

Chapter 37

Her Savior

Ava gasped awake as she was pulled from the brink of consciousness yet again. Her chest heaved as oxygen flooded her lungs. She didn't know if she should feel relieved or disgusted by how much more effectively her body reacclimated to the influx of air.

Somewhere around the fifth or sixth time the men had choked her to the point of oblivion, only to bring her spiraling back, it had all just gotten...easier.

Not mentally, of course. This was a completely different type of torture; the likes of which Ava could hardly fathom. It was...unbelievable torment, her every cell crying out for relief, only to feel like razorblades in her blood whenever that relief came. Over and over, the cycle continued.

And yet, her body persevered and adapted to this hellish reality, just like it had countless times before. In the dungeon, she became weak in order to make herself appear like less of a threat. And when she had been thrust into a world dominated by the male gaze, she'd reshaped herself into some lithe, coquettish being she'd never been before.

By this point, Ava was fairly certain she could leave her body behind altogether, and it would go on without her. Everchanging. Never resting. Never allowed the luxury to simply stop.

Ava closed her eyes and shuddered silent sobs. If she wept, she couldn't tell. They'd moved her from the fainting couch to the freestanding bathtub a while ago, and turned on the overhead shower, sending a steady stream of cold water raining down on her head.

The constant barrage of water had chilled her to her bones. Her jaw ached from the agape position it was forced into by the ball gag. Her shoulders were sore from where they sat behind her back, and the moisture has beginning to make the binds on her wrists and ankles chafe.

She was fucking exhausted.

‘Goddess, make it stop’, she prayed for the first time in a long time.

"You sing so prettily every time you come back to us, songbird." One of men pet her sopping hair, and dammit, she was too fucking tired to push him away.

Songbird. Some of them had taken to calling her that and it had picked up steam. Now all of the sick bastards kept crooning at her, complimenting her for her 'sweet melodies'. She wasn't exactly sure what they were talking about - these guys were clearly flying by the hairs on their dicks. Certifiably insane.

She thought they were probably referencing the gasps of terror she cried every time she resurfaced, however. That seemed to be a thing with them, she'd gathered. They were clearly sadists judging by the way they romanticized pain. They got their cheap thrills by playing fast and loose with the thin line between life and death. Some of them, like the ringleader, got more enjoyment of watching going out, while the 'songbird' fans liked seeing her defy their machinations by daring to revive.

And since the morons hadn't actually killed her yet, Ava was willing to bet this was all old hat to them. Like they'd said, this was their game, and they were on the hunt for new players. If they were so low on willing participants, she wondered how many of their 'playthings' actually ever managed to get out of their game alive.

Nothing about this was right, obviously, but even by the Green Light Club's usual standards of 'the customer is always right, even when they're really, really not', their actions were utterly irreprehensible.

Ava had watched all sorts of bondage and submission play during her training period, and anyone could expect to see at least a few people strapped up around the sex club's public play areas. It had always been impressed into her that this type of play was founded on mutual trust, and all guests were required to exchange safe words with their escorts before their scenes could begin.

This group clearly didn't give a shit about the club's rules, but Ava found herself more concerned with their lack of empathy for human life. And their apparent fixation on death. The way that they spoke was almost fanatic, like she was giving them something by simply reacting to the things they were doing to her. And their romanticization of her only grew with every time she came back up for air, as if she were inadvertently feeding further into whatever twisted narrative they were playing out, simply by continuing to survive them.

This was all beginning to feel very...sacrificial, to Ava.

"Yes, songbird, you've pleased us well," said their leader. "Unfortunately, our time is running short. We have one last task for you, and you will achieve nirvana."

For what was probably the first time tonight, he didn't smile his slimy grin while he spoke. Instead, he looked far too focused, as if they had a lot riding on this final event.

He snapped his fingers and one of the men stepped forward holding a chain-link collar topped with some sort of boxed mechanism. Assuming it was a shock collar, Ava reared back and yelled around her gag.

"Hush, child!" The sweating man yelled and pinched her thigh, causing Ava to flinch. "Why would you fear the vehicle of your transcendence?"

Ava shrank down in the tub as far as she could as the man holding the collar moved closer and closer to her. He persisted, following her to the bottom of the tub, and affixing the chain around her throat.

The collar was thick, and uncomfortably warm from where it had been held by the man's sweaty, meaty palms. The box sat right over jugular where it grated up and down the sensitive skin of her neck every time she took and released a panicked breath. The harder she hyperventilated, the more she felt the beat of her pulse thrum throughout the metal of the chain.

Soon, her entire body was vibrating in terrified anticipation. She tried to remain calm - she didn't want to give them any more satisfaction than she was inevitably going to. But they were all just gathered above her, leering with eager smiles stretched across their faces. If she lived through this,

she'd never forget it; not their faces, not their slimy words...those expectant grins, smiling at her through a frigid waterfall.

"Begin."

Ava snapped her eyes shut; her entire body taught like a wire waiting to receive the volt of electricity to come shredding her apart from the inside out.

That didn't happen.

Ava quickly realized that the box on the collar didn't contain any sort of shocker, it held a crank. Slowly, the collar began to contract as it was pulled link by link, back into the box. Her heart began to pound as the mechanism wound itself tighter and tighter, but Ava fought to remain calm.

Keeping her eyes firmly shut, she turned her head away from the downpour and forced her limbs to remain lax as she focused on taking steady, deep breaths.

"Playing hard to get, songbird?" The man calling the shots sounded displeased by her show of control. "Naughty child. Tighter." He ordered.

She couldn't spare the energy to shoot him the lethal glare that he deserved. Every last bit of her concentration was spent on controlling her breathing, taking in as much air as she dared without accidentally breathing in water. If she lost it now, she'd had no doubt they'd continue, and she'd be left with no reserves when the chain finally choked off the last of her oxygen.

The chain began to constrict and, without realizing it, Ava drifted into that surreal state between wakefulness and unconsciousness. "Ava, you don't belong here."

"You need to fight."

It was Layla's voice. And Sophia's. Ava was standing in a gray void, and they were with her. They stood together on one side, while Ava stood on her own, cold, and alone. She moved toward them, wanted to race toward her friends, but no matter how much she ran, they never grew closer.

"Please!" She fell to her knees and sobbed, reaching for them. "I'm so tired."

They only shook their heads in sympathy, "Not yet."

A single tear rolled down Sophie's cheek, "You have to save him. You're the only one who can."

Layla gave Ava a sad smile, "And then you have your own dreams to follow."

Ava slammed her hands into her thighs, "No! I'm done fighting. When do I get to decide?"

They didn't answer. Ava reached for them, but they were suddenly miles away. "NO!"

BOOM.

Ava jolted back to consciousness like she had so many times before tonight, but this time was by far the most difficult.

She didn't move as she heard the rush of feet and scrambling men, the sharp smacks of flesh hitting flesh, or smashing of glass and the wailing of cowards. She felt too numb to react when a shadow fell over her and the deluge finally stopped. Strong arms gathered her up, and a warm hand wiped the water from her face. Finally, the gag, binds, and chain fell free.

"By the goddess..."

She heard the horrified and familiar, but her mind was too distant to put the pieces together. "Dammit, Ava, look at me!"

This voice was different - harder and hoarse, unused to the fear cinching its throat. So far removed as she was from her anger and pain, it spoke to her and drew her in. At last, she was able to muster the strength to raise her head. Angry tears met her when she looked up into the hazel eyes she'd thought would never again gaze at her with such care.

His indignant tears filled her own and Ava began to sob. When he lifted her from the tub and pulled her into his chest, she went willingly, melting into the security he provided.

Because this...this night had broken something in her when she'd been sure there had been nothing left to take. Her captors had been right - she'd reached nirvana.

For a few short moments, Heaven had been within her reach, and had slipped from her grasp.