to envelop her whole body. Using it felt too much like cheating, with most Beasts not having developed any abilities aside from flying, but there was no such thing as too much practice.

Her attacker panted, desperately trying to keep up with her moves. He wore a nondescript set of black clothes, standing just a little taller than she.

“Too slow for your size,” she kept distracting him while driving him farther and farther back into the darkness. Her sword was there to meet his before he even made a move.

“And you’re too cocksure for yours,” he spat. “I know who you are.”

She found an opening and kicked him flat in the ribs, fueling the move with more energy than she should have, so the Beast slammed into a wall a few yards away. By the time she got to him, he was already on his feet.

“Then you should’ve stayed in your smelly corner,” she whispered with a grin and swung her sword one more time just as he opened his mouth for a reply.

A thin red line crossed his neck, and his eyes fluttered wide open. A heartbeat later, his body hit the ground.

She let out a relieved breath, standing at the edge of light, and wiped the blood off her split eyebrow. Healing it was a matter of minutes: the sharp pain receded the moment she focused on it, and she opened her eyes, letting it heal while she worked.

Behind her, someone cleared his throat.

“Oh, for crap’s sake...”

She turned around at the sound of four swords leaving their scabbards at once, while the fifth man stepped forward with a growl.

“The girl is mine!” He drew his sword with a wild look in his eyes. “She’s the one who killed Billy,” he said, and the others nodded.

“Aye, it’s her.”

She grimaced with feigned sympathy as they began to circle each other in the pool of light. “Sorry if I don’t remember. Killed an awful lot of Billies lately.”

“You bitch!”

He lunged at her with a snarl, taking big, awkward swings. It only took her three seconds to find an opening in his defense, and with the others waiting, she didn’t want to waste any more energy.

Her elbow slammed into his jaw, and her katana buried itself deep between his ribs.

“I think this is how I killed Billy,” she stage-whispered, looking into the man’s horrified eyes. “Or was it Bobby ... no, wait. I don’t care.”

She freed her sword with a vicious shove, letting him fall. The others froze in place, and she smiled, raising the big katana. “Oh, don’t be shy! There’s enough sword for all of you!”

Three sets of wary eyes stared back at her, and when she realized something was amiss it was already too late.

Someone moved behind her and grabbed her arms just as she darted upward, only to land back on her feet. She stilled, but kept a firm grip on her sword and prepared to flare the shield any second. Letting them think they were in control was the game she would never grow tired of playing.

“Wait!” One of the others said when the big man behind her whipped out what had to be a knife. “She’s worth more alive than dead. We could sell her to Eugene!”

“Yeah, right!” his friend supported him, coming closer.

“Yeah, right,” she scoffed, slewing around to look up at her captor just as another black shadow moved at the edge of her sight. “Or better yet, let me go, and I won’t kill you...”

He opened his mouth, but two brown hands grabbed his head from behind and snapped his neck in one blurry motion.

“...but he will,” she said to the lifeless body as it toppled to the ground, and Marco stood in its place with a devilish grin. “You’re late,” she greeted him, turning and taking a wide swing that forced another body to hit the ground, this time, separated from the head.

“I got distracted.”

He flew across the street, disarmed one of the two Beasts, and smashed his head into the wall with a bone-chilling crunch.

“Oh really? Did your distraction have a name?”

She saw the last thug back off into the shadows, probably hoping to bring reinforcements, which would do him more good than running. Her eyes focused on his every move while she drew a dagger from her belt.

“Two.” Marco grinned at her as the dagger hit the man in the back, making him stumble and fall. “*Naomi* and *Miranda*.”

She snorted and sheathed her sword while Marco went to retrieve the wounded Beast.

“Five points for trying, but I know you never ask their names.”

“No, I don’t,” he said with another wicked grin, dragging the terrified thug back to her. The man that had been so brave before just stared at them now, mouth open, probably knowing there was no escape from the Gruesome Twosome.

“Are you from Chuck’s squad, or do you work directly for Eugene?” she asked, squatting before him.

“Ch-chuck,” the Beast stammered.

“How many men does Chuck have?”

“I-I don’t know. Fifty, maybe sixty.”

“Whoa...” She looked up at Marco, ignoring the man’s pleading eyes, and nodded slightly.

The Beast was dead before she got up to her feet.

“Fifty...” Marco ran a hand over his short Mohawk, whistling. “And how many are in there?” He pointed his thumb at the warehouse at the end of the street. The bulk of it loomed in the darkness like a grotesque monster, its shape broken like it was built by someone with a mental disability.

“Half of them, but they’re supposed to be out tonight, remember?” She shrugged, giving him a once over. He wasn’t even wearing his vest, just the gear pants and a black t-shirt. “Where’s your sword? Did you leave it with *Naomi*?”

His big hand closed on his weapons belt. “Crap! I knew I forgot something!”

“*And* your jacket? And the vest?”

“I have my knife.” He drew a small black knife from his boot with a smile, making her roll her eyes.

“Put that back.” She unbuckled the horizontal carry sheath off her weapons belt and handed the big knife to him. “Here.”

“Thanks.” He fastened it to the belt on the small of his back, looking out over the street. “We gotta get rid of these. The clean-up team is busy at Longwood.”

“Fine.” She picked up their last kill by the back of the jacket and dragged him down to the smelly corner. “Oh, I almost forgot!” The sight of the dumpster made her drop the body and grab the bloodied duffel bag.

Marco was carrying a headless body, a grimace on his face, when she ran back out into the light.

“I wish you wouldn’t behead hairless people,” he complained. “Makes it really uncomfortable— Ouch!” He dropped the body to catch the bag that she tossed to him. “What’s this?”

“Another birthday present.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

Marco opened the bag. Looked inside. Made a face. “Jesus Christ, Pain. We talked about this.” He gave her a disapproving look. “And my birthday was two days ago.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m aware of that. I threw you the damn party, and then you were sick in my bathroom all night.”

He beamed down at her. “Yeah, I was.”

“It’s not something to be proud of, Marco,” she said, her face incredulous.

“Alright, alright... Who do we have here?” he wondered, peering at the head.

“It’s Benji!”

Marco’s face showed nothing but confusion. “I’m sorry, Benji who?”

She stared at him, not believing her ears. “Benji who swore to kill you! Tall Tommy’s brother.”

“*Who*?” Marco squinted at her.

“Oh, come on! You hated Tall Tommy!”

“Sorry, babe. I hate a lot of people, and it’s hard to keep tabs when they keep losing their heads.”

Her eyes rolled skyward. “Whatever. He’s not looking for you anymore.”

Marco chuckled. “Thanks.” His gaze switched back to the bag. “Okay, this is gross, why am I still holding this...” He disappeared around the corner, taking the bag with him. “Where did you find him, anyway?”

“I wasn’t looking, really. He was lurking around at Archie’s, probably hoping you’d be getting drunk there.” She watched Marco carry the bodies away from the light, using his distraction to avoid the dirty work.

“What were you doing at Archie’s? Ogling that hairy bouncer again, ain’t ya?”

“*Nooo...*” She made a face, before giving up with a sigh. “Maybe. He’s got beautiful eyes, admit it.”

Marco scoffed. "Sure, if his eyes are on his ass."

"Oh, shut up." She grabbed another Beast by the jacket and dragged him into the darkness to speed up the process and get back to the interesting part.

"Okay," Marco said, moving his massive shoulders as if to warm up. "What's the story again?" He dusted off his hands and stared at her with a quizzical look.

"From the beginning?" she asked, getting a quick nod from him. "Remember the two fools that have been following me around? I ran across one of them yesterday and was about to slit his throat when he said he had the info on Chuck that I've been looking for. Said he overheard me asking about it somewhere. Normally, I wouldn't listen, but you know how we've been grasping at straws lately, with Chuck being smarter than most of them."

Marco nodded his agreement, stretching his tattooed arms over his head with a yawn. "And this guy, he's not one of Chuck's?"

"He said not, but who knows. It doesn't matter anyway. His name's Fox, and he said we haven't been able to find Chuck because he's got not one, but two bases, and he changes them every week. They move their shit around in a truck, have guards posted outside at night, and Eugene's spies provide him with intel whenever our patrols come too close to finding him. In other words, he knows what he's doing."

"Yeah, I can see why Eugene likes the guy. He's not just some Mexican punk with skills."

"Exactly," she continued. "Chuck's squad is doing a security job for Eugene tonight, some big shipment of whores or arms or innocent babies for evil sacrifice, whatever. But the thing is, Chuck himself is going to stay at the base and coordinate everything from there, with only half a dozen men with him."

"At this base?" Marco pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the warehouse. "Are you sure about it?"

"No. I got it from some skanky Beast who makes his money selling scraps of gossip. How sure can I be? But I know the chance is too good to miss."

"And it didn't cross your mind that busting their shipment could be way more fun? I'm not even talking about Eugene losing a client, plus whatever we would find there."

She shook her head. "Getting rid of Chuck is more important right now. We take him out, and his whole squad goes back to where they came from, and it's half a hundred trained thugs. Besides, there's no way we'd be able to track down the shipment on such short notice. Even if the whole of the Headquarters was on it, and you know Peter's got his hands full of crap now."

"If they're all in there, and Chuck makes it out alive, we'll only make it worse. You do realize that, right?"

"Well, yeah. He'll lie low, and we won't find him for another six months. But he'll be half a squad short," she said with a smile.

Marco folded his arms on his chest, pointing a finger at her as he said, "You are talking about killing two or three dozen people, am I right?"

She paused. "*People?*" she said, incredulous. "They're not *people*, Marco. They're animals. I'm talking about using the chance to take out a gang that's been terrorizing the city for months, instead of waiting for the perfect opportunity again. Do you know why the clean-up's at Longwood?"

“No, I don’t.”

“Skull and ten more guys have been there two nights in a row. They’re wiping out a gang that’s been on our raiding list for a month, because we’re understaffed. You know why tonight?”

“Do you have to ask me every time before you say something?”

She ignored his snide question. “Because two days ago, the sheriff called Peter about the five dead teenagers they found there. They were just kids, Marco. Teenagers don’t have money. And the Beasts killed them anyway, for sport. Because they trespassed into their territory. They now have a *territory* in our city. All because we didn’t get there in time.”

He gazed at her, as if lost in thought, and it didn’t seem like he had anything else to say.

“So yeah, whoever is in there, I’m alright with taking them all out. I’ll make it as messy as possible, and then I’ll make sure people find out about it, that the Headquarters doesn’t need to send dozens of men to eliminate those bastards like the plague that they are. So that next time some gang decides this city is the perfect place for them, they think twice about it.”

“Alright. We’re wasting time.” Marco cracked his knuckles, looking back at the warehouse. “When do they start?”

“At eleven, but I’m guessing Chuck is already there. We’ll have to take out both him and his men. You told me yourself that he’s dangerous. Come on.”

They circled the big building, jumping soundlessly from roof to roof, peering into the darkness for any sign of guards. It seemed, aside from the Beasts they took out earlier, the whole area was deserted this time of night. All they heard were the distant city sounds, an occasional stray dog barking, and their own measured breaths.

Pain crouched on a roof edge eventually, observing the black warehouse before them, and felt Marco sit down close at her side. Her eyes slid over the black walls and boarded-up windows; over the misshapen line of the rooftop and the wide, open space before the front doors. It did look like a good place for a bunch of bad guys. It looked like an impregnable castle.

“What do you see?” she whispered.

He grunted, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. “I see Fox’s inevitable death in the near future, because he obviously lied to you about it all. I feel it in my guts—we’re the only ones out here. There are no guards, which means he might as well have lied about the rest.”

Silently, she contemplated his words as he continued, “They don’t even have any lights around here. We could get a hundred men here through the air and storm them from the roof. They would never see us coming.”

“Maybe they’ve pulled everyone out for that security job. Or maybe, they’re not as good as Fox thinks.”

“Maybe they’re even better, and we’re walking right into a trap.”

She frowned, turning to look at him. “Like it’s the first time.” She pointed her thumb at the building. “We went in on less and always walked back out. Don’t get all doom and gloom on me now.”

"I walked out," Marco snapped, "and dragged your ass to the infirmary, with you bleeding all over the city."

"Oh, two times that happened, big deal!" she whispered with a grimace.

"Of course, it's no big deal to you. You're not the one Peter promised to kill if you flatline on my watch again."

Pain cringed at the thought, knowing how hard their boss could be on Marco sometimes. She heard him sigh and turned to find him gazing at the warehouse, his arms crossed on his chest.

"I just have a bad feeling about this. Look, one thing Fox told you is already wrong. We'll have a better shot if we watch the place for a while and come back later. Even if they're all here, it won't be a problem with Ryan and a couple more guys."

"We could at least take a proper look at it. Come on, let's find a window." She motioned him to follow her, jumping off the rooftop and approaching the dark side of the warehouse, where moonlight didn't reach.

The tall windows had probably been boarded up for years, with the nails rusty and the wood warped from heat and rain. It took them a few minutes to find a loose plank, which came off without a sound under Marco's fingers, revealing a dimly lit large room. A single lightbulb shone on the opposite wall, above the exit doors, casting most of the space into shadows. Still, she could see steel columns and a narrow mezzanine that left the center open.

"Well, someone's definitely here," she said as her eyes adjusted, letting her see more and more detail.

"I can't see shit," Marco complained at her side, too loud for her ears.

"Shh." She elbowed him slightly, her eyes focused on the vague shapes inside. "There's a man in a chair. Does he look like Chuck?"

Marco looked where her finger pointed. "Oh yeah, totally," he drawled after a moment.

"Really?"

"No!" He stared at her. "It's impossible to see anything. Next thing you're gonna ask me to do is match his dental records from up here."

She turned back to the window with a weary sigh. "That's not true. I can see two more men there and there," she pointed with her finger, "and there are bunks by the wall. It really does seem empty, and there's no glass, so we have a way in. Look, he's moving."

They watched the man as he left his chair and walked across the big room. Marco let out a grunt. "He's wearing a long coat like Chuck. And he does seem pretty short, too. Man, my hands are itching."

"Chuck's mine! Please, keep that in mind when you get in there."

"Like you did with the big twins two weeks ago?" he whispered, arching a brow.

"I told you how—"

"Tripping and *accidentally* beheading two people is not an explanation," he said, making her roll her eyes and move away from the window.

"Are we gonna do this or talk all night?"

"Fine. You cover," he grumbled, making quick work of two more nails and one plank of wood. "Take them to the far corner, and I'll come at them from the back."

She checked her gear, weapons, and mask. "I bet I'll be done with them without your help." When he didn't say anything, she turned to him and held out her hand. "Ten bucks on me taking them all out in less than a minute."

"Twenty." He grabbed her hand and shook it, and she grinned before slipping nimbly through the window.

Initially, she was supposed to take stock of the situation, then round up the hostiles and distract them for Marco to get in unnoticed and eliminate half the threat before they knew what hit them. But now, she wasn't going to leave anyone alive in there. Ten seconds were all she needed to assess the situation and pick the first two victims out of the six men she had counted, including Chuck.

Quickly, she moved through the dark room, sliding between the thin columns to the far left corner. She fueled her flight, gaining speed a moment before the impact, when she rammed both feet into a Beast that stood there talking to another. They went over in a tangle of limbs, snarling out of surprise. Before they managed to get back on their feet, she slit their throats, silencing them.

Twenty seconds, she thought with a grin, darting across the room as the Beasts raised their voices in confusion, drawing their weapons.

"Where is he?" one of them barked, turning to Chuck.

She saw Chuck back off into the shadows and marked his position in her head, drawing the katana and beheading the speaker without touching the ground, before he could say another word. His body toppled to the ground just as she moved back under the cover of darkness and spotted Marco's silhouette above her, hovering under the ceiling. *Thirty*, she counted in her head and drew a dagger from her weapons belt, taking out another startled thug, who stood stupidly in the light. *Thirty-two*. She noticed that the fifth Beast had disappeared from his previous position, and at the same time, Marco darted to the spot where she had last seen Chuck.

She cursed under her breath, rising to the ceiling so she could find the missing enemy. Her heart pounded in her chest as she wondered why it was so quiet, with Marco and Chuck down there in the dark. Hinges squeaked, echoing through the walls, and she saw movement, someone hurrying toward the sound through the shadows. *Forty*, she thought as her body lunged forward before she could give the command.

Halfway to the ground, someone slammed into her from the side, and she tumbled into the light, breathless. The fifth Beast stood a few feet away, ready to fight, his face a vicious scowl. An angry red scar was all that was left of his right eye. *There goes my twenty bucks*, the thought flashed in her head as she took in his six-foot-three frame. Then, she remembered that Marco and Chuck were still suspiciously quiet.

"Marco!" she bellowed, swinging the katana to parry her opponent's blow. She gritted her teeth under the powerful swing of his longsword, then aimed a savage kick at his kneecap, making him cry out in anger and pain as he dropped on his good knee.

In a blur, she kicked the sword out of his hand and circled him, grabbing his jaw as her blade flew up to his throat.

"Stop!" Marco's sharp voice froze her in place just as thunderous footsteps echoed through the room.

"Marco?" She saw his vague silhouette walking toward her, and tightened her grip on the Beast, reminding him to stay still.

“Drop the sword!” someone said, and the room suddenly filled with light, revealing dozens of Beasts all around her, more pouring out of a big trapdoor in the corner.

The corner where Chuck had disappeared a minute ago, if it was he and not one of his sidekicks.

Her eyes locked with Marco’s as he stepped into the light, hands raised behind his head and face annoyed. She let go of the Beast, stepping back.

“Easy...”

She scanned the room, already knowing there was no point in fighting. They had been waiting for them, two dozen fighters or more, they were a show of force meant to make them surrender. She could slip out in a heartbeat through the window, but Marco wasn’t as fast, and they had a knife at his back.

“Sword on the ground!” someone ordered.

She obeyed only partially, putting the katana in her back sheath instead and holding her left hand up so they would know she was surrendering. Later, when she had to find the katana, at least both pieces would be in one place.

Her eyes darted to Marco as he opened his mouth.

“Don’t,” she cut in before he could say anything. “Don’t fucking say it.”

He grimaced as the big Beast she had been about to finish a minute ago stepped behind her back.

“I told you so,” Marco said.

The world went black.

* * *

She gasped for air, coming back to consciousness, only to choke on the water that flooded her lungs, her whole body jerking against the strong hand that kept her face down in a bucket. Another lungful of searing, poisonous water, and they let her go.

She pulled herself upright and spat it all out, some of it falling on the man with the bucket. As she drew a wheezing breath, flexing her wrists against the chains that held her captive, the man cursed and bent down to shake the water off his pants.

Next second, she pushed off the ground and slammed her boot in his jaw, hearing his neck break even as he flew across the room. The bucket tumbled next to his lifeless form, and she bit her bottom lip, holding back a grin.

“Bravo!” Someone clapped his hands, stepping out of the shadows to her right as she wrapped her manacled hands around the chains, water dripping off her face. “Bravo, bravo! That was truly impressive.”

Her eyes narrowed at the short man in a long leather coat, his face ratlike. Under the coat, he was wearing a black shirt and pants, and his voice sounded like sandpaper on glass.

“Let me guess...” she rasped, restoring her breath. “Not Chuck.”

He bowed his head, feigning a modest smile. “No, of course not,” he spoke with a slight accent. “Only his second-in-command. Chuck doesn’t have time for games. And I ... I happen to specialize in this.” He waved his hand, indicating a collection of knives and torture instruments on a small table nearby. “You can call me Emilio.”

“Nice to meet you, Emilio,” she said, staring him down. “Although I should be the one clapping—you sacrificed what, four men? Just to get me and him.” She pointed her chin at Marco across from her, chained up to the low basement ceiling the same way she was, arms wide over his head.

He was watching them, one eye swollen shut, blood dripping from his chin onto the shredded t-shirt. The faint yellow light didn’t allow her to see if he had other injuries, but she knew he was slowly working on them while she held Emilio’s attention. And what Marco lacked in a skill as subtle as healing, he made up for in strength and size.

She turned back to her captor. “Did your men know about your plan when you used them as bait?”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t mind, if they only knew the great cause that they’ve served,” Emilio said with a dark glimmer in his eye, taking off his coat. The damp basement made her forget it was summer.

“Yeah, ’cause that’s what you guys are all about,” she muttered. “Great cause. Kill all men, take their money, rape their women. Real warriors, you are.”

“Oh, no...” Emilio said, coming up to her. “That’s not what tonight is about. We can talk about this any other night.”

“You won’t live to see any other nights.”

He chuckled, showing his crooked teeth. “I’ve heard so much about you, and it’s all true, it seems. Imagine my joy when Fox showed up at my door to tell me he had information about you. Said you would come to me yourself, and so soon.”

“I’m gonna chop off his hand for lying, but I’ll give you a quick death if you let me go now,” she said with a half-hearted smile, holding his stare.

“He didn’t lie. He just shared the details of your encounter with me later, the bright lad that he is.”

“He said everyone would be out working at eleven.”

“He mixed up the time is all. The job’s at midnight, and when they’re done, Chuck is getting a surprise present.” His voice lowered as his index finger hooked through a loop on her belt. “You and I are gonna have so much fun together... Don’t think you’re going anywhere, ’cause I know all about you and your little tricks.”

“Really?” she murmured, leaning forward, her eyes level with his as she stood on her tiptoes. “Did you know I could do this?”

Her forehead smashed into Emilio’s nose, the crunch still echoing when she kneed him in the crotch.

He jumped away from her, doubling up, the contents of his pockets jingling from the sudden movement. *Good reflexes*, she thought. *Will only have one shot at this now.*

Marco laughed across the room while Emilio groaned, restoring his breath somewhere in the shadows, and she chuckled in response.

“That’s okay,” she heard Emilio rasp. “That’s why we kept this one alive.” He pointed at Marco, limping back into the dim light.

He snatched a small knife off the table as he walked across the room, wiping blood off his face. His left hand closed on Marco’s t-shirt, while the right one sliced at it with the blade, baring Marco’s bloodied chest.

Emilio turned to look at her, a savage grin plastered on his face. “You’re gonna tell me everything about the Headquarters. Your perimeter layout, your clients’ names, your spies

at Eugene's barracks. And every time you don't answer my question, your friend here will pay for it."

He raised the knife to Marco's chest and slowly dragged the tip across his skin, blood welling in its trace until it spilled on the floor. Marco kept silent, his jaw tense, his eyes on her, tired, annoyed, and somewhat bored at yet another psychopath who deemed himself a supervillain cutting him up.

Emilio took a small step back, his manic gaze darting from Marco to Pain. "What's the outer perimeter layout? How far out does it go?" he asked, turning back to Marco when Pain stayed silent.

Marco sighed. "Let's see... It's definitely somewhere between *no idea* and *go fuck yourself*, but closer to the former." He stared at the Beast with a humorless smile.

Pain saw Emilio's hands ball into fists as Marco's low voice rumbled on, "You're not very smart, are you?" The muscles in his arms flexed as he pulled at the chains, towering over the ratlike Beast. "I'm an agent. She's an agent. It's been years since we worked the perimeter. The Headquarters is our home. Why would we need to sneak in there?"

Emilio turned his head, shooting Pain a furious glare, and she smiled, liking the change in him. His superior, calm demeanor didn't last five minutes with the two of them.

The knife flew back up to Marco's chest.

"Touch him again," she raised her voice, stopping him mid-motion, "and I will kill every single one of your men when I get out of here."

"You don't seem to understand the situation." Emilio turned on her, crossing the room in a few swift strides.

"I understand that Chuck has left you here in the stinky basement, while he's out there, working a serious job for Eugene himself. I understand that you're trying too hard, thinking you can prove yourself yet. I understand that if half his men don't show up for the job tonight, and no one lives to tell the story, Chuck will see you for the worthless piece of shit that you are. And you'll be too dead to change it."

He stopped a few feet away, his features twisting in anger, but the sound of heavy footsteps interrupted their exchange. "What?" he snapped, turning to the big Beast that Pain hadn't got to kill earlier that night.

He stepped into the light, cutting his one eye at her for a moment before replying to Emilio, "Chuck called. We're leaving in twenty minutes."

"Fine." Emilio dismissed the Beast with a flick of his wrist. "I'm busy, go!"

Pain smirked at the snort the big Beast gave as he turned around and headed back to the trapdoor. "I bet I know who's gonna be the real second-in-command soon," she said.

In a blur, Emilio lunged at her, her head whipping to the side from the punch. She tasted blood on her tongue as his fingers gripped her chin, forcing her head back up.

"You think you're better than me because the blood on your hands is not the blood of the innocent," he hissed, mere inches from her face. "But what's the difference, if we're both going to hell? You're such a little hypocrite, pretending to care about protecting civilians when all you really want is to kill and get paid for it. You're just like me or any other guy here."

"I'm not," she said with a wry smile.

He hit her again. She swayed in her chains, waiting for the world to stop spinning and her head to stop pounding, while the blood from her split lip dripped on the floor. He would have knocked a couple of teeth out if she hadn't pulled back at the last moment.

"You will speak when I tell you to," he said, but stepped back, probably remembering the last time he got too close. "You and your Headquarters, you think yourselves saints, sacrificing dozens to postpone the inevitable. Fight all you want, but deep inside, you know that humans are weak. We are taking over the city, one way or another. You can die tonight together with your friend here, or you can give me the information I need, and I might just let you live."

She chuckled at his tirade, making him step closer again in curiosity.

"No need to be a hero," he continued when she kept her head down, silent. "No need to die for your boss. It won't prove anything, 'cause you're no better than me. You, me, him, we're all the same."

"I'm not..." she croaked, and cleared her throat, feeling him lean in to hear what she was saying. "I'm not the same as you, you dumb shit." She licked her bloodied, but otherwise intact lips and raised her eyes at him with a dark smile. "I'm *way* worse."

Like a snake, she struck, sinking her teeth into his neck as her legs locked around his waist. Blood fountained from the ugly gash in his neck when she pulled back, letting it spill on the floor while he gaped at her, amazement and horror mixed in his look. Like a trapped animal, he thrashed in her grip, but she held on tight.

"No, no, you stay here. I'm not done with you yet."

"You..." he rasped in shock, hand flying up to his neck, as if he could stop the bleeding. "Bit me..."

"She does that," Marco said from across the room, wringing an apologetic grimace and a shrug from her.

"Yeah, I do that."

Emilio's big brown eyes stared at her, his attempts to escape weaker and weaker.

"Not a bad way to go, buddy!" Marco raised his voice again. "I wouldn't mind dying with her legs wrapped around me."

"Not gonna happen," she said with an icy glare at Marco.

Marco shrugged, rattling his chains as he waved one manacled hand. "Just saying ... I think he's done."

She turned her gaze back to Emilio's limp form and let his body slip down to the floor at her feet.

"You promised me you'd never do that again. Two years ago, remember?" Marco's disapproving voice made her look back up at him.

"It's not like I had any choice. Twenty minutes, man. You heard the guy."

"Yes, but this is *unsanitary*."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "*Unsanitary*?" She looked down, rearranging Emilio's body on the floor the way she needed it. "Naomi and Miranda, that's *unsanitary*. And this..." She paused to blow out a weary breath. "This is our way out."

"What, you have a key in your pocket?"

"No, but he does."

"You don't know that."

“Anyone who’s got ears knows that.” She shot Marco an annoyed look, poking at Emilio’s pants pocket with the tip of her boot. The keys jingled again. “Hear that? We’ll be out of here in a minute.”

She let out a relieved sigh when a big key ring finally slipped out of the pocket, and reached out with both feet to pick it up. The next part—bringing the keys up to her hand and finding the right one without dropping them—was the trickiest, and the fact that Marco was watching her every move wasn’t helping.

“Do you mind??” she growled, shooting him an irritated look from somewhere between her knees, her abs burning from staying in the uncomfortable position for so long.

“No, I don’t.” He grinned, staring even harder, if that was possible. “You’re a sight to behold, Patricia.”

She froze at the sound of her name as an awkward silence settled over the room and Marco probably bit his tongue. Her thoughts quickly returned to the task at hand, and she exhaled, focusing on it. A few seconds later, she was free of the manacles, flexing her numb muscles and checking her pockets. Most of her weapons were gone, but not all of them. The only one she cared about was her sword.

Marco cleared his throat as she checked every corner, not finding the katana.

“Some help here?” He rattled his chains, but she ignored him.

She had two or three dozen Beasts upstairs, fifteen minutes to get the party started, and no sword. *Freaking Emilio*, she kicked his body before storming to Marco and his annoying rattling.

“Finally!” he boomed, but she didn’t hurry to help him out of the manacles.

Instead, she grabbed his right forearm, tracing the long, ugly scar there with her thumb. “Use that name again, and I’ll carve another reminder into your other arm.” She dug her nails into his skin before letting go of him.

“You can try,” he growled, his temper taking over. “This time, I won’t be drunk.”

“And I won’t be seventeen,” she parried, getting lost in the memory of their quarrel four years ago for a moment.

She shook her head, picking up a couple of knives from Emilio’s table and stuffing them into her belt. “I wish I could stay for the show, but I gotta go find my sword.” She dropped the keys on the floor at Marco’s feet as his eyebrows crawled up his forehead. “I bet it’ll be *a sight to behold*,” she whispered with a wicked grin, leaning in for a second, only to jerk back when he lunged at her.

“Get back here, you little ...!” He yanked at the chains, as if he could reach her as she hurried to the exit, a big smile on her face. “You can’t do it alone!”

“So hurry up! I’ll stall.” She winked at him, pausing at the short flight of stairs that led to the trapdoor.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to, it slipped out!”

She exited the basement, ending up in the corner that stayed dark even when all the lights were blazing on the other side of the big room.

“Sure it did,” she muttered to herself, pausing to pick up a fire axe that someone had left carelessly by the wall. “Well, this is just perfect.”

She weighed it in her palms and looked over the crowd of Beasts before her.

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