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Words: 3744

And Then

“No one will get hurt.”

Athena glanced up from the papers on her desk and raised a brow. She looked back at the note from her secretary confirming Avery’s location, and smiled. She was already ahead of Jericho. “You always say that.” And it was never true. Casualties were as consistent to Jericho and his plots as they were to flat out human war.

She turned away from him and paced to the other side of her office where the windows looked out onto the metropolis below. She stared out at the hustle and bustle for a moment before she spoke. “You won’t get what you seek.” She turned back to him. “We will not reward a man like you with Godhood.”

He didn’t look as bothered by this as he should have been. He just leaned casually against one white wall and stared at her with serious eyes. “You haven’t seen the rest of my plan.”

She scoffed. “We don’t need to. Our decision has been made.”

His face hardened slightly. “Zeus promised me,” he hissed.

“And when in history has Zeus been entirely honest?” she asked. His only response was to seethe in quiet anger. She walked out from behind the confines of her desk and stepped across her office to the coffeemaker. She poured herself a fresh cup of the delicious brew, doing her best to ignore Jericho’s cold stare on her back. She managed to savor a sip before he spoke again.

“I know another way,” he said. Athena wasn’t sure if he was threatening or just boasting.

“Yes, your brilliant plan to capture the God Slayer.” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice as she stirred in half a spoonful of sugar. “The only problem is that she won’t help you.” She glanced over her shoulder to see him react, but whatever he was feeling, he hid it well.

“She won’t have a choice,” he said. She could almost hear the bite in his words.

Athena waved her hand dismissively. “Of course she will.” She took another sip of coffee and let the heavenly flavor rest on her tongue for a second before she swallowed it down. Humans really *had* learned to make some excellent beverages.

Jericho pushed himself off the wall and moved to leave. “You cannot help her, dear Athena. The gods have a ‘hands-off’ policy.”

She ignored the mocking. He didn’t need to know that she had already bent that rule. Instead she smiled gently over the rim of her mug. “I don’t need to help her. She will hand you your ass all by herself.”

The bottom of the bag gave out under the weight of some soup cans and a small bag of flour. The flour landed with a solid *thump* on Aleca’s toes while the cans scattered across the front step, bouncing and spinning in every direction. She watched in dismay as one flopped into a rose bush and buried itself in the thorniest part of the monstrous beauty. She just stood there for a second, collecting herself. With a shaky sigh she finished pushing the key into the lock on the back door. The jerk on the knob wasn’t strictly necessary, but sometimes abusing her door just made her feel better. This wasn’t one of those times.

She stepped inside and slammed the door shut just to be sure.

Nope. Still not better.

She moved through the entrance way and set her keys on the edge of the kitchen counter

before turning into the living room and tossing her briefcase onto the couch as she passed it. She wasn't even surprised when the zipper burst open and her various case folders exploded across the couch and onto the floor. She didn't let herself even look at them, just turned right around and headed back outside to collect the rest of her groceries, her Great Dane, Hercules, chasing her out the door.

It took her a few minutes to rescue all the cans of tomato basil and chicken noodle soup. It might have gone faster if Patches hadn't been winding around her ankles, purring like a racecar and getting in her way. As it was, she got a nice slice on the back of her hand from the rose bush. Like her day hadn't been bad enough. She ignored the bleeding limb until all the groceries were stacked on the kitchen counters and everything that needed to be refrigerated was neatly tucked away.

She stomped into the bathroom and was just reaching for a Band-Aid when her cell phone started beeping from the living room. She paused with her hand in the box, debating whether or not to answer it. It was probably her boss, which was just another bad moment in the seemingly never-ending series of unlucky events that had followed her like flies today.

She set the Band-Aids back on the table and snatched her phone out of the mess of papers on the floor, answering it right before it went to voicemail. Judge didn't even wait for her to speak before he laid out her next case.

"Got a murder case for you, Aleca. Real weird one. The guy has already confessed, but they still want you to come down and talk to him, tonight if you can."

She glared up at the ceiling. "I don't know, Judge. I don't think I can take on another case right now."

She heard him messing with papers. "Aleca, I really need you to take this one. I'll email

you everything we have. His name is Avery Cambell, and that's about all they have on him so far. We think he's an alien. Doesn't have any papers at all that we can find."

Aleca rubbed the headache that was throbbing above her eyes. Fabulous. An alien. That would just be the cake topper for the shitty month she'd had. "Fine. Tell the boys I'll be down as soon as I can. And you owe me a bottle of Ibuprofen."

"Deal. Files are in your inbox."

Of course they were. She hung up without bothering to say good-bye.

It only took her fifteen minutes to clean up the pile of papers on the floor, another five to put away the rest of her groceries and two to throw her Stouffer's lasagna in the microwave. Then she was opening her email and downloading the new files. She was about halfway through reading them when the microwave dinged.

Judge had been right, she thought as she pulled her lasagna out and set it on a hot pad to cool. There really wasn't much on Cambell, just some new fingerprints that were blurry at best, a name and birthdate, a picture, and a description of his confession. All the evidence the cops had on him sat there under everything else, a small but problematic little list.

Her headache intensified just thinking about it, so she tried not to and ate her lasagna instead, shoveling it away in a few very unladylike bites. Her mother would have been horrified.

A thorough brush and floss later she was pulling her hair back into a loose chignon and slipping back into her favorite pair of black dress shoes. She grabbed her briefcase and carefully packed it with the new files, trying to ignore her exhaustion. She went through the kitchen to grab her keys off the counter and opened the back door. Hercules bolted outside first, and she followed him at a more sedate pace out and into the garage. She double-checked the address

before she got into the black Chevy Impala, and casually tossed her briefcase onto the passenger seat of the otherwise clean interior.

Twenty minutes later she pulled into the police station. Her new client was waiting for her somewhere inside, and she would bet her favorite sweater that he was as excited to meet her as she was to meet him. A secretary pointed her down a hall and she was led into a standard interrogation room. She didn't even fake a smile as she walked in and set her briefcase down on the cold metal table. "Hello Mr. Cambell. My name is Aleca Daniels. I'm your attorney."

He looked her up and down and sneered. His reply was as cold as his welcome. "I don't need an attorney."

She didn't have to fake the smile now. "You are being accused of killing an innocent man, Mr. Cambell. That is a very serious offense. Life imprisonment." She let that sink in, watching for any reaction or emotion on his face, but he was a closed book. Closed and superglued. "It could just be me, Mr. Cambell, but it sounds as though you might want one after all."

He sat forward in his chair, his eyes lighting up just a little and his face sliding into a seductive mask. "Ms. Daniels, the only thing that you can do for me could get you arrested in some states."

She didn't flinch. It wasn't the first time someone had hit on her at work, and she wasn't about to let him get a rise out of her. "Mr. Cambell, I am here to help you."

The mask slipped away and was replaced with the old stoicism. "I don't care why you think you're here, Daniels. Go back to your cubicle and stay out of my world."

"Big tough guy, huh? Well thanks for the concern *Cambell*, but I'm a big girl."

"Their favorite."

She didn't let herself think too much about who 'they' were. "Is that a threat?"

“A warning.” They sat staring at each other for a while and she took the time to study him. His picture hadn’t done him justice. It hadn’t captured the cruel intensity of his gunmetal-grey eyes, or the proud squareness of his stubborn jaw. Nor had it caught the right shades of brown that made up his short hair. The stubble was the same but then, it seemed pretty impossible to screw that up in a photo.

She frowned, trying to pinpoint exactly what was so wrong about his face. He was handsome enough, but there was something that put her off about him, something more than his dismissive attitude. After a minute of debating with herself she had it. No laugh lines. The guy didn’t smile enough. She knew that he was looking at her just as closely as she was studying him and she wondered what he saw when he looked at her.

He leaned back in his chair. “It doesn’t matter what you do. I’m not going to prison.”

“That’s why I’m here, Cambell. To keep you out of prison, but I gotta say, your chances aren’t good. They have a lot of evidence already –”

He cut her off. “I don’t care, Daniels,” he said, the smirk pulling into a cool, lopsided grin. “I’ll be gone by morning.”

She eyed him, intrigued against her better judgment. He didn’t look stupid. In fact, she would bet that his IQ was higher than hers. “Do you think you’re a clever boy, Mr. Cambell?”

His laugh was a snort of dry amusement. “I’m older than you sweetheart.”

She didn’t reply.

He leaned forward again, suddenly serious. “You underestimate me, baby. Big time.” He met her gaze full on and held it. “Go home, Daniels. Let your dog in, close all the windows and lock all the doors. Eat something, drink some water, and go to sleep.”

Something like ice slid down her spine at his words, and her throat closed up for a

second. How had he known she had a dog? She narrowed her eyes on this man in front of her. Just who did he think he was?

Her phone started ringing right before she staggered into the house for the second time in as many hours. She wanted so badly to just ignore it. To turn it off, walk upstairs and go to sleep, but no one called this late without a reason. She kicked her abused door shut and dug for the elusive piece of technological excrement and just barely caught it before it went to voicemail. She didn't have time to read the number on the screen, but she answered anyway.

“Ms. Daniels?”

The voice was familiar but slightly panicked. She frowned. What could the station want now? She shoved away her growing uneasiness. “Yeah, Detective, what's up?” she asked, dropping her briefcase gently onto the couch and kicking off her shoes, wiggling her cramped toes in relief.

“That Cambell guy you came in to talk to? He's fucking gone, Aleca.”

She froze halfway through her standing full-body stretch. The Detective's voice disappeared into the background as she tried to process what he had said. She only heard pieces of what he described, and none of it was good.

“...his cell was still locked...no tampering with it...no window...looks like he was never there...left a phone number...”

“What?!” She snapped back into the present.

He blustered around for a second as he tried to find the information she was looking for.

“The phone number Detective. Who's is it?” She didn't mean to snap at him, but she needed to know.

“It’s a burn phone. We don’t know who it belongs to. Judge called it once but no one answered, no surprise.” She heard him sigh in frustration.

“Give it to me,” she ordered, diving for her bag and digging around for a pen.

There was a short pause on the other end and a rustle of movement. The poor guy was probably rubbing his hair uncomfortably. “You know I can’t do that, Aleca.”

Her hand finally grasped a pen and she yanked the cap off. “Make it happen Dave or you’ll lose him for good.”

A lot of silence and then, “You better be right about that.” A series of digits followed.

She scribbled them down on her hand and barely spared him a “Thank you,” before she hung up and dialed the number on the page in front of her. It only rang twice, once in her ear and once...

She turned slowly.

“You should really lock your front door, Daniels.”

He was standing there. Right. Fucking. There. A wanted man that may or may not have killed an innocent person was standing in her living room, and all she could do was stare at him. He was holding one hand up in the universal sign of surrender, but the other hand was scratching Hercules behind the ears. She glared at the dog. What a traitor.

She should have been afraid, but oddly enough the sight of him petting her dog put her a little more at ease. “What are you doing in my house, Cambell?”

He flashed her the same half smile he’d given her at the station. “Saving your ass.” He dropped both his hands and faced her full on, his smile widening when he saw the look of total disbelief on her face.

“What?” he asked. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Not even a little bit.” She clutched her keys a little tighter in her grip, trying to decide whether she could make it out the door and start the car before he caught her. Probably not.

His smile disappeared slowly and she got the sense that he was disappointed with her answer. “That’s too bad, Daniels,” he said, turning his back on her and stepping over to the couch and lowering herself into it. Aleca couldn’t help but notice that he moved around like he was already comfortable in her space. Like he had been here before.

She followed him uneasily. “How the hell did you get here so fast?”

He raised his eyebrow at her and smirked. “I drove.”

He must drive like a bat out of hell. She folded her arms over her chest and glared at him. “Well get back in your car and go away. I don’t want to have the police congregating in my house when I call them on you.”

“You won’t call them,” he said, going back to petting Hercules when the dog came up to him and leaned against his knees.

She raised an eyebrow. She had never turned down a dare before, and that had certainly sounded like a dare to her. To prove she was serious she pulled out her phone and flipped to her most recent calls, tapping the unknown number that the Detective had called her on earlier. The screen lit up and she put it to her ear listening to the ringing on the other end. Cambell’s eyes narrowed on her and before she could even blink he was standing in front of her and plucking the phone right out of her hands. He disconnected the call and turned it off, and she thought she saw amusement in his eyes when he handed it back to her.

“You should play poker,” he said. She pointedly turned her phone back on before she shoved it into her pocket without commenting. They played chicken with their eyes for a minute, and much to her dismay, she lost. She wanted to blame her contacts, but the truth was, Cambell

just never blinked. It wasn't that she was intimidated by him. Or that she was embarrassed for noticing how much more attractive he was when he smiled. No. That wasn't it at all.

To his credit, he didn't rub the loss in her face. "Pack a bag, Daniels. We're heading out soon. And find your cat," he said.

Aleca just stared at him. "I'm not going anywhere, Cambell," she said, putting as much conviction into the statement as possible.

He ignored her and checked his watch. "In about twenty minutes, something really angry is going to kick down your front door, and it won't be wearing the uniform of your little Detective." His eyes burrowed into hers and she suddenly felt the tension he'd been hiding before. He was deathly serious now, no teasing or dry smirk in sight. "Pack a bag and come with me, or be tortured like you wouldn't believe."

She gaped at him. *Well, that escalated quickly*, she thought. "Tough choice. A murdering man I don't know or someone else I also don't know, who apparently wants to do me bodily harm. That's just great." She shook her head in disbelief. "How stupid do you think I am?" Not wanting to hear a response to that she shook her head again and threw her hands up. "Get out of my house, Cambell!" She was waaay too tired for this bullshit.

He looked very frustrated as he moved to stand in front of her again, not letting her pass. "I'm not kidding, Daniels. Not making a joke at your expense. I'm here to help you."

Had it really only been an hour since she had thrown those same words at him? *Yeah*, she thought bitterly. *Except you didn't kill anybody*.

They stood staring at each other, the impasse seeming to take its toll on Cambell as he struggled to be patient. It wouldn't have surprised her if he had snapped and manhandled her out of the house. It dawned on her that if he really wanted to hurt her he would have. He could have

easily snapped her neck when she had been on the phone with Dave. But he hadn't. She couldn't believe she was even considering this. She opened her mouth to tell him that, but he cut her off.

"We don't have time for this, Daniels. They'll be here any minute." His urgency was apparent in the way he clenched his jaw and glared out each of the windows. He was nervous.

Maybe his nerves were just making her uncomfortable, but she felt her heartbeat start pounding, and her already aching head began to throb. She looked at Hercules, saw how the hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end, how he faced the door with his teeth bared.

Something was coming.

Aleca felt herself moving, watched the living room blur past as her feet sprinted through it and up the stairs. "You better let me bring my pets, Cambell," she shouted over the railing.

"Already on it sweet cheeks."

She was back downstairs in five minutes with two bags, and as soon as she saw Cambell, she dropped them both and grabbed him by the collar. "I swear to God, Cambell, if you get me killed I will haunt you for the rest of your miserable life. Are we clear about that?" she hissed, so furious that she was nearing the point of hysteria. Maybe she was a little scared too.

He carefully grabbed her hands and pried them off his shirt, holding them for a second and looking at her like he'd never seen her before. He looked softer somehow. "I'll keep you safe, Aleca." He actually looked like he meant it too.

He stepped away and grabbed her bags off the floor, hauling them out the front door and shoving them unceremoniously into the trunk along with a few bags of pet supplies. Hercules was already in the backseat standing at attention with his eyes focused on her.

"Where's Patches?" she asked, panic rising in her throat and threatening to choke her.

Cambell's eyes flipped up and she saw his face pale. "I thought you were grabbing her."

She didn't wait to ask him how the hell he knew her cat was a 'she', just turned around and dashed back into the house, ignoring Cambell's curse as he came tearing after her. She sprinted up the stairs and into her bedroom, diving straight under her bed because that's where Patches always hid. Aleca scooped a deft arm around the cat's middle, ignoring the hissing and spitting much like she'd ignored Cambell not seconds before.

Just as she was about to wiggle out from under the bed she felt hands wrap around her ankles and pull, yanking her out and giving her a slight rug burn on her chin.

"Jesus, Cambell!" she snapped, rolling over to glare at him.

Only it most definitely wasn't Cambell.

A second before the butt of a gun came down on her head she screamed. She felt Patches jump out of her arms, the cat's back feet kicking hard against Aleca's chest, and then pain split across her head. Light exploded behind her clenched eyelids and then everything went dark, the pained sounds of her attacker being mauled by her house cat sending her off into the black blanket of unconsciousness.