

PREVIEW

The ‘Lethal Fugitives’ are reeling following a devastating loss during the liberation of crazed experimenter Dr. Oswyn’s mega-lab and prison. To combat her crushing grief, Isabel finally accepts an all-consuming role she’s avoided for years—Queen of Aves. When the phoenix demi-goddess ascends to the throne, new powers and revelations abound. One discovery forces a brother to seek answers for the sake of the family and himself. The politics of existing as royalty is a transition none make easily. Their new responsibilities will test them like no raid has before.

“Teams need harmony in this kind of work, not poorly disguised dissidents.”

—Kohl Sasaki

!!SPOILER ALERT!!

This preview is for 'Rules of Enticement,' Book 2 of the Vermilion Series. The story picks up less than an hour after Book 1, 'Fall of Falco,' left off. So, if you don't want the ending of B1 spoiled for you...

DON'T READ THIS UNTIL YOU FINISH BOOK 1.

For reals, if spoilers ruin your day/reading experience/...life, you aren't safe reading the first page paragraph of Chapter 1: Laura.

Don't say I didn't warn ya. ;) Enjoy.

Rules of Enticement
Vermilion Series Book 2
By: S. Raquel Jimenez
© 2014 Serena Jimenez

Published By: Red Gamut Works, Co.

www.sraqueljimenez.com

@EssRaqJ: [Twitter](#) & [Instagram](#)
Facebook: [S. Raquel Jimenez](#)

Somewhere in the Shadows of Parts Unknown:

1

“Sister, I must vehemently protest your methods. I will *never* comprehend your abnormal preoccupation with that...that arrogant mass of fluff.”

Had she not sighed over her brother’s complaining millions of times before, she would have done it then. Instead, she spoke calmly to her twin.

“In the whole of our existence you have not understood. Why, if never once in thousands upon thousands of years, do think you will see today?”

As usual, her brother ignored her question, a question that she believed was quite fair. He continued to pace and ramble, “Are there not things you don’t know, sister dear? Do those elusive facts not irritate you too?”

The sister paused. She focused on the irrational calm her brother’s sweeping movements gave her. They can be such opposites at times. Gods help those in their path if she and her brother are ever upset at the same time.

“Perhaps. Regardless brother, my answer will not change. Heru is mine, as I belong to him. I will not be complete until we are together again. It has been far too long.”

Clearly the sister’s calm dismissal of her brother’s emotional state is testing his patience. In all of their existence, affiliation with that “damned bird” is the one thing they disagree about.

“Have you not learned your lesson? All the elements of your greatest tragedy are present here! I cannot allow you to choose this path again, sister. It’s lunacy.”

Finally, the brother received a reaction from his twin sister. Unfortunately, for his temper’s sake, it was not the reaction he expected. His sister looked upon him in his stalking glory...and laughed.

“You were hatched for drama, brother. Really, *allow?*” His sister continued to snicker, causing his blood boiled hotter.

“Heru *abandoned* you!” The brother started strong but a flash of memory of his sister’s pain over the “feathery bastard” stole his rage. “Sister, *please*.”

Where the brother deflated, the sister rose from her carefree sprawl, atop her favorite pillow, in ire.

“Do *not* speak ill of my mate. Of all our power omniscience is not one. If not for his swift action, taken at great personal risk mind you, we could have shared his fate. What would you have done if Hu-Yen was murdered the way Saker was? We were spared devastating losses because of him. Remember that.”

The brother’s jaw locked because of that reminder. The son of the sun had indeed saved their house from unthinkable losses. For perhaps the first time in history, Heru had done something selfless, and his sister would never let him forget it.

“I remember, yes. I also know we are near war because you cling to his mandate. We are not a submissive species – especially not to *birds*.”

It is indeed lucky for all that the brother had traded his frustration and anger for petulance. His sister’s fiery temper had quickly erupted to outshine his brief display from just seconds before.

“I have not submitted to any god’s will save our father! My choice remains unchanged because this is the safest course of action. You have the patience of a human, brother.”

“Then you know humans cannot be pacified for too long.”

“I know well the dangers the rebels pose,” the sister said, her jaw locked much the way her brother’s had been.

“They *are* a danger. *War* is long past a pose!” *You must know this, sister.* The brother willed his sister to have a moment of clarity. Heru may have helped them once, but his sister would let his memory ruin everything.

“*Heloderma* is spreading her poison in hopes to overthrow us. It has nothing to do with my honoring a promise to an ally. If *Heloderma* and her children are fool enough to rise against us, they are better off dead.”

“No one cares for your reasoning if it looks as though you jump when Heru calls. This *gift* of his has you rushing into... I

maintain your methods offend me.”

The sister eyed her brother. Did he truly mean that?

“How? This gift was sent willingly. It is *perfect*—a little roughed from transit, but still, perfect.”

The lump of meat at the threshold of his sister’s innermost personal chamber spiked his temper each time he looked upon it. It reeks of death. Gift. Bah.

“Human emotions are wildly unstable. Willing or not, this could blow up in your face. And then where will you be?”

“He is bonded now! We *will* be reunited. By any means,” his sister said resolutely as she slinked back onto the pillow.

As she settled onto the sack of Heru’s gifted feathers, he knew there’d be no reasoning with his beloved twin.

“Your obsession with Heru has never been good for us. Mark me sister, history will repeat. I can feel it.”

“Marked. Now leave me, brother. There is much to prepare.”

Laura

Seventy-five degrees, sunshine, and rain—I've always thought that particular combination of weather is unfair. I can't enjoy one while the other distracts. Today, I don't mind. In fact, I welcome it. It makes me feel like my prayer back at the airport may have worked—even if it's for something as small as allowing rain without the day being gloomy too. It takes a little under an hour to get to Laura's—Xander's mom—home in Balmoral from the airport. We're ten minutes away. Isabel hasn't said a word, or done much of anything, since we left the arrivals terminal.

My intention is to focus on my driving. I'll read every sign, mind my speed, and be the perfect driver. I'll do everything I can to not think about the fact that I am driving with the widow of my best friend—my brother—so we can tell his mother that he is dead. I cannot process it. Isabel is the closest thing we have to immortal. The last phoenix, a god, lives within her, their souls combined. She is a demi-goddess. Not only is Isabel strong and impossibly fast, she can heal from the most devastating bodily traumas by flame—mending perfectly under the blaze. Rapid regeneration is an ability individual to her, yet somehow it seems impossible for Xander to be gone. Equally unfathomable is Xander's connection to Oswyn.

For at least the better part of two decades, Oswyn's network of lunatics have been abducting people for use in their sick experiments. The rare development of supernatural abilities in test subjects is their immediate goal. Ritual magic and various chemical cocktails are forced on their captives. More attempts fail than succeed. Considering the number of casualties they produce, their *clinics* should be called death camps. Despite our particularly efficient group of escapees destroying clinics for the last ten years, the Oswyn organization's end game is still a mystery to all but Oswyn himself.

Three days ago, our group liberated one of Oswyn's largest facilities—hidden in a repurposed Romanian coal mine. Two

hundred and seventy people were freed. Two on our team sustained serious injuries during the raid. One of us didn't make it out. Isabel overheard Xander admit to feeding Oswyn info about the development of her abilities in exchange for clinic locations. From what Isabel witnessed, it seems he did what he thought he had to. Knowing him as well as I do—and I *do* know him despite the secrets he kept—it shouldn't feel like such a surprise. He'd take dull a knife in the gut for his mom; and for our Isabel...obviously, he'd do anything.

"Pull over, Tyce. Please." Isabel sounds like she's in pain. I slumped a little on the seat when I realized that she *is* in pain, and this kind of pain is one I can do nothing to ease.

The first turn off the road is a dry-cleaning shop. The parking lot is small and mostly full. A woman the size of my thumb stumbled out of the shop carrying a bigger load than she should. She wobbled to the trunk of the car next to ours. With a grunt, she half laid, half slung, the plastic sheathed clothes in before she slammed the trunk shut.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this. Not yet." Isabel looked to me, her lower lip is trembling, and her eyes are desperate.

"What changed your mind?" I hope it's nerves, but I know better.

"He's strong. Maybe..." Isabel forced a calm expression. "I don't believe he stayed there to die. He had to have another way out of there." Her face may be forcing blank calm, but her voice and eyes give her away.

Since I've known Isabel Falco, she's kept a tight hold on her grief. None of us have lost more than she has. Because of Oswyn, all of the other Falcos are dead. Oswyn sent his hunters to massacre her clan and collect Isabel. Now, not even her soul is completely her own. Since fleeing the excruciating existence of an Oswyn test subject, Isabel has been in constant fear of losing her humanity. Although everything that mattered to her was destroyed, I've never seen her allow herself to be sad. I catch a glimpse now and again, when she thinks she's alone, but she sucks it up and smiles quickly when she realizes that she isn't. Instead of dealing with her feelings, Isabel helps everyone else

with theirs.

At first, before I knew her well, I thought Isabel was using us. I thought she was taking such good care of Xander, me, and even Doc, so that she could feel better about herself. I grew up around selfish *how does this benefit me* people. Sister Amadora is the only truly good person I knew in Italy. You'd think being married to God would make all nuns good people... Another story for another day.

Every time Xander or I would walk into the same room with Isabel she'd light up. She'd do anything we asked if she thought we'd enjoy it. The suspicious street kid in me didn't trust such kindness, even though she hadn't lied to me once in the year we'd been living together on Vermilion Cay — Isabel's island home. One day, I asked her as plain as I could in my broken English.

"You always happy seeing me. Why? What you want?"

Isabel gently ruffed the breast feathers of the falcon she'd just finished feeding. It had been hurt during a storm and Isabel was personally nursing the bird back to hunt-ready health. Isabel's head slowly tilted to the side as her features bunched up in confusion. The falcon's posture eerily bent to match hers. I watched her eyes as she studied me. Isabel's eyes have a way of stopping you cold. I'd like to say it's their odd color — a dark red pretending to be black — but no.

Isabel's eyes are literally the windows to her soul. No matter how pleasantly she curves those plump lips into a smile, or how carefree she may look when she tosses that wavy mop of hers about, her eyes will always tell me where her heart is at. This time, for a moment, I saw a flash of fear. How strange. Despite being a tiny thing, there isn't a doubt in the minds of the three men she lives with that she could kick all of our asses without breaking a sweat. Funny, with all of that strength, you'd think she'd be a buff little hard-body. Instead, Isabel is so curvaceous and feminine that I still insist on opening new jars for her. Hell, I carry her bags. Like she needs my help.

"Of course I'm always happy to see you. I only want you to be happy, Tyce," Isabel said.

“Why? Why you care?” I pressed.

She shrugged and smiled. “Because I saved your life. If I’d gotten you out of that prison, but left you unhappy and alone, I’d be no better than Oswyn. Besides, I like being around you. Why do you ask?” Her smile waned. “You know, you can go back home whenever you want. I’d never make you stay here. Do you want to leave?”

Everything Isabel said washed over me, clean and easy, the way only truth does. That’s my *gift* from Oswyn. I have a talent for truth. I know when a person is lying and I can force anyone to tell me the truth.

At the time, I really was thinking of going back to Italy. I would have been on the streets, but I’d lived through that before. I could drop English and hustle a decent wage somehow. But...Isabel wasn’t trying to use me. She didn’t hate or shun me because no lie escapes me. She didn’t attack me when I lost control of my power, even when it forced her to admit she was afraid to sleep under sheets, because if she woke up in the dark, she’d think she was strapped down in Oswyn’s *orientation* room again. Isabel embraced me as a person, not as a tool to be used. At that time, I had more fingers on my hands, than friends I believed were not out to use me.

Still, her question gave me pause. Isabel would have bought me a first class ticket home without a fight. I felt immediately compelled to answer no, which shocked me. All I’d done that year was wonder what her angle was. She smiled that sweet smile she uses to get her through difficult conversation—pleasant, unbiased. As always, her eyes show her true feelings. She didn’t want me to leave. It doesn’t happen often, and hasn’t happened since, but my heart spoke for me that day.

“Isabel Falco, I never leave you. I work for you to be happy. Same you work for me. *Uguale.*”

A real smile reached her eyes as she hugged me. Taking the time to feel the moment, I finally allowed myself to accept Isabel for who she is. She is completely selfless. It has nothing to do with

what she's been through. Somehow, I know she would have been the same person if none of this had ever happened. I made her smile from her heart. Knowing I can't do the same for her today put a lump in my throat.

I was hoping we could get home before having this discussion. I want Isabel to be surrounded by our family. No way I want to do this in a rental outside a drycleaners. I don't think I've ever dreaded doing something so much.

"We can get a room if you want more time, but we have to tell her," I said while keeping a close watch on her eyes.

"It won't be any easier tomorrow, or the next day, but what if—"

"He won't come back, *sorella*." Isabel opened her mouth to argue but I won't let her start again. "He's gone."

"How can you be so sure? *I'm* not sure and I was there."

I knew she would dare me, knowing I have no proof. But I do have proof. God help me. The last thing I want to do is play this last card.

"I checked my messages while you were in the lady's. Doc said they have...something." Isabel's shoulders hunched as she looked away from me. I want to touch her—comfort her—but somehow I think it might hurt more. But those are *my* issues. As much as Xander was my best friend, so is Isabel. She needs me to be here for her as I promised I always would be. So, I'll take her hands firmly in mine while I tell her, "Lye has been keeping watch on the recovery effort for the mine explosions. Seventeen bodies have been recovered so far." She tried to pull away from me so she could crumble completely. I held her hands tighter.

"Bodies," Isabel whispered after a shuddered breath.

"We have the morgue photos of the unidentified. He...*Xander* is one of them."

I wait silently for her reaction. Isabel hasn't broken down yet. That could be dangerous—another reason we wanted her at home for this. If she had cried at all—I mean *really* cried, not a few escaped tears here and there—I'd say that we are in the eye of the storm, but she's been so *quiet*. I watch her profile, looking for any tell as to what she is about to do. Nothing betrays her. Isabel

closed her eyes and was utterly still for the longest time. I opened my mouth to say something—I hadn't decided what yet—when she spoke.

"Have you seen it? The picture," she asked. Her voice is void of emotion.

"Yes."

"I need to see it," she said. She is sure. I can feel it. Lies have a very unpleasant...texture—the more egregious, the rougher the feel.

"He was pulled from the rubble, *cara*. You don't want to—"

"I *need* to see!" Isabel looked to me again. Her eyes are brighter than their usual dark near-black red. Not good.

"I know this is not what you want to hear, and may be damn near impossible for you right now, but I need you to calm down. *Isabel!*" I squeezed her hands, which have become quite hot, then gave them a firm shake. Usually it takes a very deep and nightmare ridden sleep to bring the phoenix's heat. Her control is slipping. Again, not good.

Isabel closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, the crimson had receded back behind the natural dark color of her eyes. *Grazie a dio*.

"Show me," she said.

I took out my phone and opened the photo message from Lye. "I don't want this to be the way you remember him. You shouldn't see this. Can you just trust me on this? Please, Isabel," I begged her once more.

"Will you remember him that way?" She gestured to my phone.

"No. But this will haunt me. You have enough nightmares without it."

I tried. I should let the photo slide until we get back to the cay, but I can't do it. That's too close to a lie and I can't lie to her. Never could. It causes me physical pain. Only Isabel affects like me this. I don't understand it, but it has always been this way.

According to Lye, this photo was the lesser of two evils. This is the shot from the morgue—the other was taken not long after Xander's body was pulled free. Even with the blood and debris

cleaned away, and the damaged skin laid back as close as possible to its original places, it is still...traumatic.

I placed the phone in Isabel's hand. She closed her eyes and sat the phone on her lap. After several steadying breaths, she looked. If I hadn't been staring I'd say something hit her. The air rushed out of her in a sharp huff. Her body tensed until she was completely frozen—frozen after she'd deflated. I had to remind her to breathe. Isabel strangled down a few breaths. *God* I hate this. Isabel is the strongest person I know. I've seen her hurt physically before but never this. Never this.

Isabel's free hand jerks indecisively between covering her mouth and holding centimeters away from the screen. She wants to touch the phone, but she just...can't.

"We have to get him. Rest him properly." She handed the phone back without looking in my direction. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Please, don't be angry. We thought it'd be safer to get you home before we told you."

"How could you all decide to take that choice from me? It may have been short but he was *my* husband before anything," Isabel hissed.

As those last words left her mouth, haze that the heat of her breath made danced in front of her face, distorting her features. She's pissed. She has the right to be. The air conditioning is losing the battle with her heat.

"*Sorella*, please. You have every right to be upset with us but—"

"But *what*? What was the plan, Tyce? Leave him there to rot!"

The slow roll of the haze quickly spread throughout the car, warping my view of anything beyond the windows. My eyes and mouth are drying out. Blinking isn't helping. I feel...heavy. My limbs... It's like I'm buried to my neck in hot sand. The oxygen level is dropping more quickly than I could have imagined. I'd lower the windows, but I can't lift my arm.

"Of course not," My words came out as whispers. Honestly, I'm surprised I can speak at all. "Cynthia is going. She'll pose as his mother to claim him. Lye set it all up." Isabel looks so hurt.

Betrayal is still fresh in her eyes. “Think about it, Isabel. You can’t risk...blowing cover. You are...roasting us in this car...and we’re just talking. You couldn’t even bring yourself...to touch...the screen. I know you believe you can...handle it, but this isn’t a risk you should take. Right now...we are...where we’re most needed—where you are most needed...as his wife. Laura will need you.”

“If she doesn’t want to kill me,” Isabel scoffed. Her anger melted back into that lost hopelessness that looks so foreign on her.

The sudden dip in her mood squashed her heat. Thank god for that. Come on A/C, cycle in that fresh air. I can’t turn my head. Luckily, the vent is blowing directly on my face. Still, it isn’t enough. I’m telling my arm to lift up, to open the windows, but it’s not moving. The most movement I can muster is a twitching digit. I feel it...my consciousness...it’s slipping...

“Tyce! Oh gods, I’m sorry. Wake up! I’m too hot to touch you. Fuck, I...oh no no no. Tyce!”

So loud. What’s... Ah, now I remember. Isabel must have let the windows down.

“Tyce Accati, *do* something. Yell at me. Dammit, hit me! Just let me know you’re—“

“Shut up, Isabel. You’re killing my ears.” I tried to smile but it seems my oxygen-starved body still isn’t following directions.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got it under control I swear,” she said into her hands. “Please, forgive me. I couldn’t live with myself if—“

“I thought I told you to shut up,” I slurred as I stuck my head out of the window. Or rather, let my head fall out.

If she keeps talking, she’ll worry herself into another heat wave. It’ll be a few minutes before my voluntary movements accurately match the signals my brain is sending out. While I breathe in the outside air, I open my mouth to let the rain fall in. The drops hit my sandpaper tongue and absorb immediately. Every few breaths I try to move a different limb. While becoming increasingly satisfied with my recovery, I realize how quiet it is. Then I remember why.

“*Gesù Cristo*, Isabel. I’m sorry I spoke to you that way,” I said quickly. Isabel let out a brittle excuse for a laugh. “What?”

“I could have killed you. Yet, you apologize to me?”

“I know your heart. I’m not concerned about what happened. As soon as you saw that I needed you, you helped me, right?”

I took her hand again. I’m grateful for two things, one: she let me take her hand; and two: my hand didn’t tremble as I reached for her. If I don’t clear the air, she could come up with the insane notion that I’m afraid of her. Isabel’s heart has done enough breaking to cover several lifetimes. I won’t add to it.

“Of course, but—”

“Why would you say that? What you said about Laura. I feel that you believe she will.”

Isabel has never been one to fight a change of subject during particularly difficult conversation. It’s a guy trait to be sure. Side effect of mostly male companionship I guess.

“Don’t make me say it.”

I just looked at her. I won’t make her tell me the truth, as I have the ability to—that has always been an unspoken rule between us. And I don’t have the energy to do it anyway. First thing, my heart rate needs to regulate.

“It’s my fault,” she gritted out. “If I had trusted him to clear the mountain on his own, he wouldn’t have made me take his way out.”

“You can’t blame yourself for his choices. It was not your fault.” The air is beginning to cool. Her grief must be washing the anger back—leaving her cold. “Now, we are going to Laura’s. We’ll tell her together. You two can plan what to do...about the burial.”

Isabel winced at the word, burial. Her shoulders hunched and her body rolled as if she would be sick. She’s holding still, as one does when concentrating on not being ill. Something else I never thought I’d see. Isabel is *never* ill. She nodded and the mask of cold calm switched back on. It’s not that I want her to cry, or have a screaming fit, but the way Isabel’s already shutting herself down...it worries me.

When I parked outside Laura’s house, I figured I’d either have

to give Isabel a minute to will herself out of the car or I'd have to talk her out. I didn't have to do either. Before I could get the parking break up, she was closing her door. Like most of the posh homes here, the best views are hillside. The stone steps that lead up to the house are steep. By the time I make the top of the stairs, Laura's already hugging Isabel tight. She looks relieved.

"I've been trying to reach you two. I know the messages must have seemed a bit frantic, but I didn't mean for you two to run back..." Laura trailed off when she saw me. "Tyce," she whispered like the breath was stolen from her lungs. "Honey, it's good to see you."

"You look younger than I do, Laura." I give my best neutral smile. It feels misleading. My gut is threatening to flip again because of it. Laura released Isabel from a strong hug and turned to face me. She's flashing a smile that dimples at the corner of her mouth, the same as her son. She and Xander have identical brown eyes, same shade, and same shape.

"What a flirt," she laughed. "Where's your husband?" Laura asked Isabel. I thought she'd wince again but Isabel's face is expressionless.

"May we come in, Laura?" Isabel asked.

"I asked you not to call me Laura," she answered carefully. The women share a moment in a glance. Laura is trying to read the situation. Isabel is trying to keep it together. "You didn't get my messages, did you?"

Isabel looks to me. I shake my head. Laura let out a sigh and turned back towards the house. Taking Isabel's hand, and motioning for me to follow with the other, we make our way inside.

"Whatever brought you two home can wait until you see who's inside," Laura said quietly.

Home. I hope Isabel caught that. They say, *a mother knows*. Laura may not be thinking the worst, but she knows something is up. What worries me is who could be inside her home who is important enough to delay what we all know will be bad news. I'd say it's stalling but that doesn't feel right.

Something smells good. Laura is baking. I close my eyes for a second to take in the sweetness of the air. I'm willing to take any distraction from what's to come. High-pitched giggling brings me out of my moment. Isabel and I slow at the same time. We look to Laura. She rubs Isabel's back then quickly hugs herself tight to her arm. Laura's smile is brittle now. She nods towards the corner while ushering Isabel forward.

A familiar woman is sitting on the far sofa—or should I say a *notorious* woman? Her bright red hair makes her hard to miss. The giggles are coming from a baby on her lap. It's a girl—obvious by her fluffy white dress and flower sandals. The woman lifts the child up over her head at arms length then sits her back down. From the height the child reaches, it's a safe bet that the redhead is tall for a woman. Too skinny for my tastes. The ride must be *very* entertaining for the baby girl. The child squeals and kicks for each trip.

"Elle, you remember Brenda," Laura started strained.

When did *they* meet? Whenever it was, it did not go well. Isabel stiffened under Laura's arm. Her fingers curled to claws before she flexed them and forced them to hang neutral at her side. Not only does Isabel remember Brenda, she knows exactly what she used to be to Xander.

"Brenda, have you met Tyce?" Laura asked. She's making sure to keep her hold on Isabel's arm while trying to remain a good host in keeping with the introductions.

Brenda let the child sit on her lap. She's playing happily with the pacifier on a string that's clipped to the front of her dress. "I have." Brenda smiled the kind of inappropriate smile I get far too often. "It was years ago. How are you, Tyce?"

I step closer to Isabel's side and rub her back between her shoulder blades. As I thought, she is completely stiff.

"Well as I can be," I replied.

The room is charged. Laura's eyes dart nervously between the two women. Brenda is staring and smiling sweetly at Isabel. Isabel is staring at the child. No one spoke. The girl screamed some baby nonsense then laughed at herself. Isabel jumped at the sound then looked to me. I know what she wants.

"Your daughter, Brenda?" I asked.

"Yes. This is Andi." She turned the child to face us clearly.

Isabel grabbed my hand. She'd stopped breathing. I took the time to actually *look* at the child.

"*Mio dio, quegli occhi.*" Those eyes. They're...

"Xander's eyes," Isabel whispered.

"Yes, *Elle*, Xander's eyes," Brenda said smugly. "Andi is ours."

Brenda's smile hasn't changed; I'm just better able to read it. Brenda is pleased with herself. She's enjoying the tortured look on Isabel's face. Most important is her words are true. Any further proof needed is in the child's eyes.

In theory, Laura is right to get a good grip on Isabel. What Laura doesn't know is if Isabel wants to get to Brenda, it'll take a hell of a lot more than a woman of a buck-forty and a few inches taller latched to her arm to stop her. The good news is if Laura's still holding on, Isabel isn't heating up.

Isabel closed her eyes and began to breathe slowly. When she opened her mouth to speak, I expected to see the haze again. How could it not return? With this new bombshell, I'm surprised we're still alive.

"He knew? About her," Isabel asked. No haze. Promising. But can it last?

"No, honey." Laura started in comforting Isabel. "He'd never keep something like this from us."

Isabel started to slowly shake her head. Surely over the new list of *nevers* proved wrong about Xander in the last few days.

"*Knew?*" Brenda asked. She slid to the edge of her seat, frowning.

Laura unwrapped herself from Isabel, stepping in front of her. She placed her hands on Isabel's shoulders. Isabel stood still. Her eyes are still closed. Laura moves her hands up to cradle Isabel's face. Isabel opens her eyes and looks up into Laura's. Both only need to blink for the tears to fall.

"I...I'm so sorry, Laura. I couldn't bring him back this time."

"No," Laura whispered.

"I'm...sorry," Isabel said again as her voice began breaking—pleading.

Laura went paler than she already was for finding out she's a grandmother. She would have fallen to the floor if Isabel and I hadn't caught her – mostly Isabel.

"No, no, no, no..."

"What the hell is going on? What did you do to her? Where is Xander?" Brenda is out of her seat, stalking towards us. She left Andi on the sofa where she watched her mother's every move.

We're crouched on the floor in front of Laura, who isn't looking at anything at the moment. I pull Laura closer to me. Isabel can deal with Brenda. Isabel stood.

"Xander was killed three days ago on a mission. We came straight here," Isabel said, having pulled back into her calm façade.

Laura's head snapped up. "How? *How* did it happen?"

"There was an explosion in the structure we were sweeping – it collapsed," Isabel said plainly. No emotion. Just words recited.

"That's it?" Brenda yelled. "That's all you'll say?" Her eyes widened as her next thought came to her. "It was *your* fault, wasn't it?"

"*Brenda!*" Laura growled, glaring at her.

I said, "No, of course not."

At the same time, Isabel said, "Yes."

"Isabel?" Laura sat up straighter on the floor.

"It was *not* her fault," I said.

"I was supposed to leave as soon as my job was done, but he wasn't out yet. He should have been long gone. I broke the rules – went after him. I thought he might be hurt. I couldn't contact him... I found him – perfectly fine. The structure started to go. My escape was supposed to be closer to the ground. His was up very high. I wasn't prepared for a jump. There was a fire... In the confusion he tackled me and forced his chute onto my harness. He threw me out of a window. When I landed, the place went down."

"It *is* your fault," Brenda hissed. Isabel hasn't so much as looked at Brenda since we walked in but she's looking at her now. Tears roll down Brenda's face. She shook her head fast, leaving her orange-red hair sticking to her wet cheeks. "How can you

stand here like that? How can you tell his mother her only child is dead, because of you, and not shed a single tear? Do you even care?"

"I do not owe you an explanation, Brenda," Isabel said, no longer looking at her.

"You owe—"

"Jack *shit* is what I owe you, Brenda. So shut the fuck up," Isabel hissed through clenched teeth. She jerked her chin to the left. The sharp movement cracked her neck.

"*Her*," Brenda pointed to Laura. "You owe her. He was *your* husband for god's sake!" Isabel didn't move—didn't flinch.

At that moment, I knew. From the moment she climbed into the Humvee in Romania, Isabel has been trying not to kill us all. She's been smothering her emotions to keep us safe. It's immediately apparent that the episode in the car earlier was but a drop in the bucket to what Isabel can do. I can't imagine the power she's been controlling, stifling. I know Isabel. And the Isabel Falco I know would have already knocked Brenda on her ass or out cold. The fact that she's allowing her to keep yapping...it's complete lockdown or complete meltdown—that's where Isabel is now.

I was too busy watching Isabel will herself to stone-faced control to see the hit coming. Brenda slapped Isabel down across her face.

"Brenda, stop this!" Laura called. She struggled, trying to get to her feet quickly.

No matter what Laura wants to do, she won't be fast enough to stop Isabel. My goal isn't to stop her from hitting Brenda back. It's to stop Isabel from beating Brenda to death. Two of the fastest and most brutal fighters I've ever seen in action are Xander and Isabel. As upset as she is, I'm sure she can't gage her strength, or worse, she doesn't want to. But Isabel didn't strike back. She's just looking out at nothing. Brenda looks furious over the dismissal. She pulls back a tight fist and swings hard to hit Isabel on the nose—again, no reaction.

Brenda screams in frustration and tackles Isabel, knocking them both to the floor. Andi starts to cry and reach for Brenda

from the sofa. Seeing as Isabel isn't fighting back, I move to pull Brenda off of her. Laura beats me to them. Laura is pulling Brenda back by the waist but Brenda is reaching for Isabel again, this time wrapping her hands around her throat. Too far Brenda. She squeezes...hard. Still, Isabel doesn't react. Brenda continues screaming at Isabel after getting in two knees to Isabel's stomach. I rush over to help Laura separate them.

"Cry! Cry damn you!" Another knee to the stomach. "You killed him, you bitch! You killed him! One tear." Another knee strike. "One fucking tear you heartless bitch!"

I'm prying Brenda's fingers from Isabel's neck. I want to snap each digit off completely. Before I could complete my task, Brenda bashed Isabel's head to the floor. Laura succeeded in pulling Brenda across the room and out of my reach. As soon as they were safely away from us, Laura pushed Brenda away from her. She looks disgusted by the woman—and heartbroken. Isabel's face is scratched and bloody. While attempting to catch her breath, blood bubbles from her mouth and splashes out when she coughs.

Any second now, the healing will start. If I don't get Isabel away from Laura and Brenda, they'll see. The healing blaze, the will of the phoenix god Heru, will burst from Isabel's injuries and burn her back to perfection.

"It's fine, Tyce," Isabel said, her voice a raspy whisper. "I'm going to heal...normally." She said the last for my ears only.

Normally? No fire? Isabel must have read the confusion on my face because she nodded. How can she know that? She can't control the healing. I helped her sit up.

"Sweet *Jesus*, Elle. Your face." Laura swept up the crying child while trying, then quickly succeeding, in giving her the pacifier. "Brenda, stay where you sit or I will shoot you. Do you understand that?" Brenda drew her knees to her chest. She didn't acknowledge the warning verbally.

Laura went down the hall and disappeared into a room. Isabel touched the scratch under her eye and came away with blood on her finger. She stared at it quietly. I opened my mouth to tell her to put her head back for the nosebleed, but she started giggling. The

giggles grew to full out laughter. Laura sprinted back but stopped, staring startled at Isabel.

"She's lost it. She's crazy," Brenda said. She's scared now – like she should have been to begin with.

"Elle, honey..." Laura said inching forward, first-aid kit in hand.

"I'll take crazy," Isabel said. She cleared her throat and began to sound more like herself. "I'll take it." Isabel is smiling now – a brilliant smile that doesn't fit her bloody face. "I watched a fucking mountain collapse around the person I loved most in this world. I came to tell the woman that trusted me enough to welcome me into her family that I failed her and I find *you!*" She lazily waffled her hand at Brenda, as if she was the least important thing on this earth—less than dirt swept under a rug, or the dirt that was already there. She didn't even look at her. "We have been inseparable for over a decade. We lived through things you cannot begin to imagine. He loved *me*. Not you. But you have his child, she has his eyes, and I have nothing but memories. You'd think I'd have learned by now that *life isn't fair* is a gross understatement." Isabel took the towel I held out to her and wiped the blood from her mouth the best she could without being able to see herself.

"It is my fault. You. Are. Right. And because that is true, I won't cry. Not in front of anyone who loved him. I don't deserve comfort. I don't deserve to grieve with even you. I felt like I deserved punishment. So I let you hit me. I didn't lift a hand against you because I would have done the same thing if I were you." Isabel looked to Brenda now with a wide grin that's more hysteria than a smile. "But know this Brenda, it will never happen again. You don't know me and you don't know what I'm capable of. Anyone who has ever drawn this much blood from me is dead. Try it again and you will join them. And I swear on everything I hold dear, your end will be slow."

That big grin had turned into something sinister while Isabel spoke—a sneer on the line of evil. She's thinking about it—killing Brenda. Laura watched Isabel with an equal amount of fear and pity in her eyes. I moved to block Isabel's line of sight to her. If she

sees the pity, I am sure she'll lose it for real. Nothing sets Isabel off like pity.

"I'm glad to know you're hurting," Brenda said.

"Stop it, Brenda! God *damn* it," Laura yelled.

"I hope you see his face every time you close your eyes and then I hope you see Andi's—see what you will *never* have," Brenda hissed the words like a curse.

The expression on Isabel's face crossed the line of evil and burned it. I pray to god she never sees her face like this—so twisted with rage. It's inhuman. Isabel's worst fear would be confirmed. The binding with the phoenix god's soul has stolen her humanity and is likely to take her over completely someday. Even seeing this myself, I don't believe that is true. But in Isabel's mind...

The tension in the room is stifling. I look back to Isabel. In the time it takes me to blink, she's gone from the spot, leaving me staring at her blood on the floor. By the time my eyes catch up, Isabel has already split Brenda's lip. The blows are raining down on Brenda in a furious blur.

"God Tyce, stop her," Laura said.

Brenda is holding one limp hand close to her chest. Her other hand is pulling at the thumbs that are crushing her windpipe. I smell flesh burning. *Shit*. "*Sorella, per favore*. Let her go. *Il fuoco*," I whispered urgently to Isabel.

I can't touch her or I'll be burned too. When Isabel released Brenda, she gasped then screamed over the pain of the burns. Andi started to cry again.

"Take the baby out Laura! I'll handle this."

Laura doesn't argue. She sprints past us, disappearing down the hall. Isabel is screaming in anguish, hugging herself. She's fighting for control. The heat that's rolling off of her is biting at my skin like hundreds of tiny pinpricks.

Brenda is shaking—likely shock from the burns. "*Isabel!*" Her full name usually brings her back to earth. Isabel glared at me. "Pull it together. Lead me to a bathroom."

I followed Isabel with a shocky Brenda in my arms. Brenda is alert, but quiet. "Isabel, you go clean up somewhere else. I'll take

care of her.”

As Isabel held the bathroom door open, she actually growled at Brenda as I passed. Her irises are churning deep crimson again. They flash to near neon then dim to a dull glow.

“Like I give a fuck about her,” Isabel hissed. Her flashing eyes and sneer cause the shaking woman to grip at me desperately.

Isabel’s tone caught me off guard. Yeah Isabel suffers from severe sailor’s tongue at times, but she’s never so hostile about it. God, please help Isabel stay in control. The last thing we need is Mr. Zero-Compassion Heru taking her over completely.

The burns smell worse than they actually are, fortunate for all. Brenda could still press charges though. We’ll try to avoid that. She moans and cries while I fix her up as best I can. I could have used a lighter hand, but as bad as it sounds, I’m right in line with Isabel when it comes to Brenda. If I didn’t have a conscience, if there wasn’t an innocent child dependent on her wellbeing, I wouldn’t help her at all.

“You’ll need to keep this clean and dry. Blisters may develop. Don’t pick at them. Ointments will do you little good,” I told her.

“What are you, a doctor?” Brenda asked with plenty of attitude.

“No, my dad is.” We all had to learn how to treat burns living with Isabel.

“What did she do to me?” Benda whispered.

“You don’t want to know. Just be thankful that you are alive. She could have killed you, you know? And none of us would have been able to stop her. Isabel loved Xander. More important, he loved her. She is what he wanted most in life. Respect that.”

“He would have wanted Andi *more*,” Brenda said indignantly.

“Then he didn’t know about the baby?”

She glared at me, peevish over the admission she obviously didn’t mean to make. I grab the arm Isabel injured and focus my power on her. Isabel deserves the truth and I need to know that my brother hadn’t kept yet another life secret from us. Because Brenda is weakened by her injuries, I don’t have to use much force. I’d barely begun to push when Brenda began to speak.

“Xander told me that Elle didn’t know he existed outside work

and being friends. I could see that he was depressed over it—over *her*. That evil freak of a woman broke his heart every day. The bitch. I saw him for the man he was and treated him like one. Andi is his gift to me. I understood what he needed and I gave it to him,” she said. God, she’s actually proud of herself. Stupid girl.

“A one-night stand isn’t what he needed. You didn’t understand him at all.” Her eyes widened at that. Yes, I know all about it. I shook my head over her ignorance. For what she’s done today it would be all too easy to tell her what Xander really felt for her, or rather what he didn’t, but shit like that is too damn petty and there are much more important matters to attend to. “Did Xander know you had his child?”

Brenda blinked away fresh tears while she confessed her truth to me.

“I called him, to tell him I was pregnant. He blew me off until Laura told him my mom had died. When he did call, he felt so bad he wouldn’t let me talk. He apologized about not returning my calls. Said his work put him into a lot of *no call zones*. He remembered me saying how hard my mom and me worked to keep me in school. Said he’d cover me until I graduated. He rushed me off the line so he could get back to work. Didn’t give me a chance to refuse his money, let alone tell him I was carrying his child.”

“So you just took the money and shut up about the baby?” Incredible.

How in the hell did Xander stomach this girl? Well, he *was* looking for Isabel’s opposite. Had this bright idea that the change would take his mind off Isabel. I told him it was a dumb idea. He tried anyway. *Be careful what you wish for* has never been so true—or cruel.

“Xander didn’t have time for me or a kid. I had a boyfriend. A stable man. I let him think she was his.”

“Why tip your hand to Laura now?”

“I came by to see Laura a few weeks ago. Isabel answered the door. She was *glowing*...and that *ring*! He’d married her. He’d made space in his life to commit to *her*—a woman who never appreciated him. If Xander had time to be a husband, then

dammit he had time to be a father. I tried calling him again but he didn't answer or return my calls. So finally, sick of waiting, I came here. No way he dodges Laura the way he did me. While she called and called every number she had, I started to feel a little better. Like maybe it wasn't me. Then you two showed up and..." Brenda shuddered and stopped herself from touching her burns.

"So...because your feelings were hurt, you cheated the man out of knowing his only child? If anyone would have been a good father it was Xander. How dare you speak that way to Isabel with what you've done? The curse you laid on Isabel is really the guilt *you* live with isn't it? Every time you look at Andi you see Xander. If you were any kind of human being you'd regret, every day, your selfish choices and what they've cost *Andi*, not *you*."

Brenda started to sob. No way in hell am I going to comfort her. I left her with that, her shame over her selfishness, her grief, and walked back to the living room. Isabel is cleaning her blood from the floor. Laura tipped around me. One finger held to her lips.

"I got the poor thing to sleep—don't know how. Elle honey, get up. I'll take care of that," Laura said. She meant it.

"I won't have you cleaning up my mess. I'm sorry I lost control." Isabel's voice is dead again.

"No, no. You look at me, Elle. Brenda had no right to say those things to you." Isabel looked at her. "And you have no right to say those things about yourself. I won't have it. Listen to me. The only person with the right to blame anyone is Xander and he made his choice. We can only respect it."

"I don't understand it," Isabel said, going back to scrubbing the blood stained grout.

"What's to understand? He wanted you safe darling," Laura said softly.

"But *why*? How could he think I'd want to stay here without him?" Hearing those words feels like a steel-reinforced blow to the chest. She meant that. That she does hurts much more than maybe it should.

The blood is cleaned up but Isabel is still scrubbing. She's staring out at nothing again. I can't help but think she's seeing the

photo of Xander, broken and lifeless, and I feel horrible having shown it to her. Laura had to physically stop Isabel from scrubbing.

"You can stop that now, honey," Laura said.

"How can you call me that, touch me? Why don't you hate me?" Isabel asked.

She hasn't blinked at all, but gravity is too much for the tears. They fall to the floor and Isabel furiously wipes them away. Laura stops her again. This time she pulls Isabel into her arms.

"I can never hate you, Elle. Xander told me what happened to him in that place." We both gawked at Laura. Apparently we were both under the impression that Xander had cleaned up the story. "He told me how you saved him. Made me promise to never speak of it to you. Anyone who knew you two could see how he felt. I lied about not knowing whom he cared for. I was never brave enough to talk to him about it. He loved you so much. Always did. Didn't he, Tyce?"

"More than anything," I replied.

"Because of you, I got to see my son again—finally know what happened to him. Because of you, he didn't die a lonely tortured child. He died a hero to those he helped and loved by the woman he wanted to love him most."

Isabel closed her eyes and concentrated. I need to get her home, fast. We're pushing it as it is. Laura petted Isabel's hair and hugged her—like a mother. Having never been consoled that way, and often jealous of those who have been, I know it when I see it.

"Do you want me to tell her, Isabel?" I asked. She nodded. "There was a recovery effort. Xander was found this morning. One of our people went posing as his mother to claim him. The only reason we're doing it instead of you is because there are very dangerous people still there. We couldn't let you risk it, Laura." The tears have returned for Laura. I can see that she is concentrating too. "We need to know where to send him. Then plan what to do...after."

Laura wiped her face and said, "Xander told me your family was killed, Elle. He said you had them laid to rest on your family's

estate.”

“They are,” Isabel answered.

“Is it true that they were the soldiers of your people?” she asked.

“They were. I am very proud of them.”

“Is there room there for my son?” Laura asked.

Isabel’s eyes opened wide. She stared at Laura, waiting for her to take it back I assume.

“You mean that?” Isabel asked.

“Completely,” I confirmed.

Laura looked from me to Isabel as she said, “He knows.”

“What do you think, Isabel? Bring him home?” I asked.

“Thank you, La...mom.”

They hugged and helped each other to the sofa. I stepped outside to make the call. First I called Cynthia – she didn’t answer. I tried Doc – the same. Lye picks up.

“Lye, I can’t get the parents. What’s up?”

“They...have their hands full at the moment. Something happened at the morgue.”

Lye started to tell me everything. I stopped him.

“Tell us when we get back. I already had to show Isabel the photo,” I admitted.

“I knew I shouldn’t have sent it. *Fuck*, Tyce! You know what happened when she thought he died in lock-up. She could have combusted. Do you really think she can survive losing you both? In her mind killing you both?”

“I know. I know.” Maybe me, but not Xander *and* me. *Whoa*. What the hell kind of thought is *that*?

“How did she take it?” Lye asked.

“She’s...internalizing.” No need to broadcast that she got so hot I passed out in the car. “Would have been fine if there wasn’t an old lay here,” I said.

“Hmm. Better than leaving Sydney a smoking crater I suppose. Wait...a jump-off at Laura’s? What the hell was she doing there? Since you’re talking to me is it safe to assume you aren’t cleaning up ashes?”

If that weren’t such a very real possibility, I’d have laughed.

“Dude, you won’t believe the details. Isabel is trying hard to hold it together. How is everyone?” I asked to change the subject and because I truly want to know.

“Quiet,” Lye sighed. “Just...quiet.”

“Laura and Isabel have decided to bury him there. Set it up, ok?”

After a pause Lye said, “I’ll do my best. Listen, I was just about to call you. To keep Elle out of the loop—for safety’s sake of course—I need you to bring Laura with you. Some strange shit is going on,” Lye said. I can hear the tension in his jaw.

“Perfect. Well, that shouldn’t be a real task. I’d assumed she’d be coming too, since they want to bring him to the cay,” I answered trying to pinch back a building headache from the bridge of my nose.

“Right. Do you have any weapons?” Lye asked.

“No.” And that’s actually a good thing. Any bullets on me could have fired in the car earlier. And it would have been very hard to not shoot Brenda had any of those bullets survived being baked.

Lye sighed, “Hurry home bro.”

“On it.”

Whatever the reason the parents aren’t answering calls is, it feels like it’s going to be a disaster, and I feel heavier for it. All of the ladies are in the kitchen together—civil. Doc says if it ain’t broke...

“Laura, what smells so good?” I sat at the bar with Isabel and Brenda. Laura placed desert plates and spoons down for each of us.

“Banana bread,” she smiled.

“As good as your chocolate cake?” I asked. Laura’s chocolate cake is legend.

“I’ll let you tell me.” She served us each a slice. “Oh! Don’t cheat. Let me get the powdered sugar.” She rushed off into the pantry.

I cheated. “*Delizioso*, Laura.”

“I knew you’d cheat,” Laura called out from inside the pantry. “Go ahead and start it then. You’ll still get the sugar. What do you

think, Elle?" Something fell to the floor inside the pantry. Laura cursed then muttered to herself, "Where in the hell did I put the damn sugar?"

"Better than mine," Isabel said after spoon number three. "What did you do differently?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just different hands I suppose. Elle traded her recipe for one of mine!" Laura yelled for Brenda's and my benefit.

"Is it the chocolate cake?" I asked. Please let it be the chocolate cake.

Isabel smirked at her half eaten slice. "Maybe."

"May I have it? This recipe," Brenda asked past a fat lip. "Banana is Andi's favorite food."

Isabel and I both looked at Brenda. She didn't look up from her plate.

"Of course you can," Isabel answered.

"Thank you," Brenda said in a tone so timid I had to blink to be sure someone didn't swap her with a look-alike.

Isabel turned her attention back to her plate.

"Don't mention it," she said.

How did they go from wringing each other's necks to swapping recipes? Some things you should just let go but I really want to know. I'll ask one day. The doorbell rang. Which reminds me, we need to be getting out of here — soon.

"Elle, will you get that please? I'm not expecting company and I don't want any."

Laura stepped out of the pantry with a powder-dusted shaker. Isabel nodded and went for the door. Laura powders what is left of our bread to our liking and serves us coffee. The front door closed sharply. Isabel doesn't slam doors.

"Who was it?" No answer. "Elle?"

Isabel stepped stiffly around the corner but stopped at the entryway. There's a gun to her head. She looks more annoyed than concerned. Classic Isabel. This is the most she's looked like herself in days. I almost feel good about it but the gun kind of gets in the way of that. The gunman is staying out of sight. Only the silencer and an inch or so of the barrel is visible. The silencer is pressed onto Isabel's temple, forcing her head to lean to the side.

Isabel's eyes narrow as she pushes back. A low chuckle comes from the gunman.

"Two. Gun, six feet. Female, five-nine sig 220," Isabel reported quickly.

I have to hold Brenda to her stool. I don't know where she thinks she can go—probably panic and lead them straight to Andi. Laura backs slowly towards the pantry. I don't stop her.

"Is it that you cannot die or that you are simply not afraid to?" the woman asks. Sounds like she's closer to the front door than she is to us.

"What do you want?" I've moved in front of Brenda now. "She's unarmed. There is no need to hold her at gunpoint."

"If she's unarmed then I am next in line for the throne." The man let out an amused scoff. "Me, in the line of succession? What fuckery..." he chuckled on.

His accent is familiar—not stuffy I'm-better-than-you House of Lords Brit, but street smart Cockney Brit—like our friend Lucky. I'm kinda wishing Lucky were here now. I don't like these odds as they are. Isabel has recovered from critical injuries before, but she's never been shot in the head.

"What-do-you-want?" Isabel asked as she tapped her head against the silencer with each word, turning little by little so the gun ended up pressed to her forehead.

What in the hell is she thinking? I try to move, to get her attention. She's smiling at the gunman. Not the time to flip, Isabel. *Not* the time. A shadow moves closer to me from behind. I thought it was Brenda moving closer, but no. I turn to see Laura standing behind me. She's holding a twelve-gauge shotgun. So that's what Isabel is smiling about.

"Patience little fire-bug. Despite the stick-em'-ups, we came to talk, promise."

Isabel looked at me. He's telling the truth so far, so I nodded.

"So talk," Isabel instructed the gunman.

"Now that the Gore-monger is dead, his treaty is null."

Isabel snickered, "Did you say *gore monger*?"

"He has many names among us," the gunman answered piqued.

“Did you hear that?” Isabel asked me.

“New one by me,” I said.

Again, this is *not* the time for laughter, but this guy is dead serious about this alias for Xander. I’m fighting cracking up myself.

“Oh he’d just love that. *Gore Monger*,” Isabel said, wiggling her fingers ominously.

That’s it. The ridiculously apt moniker for a man who controlled blood put to *spirit fingers*...it’s just too much. One sharp bark slipped past lips I thought I had a tight lock on. My slip made Isabel laugh outright.

“Taking the piss, Phoenix?” the gunman asked while pushing her head back a few inches with the gun. It must be quite irritating when the person you’re holding a gun on is laughing at you instead of being intimidated.

Isabel is keeping the guy talking so Laura can aim the shotgun towards his voice through the wall.

“Oh no. I’m just imagining how much he would have enjoyed that one.”

“What treaty?” I asked. Laura is in place. Brenda is shaking on her seat. At least she hasn’t bolted.

“Our mother promised not to hurt *his* birth mother and to not actively track you home if he cooperated. Now that the son of a bitch is truly gone, mother is no longer honor-bound to stay away from the bitch in question. Enter us.”

“What do you mean track me home?” Isabel asked.

Isabel could have picked a few points to argue from what he said, but she stuck to business. She’s good that way. And that she can do it now makes me respect her even more. When he said *our mother*, Isabel’s eye twitched. Looks like everyone on Oswyn’s side knows that Isabel is the Missus’ daughter.

“When you betray the clan you loose the way home. You’re Queen of Falco and you don’t know that much?” he scoffed.

I follow the line of his hand and focus my energy on where his body should be.

“Arm getting tired?” Isabel asked to test my aim.

“Yes,” he answered with an effort. He didn’t want to admit it. I

have him and Isabel knows it.

"Tell me why you're here," she ordered.

"Snap out of it, Coffee! It's the Interrogator," the woman called out.

"Oh that's no fun, we've already heard *The Interrogator*. You *have* to have something as awesome as *Gore Monger*," Isabel chided.

"I am a tracker. Since our mother has been banished spiritually, she cannot remember where her home is. That is why she never again invaded," the gunman said quickly.

"Coffee!" The woman took two steps by the sound of her heels.

"What do you want with the Letter's birth mother?" Isabel asked.

"Her life," Coffee answered without missing a beat.

"Well shit," Isabel said the two words to cover her nod. She's ready.

I hold up three fingers to Laura. She readjusts the stock of her shotgun for recoil and takes a steadying breath. Her face is cold and hard—mission mode. Her stance is so much like Xander's that I wonder who taught whom how to handle a shotgun.

Three. Two. One.

Isabel moved so fast she left the barrel of Coffee's gun pointing at thin air. Before Coffee's reflexes could kick in, Laura fired into the wall. Coffee's gun fires twice before I hear it hit the floor. The woman is firing now. Isabel screams a curse, lunging, I assume, for the fallen pistol. I take the shotgun from Laura and motion for her to take cover with Brenda.

"Clear!" Isabel called. "*Fuck me.*"

A body falls to the floor. Although Isabel called clear, I still check as best I can before rounding the corner. The top of Coffee's head is blown off. Blood spatter is everywhere and I haven't passed the first body. Isabel had fallen to her knees first then to her side. Her position looks almost fetal but clearly unnatural. The other crumpled body belongs to a woman with long black hair, black eyes, and features as unnaturally perfect as Mr. Oswyn's. Someone is going to be pissed over her. Oh well, get in line.

Both she and Coffee are dressed casually except for the black

leather gloves they're wearing. One shot to her chest and one to her head—for hating guns so much, Isabel is an accurate shot. I secured the fallen woman's gun then went to Isabel. Her eyes are open.

"*Sorella?*"

"Not dead yet," she croaked.

"Where are you hit?" She's so bloody and hunched I can't tell.

"Shoulder. Stomach. Can't feel legs. Scared."

Scared?

"Is the healing coming?" I asked about an octave higher than I'd meant to.

"No," she groaned from the pain.

"What the fuck do you mean *no*? Oh Jesus, *Isabel*."

Everything Doc ever taught me flew right out of my brain. I just froze. Isabel doesn't get scared. She runs barehanded into gunfights. She'll push her own dislocated shoulder back into place and keep fighting. She doesn't get scared.

"Tyce." Isabel is looking through me. Her voice is shaky.

"Don't do this to me. Isabel, please concentrate. *Heal!*"

"Cold," she whispered.

"Oh my god!" Laura blurted as she ran to us.

She steadied herself by grabbing onto my shoulder. The floor is slick with blood. Laura looks to me with wild eyes. "Get some towels from the hall closet!"

I ran for the closet before I could process that I was moving. Laura's command snapped me out of whatever had me glued to the spot. Isabel is gasping, trying to say something. I pray I'm not missing her last words. Because she's not healing, I don't know what to think.

From the closet, I grabbed an arm full of towels. On the way over I'd tracked blood and brain. The matter is lodged into the tread of my boot. I slip on loose brain and fall flat on my back. Light flashes across the ceiling. Initially, I think my head's smacking marble is the cause. Then, the screaming began. No shocker the commotion woke Andi but the women are screaming too. I sprint back thinking we have more company. Two things crash into me at once—Brenda and Isabel's fire.

Brenda's momentum, coupled with my unsteady footing on the bloody floor, easily knocked me backwards. I land on top of Coffee's unnamed partner. Brenda lands on top of me. From my awkward angle, I can feel that my right pants leg is on fire. I smother the flames with my left leg. Carefully, I move Brenda to the floor. Isabel is screaming and writhing—fire licking her torso. I let out a sigh of relief. She's healing at least. Laura is scooting back into the furthest corner from us—she's terrified.

"Laura! See to Andi," I called hoping one: to make sure the kid's ok, and two: to get Laura out of the room.

Laura walks the wall out. She never once takes her eyes off of Isabel. As soon as I saw Laura's face I covered Brenda's chest with a towel. When she was out of sight I pulled the towel off. Brenda must have been trying to stop the bleeding when the healing started. She caught the blast of flame point blank. From the looks of the wound, the blast cut through her heart. The fire immediately cauterized the hole left behind. She died instantly. I closed Brenda's eyes and went to Isabel.

The fire has stopped. Isabel's shirt is smoking rags. She's gasping and coughing. Her legs kick and jerk—that's a good sign. With one of the towels I cover her exposed chest. She quieted soon after she caught her breath.

"Isabel, we need to get out of here. The trackers are dead. Brenda's dead too. We have to get to a safe place. They'll send for Laura again. Can you stand?"

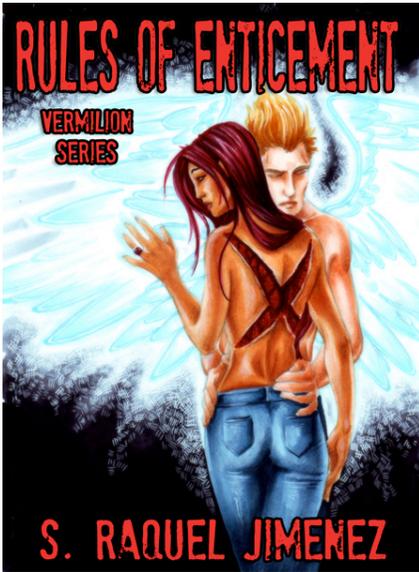
"I believe so," Isabel said quietly. "What just happened?"

She's still disorientated from the healing.

"Strange shit," I answered.

Andi is fine, thank god. Laura didn't argue that we had to get away from there. She didn't even argue about packing. The only thing she wanted was an unopened box that had been taped and mailed to her. She was adamant that we bring it. We had to rely on homegrown talent to get our hands on some passports for Laura and Andi. Andi would be Laura's daughter. No one spoke the whole day and a half of travel unless it was to or about Andi. Anything that could have been discussed shouldn't be brought up

in public or in the confines of a plane. We are traveling under false identities, fleeing the scene of a triple murder, and kidnapping a baby. Busy, busy.



**RULES OF ENTICEMENT
VERMILION SERIES BOOK 2
SUMMER 2014**

www.sraqueljimenez.com

@EssRaqJ: [Twitter](#) & [Instagram](#)
Facebook: [S. Raquel Jimenez](#)