

Chapter 3

A scream rang throughout Lyniera's swanky Seattle townhome. In a fit of rage, she hurled her cell phone. It splashed into an exquisite salt water aquarium, which showered brine water onto a silk wall hanging behind it. A bright yellow tang and a pair of clown fish scooted away to avoid being hit. Bubbles streamed from the phone as it sank. Its display went dark.

Lyniera took the news surprisingly well, her associate Ricar thought as he approached. As he had been informed in a text message a moment earlier, the assassin had missed. All right, she had struck her target, but hadn't taken Cajur down.

"Ricar, give me your cell phone. Mine isn't working."

"Of course," he said. He reached out a gloved hand, resting his rather expensive phone in her outstretched palm. "Should I have another one sent, lady?"

Her expression brightened suddenly. A smile graced her face. "Yes, do be a dear and go pick one out for me—and make it yellow this time. I need a happier color."

This kind of mood swing wasn't unusual for Lyniera, going from tantrum to control, as if she wasn't even aware of the transition.

Ricar removed a cuff link and rolled up his sleeve. Lyniera looked genuinely puzzled as Ricar fished her soggy cell phone out of the tank, as if she had no idea how it had gotten there. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She blinked her eyes and looked up cheerfully.

Ricar gave the drenched phone a shake over a waste basket, accidentally getting a few drops of water on his pleated wool slacks.

As she flicked a bit of lint from her lacy pink shirt peeking out of a well-cut burgundy blazer, she asked, "So what's on the schedule for today?"

"Trying to take over the world. Same as always."

"Cute, Ricar. But someday we will, won't we?"

"That's what I hear. Would you like me to send a second assassin?"

"You make it sound like you're asking for another sugar cube in your tea, not ordering a hit. We mustn't give in to the temptation to be too cold." She gestured flippantly with one hand, flashing a smile that Ricar found incredibly sexy, despite his resolve to keep their relationship strictly business.

Lyniera tilted her head and looked up and to the right, as if pausing to think. "Okay, *cold* is all right, but *indifferent* is just bad form."

She sternly pointed a manicured finger at Ricar, like a strict school teacher chiding an unruly student. "To kill is business, but we must not become uncaring. It makes us less.

"If a dog bites its master," she continued, "no doubt it must be put down. The owner may kill in outrage for its betrayal, and that is as it should be. He may weep as he pulls the trigger. That is also entirely acceptable. But to kill and feel nothing, that is a true tragedy. If he can feel nothing, then the dog and its master both die together."

"As you say, Lyniera." Ricar gave a shallow bow to show his acquiescence to her wishes.

She reached out a hand and lifted his chin until his eyes met hers. Her mouth turned up in a weak smile, which grew wider. Her expression morphed into one of complete rapture. She began to laugh, and closed her eyes, revealing her pleasure in the moment.

"How soon, Ricar?"

"What do you mean, lady?" he said.

"When do we get it all back? When will this world tremble at what we can do? When will men flock to us as they once did? How soon?"

Ricar's voice took on a serious, determined edge. "Soon, lady. Very soon."

She stretched her arms high. Slowly she began to turn in place, gradually picking up speed. Lyniera's unnaturally red, dyed hair swayed outward. Her skirt flared out with the motion. She arched her back and spun and spun. As dizziness began to overtake her, she slowed. Finally she stopped, one tone, shapely leg bent at a right angle. She stared right at Ricar. She raised an eyebrow.

"So right you are, my faithful. We will wrest power from the very ground. And the best part is that this time, there's nobody who can do anything to stop this avalanche. It is far too late for the pebbles to vote." She giggled, childlike, then stepped with feline grace toward Ricar, almost as if drifting across the cream-colored carpet.

One of his glossy wing-tip shoes tapped silently, one of his nervous habits. He felt uneasy, and with good reason. When Lyniera's moods darted from anger to bliss, things got broken. People got broken.

"My lady?"

Lyniera came to a halt a mere foot away, well inside Ricar's personal space. She leaned even closer, and straightened his tie in a way that reminded him of the tenderness of a lover or the care of a mother—maybe a little of both. She stood upright to a perfect, postured stance—back curved, chest out. She cocked her head just a little. She snapped her fingers as she lifted her hand, her index finger pointed skyward. "Change in plans. You were right, all along. Cajur's too hard a target unless we can lure him from safety. I don't know why I didn't see it before."

"Didn't see what?" Ricar said, in his strong tenor voice.

"Have you read Sun Tzu? The Art of War?" she asked.

"I have heard of it, but never studied the work," he said.

"Pity. Well, you don't have to have read his works to recognize his wisdom, such as this passage: 'In battle, there are not more than two methods of attack: the direct and the indirect; yet these two in combination give rise to an endless series of maneuvers.'

"Don't you see? We're attacking on his terms, at his points of strength. Now we begin to exploit his weaknesses. True, it lacks some of the rage of the direct assault, but putting *this* dog down will be anything but emotionless. We'll let him die, but first he must suffer. It's not tidy, neat, or efficient, but we cannot fail the old code, else why are we fighting, anyway?"

She planted a kiss on Ricar's cheek, which left a moist red lipstick mark.

His emotions raged, a blend of arousal and fear. "My lady?" he said.

"This will be fun. You'll see." She gave Ricar a wink. She turned on his phone and tapped out the digits of a phone number. Her playful look turned dark. She turned away and headed for the front door at a brisk pace, holding the phone to her ear. "Tell Granger it's a go. Take her down. Today."