

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 6

Raphael

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“Five minutes are up,” I whispered, flicking the safety off my bow, “The Void is open. Happy fucking hunting, gentlemen.”

With a surge of adrenaline, the men vanished into the trees, disappearing into the blackness I controlled.

I stayed on the terrace for a moment, watching the digital map on my wrist. I wanted to see which of the trash ran the fastest. I wanted to pick the most interesting target.

I was the best at this because I didn’t just hunt with my hands, I hunted with my mind.

I stood there, the blue light from my watch reflecting in my eyes as the screams began to drift back from the treeline. The others had already vanished, crashing through the brush like hungry wolves, but I preferred to wait. I liked to see the patterns form.

On my wrist, fifty dots of light were scattering. Most of them were clumped together, huddled in the thickets like sheep, easy pickings for the others. But one dot caught my eye. It was moving fast, cutting a straight line toward the northern ridge, weaving through the densest part of the forest with a speed that didn't match the rest of the trash.

"Found you," I whispered.

I jumped from the terrace, landing silently on the grass. I wasn't running, I was gliding. I knew every root, every dip in the dirt, every rock of these acres. I had mapped this land in my head long before I ever mapped it on a screen.

I didn't go straight for him. That would be too quick. Instead, I looped around, cutting through a narrow ravine to get ahead of his path. I wanted to see the look on his face when he realized his escape was just a circle leading back to me.

I reached the ridge and climbed a massive oak tree, settling onto a thick branch twenty feet above the forest floor. I pulled an arrow from my quiver. The electronic tip hissed as it armed itself, a tiny red light blinking.

Below me, the woods were alive with the sounds of the Hunt. I heard the distant thwack of an axe, followed by a high scream that cut off abruptly. Somewhere to my left, I heard Julian laughing.

Then, I heard it.

The runner appeared. He was gasping for air, his lungs whistling in his chest. He stopped for a second, leaning against a tree just below my branch, his head darting left and right. He was covered in sweat and filth, his eyes wide and white with pure fear.

I looked down at him, my finger resting lightly on the bowstring. I could see the pulse jumping in his neck. I could smell the salt of his sweat.

I didn't fire. Instead, I reached into my pocket and pressed a button on a small remote.

From a hidden speaker ten feet behind the man, the sound of a twig snapping echoed through the clearing.

The man whirled around, a sob breaking from his throat. He started backing up, right into the open space I needed. He was shaking so hard he could barely stand. I watched him through my digital HUD, my bow calculating the wind, the distance, and the exact moment his heart would be most vulnerable.

"Please," he whimpered into the darkness, "Please, I didn't do anything..."

"You ran the fastest," I said, "I hate it when people make me work for it."

He looked up, his jaw dropping as he saw the red dot of my arrow settle right over his sternum. He didn't even have time to scream again.

I released the string.

The arrow hissed through the air. It hit him dead center. There was a bright, blue flash as the electrical surge hit his nervous system, locking his muscles instantly. He didn't fall, he crumpled, his body twitching with the force of a thousand volts before he hit the dirt.

I dropped down from the branch, landing over him. He was still alive, his eyes rolling back in his head, his chest heaving in short bursts. I reached down and pulled the arrow out with a wet schlick.

"Thirty seconds," I said, checking my watch. "That's how long it took you to die in my head. You lasted forty. Impressive."

I didn't look back as I turned toward the next heat signature on my map.

The forest was screaming like it was a slaughterhouse with no ceiling.

I moved through the undergrowth like a shadow, my thermal HUD painting the world in shades of blue and neon heat. To my left, the brush exploded. A man burst through the thorns, his face shredded by branches, but he didn't get far.

A heavy, rusted metal chain whipped out of the darkness, coiling around his throat with a sickening clink.

Luca stepped into the faint moonlight. And he looked like a fucking demon. He wasn't even breathing hard. He planted his heavy boot firmly in the center of the man's lower back, his muscles bunching and rippling under his black shirt as he gripped both ends of the chain.

The man's hands clawed at the rust, his eyes bulging as he tried to find air that wasn't there. Luca leaned back, using every ounce of his strength to arch the man's body backward over his knee.

The sound that followed was a wet, muffled crunch, the unmistakable sound of a spine snapping like a dry branch.

The man's body went limp instantly, his legs uselessly hitting the dirt. Luca didn't let go. He kept the tension tight for a few more seconds, watching the light go out in the man's eyes with a look of pure hunger. He let the chain slacken, and the body slumped into the mud like a sack of grain.

Further down the ridge, the sound of breaking bone echoed through the trees. Adriano was standing over a cluster of three men who had tried to hide in a ditch. He held a baseball bat wrapped in rusted barbed wire. Every time he swung, the wire bit deep, hooking into skin and fabric, ripping chunks of flesh away when he pulled back. He wasn't even breathing hard. He looked like he was taking batting practice, his face calm and bored as the men begged for mercy that didn't exist in these woods.

Then there was Dante.

He didn't use chains or bats. He had something I'd helped him modify, a "stinger" glove. It was a heavy tactical gauntlet fitted with pressurized titanium needles on the knuckles.

Each needle was hollow, designed to inject a high-concentrate acid directly into the bloodstream upon impact. I watched as he caught a runner by the shoulder, spinning him around and burying a fist in the man's chest.

The man didn't just fall. He hit the ground clutching his torso as the acid began to eat him from the inside out, his screams turning into a wet, gurgling wheeze. Dante just wiped a drop of blood off his glove and looked around for the next one.

I turned away. I had my own work to do.

Three heat signatures were huddled behind a fallen log a hundred yards ahead. They were staying quiet, thinking the darkness was their friend.

I raised my bow.

I didn't need to see them with my naked eyes. My HUD locked onto the middle one's spine. I adjusted the dial on my bow, switching the arrow's setting from "Shock" to "Broadhead."

Whiz.

The arrow hissed through the air, piercing the rotted log and the man behind it. He didn't even have time to gasp before the arrowhead expanded inside his chest, pinning him to the wood like a butterfly in a display case.

The other two bolted. I let them get ten feet.

I dropped from my perch, landing between them. One tried to swing a fist, I caught his wrist, snapped the bone like a dry twig, and drove a combat knife upward through his jaw in one motion. He slumped against me, and I shoved his body into his friend.

The last man fell backward, crawling away on his elbows, "Please! I have a family!"

"So did the people you sold out," I said.

I didn't use an arrow for him. I stepped on his chest, feeling his ribs give way under my tactical boots.

I leaned down, the red dot of my bow's laser resting right between his eyes.

And then I pulled the trigger.

The hunt went on, and as the first gray light of dawn began to bleed through the canopy, the Hunt ended.

I stood up and checked the digital display on my wrist. Twelve. Twelve kills tonight.

I walked back toward the clearing. The other men were already there, emerging from the shadows like a pack of wolves returning from a kill. Their expensive tactical gear was stained with mud and blood, their faces flushed with the kind of high you couldn't buy in a pill.

Julian walked up to me, his chest heaving, he raised a blood-spattered hand, and we hit a heavy fist bump.

"God, Raphael," he laughed, "That ridge trap? Pure genius. I watched the third one run right into your wire. Best night of the year."

Marcus joined us, wiping a smear of red off his cheek. He grabbed a bottle of hundred-year-old scotch from a waiting soldier and took a long swig before passing it to me, "The side bets are through the roof, Rafe. We're going to need a bigger forest next time. Fifty isn't enough."

Luca walked over, the rusted chain still draped over his shoulder like a trophy. He didn't say anything, he just stood next to men

“Clean it up,” I ordered the soldiers, “I want the place cleaned by sunrise.”

I turned my back on the woods and started the long walk back to the mansion. I stripped off my gloves and tossed them onto a side table, my eyes scanning the foyer, “Where are they?” I asked a soldier standing guard by the stairs.

“In the private room, sir,” he muttered, “Enzo brought them in through the service entrance three hours ago.”

I pushed open the doors of the room, the light was dim, lit only by a few lamps, the scent of cheap, sugary perfume filled the place.

Two women were huddled on the velvet sofa. A white girl with soft features and light hair, and a Black girl with sharp features and curly hair.

I scanned their faces, my mind clicking through the memories of the club. Neither of them was her.

“Where is she?” I asked.

The blonde looked up, “Who?”

“The one who performed for me,” I snapped, stepping into the circle of lamplight. My shirt was still damp with sweat, and a streak of dark blood was drying across my jaw. I probably looked like a nightmare, and I didn’t care, “The one in the silver wig.”

The blonde stood up slowly and walked toward me. She tried to put on a brave face, swaying her hips in a way she probably thought was seductive. “I was in the silver wig the other night...”

I narrowed my eyes, scanning her from head to toe. I didn’t really remember the face. In the dark of the club, faces were just masks. What I remembered was the way she moved. I remembered the curve of a spine, the tilt of a head, and the way her skin had caught the neon lights like silk.

I looked at the woman standing in front of me now. She was pretty, sure. But she was stiff.

“Turn around,” I ordered, my voice flat.

She obeyed, trying to arch her back, but it was all wrong. The math didn’t add up. The height was off by an inch, the shoulders were too narrow. My brain recorded everything like a high-speed camera, and this wasn’t the footage I had stored in my head.

I stepped back, the interest draining out of my eyes. This wasn’t her.

“You’re not the one,” I said.

The blonde froze, her fake smile slipping. She looked at the other woman on the sofa, then back at me.

I didn’t have time for this. I turned my back on them and looked at the soldier waiting by the door.

“Get them out of here,” I ordered, “Take them back. Make sure they are compensated for their time and they get home in one piece.”

Ruby Walker