

Snake Eyes, the Most Precious Kind

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Snake Eyes, the Most Precious Kind

by [casino_lights](#)

Summary

The Deputy was charged with finding Jacob Seed and ending his reign over the Whitetail Mountains. But Jacob is charming, in his way - not with Joseph's golden tongue or John's allure, but with strength and loyalty - and the Deputy is far from unaffected. She has her own wit, however, one Jacob never anticipated, and they have more in common than they realize. These two old soldiers might wage war against each other, but how much longer can they pretend they don't see themselves in one another's eyes?

Notes

This chapter has some basic violence - probably less graphic than that of the game itself - and some swearing. Fun times! Please enjoy and don't hesitate to leave me a review here or a comment on my tumblr page if you have any questions, concerns, or feedback! <3

Game of Survival

The deputy wakes up with a sore back and an aching head. As she tries to bring her hand to her pounding forehead, she realizes her wrists are bound to the arms of a lawn chair with zip-ties. She stomps her foot and the chair clatters against the ground with a wobbly leg.

It's only then that she looks up and comes face to face with the grotesque face of a mutilated buck, and she groans in disgust.

Another battered face, a human face slips into her field of vision and she startles, shaking the chair hard. Warm hands cup her immobile wrists and she blinks the darkness from her eyes just enough to make out the name embroidered on the person's jacket.

S. Pratt.

"You should've left, Cooke," he whispers frantically as he tightens the deputy's restraints. "You shouldn't have come for me."

She reaches her fingers out toward him, but he folds them back down against the chair.

"Just... be strong."

There is another in the room, dressed in Army green. Cooke would know it anywhere. He's the one holding the remote for the projector, and each slide he introduces is worse than the last. He meets Cooke's eyes with a wicked grin and walks toward her even as the projector bathes him in bloody light.

The name on his jacket says J. Seed - not that it helps Cooke any, since she can't keep any of the Seeds straight anyway. It isn't Joseph, she knows, because God forbid Joseph ever wears a shirt, but, hell, she isn't even sure how many Seeds are still running around out there. This one doesn't have John's insufferable confidence, however, so it's a good bet that it's Jacob.

"Now the Collapse is upon us," he's lecturing, voice low and gravelly in the gloomy back room. "And this time the lives of the few outweigh the lives of the many."

"And you're the few?" Cooke only realizes she's gagged *after* she speaks, but her sardonic tone is not unrecognized, even if her words are muffled. Seed's eyes narrow, and he reaches for a small box on the projector table.

Movement to the left flickers in Cooke's peripheral vision and she glances over just as the slide changes and the room is plunged into darkness. By the time the next one loads, the movement has stopped, and Jacob is winding up... a music box?

Cooke laughs at it. She regrets it as soon as the first note hits her ears.

When Cooke finds that she can move her hands again, she's ecstatic. It comes at a price, however, as the glaring red light in the room and the haunting, distorted melody in her head send her right to the floor as soon as she tries to stand. Either the room is spinning or she is, but she doesn't have time to make out which as a bullet whirrs past her ear.

She looks up, brows furrowed, and sees two other empty chairs like the one she was sitting in - and their angry occupants aiming pistols right at her face. Unthinking, she wraps her fingers around the edge of the table and yanks it over as she rolls behind it for cover. The projector crashes to the ground beside her and showers her hands with broken glass, but a pistol clatters next to her and she cocks it before holding it tight to her chest.

"Fuck," she whispers. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

When she pokes her head above the table, already splintering apart, she recognizes one of the shooters as a policeman.

"Hey!" she shouts at him, ducking back behind the table as he fires a few rounds at her head. "You! Uh... Tom? Thomas? That's your name, right? I think we met!"

Two more rounds burrow into the table. To her right, the squashed tip of a bullet pokes daringly out of the wood.

"Tom! Buddy! We're on the same side! Just breathe and think!"

The other one rounds the table, and Cooke shoots him in the chest - only to be met with a puff of red smoke and a small pile of ash. She cocks her head to the side, half-frowning, before shrugging and emerging from behind the table to shoot the policeman.

The same thing happens to him: a plume of smoke and nothing but ashes to prove he was ever there. That damn song from Jacob's music box keeps playing in Cooke's head, and by now she's realized this has to be in her mind, but when she looks down at her hands and sees blood from the broken glass, she shakes her head and sucks in a deep breath.

"This is such bullshit," she spits angrily. "Why does the weird stuff always happen to me?"

A voice, deep and smoky, whispers from every direction at once. *Go faster. Cull the herd.*

And God help her, she listens. A semi-auto calls to her from a box by the doorframe and she snatches it up as she crosses the threshold. The halls are crimson and decorated with scrawled commands like *Train* and *Fight*. Each time Cooke encounters another person, they start shooting at her, and after the fourth one she starts shooting first. After that, the voice in her ears starts praising her.

Good. You're doing well. Keep moving.

She starts running. More weapons are scattered through the twisting halls and she picks each new one up as she finds it. She doesn't see any more officers, but she isn't looking anymore, either. The voice in her head says "go," so she goes. It feels good to be acknowledged, for once.

After a while, the song doesn't sound too bad. She falls into a sort of rhythm between the gunfire and the music, and things that should hurt barely tickle. She's shot in the shoulder once, and she half expects herself to disappear like everyone else. But she doesn't. She just feels a soft throbbing in her arm, all the way down to her fingers, and she pushes through until the last person in her way is nothing but dust.

And when they're all gone, she closes her eyes, and the voice in her head tells her she's strong.

No one's said that to her in... too long.

She wakes up again in a hard bunk, not unlike the ones in the police station. Her eyes narrow as she glances around the room, and she reaches for a gun she doesn't have when she sees movement in the corner.

The source puts their hands up and steps slowly out of the shadows. "Easy now," he says, a burly man with unkempt hair and a thick beard. "Easy, rookie."

Cooke braces herself up on her elbows. "Who are you?"

"Eli. That's all you need for now. Just... try to relax. The first time Jacob Seed gets 'em is always the worst."

When her head throbs painfully in response, she understands why.

Battle Born

Chapter Notes

The dates featured in this chapter aren't canon; I made them up myself based on how long I wanted Jacob to spend between the army and Hope County. Enjoy!

After a tour of the Whitetail base and some basic chores to prove she's "authentic," Cooke reports in to Sheriff Whitehorse. The wound in her shoulder has been stitched shut and bandaged, and the cuts on her hands are covered by her gloves. She looks no worse for wear, for good or ill, and after she delivers her abridged report, she asks for everything he knows - and everything anyone *else* knows - about Jacob Seed.

As she pores over the files deposited in front of her, she takes down notes for her next meeting with him. He doesn't seem like a man who lets go easily, and the way he looked at her before turning the handle on that hellish music box is still burned into her brain. It's not *if* she'll see him again, it's *when*.

Taken from abusive father. Juvie record for arson and battery. Separated from brothers when John was adopted and Joseph went through the foster care system. Gulf War vet. General discharge from the Army in 2000. Medical reasons + contract almost up. Second spotter, Eric Miller, declared deceased in absentia. Remains never recovered. Veteran's Hospital resident for a year before money ran out, got booted back onto the street.

(Like me. Figures.)

Spent a few years years homeless and wandering.

(Also like me. Also figures.)

First seen back in his hometown of Rome, GA in 2007, first seen in Hope County, MT in 2014.

Cooke pinches the bridge of her nose as she tears herself away from her notes. Her eyes sting from staring too long at file after file, and her fingers itch from her healing cuts, but she just wipes her eyes and stands up. She stretches her arms, tucks her notebook into her backpack, and exhales softly.

"Sheriff. I'm going back in."

Whitehorse looks down his nose at her and scowls. "You sure you're up for it, rookie? It's rough out there. You only just got back."

She loads her shotgun and slings it over her shoulder. “It is rough out there. And Pratt’s still stuck in it.”

Whitehorse’s expression falls and he slowly nods. “Alright, kid. Do what you gotta.”

Jacob returns to his training grounds to see how well his newest potential soldiers did, and when he sees nothing but blood on the ground, he knows the Whitetails came for their fallen. Even that one stray officer he’d nabbed was gone. There’s an awful lot of gore everywhere, however, and comparatively little where Deputy Cooke had been tied down. Something approaching pride swells in Jacob’s chest at the thought of her emptying her clips into those Whitetails, and he allows a smile to flicker across his face for a moment before Pratt approaches him with the obvious.

“They’re all gone. The Whitetails took them again.”

Jacob grunts roughly in response. A moment of tense silence passes before he says, “I want everything you know about Deputy Cooke. *Everything.*”

Pratt swallows and his fingers fidget at his sides, but he nods submissively.

Once they’re back at Jacob’s bunker, Pratt sets a stack of paper in front of him and slinks back to his corner for dinner. Jacob opens the first file to see a picture of the deputy, looking no cleaner than when he last saw her. He’s nearly convinced the dirt, road dust, and dried blood are just her features. But further in, he sees a photograph attached with a paperclip: a teenager and her parents, every one of them blonde, smiling, and uncomfortably dead-eyed. She’s sparkling clean, but her expression is so forced it looks painful, and her parents have a vice grip on her shoulders. The scrawled handwriting on the back reads “Andrew, Janice, and Marilyn, June 1993.”

The next page in is a report filed about her from the army, timestamped late 2005. Jacob starts skimming its contents, but freezes midway through when the letters “POW” catch his eye. He scans the following line, breath caught in his chest, and only exhales once he’s reread it twice.

The egregious and inhumane treatment of Specialist Marilyn J. Cooke while held by enemy forces from 14 November 2004 to 30 September 2005 has been determined an appropriate experience to warrant an early and honorable discharge from the United States Armed Forces.

No wonder she’s tough. She was a goddamn prisoner of war for ten and a half months.

Jacob scratches his beard and leans back in his chair. He’ll need to step up his game if he has any hope of getting *Specialist* Marilyn Cooke on his side. When he returns to the stack of folders before him, he’s donned a brand new attitude. She doesn’t look dirty in her photos anymore; she looks free. A write-up of her service record recommends her with glowing praise, but it looks like she never went back to the army once she was honorably discharged in 2006. There’s no mention of her for nearly ten years, military or not, though a set of newspaper clippings from 2014 detail a nine-car pileup that injured seven people and killed

four. Among the dead were Andrew and Janice Cooke, but where their obituaries listed their surviving family members, Marilyn's name was nowhere to be found.

Either she ran away or they disowned her. Maybe both.

Everything in the files after 2016 are in reference to Cooke's service with the U.S. Marshals, so Jacob slides them across the table, takes a drink of his bourbon, and steeples his fingers. He can already tell Specialist Cooke is going to be tough to break, but that stirs excitement in him like nothing else. His eyes flit to the radio on the other side of the table. Her frequency is listed in the files. He could call her right now, open his music box, send her into a trance like none other, wherever she is.

He calls her. But he doesn't open the box.

"I dunno, Addie," Marilyn mutters, eyes on the road ahead of her as she cruises down one of the winding back roads of the Whitetail Mountains. "Marriage is like... a life's worth of fucking, guaranteed. I mean, one fuck is okay, but if you're going with marriage, ain't it gonna be more intense?"

Adelaide frowns in the passenger's seat. "Hmm. You're onto something there. I was going with one of those loveless ones, y'know, the ones you see in soap operas and shit. But I guess if you put it that way... I'd still fuck John and kill Jacob, but I think I just might marry Joseph."

Marilyn snorts with laughter. "Joseph? Nahhhh, Addie, you want a good, solid dicking down for the rest of your life, you go for Jacob. Looks like Michael-fuckin'-angelo chiseled him outta marble."

"Didn't he just kidnap you?"

"Hey, this is all hypothetical." Marilyn stretches each of her arms in turn, then shrugs halfheartedly. "Joseph would be all tender and shit, and I ain't into John's knife thing. Fuck Joseph, marry Jacob, kill John. And get Faith a pair o' good shoes and a goddamn hug."

Adelaide laughs. "You got *that* right."

Marilyn's radio crackles to life on her jacket and she presses the talk button. "Cooke here."

"Deputy. Or do you prefer Specialist?"

Marilyn nearly sends Adelaide through the windshield as she brakes abruptly. God only knows what would happen if he used his music box while she was driving. She swallows, takes a deep breath, and responds.

"Jacob Seed. You did some digging. So did I."

"I didn't expect any less from you, Specialist." A soft chuckle filters through the radio. "What was it like, sitting in an enemy camp for ten months?"

“Like a typical family reunion,” she retorts bitterly. “You think old wounds are gonna get under my skin, Seed? Try harder.”

“You’re angry, Cooke. I know what it’s like, feeling empty inside. Feeling like you don’t have a purpose in this world.” His voice is nearly soothing in its softness. Reassuring. “I can give you a purpose.”

“Did you give your spotter a purpose?” Marilyn asks, glancing out the window. “What happened to Eric Miller?”

She gets nothing but silence back for several moments, and she thinks this must be it. He’s readying that goddamn box.

Instead, he comes back with quiet laughter. “You think old wounds are gonna get under my skin, Cooke?”

She shuts her eyes in frustration. He’s tough, no doubt about it, but she was never under the illusion this would be easy.

“Try harder,” he says, and it echos in her head along with a flicker of a hazy red room. “I’ll come for you soon. Don’t fight it. You’ll need your strength.”

The radio clicks off, and Marilyn sinks back into her seat with a sigh. Silence rings heavy in her ears for too long until Adelaide breaks it with a loud exhale.

“Well, now. If that didn’t sound like a come-on, I dunno what does.”

Marilyn doesn’t look away from the tree line outside. “Somehow,” she replies slowly, “that doesn’t make it any better.”

Shut Up and Let Me Go

Chapter Notes

To everyone who's commented and left kudos, you guys are my heroes. Thank you all so much. I hope you continue to enjoy this story to its end!

When Marilyn opens her eyes and sees the bars of a cage, she laughs. She laughs like Satan himself just told her a joke, and as she rolls onto her back she folds her arms patiently underneath her head.

“Gee whiz,” she mutters, eyes closing again. “It’s almost like we *didn’t* have this dream all week. Cue the gate creakin’ in five... four... three... two...”

A dull whine of metal on rusty metal sounds and she chuckles airily. “Now the heavy footsteps...”

Right on time, a series of hard thumps approach the cage. Eyes still shut, she says, “Aaaaaaand some shoutin’ in Arabic—”

The shouting is in English instead, and she jerks up into a sitting position as another deputy is dragged right past her cage, digging her heels into the dirt and clawing her captors.

Marilyn recognizes this one. S. Medina’s what her jacket reads - at least that’s what it looked like back at Whitehorse’s station. She’s too young for all this, just like Pratt. Hell, maybe Pratt’s the reason she’s here in the first place. From what little Marilyn knows of her, she’ll go anywhere for her friends.

As Deputy Medina is pulled away, the amused expression of a redhead built like a brick house comes into Marilyn’s view.

“Mornin’, sunshine.”

“Ahh. Seed. Not quite who I was thinkin’ would show up.”

He barks a laugh and crouches in front of the cage. “Expecting someone else? Maybe an Iraqi insurgent?”

She wraps her fingers around the bars and her stomach drops as it finally sinks in that she isn’t dreaming. “I was, but I reckon I’ll be alright. This traumatic experience is definitely better than my recurring nightmares about another traumatic experience.”

He sits down on a nearby stool and crosses his arms. “You never did answer my question, Specialist.”

“Quit it.” She rocks back onto her knees. “I ain’t a specialist anymore. You can wear that jacket all you want, but you ain’t no soldier, neither.”

A smirk tugs at his lips. “I’ll ask one more time. What was it like—”

“Shit, okay?” she spits. “It was shit. Bein’ stuck in a cage for ten months while people you don’t know yell at you in a language you don’t speak is *shit*.” Leaning back and meeting Jacob’s eyes, she adds, “Hell, this is shapin’ up to be a five-star vacation in comparison. We’re practically buddies, you an’ I.”

“Practically,” he says, giving her something that looks like it’s trying to be a smile. “I’m not here to punish you for anything, Cooke. I’m just here to show you the path.”

“Does the path lead out of this cage?”

He shakes his head slightly. “You just don’t stop, do you?”

“I’m always on, big guy.” Marilyn shrugs casually. “What can I say? My C.O. in Iraq was an asshole, for sure, but he taught me right. If you can’t beat ‘em, laugh at ‘em.”

“Hmph. Mine preferred ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, you’re not good enough.’”

“Eh, maybe *everyone’s* C.O. is an asshole.”

He smiles genuinely this time, if only for a second, and she matches it before the moment flickers out like a dead ember.

“Mine, well...” Jacob rolls his shoulders back and exhales heavily. “Mine was all too happy to write me off the second he couldn’t find me.”

Marilyn’s eyes find the dog tags dangling from his neck, catching sunlight. She isn’t quite close enough to make out the lettering.

“—first Gulf War,” he’s saying, staring past her. “Got separated from the main squad with my spotter. Bet you knew all that, though. You did your homework.”

“Yeah,” she replies, “top of my class in Advanced Bad Guy Studies.”

He seems disappointed, face falling and eyes meeting hers daringly. “That’s okay. I know you think that now.” He stands up and leans against the cage, looking down at her. “But I’m not the bad guy here, Cooke. I’m trying to help you.”

“What, by givin’ me migraines with your cute li’l music box? Keep workin’ on it.”

He crouches down so he’s nearly eye-to-eye with her. “I’m giving you a purpose. I’m training you so that when I bring you into the fold, you can just... let go.”

She scoffs. “Let go of what? Myself? How’d that work out for *you*?”

He keeps his eyes on her for a moment, piercing blue facing defiant green, and then he stands up. “You’ll understand someday. This isn’t something I like doing. It’s necessary. For you and for me.” He withdraws the music box from his pocket and winds it up.

“Ugh, this shit again.” Marilyn lies down and shuts her eyes just as he opens the lid, and her head begins to pulse painfully with each note.

She’s back in the red room again, the one with the grisly slideshow. This time, her hand finds the pistol on the table almost immediately, and she shoots the two men in the room on sight.

Then she stares down at her hands, tinted crimson like everything else, and feels sick. But Jacob whispers in her head, tells her to be strong, and oh, God, she wants to be.

So she moves. One foot in front of the other, one finger on the trigger, and her actions feel instinctual as she shoots her way through the nightmarish Veteran’s Center. She pushes further than last time, finds hallways she doesn’t remember, and stops cold when she sees a familiar map hanging crookedly from the wall. A Whitetail map. The rest of the location clicks into place as soon as she recognizes it; it’s twisted and wrong, but it’s part of their base.

Something’s not right here. Who does he expect her to fight? A Whitetail soldier passes by and she shuts herself into a nearby closet to avoid detection. That answers her question, but leaves her with another. Why her? Why choose her to fight Eli and his men when he has plenty of Peggies to spare? Why go for a deputy, and a *marshal* at that?

Jacob speaks in her head. *What are you waiting for? Go.*

She shivers at the sound and something pulls her toward the door. It takes all of her willpower to stop herself before she reaches the handle, and she staggers backwards into a shelf and huddles up on the floor. All she has to do is wait for the song to end. It’s all she has to do...

When the last few notes play, she doesn’t feel the same warm darkness she did the first time. She feels splitting, blinding pain, and she bites her cheek until she tastes blood as Jacob scolds her quietly.

Don’t be afraid. You’re better than this.

Bang Bang

Chapter Notes

John shows up in this chapter, so you know there's violence ahead. There's some brief description of facial injuries. Read with care if this sort of thing bothers you!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Oh, goody,” Marilyn groans as she sits up and rubs her aching head. “We’re here again.” When she looks up through the bars of Seed’s cage, expecting to see him, she finds Pratt’s worried eyes instead.

The instant she recognizes he’s alone, she scrambles to the bars and reaches her hand out through them. “Staci!” she hisses, a breath-caught smile on her lips as she grasps his dirty fingers. “Staci, you okay? Where’s Medina?”

“You need to be strong,” he insists, hands shaking. “You need to be strong so you can get out of here.”

“I am strong, and so are you.” She reaches for his face and he backs away, leaving her hands hanging free through the bars. “You can make it through this, Pratt. You can make it outta here.”

“No,” he mutters. He says it again, louder, eyes squeezing shut. “No! I can’t let... I just can’t. We... we *both* need to be strong.”

“Pratt—”

Two sets of footsteps has him darting to the corner, and Marilyn sinks to her knees, cursing quietly.

“Dammit, Pratt...” she whispers, more to herself than him. “I’m gonna keep you an’ Medina safe, I promise. *I promise.*”

Jacob stops in front of her, peering down, with another man behind him looking all too eager.

“What happened last night, Cooke?” Jacob asks, one brow curled up. “Huh? Stop for a bathroom break?”

“Funny,” she replies dryly. “Those rooms weren’t there last time, that’s all. Guess I ain’t so good with directions.”

“Guess not.” He stoops to meet her eyes and traps her hands between his and the cage bars. “We’ll just have to try again. You’ve got it in you - I got a good feeling about you.”

“Aww, now I feel all warm and fuzzy.”

His thumb traces one of the cuts on her hand, still healing from the first time they met. His touch is surprisingly gentle, and she finds herself *actually* warm. “You strayed from the path, Cooke, but that’s okay. You’ll do better this time.”

She purses her lips and snatches her hands back. “Sure thing, big guy. Whatever you say.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He rights himself and motions for the man behind him to approach.

When his face hits the light, Marilyn bristles like an angry cat. Her muscles tense and she backs up, away from the bars, where John Seed is now grinning wickedly at her.

“Hello, Deputy,” John says, almost purring. “Fancy seeing you here, hmm?”

“Fuck off.”

John clicks his tongue scoldingly. “Now, now. Is that any way to greet someone?”

“You heard me, dirtbag.”

“What did I ever do to you?”

Marilyn snaps open the first three buttons of her shirt, displaying a scarified tattoo just above her breasts. “How about this?”

Jacob turns his back. He looks like he’s checking one of the other cages, but as Marilyn’s eyes follow him, he’s actually just standing still and taking a few deep breaths.

Huh. Interesting.

“Hmm. I did do that, didn’t I?”

She answers John only with a vicious glare.

“But, see,” he continues calmly, “then you shot down my plane and almost killed me. Now, you know the Father teaches forgiveness, but I’d say we’re about even, wouldn’t you?”

“Even?” She glances over his healing scrapes and bruises, then runs a finger over her still-tender chest. “Your mama never taught you what ‘fair’ is, did she?”

His eye freeze over, sending a chill up Marilyn’s spine, and he enters the cage with Jacob’s key. “My *mama*,” he starts venomously, “certainly *did* teach me what fair is. Over and over and over again.”

Marilyn leans against the bars in the back of the cage, doing her best to look casual. “Ah, that’s right. She hit ya, didn’t she? Mm-hmm. I remember you goin’ on about it.”

“Good.” He takes a long, serrated knife from the sheath on his belt and twirls it between his fingers. “See, you may have rescued your friend. And you may have vandalized my bunker. And you may be here now trying to destroy what Jacob is building, but you won’t get any further. Because you *are* going to atone. Even if I have to make you.” He kneels on the ground in front of her and folds his hands in his lap. “So, how would you like to start? Would you like to confess now, or do I still need to convince you?”

Marilyn crosses her ankles and meets John’s eyes. “How’s your girlfriend? She leave you after I shot your plane down? You’re lucky she was there to save your sorry ass from me.”

“Do not *ever* talk about her.”

“Who’d ever think psych specialist Cleo Monroe would end up with a guy like you, huh? You better be real good in bed to make up for the rest of... *this*.” She gestures at him disdainfully. “What makes you think you can break me down now? Hell, you couldn’t even kill me when you had me right in front of ya.”

He grabs her by the ankle and drags her across the dirt, then stands over her at his full height. “I can do it now. Jacob wouldn’t get in here until it was too late.”

A warning comes from outside the cage: “Easy, John.”

“Yeah, *John*,” Marilyn mutters. “Better keep that *wrath* in check.”

He hits her. A closed fist, right to the cheek, and she’s lucky none of her bones fractured. His rings have surely left an imprint in her skin.

As Jacob approaches the cage, Marilyn starts laughing. “You hit like a baby, Johnny boy!” she calls, hands pinned beneath him. “Do it again!”

Jacob tells him not to. Then John looks down at Marilyn’s split smirk, goading and fierce, and he ignores his brother.

When John pulls his fist away, the redness is already blossoming across Marilyn’s face from the first punch. The second one almost certainly displaces something in her nose, but she’s cackling like she’s only been tickled.

With wild eyes, she spits blood at John, mad laughter ringing through Jacob’s compound. “That all you got? Huh? *Hurt me!* Betcha can’t even do that!”

He wipes his face and hits her again, heavy-handed, before Jacob hauls him off her and pushes him backwards. He’s breathing hard, and his face is red with fury, but when he looks down at her to see her still in hysterics he feels a twist of something... dark in his stomach. She’s like nothing he’s ever seen.

He almost wonders if this is how other people see *him*.

Forcing herself up on her hands and knees, she grins up at him with bloodstained teeth. “Was it good for you, too?”

He's ready to come swinging at her again, but Jacob holds him back with a firm hand on his chest. Jacob scuffs his feet through blood-soaked dirt as he pulls Marilyn to the back of the cage.

"That mouth is gonna get you in trouble someday, Cooke," he growls as he props her up against the bars.

Her laughter is nothing but wheezing now. "My mouth gets me a lot of things, Seed."

He decides not to dignify that with a response. Shaking his head, he stands and whistles for Pratt, who comes like a trained hound.

"Clean her up," Jacob orders, tossing Pratt the key. "And fix her nose. I'll be back."

He takes John by the shoulder and marches him away, and it's right then, as Marilyn's eye is slowly swelling shut, that the pain finally knocks her out.

Chapter End Notes

Cleo Monroe is another character of mine, featured in the fic "Bold and Brave" found on my page.

If John/Deputy is your thing, check it out! There's definitely more to come with Cleo in the future as well!

Way Down We Go

Chapter Notes

Warning for typical in-game violence and the resetting of Marilyn's nose. Ouch.

Pratt is gentle with the rag and cold water, but there's no soft way to set Marilyn's twisted nose. He cradles her head in his lap as he dabs the blood away from her eyes and lips, then jerks her nose back into place with one hard tug. Her good eye snaps open and she yelps in pain, but he holds the cold rag over her face and lets her squeeze his hand.

"I'm sorry," he mutters, over and over and over again. "I'm so sorry, Cooke. You shouldn't even be here."

As soon as Jacob returns, however, Pratt's sent scurrying, and Marilyn's left holding the wet cloth against her bruised eye.

Jacob sits in front of her cage and sighs quietly, a glass of bourbon in his hand. "Now why'd you have to go and provoke him, huh?"

She curls up on her side, facing away from him. "He's an asshole."

He chuckles. "'Least you're honest. I remember this one time, we were growin' up—"

"Don't subject me to your family stories, Seed, I don't want 'em."

Surprisingly, he acquiesces, and sips his glass of bourbon. "He's wrong about you, y'know."

Now this, she's interested in. At her open silence, he continues. "He says your sin is wrath. It's not."

Her aching chest seems to throb at the mention of it, and she brings the cool rag down to soothe it.

"It's pride," says Jacob, voice low as if he's talking to himself. "Joseph hates pride. Says it's all about thinking you're above God. And maybe that's all there really is to it. But I don't think so."

Marilyn turns over and meets Jacob's patient gaze.

"Nah, I think it's forgetting you're human. Forgetting your own weaknesses. Everybody has 'em, and nobody wants to admit 'em." He takes another drink. "Just human nature."

She scowls and pushes herself up on her hands. “So your whole ‘cull the herd, remove the weak’ thing. You sayin’ that’s pride?”

“Mhm.”

Her head tilts to the side and she presses the rag back against her eye. “What about Joseph’s ‘God won’t let you take me’ thing? What’s that supposed to be?”

“Pride.” He leans forward, close enough that she can smell his bourbon. “We all got pride on our backs, Cooke. You do, I do, John and Joseph do. Everyone does. Like I said: just human nature.”

She lowers her hand, and he grimaces into his glass.

“You’ll stay here for now. Just until that heals up.” He motions to her eye. “I want you with both eyes next time you train.” He stands up, swallows the rest of his drink, and moves to leave. Before he does, however, he turns back to her and adds, “Just don’t hide in the closet this time.”

“Very funny,” she sneers before replacing her compress. “Ahh... fuck.”

When he leaves her food, she doesn’t take it. Either Pratt eats it or she kicks it toward the closest cage. At this point, she doesn’t care if it isn’t poisoned. Starvation is better than... whatever Jacob wants her to do. The fact that the Whitetail base was part of her last training exercise didn’t bode well, and something about the way he says he wants her at her best next time leaves her worried.

So she lies on the ground and sleeps the days away, waking only when he or Pratt comes by to check on her. Jacob usually stays longer - he feels free to talk to her for as long as he likes - but Marilyn pays more attention to Pratt. Each time she sees him, he’s wounded somewhere else. The first day, it was his hands, worked raw with filthy nails. The second was his right eye, bruised to match hers. The third was a split lip, the fourth was a swollen nose, and the fifth was a mottled green and purple line across his neck.

From the way some of his injuries surprise Jacob too, she gets the feeling he didn’t do all of it. That thought pains her more than anything, and once her own bruising and swelling has died down enough to satisfy Jacob, she’s almost ready to ask him for training just so she can hit someone.

Once she’s back in that horrible red room, her actions are fluid and decisive. Each time she shoots someone, she thinks of Staci Pratt, and it spurs her on. One for his fingers. One for his nose. One for his eye. One for his neck. One for his lips. And one for every goddamn day he’s had to suffer in this awful camp.

And one, the very last one, for the pride that keeps pulling her back here against her better judgement.

She hears Pratt's voice, and she thinks it's in her head. Before she can turn over and cover her ears, though, something hard bounces off her shoulder and she bolts upright. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she sees Pratt's dim silhouette behind the bars of her cage, and she crawls over to him as fast as she can.

He holds something up. Against the light of the fading fire outside, it looks like... a key?

"I can get you out," he hisses frantically. "Come on, come on!"

Marilyn scrambles to her feet and reaches out through the bars, grasping Pratt's wrist and shaking her head. "No. You go. You take Medina instead and you get out of here."

"I can't," he insists, face lowered. "I can't leave."

"Staci, you have to. You have to go. Help her."

"I can't let him win." Pratt clenches his teeth and looks up at Marilyn, eyes cold. "Jacob Seed cannot win, you understand?"

She strokes his shoulder and closes her other hand around his dirty fingers. "Staci, it's okay. I'm handling it."

"You can't stay here!" His eyes are wide as he leans toward her and practically begs. "You can't. He knows you're ready, Cooke."

"Ready for what?"

His eyes are wild, much like hers when she faced John Seed, but his are full of fear instead of defiance. "He... he gets in your head. And you don't even fucking realize it! Do you get it? You understand? He's training you to kill people without thinking about it and next time—next time they'll be real."

The Whitetail base, covered with a red haze, flickers in her mind. "He wants me to kill 'em. Eli and the others."

"Yes. Yes! Why do you think he has you going through the same fight over and over and over again?" Pratt pantomimes firing a rifle, eyes still locked desperately on hers. "One, two, three. One-two-three. One-two-three-*one-two-three*—and then they're all gone! Then they're dead and you killed them a-and you didn't even fucking know it!"

"Staci, listen to me. I ain't gonna let him hurt anyone else, okay? I promise." She cups his face in her hands. "But you gotta promise me something too. You gotta promise me you'll go get Medina and you'll both get out of here and you'll take care of each other. Can you do that?"

Though his expression is pained, he slowly nods. "I promise."

She smiles warmly at him and takes both of his hands in hers. "You'll be just fine. I know you will."

As he disappears into the maze of cages, she sinks back against the bars and sighs, arms crossed. Under her breath, with her eyes shut, she murmurs, “Fuck, I hope you will.”

Don't Forget to Breathe

Jacob's sitting in front of her cage when she wakes up the next morning, and the first thing she hears is her stomach growling.

A bowl of diced red meat sits before her, and her mouth waters as soon as she sees it.

"Seven days, and you haven't eaten a thing," says Jacob, shaking his head. "You must be hungry."

Marilyn drops the bowl outside the cage. "I'm more of a medium-well kinda gal."

Jacob chuckles dryly. "You're somethin' else, alright. There a reason you're starving yourself?"

She shrugs. "It was this or the South Beach diet, and who has time for *that*?"

He smiles. It looks genuine, and she reciprocates before she even realizes she's doing it.

"You know your brain starts to eat your muscles to survive when it runs outta fat," he says coolly. "That's why you're so goddamn skinny."

"Gotta get that bikini body."

"Had *that* when I met you." He takes a sip from the canteen he wears on his belt. "Either way, I'm sure I'll get some food in ya before too long."

"Candlelit dinner or Chinese takeout?"

He tilts his head and grins at her. "Why not both? Takeout with candles."

"Great. Just no pork."

"I'll make a note." He stands up and unlocks her cage, then extends a hand. "C'mon. Someone wants to see you."

"Ooh, *someone*? Could be anyone." Marilyn stands up - a bit weakly, though she does her best not to show it - and lets him take hold of her arm. "Is it Santa?"

"Close enough." He leads her to a small room, well-lit, where he binds her wrists together with a zip tie and sits her in a chair.

The only furniture is the one chair and a small table in the corner with a series of syringes on it. The light on the ceiling is caged and emits a low hum, the kind that has Marilyn grinding her teeth and glaring at nothing in particular.

The door opens with a squeak and Joseph Seed enters with Faith behind him, barefoot as always. She looks excited, and Marilyn's already learned to run whenever Faith Seed looks

excited. But this time, she can't run, and as Jacob greets Joseph with their traditional forehead touch, Faith flits around Marilyn like a moth examining a candle.

"We haven't really been introduced," she says brightly. "I'm Faith. You must be Marilyn! Jacob's told us a lot about you."

Despite herself, Marilyn smirks. "Has he, now?"

"He's very happy you're here. He says—"

Joseph interrupts her gently with a hand on her shoulder, and she smiles kindly. "Well, we're all glad to have you with us, anyway."

As Faith bounces toward Jacob, Joseph leans in toward Marilyn. "My brother tells me some of your friends escaped last night."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Just before dawn, they broke out of their cages. He was impressed, actually. And surprised that you stayed." Joseph crouches down so he's closer to her level. "Where did they go?"

"Still don't know what you're talking about," she repeats, looking past him at Jacob.

He glances over and meets her eyes. He knows she's lying, and she can tell.

Upon putting the pieces together, Marilyn laughs and asks, "Is this some kind of interrogation? Is that it?"

"We don't need to use methods like that here," says Joseph, voice even and patient. "We're offering you a gift."

Faith chimes in, approaching Marilyn with greenish powder in the palm of her hand. "We're giving you the chance to see things a little differently!"

Marilyn knows exactly what that is, and she wants no part of it. Just as she starts to climb out of the chair and struggle against the zip tie holding her hands together, Faith blows on the Bliss powder, a whole lungful, and Marilyn has the poor fortune of inhaling it almost all at once.

Her eyes roll back, her fingers flex outward like she's reaching desperately for something, and she crumples to the ground as her mind turns into a forest.

It's dark beneath the imaginary canopy, with downturned flowers hanging morosely at Marilyn's feet as she walks through the grass. She sees a woman in a dirty white dress collecting the flowers near the base of the tree, but when she approaches, it isn't Faith.

"Mom?"

Janice Cooke looks at her daughter with a thin-lipped smile. “Marilyn! I’ve been looking for you everywhere. It’s almost suppertime.”

“So you’re... picking flowers?” Marilyn cants her head to the side and crosses her arms. “What... what’s for supper?” She doesn’t recognize the words she’s speaking, but they sound... *right*.

“Your favorite! Gramma Belle’s broccoli cheddar soup.”

Marilyn’s stomach twists horribly at the idea. She can almost taste it. “Oh, God, I feel like I haven’t eaten in a week.”

“Well, you come and sit down with me and your father and I’ll serve you some right up.”

Janice leads her daughter to a long oak table, stretching deep into the forest. Only one other chair furnishes it, and it sits at the far end, shrouded in mist and darkness. Marilyn can only just make out the shape of a burly man.

“Dad?”

No answer came from the end of the table, but a bony hand on her shoulder startles her. She looks up toward her mother, who looks much older and weaker as she carries a steaming bowl of green soup.

Gramma Belle’s broccoli cheddar soup was never pond-scum green, that’s for sure.

Marilyn narrows her eyes, rubs them, and scowls at her mother. She hears a deep whisper, a sound so far away she isn’t certain it came from the forest at all.

Easy does it, kitten.

She looks back toward the far end of the table, squints down the cherry-stained wood plank that stretches too far back, and skeptically eyes the shadow at its edge. It shifts every time her eyes move, limbs distorting in a flash or head twitching on its own.

Marilyn stands up hesitantly, staring at her mother. Another murmur sounds from even further away, words indiscernible, and Marilyn feels like a thick blanket has been wrapped around her. Her fingers are stiff and her chest feels tight, and when she blinks, her mother’s face looks... wrong...

“Stay here,” says her mother, voice raspy and cold.

Her father echoes it from beyond her view, a breath on the wind and little more. *Stay here.*

Marilyn catches her own hands reaching out toward her mother and hurriedly folds them in her lap. “I... don’t... want to stay,” she manages, though it doesn’t sound like her voice anymore.

The wrinkled hand slips down her shoulder and cups her neck, skin like ice.

Marilyn uses all her willpower to leap out of her seat and throw the bowl of soup at her mother. “Fuck this!” she cries, voice cracking as she backs away. “*You died!* You and *you*—” here, she stabs a finger toward the dark side of the table, where her “father” sits— “you can’t be *here* if you’re fucking *dead!*”

Her mother opens her mouth in a scream that shakes the trees, and Marilyn watches in horror as her skin falls away and leaves only a skeleton, dripping blood and green liquid. The bones lurch toward her, and she leaps over the table and runs toward the edge of the forest. The trees seem to be endless, however, and the further she runs the darker it gets.

She trips over a gnarled root, which twists and snakes around her ankle, and her mother’s skeleton descends upon her like a starving beast. Marilyn tries to fight, but the more she struggles, the tighter the roots and flowers ensnare her.

“Scream for him,” the skeleton hisses.

Again, the words are repeated by the hulking shadow at the table. *Scream for him.*

“You know your place, little girl.”

You know your place, little girl.

As the skeleton’s teeth begin to tear into her exposed neck, Marilyn uses her last breath to scream her only hope left. The birds screech it back and it echoes through the forest, creating a hellish cacophony of her shrill voice.

“*Jacob!*”

Cold Arms

When Marilyn collapses, Jacob catches her and gently eases her to the ground. Faith flutters around them, worrying over Marilyn and apologizing repeatedly, while Joseph watches in silence.

“Easy does it, kitten,” Jacob breathes. He casts a moment’s glance up at Joseph. “How long will this last?”

“Until she sees what she needs to,” Joseph replies softly. “You’re doing well.”

Several moments pass with Faith pacing and Jacob watching Marilyn’s eyes shift under her eyelids. It seems like a fairly mild experience, save for the unexpected unconsciousness, and Jacob’s nearly ready to set her back in her chair when her eyes snap open suddenly.

And for the first time he’s ever heard, she screams like a horror movie beauty queen.

She’s thrashing in his arms now, restrained only by his hands and the zip tie around her wrists. Her legs kick wildly, almost as if she’s running from something, and it’s all he can do to hold her torso still.

“Shhhh. It’s okay. You’re alright.” For the briefest of instances, Jacob sees a little boy in his arms with frightened eyes of teary blue and blood in his dark hair. The moment passes, sure as that boy grew up, but it doesn’t change the tightness in Jacob’s chest.

Joseph kneels by Marilyn’s feet and wraps his long fingers around her ankles to hold them still. With Jacob holding the rest of her tightly, she’s finally immobile, and as her head cranes back in his arms, she cries out in fear.

Jacob looks up toward Faith. “Get me the long needle from the table,” he orders, voice icy. “Now.”

Her fingers are shaking when she brings it back, but she swallows and asks, “What do you need me to do?”

“Her thigh. Hit it hard.”

“Let me,” Joseph insists, giving up one of his hands to take the syringe from Faith. “Hold her leg.”

Faith’s spindly fingers strain against the force of Marilyn’s kicks as Joseph positions the needle above her thigh.

She screams Jacob’s name, voice harsh and desperate, and Joseph drives the needle into her leg and forces the adrenaline out of the syringe.

Her body slackens after a few more moments and Faith lets go of her legs. Marilyn’s fingers scrabble for purchase and find it on Jacob’s jacket, curling around a fistful of fabric and

wilting into his touch. He moves one of his hands to stroke her hair and hushes her once more as she whines plaintively. She's cold and sweating, but Jacob pulls her hair away from her slick forehead and rocks her gently.

He starts humming. As always, the first song that comes to his mind is "Only You" and he whispers the lyrics to her as her body relaxes. She pulls tighter against him, and he isn't sure if she knows who he is until she manages words again with less than a breath.

"Jacob... *thank you*..."

Faith sits in the chair and folds her hands in her lap. She glances at Joseph with a soft smile, and he returns the expression before cupping Jacob's shoulder and kneeling beside him.

"You treat her well, brother." He watches her chest rise and fall with her now-steady breathing. "She'll be ready for the Cleansing soon."

Jacob doesn't reply. He just looks down at Marilyn's face, more serene than he'd ever seen her, and wonders if she'll really need it after this.

When Marilyn wakes up this time, it's with a jolt and a gasp. She clenches her teeth and rubs her sore wrists. Instead of dirt and sweat, she smells of Jacob's clothes, and she dimly recalls clinging to him for protection from... something? As her head throbs angrily, her vision from the Bliss returns to her all at once and she shudders.

She always used to say she wished her parents were dead. When she found out they actually were - a full year after the fact - well... suffice to say that was a very long day. She'd resigned herself to never seeing them again and she'd made her peace with that, but this? This was just wrong.

She rubs her eyes and stands up, wobbling a bit before grasping the cage bars to steady herself. She hardly minds that she was so close to Jacob Seed - he's built sturdy, at least, and it was some much-needed warmth for her cold bones - but the fact that she called for him so readily... that's what she's hung up on.

That, and the fact that she knows she'd do it again.

Her mind is made up from that point on: she needs to get the fuck out of here. She promised Pratt she'd handle this, and she can't stop Jacob by running from him, but she can't stop him by running into his arms either. She has two pins in her hair, hidden in her braids. At this point, she's surprised no one's found them yet, but she won't look a gift skeleton key in the mouth. She knows she can pick the lock, but it's a matter of where to go from there.

She sighs and paces around the perimeter of the cage. On her third pass, she feels like someone's watching her, and she stops in her tracks to look around. In the far back corner, hidden in the shadow of a drooping oak, a single guard eyes her suspiciously.

Marilyn feels like she could jump for joy. Cover, a lone guard, and plenty of mountainous terrain to escape into? It was almost perfect. If she could either scale the fence or find a gap

in it, she'd be able to get out that way with no one the wiser.

So she watches him. All day long, she watches him. She takes notes in the dirt beside her when he goes on a break and when the shift changes, and eventually, she has a sort of schedule to go by.

She has two minutes and twenty-one seconds at 11:58 p.m. to make her move. So at 11:57, she positions herself by the cage door and pulls the pins out of her hair. She counts thirty seconds, picks the lock, and starts creeping toward the fence.

The guard leaves right on time, and Marilyn picks up the pace. She's at the fence line in moments, but her hopes are dashed when she realizes that what she thought was a gap in the links is just a shadow, and the barbed wire at the top of the fence is spiraled tightly.

It's barbed wire or getting fed to one of Jacob's wolves, at this point. So she climbs the fence, and though her clothes tear and her hands are a bloody mess, she hops the fence and makes a mad dash into the forest.

She doesn't need to know where she's going. Old roads crisscross the Whitetail Mountains, and as soon as she finds one, she can follow it back to... somewhere. She'll just have to hope that somewhere isn't under the control of Eden's Gate.

The Less I Know the Better

Chapter Notes

Content warnings here for usual canon violence, but also for a fractured leg bone. And the, um... act of fracturing it. I tried to be brief, but there you have it.

When Marilyn returns to the Whitetail HQ about a day after her escape, she gets a new set of clothes and bandages up her hands. She takes a few hours to eat and rest, but she doesn't sleep for a second. After a while, she just stops closing her eyes altogether, and she rises from her bunk as quietly as she can. She walks the halls of the Whitetail base, eyes only half open, until she's wandered into Eli's office.

It's icy cold in there. She grins to herself when she thinks of how warm Eli's scruffy beard must keep him, but it fades quickly as she sits down in his desk chair. Slowly, she swivels back and forth and stares distantly at the wall as something prods at her conscience. She closes her eyes and hears Pratt's voice - *one-two-three-one-two-three* - and then looks down at Eli's desk. For a brief instance, she imagines him sprawled across it, bloody and breathing hard, and she has to shake the image from her mind.

Jacob wants her to kill the Whitetails, but if she can't get to them, she can't hurt them. So she writes Eli a note, collects her things, and leaves quietly. There are enough ways for her to stop Jacob without the help of the Whitetails, and she sets off in search of them with nothing but her backpack and her shotgun.

When Jacob is told of Marilyn's escape, he goes hunting. Not for her, but for deer. The bearer of the news narrowly escaped with his life, and even then only because Jacob was in a relatively placid mood when he was informed. Still, he doesn't want to test his own mercy, so he takes his radio and his rifle to his favorite site overlooking a picturesque valley. What better way to take some aggression out than on game animals? He's pretty sure they're in season, at least - though he can't remember the last time anyone worried about hunting seasons in Hope County.

He spends hours up there, watching the wildlife in the plains below and indulging in some quiet introspection. The sun beats down upon his back as he lies chest-down, rifle balanced on the ground, and he's hardly paying attention to his actual prey. No, instead, he thinks of Marilyn, of how he let her slip through his fingers so easily. He respects her, finds her dedication and strength admirable. He usually doesn't even notice that he's taking part in her banter until after the conversation ends, when he repeats his own words in his head. Every time he realizes how often they smiled at each other in the same little talk, he finds himself more and more pleased at the feeling.

Clichés be damned, Marilyn Cooke is unlike anyone he’s ever met. She fascinates him, and that in itself is an oddity that demands attention.

Bipedal movement in the valley below draws Jacob’s eye. He centers his scope on the source and sees a woman with a backpack and a shotgun stopping for a rest on a sunny boulder. She scales it almost effortlessly, her strong fingers finding any little nook in the rock face, and sits atop it triumphantly. She knows she’s in the open. She has to know. But she leans back and soaks in the sunlight nonetheless.

Jacob smirks mischievously and turns on his radio.

“Cooke. I know you’re listening.” He watches her fumble with her pack before she wriggles her radio free. “I see you managed to escape for a little bit.”

“You could’ve made it harder on me, y’know,” she snarks from below, oblivious to his presence. “Your locks are pathetic.”

“You’ve got skills, I’ll give you that.”

“How generous.” She drapes across the boulder, eyes closed, and combs her fingers through her hair. “Why’d you call? You gonna ask me out or somethin’?”

“I don’t need to.” He looks through his scope to get a better view of her. She’s smiling, and he’s mirroring it unconsciously. That contagious expression of hers strikes again. “I can have you back with me whenever I want.”

“A girl’s got places to be, Seed. People to arrest and all that.” She stretches her arms, curling slightly like a sunbathing snake. “Speakin’ of, you wouldn’t happen to know where your li’l brother Joe went off to, would ya?”

“You’re just delaying the inevitable. You know that, don’t you? You were on the path, Cooke, but now you’ve strayed. You’ve forgotten your purpose.” He drops his voice to a low rumble, if only to watch her react. “But it’s okay. It’s not too late. Come back to me.”

Through his scope, he watches her clench her fists and draw her legs closer to her chest. “Careful there,” she purrs, fingers slowly drifting toward her lips. “You almost sound like you *want* me back.”

“Maybe I do, kitten. Maybe I do.”

She pinches her thumb between her teeth. Before her radio switches off for good, a soft groan escapes her, and Jacob chuckles from the ridge above.

“That’s right, Marilyn,” he mutters, more to himself than her. “You’re getting there.”

His song brings her down late in the afternoon, but he didn’t know she was already coming. She’d sat on the rock and contemplated everything, reflected fully on what brought her to this point and where she could go from there, but she could only replay Jacob’s words in her head.

Come back to me. Come back to me. Come back to me.

So she did.

She doesn't even see the cage before she's back in the red haze, training for Jacob once more. She navigates with ease, and she's nearly memorized where everyone will be. Turn, step, shoot, turn, step, shoot. It's a grim rhythm she's fallen into, but Jacob encourages her the whole time and some primal part of her wants to please him above all else. It's his wretched conditioning, she knows it must be, but it happened so quickly that it frightens her.

She stops in her tracks. He told her not to hide in the closet, but he didn't tell her not to let the others kill her. She wonders if she'll turn to dust as they do, or if she'll really die. At this point, she isn't sure which one she'd prefer.

All at once and from every direction, she's bombarded with bullets. The pain from one is bearable, but with this many, she's sent reeling. Soon enough she's on her hands and knees, and her own survival instincts have taken over and pushed her to crawl away. Someone from behind her snatches one of her ankles, and she's too weak to kick them off. She can only drag herself forward as another hand grabs her leg higher up.

And then they twist their hands in separate directions, and she hears a tangible *snap* in her leg before white-hot pain jets up through her bones and she loses consciousness.

Jacob should have killed her, and he knows it. But when he sees her lying in the grass outside the Veteran's Center, riddled with bullet holes and somehow still looking like she planned this all along, he calls everyone off and carries her back himself. He lets himself think it's because she's a good soldier, one who could bring countless victories to the Project, but he can almost hear her mocking him in response.

Sure, Seed, that's exactly why you, personally, picked me up and oh-so-carefully brought me to your bed to examine my injuries yourself, in private. Sure.

Because she hasn't eaten properly in days - probably weeks by now - her bones were a little easier to break than usual. Her wounds need cleaning and proper bandages, and her clothes are ruined with bullet holes, blood, and grime. Even though she made it out with just a fractured fibula, she's out of commission for at least two weeks. But that gives Jacob plenty of time to find her weaknesses, to exploit them as much as he can, and to finally, finally *keep* her. Pain and control are his usual methods, but she's too damn stubborn for those. So he'll have to try something new, something he thought only worked on himself.

He'll have to tell her the truth. And that thought unsettles him more than it he thought it would.

Melting Ice

The first thing Marilyn does when she wakes up is move her leg, and as soon as she does her jaw falls open with a raspy scream. Her fingers curl around the sheets of Jacob's bed and she forces her eyes open, only to meet his attentive blues and recoil in shock.

"What... did you do?" she manages through gritted teeth, trying to ignore the shooting pain in her leg.

"I saved your life," he replies, sitting beside her on the bed.

"I had a whole plan an' everything," she grumbles, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Thanks for nothin', big guy."

He pulls a strand of hair away from her shoulder to get a better look at the bandage there. It's already stained red. Wordlessly, he puts one of his hands under the small of Marilyn's back and hooks the other around the bend in her knees.

"Hey!" she raises a hand to swat him away, but her bullet wounds protest with sharp pains and she just groans combatively instead.

"This'll be a lot easier if you stay still," Jacob says, looking down at her severely.

She's aware. But that doesn't make it any better. She lets her muscles relax, and she withers into his grip. It feels secure, and that irritates her even more. Still, she's comfortable, and that's better than being in the cage.

He sets her on the floor in his bathroom and starts running water into the clawfoot tub. She realizes now, a bit late, that she isn't in the Veteran's Center anymore. As Jacob tests the water temperature with his hand, she carefully examines the room for anything she can use - or any way she can escape.

"I know what you're thinking," Jacob says without looking back. "Don't bother. I took the time to... *Cooke-proof*, let's say."

Marilyn sighs. "Why'd you bring me here? Seems awful risky for you to let someone like me into your house."

Jacob perches on the edge of the bathtub and looks down at her. "Miss the cage already?"

"It was downright homey."

"You got a funny idea of home."

She closes her eyes and leans her head against the wall. "Cages don't scare me, Seed, and neither do you."

"I know." He motions to her vaguely and commands, "Undress."

Her eyes snap open. “*Excuse* me?”

“You heard me, Cooke. Undress.”

Her forehead wrinkles as she narrows her eyes. “The fuck I will!”

Jacob shuts the water off and stands up. He towers over her, and it’s only made worse by her useless leg. “Undress, or I’ll do it for you.”

“You’ll strip? *That*, I’m okay with.”

He rolls his eyes. “You wanna take a bath with all your clothes on? Fine. Whatever does it for ya.”

Her lips twist in a bitter scowl. “Why do you even care? Am I too dirty for ya or somethin’?”

“You can skip bath time if ten different infections sound good to you.” He eyes her bloody bandages. “But believe me when I say I’m tryin’ to keep you alive.”

She swallows and recalls the flare in Jacob’s eyes when she opened her shirt to display the scarred *WRATH* on her chest. Completely stripping in front of him... she doesn’t know if the knot in her chest is fear or excitement.

"And why would you care if I died or not?"

"I'd hate to waste such a promising soldier," he lies.

Her cracked lips curl into a sneer. "I'm *sure* that's all there is to it."

Slowly, she pulls her grimy tank off and slings it uncaringly toward the door. She slips her thumb under the waistband of her cargo shorts and unfastens those as well, never breaking eye contact with Jacob.

If she has to do this, she might as well make it fun.

She wriggles out of her shorts and her underwear in a series of stilted movements, made harder by the shooting pain in her right leg. The last step is to unclasp her bra, which she does with one swift motion, and it falls away to reveal her scarred body in its fully naked state.

“See anything you like, Seed?”

“Hmph.”

She rolls her shoulders back and twists a strand of hair around her finger. “C’mon, big guy, I see the way you look at me sometimes.”

He knows the way she's talking about. Oh, he knows it well. He knows how those looks turn into long nights when he's alone, where he closes his eyes and imagines hers looking up at him, sparkling green and mischievous. He knows how her voice is a sultry sound he replays

in his mind as he revisits every line of her body. He knows how he takes himself in both hands and imagines his rough skin is her tender flesh clamped around him.

But he lies again and squashes those thoughts and says instead, "That's not why you're here."

"You ain't no fun at all."

Jacob lifts her up and sinks her gently into the hot water. Her skin is tender and she winces upon contact, but she finds comfort in the bath like she hasn't felt since setting foot in Hope County. She lets her arms drape over the sides of the tub, displaying her body for him carelessly, and she leans her head back to rest upon the lip of the tub as she eases down.

Jacob kneels beside the tub with an assortment of cotton swabs, rubbing alcohol, antibiotic gel, and fresh bandages. He merely stares at her expectantly, uncharacteristically silent, and watches as she explores the nature of her own wounds.

"Things... *in there*," she begins quietly, "they happen out here?"

Jacob considers it for a moment. "Mm. Sometimes. And only some things."

"Weird," she mutters to herself as she gingerly pokes an angry red bullet hole in her left shoulder.

Jacob takes a clean tissue to it to stem the slow trickle of blood. With his free hand, he opens the bottle of rubbing alcohol. He thoroughly rinses the wound with water, dries it again, and flushes it with a bit of alcohol. It burns right through to Marilyn's core and she grimaces in pain, but Jacob strokes her hair and soothes the hurt with another water rinse.

"Good girl," he murmurs, almost beyond hearing. "You're doin' so well." He traces a few criss-crossing scars on her upper back and follows them with his eyes across her entire torso. "Where'd all these come from, hmm? Iraq?"

Marilyn nods softly. "They'd take videos of me. The people who took me. Grainy, shitty videos. They'd cut me, stab me, punch me 'til I bled. Lost a toe once." She wiggles the toes on her left foot to display the stub where the littlest one should be. "They'd film it an' send it home so people would get all mad. Then brass would send out another search party, the Taliban would wanna transport me again, I'd struggle, and they'd just... hit me 'til I stopped movin' around."

Jacob pulls her arms away from her chest and she lets him. He's still carding his fingers slowly through her hair as he tends to her other bullet wounds. He offers her a brief moment of eye contact, coaxing her to continue, before returning his attention to a spot where a small caliber grazed her ribcage.

She closes her eyes as his fingers work along her side, touch electric and warm. "Some staff sergeant found me eventually," she says with a sigh. "He and a squad were takin' down the prisoner transport I was on. Hit the truck with a couple grenades. Didn't know there were people in the back 'til we started screaming." Eyes still shut, she motions to her fractured leg. "That bone in there, the one that broke? Probably the same one what broke that day, too."

Always was a little more delicate after that. Hard not to be when a six-wheeler lands right on ya.”

Jacob lifts her leg out of the water, as gentle as he can be, and perches it on the edge of the tub. “Keep that up and dry,” he instructs, dropping a washcloth and a bar of soap into the tub. “You can do the rest.” He stands up and stretches his legs, then leans against the wall with his arms crossed. “Go on. Don’t soak for long - those bullet holes need to heal up.”

Reluctantly, she bathes herself in his view. He watches her carefully, though his eyes are unfocused and distant. As she works her way down, he tells her his truth in return for hers. Everything that happened to Eric Miller, everything that wasn’t in the files she read. And she listens to every word. She soaks in them like the water in the tub and when he’s done, she looks over her shoulder at him, hair stuck to her back in wet ropes, and she nods once.

Respect where respect is due, she thinks. *Sometimes, all you can do is cave in.*

“Seed...” she begins slowly, eyes scanning his, “y’know how, in all them... superhero movies, the bad guy always says to the good guy, ‘we’re the same, you and I?’ Well, I... I don’t know much about good an’ bad, with you, but, uh...” she trails off and looks back at the water, tinged pink with blood. “Maybe we ain’t all that different.”

“Maybe not,” he says, readying a towel for her. “Maybe not.”

Gods & Monsters

Chapter Notes

Content warning for suicidal thoughts, but nothing is discussed in great detail.

Once her wounds are bandaged and her leg is set with a splint, Jacob puts her back in the cage. She wasn't expecting it, not by a long shot, but he slipped something into the glass of water he served her later and she came to behind bars again. In retrospect, staring up at the top of the cage, she has no idea how she could've been so stupid. She let her guard down for one day, *one fucking day*, and he used it against her. Maybe everything he said was a lie. Maybe he just spun that story about eating Miller.

What kind of sick mind would make up a story about cannibalizing their spotter?

Marilyn shivers at the idea. And to think, she almost sympathized with him. She almost saw a human underneath that ironclad visage he puts up. She almost found a sliver of kindness in the way he touched her wounds, the way he stroked her hair. She almost met a good man.

And then he put her back in the fucking cage.

She's only in there for an hour after she wakes up before he returns, however, and he stands in front of the bars peering in at her with a stoic look.

She spits at his feet. "Fuck you."

"Pretty mouth."

She turns her back to him and crosses her arms, even though they're sore.

"Listen, kitten, the only reason you're in there is 'cause my brother wants to see you."

She tries to ignore the heat that quickly pulses through her when he says *kitten*. "Well, fuck him, too."

He crouches down and grabs her uninjured shoulder roughly, twisting her a bit to look at him. "You behave, you understand me? Or you'll stay in there until that leg heals up."

"What's my alternative?" she sneers, eyes narrowed. "Stayin' in your bedroom?"

"Better than this, ain't it?"

He's right. But she doesn't care about better. Not anymore. She shrugs his hand off and faces away again, and he sighs impatiently as he stands up.

“Have it your way, Marilyn.”

“It’s *Cooke* to you, asshole.”

“I’ll call you whatever I damn well please, *Marilyn*.”

Joseph’s even voice comes from across the row of cages and Jacob turns to greet his brother. They touch foreheads, and Joseph kneels beside Marilyn’s cage.

“Hello, Deputy.”

Marilyn doesn’t say anything.

“My brother tells me what you did in your training. I know you must be in pain.”

She is. The bath and Jacob’s care helped immensely, but she’s still hurting. Not like she’d ever let either of them know that. She remains silent, staring coldly at the dirt by her feet.

“You’re not the only one to be tested.” Joseph launches into a half-sermon about his deceased wife, but if she’s honest, Marilyn stopped listening after he said “we were pregnant.”

You weren’t pregnant, you dick. She did all the work.

“Marilyn,” Jacob says during a pause in Joseph’s speech. “Look at him.”

She doesn’t stir, nor does she reply.

Through gritted teeth, he tries again. “You know your place, *Specialist*.”

With a soft growl, she spins around and drags herself right up to the bars, where she ignores Joseph and stares directly at Jacob. “Fuck you,” she says, each syllable measured and venomous, “and fuck your goddamn *places*.”

Joseph grabs her hands and pries them off the bars, then pulls her as far toward him as she can go. “I know you seek something. Not victory or glory. You’re not making this easy on yourself, and you’re doing it for a reason.” His thumbs smooth over the back of her knuckles, even as she struggles to get her working leg underneath her. “What do you want? Hmm? What is it you’re looking to gain?”

Through pained breaths, she replies icily, “I want you to *let me die*.”

Jacob’s eyes widen for a split second, but he closes them right after. Joseph holds fast to Marilyn’s hands, and she still writhes beneath his touch like his fingers themselves burn.

Softly, he asks, “Why?”

“Because...” she manages to balance on her good leg while her fractured one lies stretched out behind her. “*Shit*, ‘cause I ain’t nothin’ to you. Or Whitehorse. Or Eli. Fuck,” she laughs bitterly, “Eli doesn’t even know my goddamn name. Your bastard brother over there knows me better than either of them do.”

Joseph lets her hands go and she slinks to the back of the cage.

“I ain’t no good to you,” she continues with a wheezing laugh. “I don’t believe in your cult and I don’t believe in you. I ain’t gonna fight my friends, and clearly, I can’t fight your Peggies. Your brother keeps tryin’ to break me, but you can’t break what’s *already fucking broken*. Believe me, I have *tried*. I tried with drugs, I tried with sex, I tried with jumpin’ off every goddamn bridge I could see and y’know what I learned? *You cannot break a broken girl*.” Marilyn curls up on her side, legs pulled tight against her chest, and she closes her eyes. “Just do it already. Starve me or shoot me or choke me or whatever the fuck it is you’re gonna do.”

Joseph stands up and takes hold of one of the cage bars. He looks in, staring at her deeply, and waits a few moments before calmly posing, “Do you have any last requests?”

Wearily, she mutters, “Sure. A bottle o’ Jack and a nice long fuck.”

Joseph takes a step back from the cage and looks up at Jacob, touching his shoulder gently.

“She’s yours,” he whispers, and Jacob’s chest swells with pride and satisfaction.

Joseph leaves, singing a hymn on his way, and Jacob takes his brother’s place at the front of the cage.

He looks down at Marilyn, balled up in the corner. “So... you don’t believe, hmm?”

“Not in some voice in your li’l brother’s head, I don’t.”

Jacob crouches before her and meets her eyes. “I don’t know if he talks to God. That doesn’t matter. He’s right.”

“About *what*?” She sounds angry, and her glare confirms it.

He chuckles dryly. “What *isn’t* he right about? He knew you’d come here. He knew you’d escape. He knew you’d come *back*, and he knew I’d...”

“You’d what?”

Jacob shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter,” he repeats. “He’s right. Maybe God has a plan, maybe He doesn’t, but my brother does, and I can see it. I can carry it out. I know where it’s going and I know what it’s for.” After a slight pause, he drops his eyes from Marilyn’s and stands up. “Better than any plan God’s ever made, that’s for damn sure.”

Before he can leave, she calls, “You don’t believe, hmm?”

He answers over his shoulder. “Like I said, doesn’t matter.”

Silence passes eerily between them, thick with things unsaid. Finally, Marilyn speaks again, a rasp against the wind with more power than a semi.

“It matters to me.”

Jacob can only turn away.

Milk & Honey

Marilyn sits in the cage for six more days, refusing the food the Peggies bring and drinking only rainwater that drips in. She said she'd starve to death in Jacob's custody, and she meant it.

When he finally does return at dusk on the last day, she's curled on her side facedown in the dirt, hair obscuring her face, breathing shallow and shaking slightly. It gets *cold* in Hope County, especially in the mountains, and with how thin she's getting she has barely any cover for her rattling bones.

He opens the gate and kneels beside her, his hands warm on her shoulder. He draws her hair back from her face to find her eyes shut, and he touches her forehead gently.

She startles at the sensation and swings up, missing badly and punching one of the cage bars, which sends a shock through her arm that makes every injury of hers ache like they were freshly made.

Jacob tuts at her, head shaking slowly, and lifts her as if she weighs nothing. "You've gotta keep that temper in check, Miss Wrath," he says as he slings her over one shoulder.

She crosses her arms and rolls her eyes. "Whatever, big guy."

As he brings her... somewhere, he talks to fill the silence. "My boys tell me you haven't eaten a thing. What's goin' on?"

"You cook for shit."

"I didn't make any of that."

"So... your dogs did it?"

"They're wolves."

"*They* cook for shit."

He laughs, and the sound makes her laugh weakly in turn. It's insane, this back and forth they have, and she knows it, but *God* if he isn't compelling. He brings out something in her she thought she'd lost, even from behind metal bars. Did one capture undo the other? By some twisted logic, did he shake off whatever was left of Iraq?

Did he save her, just like Joseph said he could?

Fuck's sake, she thinks to herself. *What kind of idiot am I to fall for this shit?* She already tried this whole "acceptance" thing once and he put her back in the cage. So why does she still melt in his arms?

He puts her in a truck - not his, she presumes, but one of the trucks his men share - and drives her somewhere. She doesn't know and she doesn't care, and she sleeps away the trip. She doesn't bother stirring when he carries her inside, and she *really* doesn't move when she's placed in his bed.

Hell, he even tucks her in. He moves around her and she ignores it, eyes shut, dreaming of brighter days, until he sits on the bed next to her and places a tray between them.

She sits up and he places a pillow behind the small of her back as she looks down at the spread he's brought. Tea with cream and honey in a small mug, fresh and steaming scrambled eggs with shredded cheese, and sausage in links the size of her thumb all sit on the tray, tantalizing her, and she looks up at Jacob with confusion in her eyes.

What comes out of her mouth is distinctly less delicate than the breakfast set before her. "The fuck is all this?"

He huffs a laugh and spears a sausage link on a silver fork. "Food. Eat it."

"Are you kidding me?"

Now he's the confused one. "Why?"

"You've been tryin' to feed me dog food and raw meat since I got here, and now you made me a fuckin' five-star breakfast. What the *fuck* is this?"

He clasps her jaw and holds it open, then shoves the fork inside. She coughs and grabs his wrist, trying to pull him away, but he's far stronger than she is on a good day, let alone in her weakened state.

"Eat," he commands. "You'll need your strength."

She mumbles curses around the food in her mouth, and Jacob draws her face closer to his. When he looks into her eyes, they each see what they weren't expecting. He sees fear and she sees honesty, and it startles them both.

Reluctantly, she begins to eat what he's given her. She can't lie; it's *delicious*, and she knows it'll fill her stomach with enough protein to jumpstart her system. He feeds her at first, as she's still stubbornly rejecting the fork, but once the sausage is gone and she's eased back into the bed, he hands it over.

From the first taste of the eggs, she's in love. She devours it like a predator, and she can feel Jacob's proud eyes on her back as she stoops over the plate. They're creamy and savory, firm where they ought to be and soft everywhere else, and they're nothing less than ambrosia after the bowls of lukewarm meat she's been faced with since Jacob first captured her.

With his hand rubbing slow circles into her back, she'd almost forget she was his captive. And oh, God, she wants to. He's cooked for her, he's bathed her, he's cradled her and soothed her... he's nearly been like a tender lover with her. The only thing keeping her from him is the side he's on and the cage he keeps putting her in.

“There’s a good girl,” he murmurs gently. “You’re doing well.”

She only responds with a hum, muffled by the fork in her mouth.

“You’re not going back in the cage again, Marilyn.”

She stops just short of the teacup and stares wide-eyed at him. “Mm? I’m not?”

“No, you’re not.”

Oh, she could kiss him right now. Instead, she drinks her tea in thick gulps, the first real liquid she’s had in days, savoring the sweetness of the honey and the richness of the cream. She drains the cup in moments, dropping it back onto the tray with a clatter and staring down at the empty plates.

He smiles at her. His eyes are warm and encouraging, and she’d drown in them if she could. If this is what his “training” was meant to do, it was working. And she knows she’s letting it.

He sweeps the tray off the bed and onto the side table with one swift movement and drapes his arm across her shoulders. She leans into the warmth, and pretty soon, she’s nestled against him with her eyes closed and her belly full.

“You’re never going in any cage again,” he whispers as she falls asleep in his arms. “Not on my watch.”

In My Feelings

She wakes up in Jacob's arms, and when she realizes where she is... she doesn't move. She can tell he's awake by the way he lazily circles his thumb around her shoulder, but she stays quiet for several moments. It's... calming here. Her heart feels light and her breathing feels easier. She feels stronger already with the energy from the food she ate, and she's warm next to Jacob with his chin resting atop her head. His beard itches a little, but she's alright with that. His stomach is soft and his arms are strong, and she feels secure for the first time in a while.

She's unsettled, it's true; he kidnapped her and inflicted psychological damage that may never be undone. And that's not to speak of what he did to Staci Pratt and countless others. He deprived her of food and he exposed her to drugs and he made her run his demented course over and over and over again.

Yet she's here, nestled beside him, in his bed, with his food in her system, and his bandages on wounds she let herself get in a last-ditch attempt to escape him. She wonders if he knows how it feels to hold an enemy close and forget what it's like to hate them. She wonders if he looks at her the same way she looks at him: with respect well-earned but reluctantly given, and with a twisted sort of care that has her savoring his contact.

He looks at her that way too, though. He sees strength in her, sometimes on the surface and sometimes buried deep. She puts up so many walls, just like he does, and beneath them all is a small, small person with big, big fears. A child, in Jacob's case, watching his brothers suffer as he can do nothing. In Marilyn's case, a soldier trapped in a rusty cage in an endless war she never wanted to fight. He wants to keep her safe, God, he really does, and he knows the safest place for her is with him and his family. Joseph says he has to bring people into the fold whether they want to come or not, especially people he cares about, but Marilyn is too stubborn even for that. She won't break - hell, she won't even bend - but he knows this can't end without one of them giving in.

He can tell she's awake by the soft tapping of her left foot under the covers, but he decides not to acknowledge it. He feels... quieter here. His chest isn't so weighted and his thoughts seem slower. He feels better already about Marilyn's trust in him with how relatively little she fought, and her weight is comfortable in his arms. She's bony and sharp, but he's alright with that. Her breath is warm and her hair is soft, and he feels at home for the first time in a long while.

"Seed?"

He opens his eyes and looks down at her. "Hm?"

"Why..." She pauses, breath caught, and clears her throat to ask a question that wasn't the one she started with. "Why 'Only You?' There're so many songs in the world and you pick *that* one?"

A laugh rumbles in his throat and he sits up, letting her settle back into the pillows. “’s a good song. Doesn’t irritate me.”

“‘Only You’ by the fuckin’ Platters doesn’t irritate you?” She stretches out on the bed. “You got nerves of steel, big guy.”

“Besides,” he adds teasingly as he stands, “I like to make you feel special.”

“Suuuuure.”

He leaves the room and she flips over onto her stomach, careful of her leg. Slowly, she traces shapes into the sheets and hums his song. She knows most of the words; her parents always played old music, and she grew up with songs just like this one. Maybe someday she’ll be able to listen to it again without hurting anyone. When she thinks of it now, she can faintly hear Jacob’s voice murmuring the lyrics, and her body warms with the thought.

He reenters the bedroom with two glasses and a bottle of whiskey in his hands. She frowns at it for a moment before her eyes widen, and then she laughs in disbelief.

“You brought me a bottle o’ Jack.”

“You asked for it,” he responds with a shrug. He uncaps the bottle and fills the two glasses, then sets it on the side table and hands Marilyn her drink.

She smirks at him over the rim of the glass. “Is there, uh... room service for a nice long fuck, too?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Who you wanna fuck.”

She chuckles. “I got a choice? *Now* ya made a believer outta me.”

“I’m sure John would volunteer.”

She nearly spits her drink. “Christ, I’d rather dismember myself with a rusty spoon.”

Jacob shrugs. “People say he’s charming.”

“If John Seed is charming, I’m Queen Cleopatra.”

“Who’d be your Marc Antony?”

“Ain’t that what we’re tryin’ to figure out?”

He taps the side of his glass thoughtfully. “Well, if you’ve taken a liking to one of my boys out there...”

She coughs into her next gulp. “The hell I have!”

Now it's his turn to laugh, and he reclines back on the bed with her. "What? Most of 'em shower."

"Ugh." She finishes her glass and holds it out toward him expectantly. "Please. They're all beanpoles."

He raises an inquisitive eyebrow as he pours her second glass.

"Some of 'em, uh... got more bean than pole." She readily swallows the fresh whiskey. "An' then there's you, lookin' like the statue o' David."

Jacob grins slyly. "So... Marc or no Marc?"

"I'll just stick with Jacob for now."

He stops just shy of his glass, staring at her with a warmth she isn't used to.

"What?"

"Nothing," he replies, taking a drink. But in the back of his mind, he tucks away the sound of his name on her tongue.

She leans back and tucks her hands behind her head. "Ain't you at all worried I'm gonna run? This is all... awful sudden."

"Hmph. You can *try*."

"Oh, yeah? You think I can't do it, big guy?" It sounds far more playful as she says it now, sweet and teasing instead of the bitter taste it left before. "I don't even know where we are and I betcha I could still get away."

"When you do," he starts, reclining in the bed with a tired huff, "I'll time you and have some of my boys race against it. Should be good for 'em."

She turns on her side as best she can and holds her head up with her hand. "There's a hole in your west fence, by the way. Couldn't reach it in time from my cage, but if I were a coupla rows closer, I'd be home free in sixty seconds. Less, on a good day."

He scoffs and closes his eyes softly. "I'm sure."

"Only one guard, plenty o' tree cover outside the fence to hide in, buncha rocks to scale for a vantage point... hell, I could do it even with my leg all fucked." She traces a spiral on his shoulder absentmindedly as she watches his chest rise and fall. "Specially if the guy in charge was takin' a nap. Am I boring you, Jacob?"

He smiles and snatches her hand. "You escape, you'll come right back," he says, voice a soft rumble as he smooths his thumb across her knuckles. "You know it."

"Only 'cause you can't live without me."

He opens his eyes and opens his arm for her. “Just get over here, Cleopatra.”

Her eyes have a shine he hasn't seen before. “Whatcha gonna do if I don't, Marc?”

“I'll think of something.”

“Snakes in a box?”

“You've got venom enough for a cobra.”

She folds against his side and he drapes his arm around her shoulders, heavy and warm.

“My mama would be ashamed,” She mutters, more to herself than him. “Always said I got bad taste in fellas.”

Jacob only grips her tighter. Maybe she does have bad taste. If you ask him, it's *certain* she does.

But he's not about to tell her that.

It Only Takes One Night

Chapter Notes

The smut chapter has finally arrived! For anyone who isn't interested in that, feel free to skip to the final chapter. Otherwise, read on, and enjoy!

They've talked for hours. About their lives, their families, their military pasts, and everything in between, they talk and drink until the bottle sits empty on the side table and their voices are raspy and slurring. They have their wits about them, enough to carry on, but the pleasant warmth and numbness they both feel is soothing. Jacob drank more than Marilyn did, of course, but they're both happily drunk with minimal risk of regretting their life choices in the morning.

But right now, she wants nothing more than his hands on her body, and he wants nothing more than to see her undone at his touch. It has all the promise of a horrible mistake and none of the benefits, save perhaps one night of tipsy pleasure. They're beautiful people, both of them, exchanging glances full of need and desire, and any ounce of logic left in either of them is not strong enough to hold them back.

Jacob's fingers, calloused and tough, are lazily drifting up and down Marilyn's exposed shoulder while her head rests on his solid chest. He's rambling through a tale from his days in juvie, his first real foray into the world of choice and consequence, and she holds him like a lover, gentle and light. The breeze through the open window is her breath; the rise and fall of his chest, her heartbeat. She watches his free hand as he gestures mildly along with his story, and when he drops his hand for a moment, she takes it in her own and rubs circles across his scarred knuckles.

The hand on her shoulder wanders down her arm, lingering at her fingers and slowly tracing each one. He moves from there to her waist, finding her hipbone and cupping its corner in his hand. She shifts and it pivots, and the movement under his palm is smooth and slow.

With his fingers, he pulls an imaginary line from her hip to her ribs and strokes her side up and down. She finds it harder and harder to concentrate on his words as his hand graces the sensitive strip of skin between her tank top and her underwear. His touch ghosts across her waist and she flattens her hand against his chest as a flicker of heat settles between her legs.

He seems to notice the shift, and he lets his hand drop lower to her thigh. He crisscrosses her skin delicately, fingers only just brushing the surface, and she squeezes the hand she's holding. In turn, her free hand roams under his shirt, and he smirks softly as her fingers meet his every scar and massage them gently. He frees his other hand from hers and strokes her cheek languidly, thumb brushing her lips, and she curls into the touch. Her eyes close and his expression softens as he presses back into the bed.

As his thumb passes her lips again, she takes it between them and opens her eyes to look up at him. His smile shifts into a smirk, and she circles her tongue around his fingertip.

He hooks his thumb up to a more comfortable position in her mouth as she slowly sucks on the digit. His other hand grips harder at her thigh and she spreads her legs a bit, allowing him further access to her bare skin. His every touch is lightning on her flesh and her lips are spreading fire from his hand to his heart.

Careful of her leg, Jacob pulls himself up over her, knees on either side of hers, and tucks her hair away from her face. As he frees his thumb with a pop, she licks her lips enticingly and he leans in to kiss her.

It doesn't even occur to him until their mouths are moving hungrily against each other that it's their first kiss. It feels like ice between teeth, numbing and almost painful, and when he pulls away for a breath she cranes her neck up for more. As one of his hands cups her hip, she runs her fingers under his shirt and trails soft touches up his chest. He breaks contact for a moment to strip the offending garment, then returns his full attention to her. He slinks his hands up her sensitive sides, sliding her shirt up as he does, and she stretches her arms up to let him slip it off.

The instant it's gone, his lips are on her neck, working down, down her chest. He is wretchedly patient, stopping with every kiss to suck on her skin. Tender red marks blossom across her chest, from her collarbone onward, and he cups both his hands under her ass as he devotes himself to her breasts. His lips are clumsy in their wandering, but he more than makes up for that with the force of his kisses, and she's left sighing for more as she rakes her fingers across his scalp.

He groans against her skin as she palms him through his pants, and he takes one hand off her to remove them in a series of rough motions that nearly rattle the bed frame. His erection falls free as she struggles out of her underwear, and before they're even at her ankles he's reaching down to touch her slick folds.

Her sharp intake of breath at his first contact has his cock twitching already, but Jacob is a patient man, and he's capable - if only just - of resisting long enough to give his partner *whatever* they need. So he touches her slowly, like honey dripping from a spoon, carefully circling her clit with the thumb she so sensually sucked on and easily slipping two fingers inside her to stroke her from every angle.

She arches her neck and moans his name softly, an ethereal sound he hadn't anticipated from her. It's breathy and hot, voice trembling, and *oh* how he wants to drink it from her like wine. Her lips form a perfect *O* as he pumps his fingers in and out, thumbing her tenderly. Her fingers press pale spots into his shoulders as his whole arm pulls and pushes with his sweetly repeated motions, and his lips find hers again in a passionate kiss that acts as their lifeline to each other.

As her nails scratch lines across his back, he squeezes her ass and works her cunt nearly to the point of climax... then stops. She mumbles curses around his tongue, tied with hers until she separates them, and pouts at him with wide eyes.

He laughs hoarsely, just air at this point, and bites at one of the bruises he's left on her neck. She cries out in a pleasure-pain she's never felt before as he works the tip of his stiffened shaft inside her, thick enough to stretch her to near-discomfort.

"Fuck," she hisses as he pushes further, "you do all the girls like this?"

"Only you," he murmurs against her skin, following it with a dry chuckle at the unintended irony. "*Only youuuu...*"

She giggles brightly, and he makes a point to tickle her shoulder with his beard as she swats at him playfully. He kisses her lips and nips at the bottom one, eliciting more laughter, and she tugs his body closer.

He shifts his weight and slides himself fully inside her, swallowing a deep groan as he hilt against her, and just as she's adjusted herself to his size he begins carefully rocking in and out. The friction has her back arched as far as it'll go, and he holds her up by the base of her spine to keep her from putting pressure on her leg. She's rutting against him, near-frantic in her pace, and he slows her with soothing caresses of her hair and neck.

He hushes her needy whimpers, the same way he hushed her as she came off the Bliss. It feels like an era ago that he first held her in his arms. So combative, so stubborn, and now here she is moaning for more as he makes love to her.

She tightens around him, her breaths hitches in her throat, and her voice rises in pitch and tone as the heat within her pools between her legs and threatens to explode out through her veins.

She manages words, cracking and soft: "Jacob... oh, Jacob, please... let me..."

He brings his thumb to her clit and circles it once, and she comes undone in his arms with a long, succulent cry. Her muscles fire all at once, toes and fingers curling in as her jaw slackens and her eyes snap shut, and she pulses around his cock as shivers wrack her frame. It's only his hold on her that keeps her from falling back against the bed, white-hot pleasure overwhelming her senses altogether.

He spends himself inside her, lingering as she shudders with the aftershocks of her climax and burying his face in the crook of her shoulder to breathe her in. He tastes salty sweat when he kisses the skin there, and he hears adoration in her voice as she exhales his name like a whispered prayer.

This... this is exactly what Joseph said would happen. The eldest, strongest, and most goddamn stubborn of the Seeds would fall in love.

And by God, Jacob knows he has.

Epilogue - Cleopatra

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jacob says that someday, Marilyn will bring him children. She can't say the idea isn't enticing; a baby has always been in the back of her mind, but she never trusted herself enough to raise one, and two miscarriages have her wary to even try. She's no more certain now, not by a long shot, but if the Collapse Joseph speaks of will really give way to a healthier world - a *fairer* world - then it could very well be in her future.

She hates to admit it, but she *likes* the new family she's been given. Joseph and Faith are kind to her, and she and John are on speaking terms, at least, and his bride-to-be is generous with her affections. The Peggies have started looking up to Marilyn, watching her the way they watch Jacob - though the path to respect was a long one. They listen when she speaks, and Jacob's even offered to let her train a few. She always, always takes him up on that. She is gentler than he, and having bent at his hand, she knows the mercy she can offer those he cages.

The wind cards through her hair, free from the tight braids she used to sport, as she keeps a watchful eye on Jacob's men—their men. They train like proper soldiers now, exercising and doing drills and practicing like they should have been before. It's no wonder she escaped so easily and defeated so many of Jacob's fighters. They were amateurs. Under her guidance and his firm hand, however, they're growing and learning like never before.

They come together in the evenings, talking over dinner and retiring to bed when they're done. Some nights they continue the conversation until one of them fall asleep, some nights they simply curl up together without a word, and some nights they make love well into the morning. When sunlight shines through the curtains, they eat their breakfast together, groggy and stiff, and then go their separate ways if they must.

Some days, Jacob takes her by the arm and they disappear into the mountains. They hunt, or they fish, or they simply savor the wilderness in tender silence - whatever they do, they do it together and it's these moments they both cherish above all others. It brings them back to their first night as a pair, fumbling through feelings and drunk on whiskey and want. They connect so easily it's a wonder they were ever enemies at all.

Marilyn keeps him close, physically and emotionally. There's nothing she won't share with him and nothing she can't get him to share with her. His loyalty is nothing to scoff at, and now she knows it firsthand. There's something comforting about his presence, so stoic and yet so tender - but only for her, yes, only ever for her.

Only you, he says, laughing, soft and free and so unlike how he is otherwise, all sharp edges and stone walls—

When she kisses him, he hums into it. Just a low rumble of contentment in his throat, but it means the world to her. He loves to pick her up, to carry her back to bed or a chair or the

kitchen counter and feel her familiar weight in his arms. She eats well now, and she has soft flesh on her bones for him to squeeze and grip and kiss. And *oh*, how he kisses. He has John's fire and Joseph's tenderness and Faith's joy, and he mixes it all with his own torturous patience to create a cocktail of sensations that never fail to have Marilyn gasping for his lips on her skin, anywhere, *everywhere* he can place them.

The first time she tells him she loves him, it is not taken well. They are joined in a tangle of sweaty limbs and urgent moans and she cranes her head back as his fingers find her sides - her delicate, sensitive sides - and paws at them tightly. It's less than a breath when she says it, but more than enough to make him stop mid-motion.

I love you, Jake, I love you so fucking much.

He tugs her off him and forces her to her stomach, and he takes her so roughly that her cheeks are stained with bittersweet mascara tears, and when he's through with her he slips away without a word. She doesn't see him for eleven days, and neither do his brothers.

He looks different when he returns, and not just because he's sporting a new scar shaped like a grizzly's jaw. He drops his prize, whatever it is, and takes Marilyn in his dirty arms like he never left.

She feels the hint of a tear on her shoulder as he buries his face in her neck, and she caresses the base of his skull and tells him she's proud.

You got bad taste in men, he whispers bitterly. *But goddammit, Mari, I love you too.*

After that, he tells her he loves her once a day, like clockwork, over dinner. He says it's so the words stick, just like any kind of conditioning, only what he's trying to trigger now is belief. He isn't an easy man to care for, and he knows it, despite how she says she's handled worse before. He doesn't know she's referring to herself.

He *shows* her he loves her, however, countless times and in infinite ways: hot breakfast on her side table when she wakes up, or a Judge by the door with a squeaky toy clasped between their teeth, or his jacket laid out on the bed so she can wear it. They both know some of his soldiers laugh when they see her dressed in his jacket with one of his Judges panting like a puppy at her heels.

At first, the men were generous with their insults. *Jacob's whore. The Soldier's little sinner. The wild animal he turned into a pet.* Some of the ones who spoke out simply... disappeared. And whenever Jacob stalked back home, late at night, to tick another name off his roster, Marilyn just smiled and kissed him fiercely and showed him her favor until dawn.

When the Father himself anoints her as his Specialist, all of that talk ceases at once. She becomes Marilyn Seed the same day, and Jacob can only smile when she takes his hand and slips a silver ring onto his finger.

I love you, Jake.

You got bad taste in men. But I love you too.

She is his, and he is hers. Cleopatra and Marc Antony. A quick-thinking queen and a stone-faced soldier. They may be a match made by the Devil himself, but that won't stop them from savoring every second of it.

And besides, Jacob's always found something fascinating in a snake's beady little eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we did it! Thank you all for sticking with me through these 14 chapters! Your comments and kudos have meant the world to me and have gotten me through some bad days. I'm so grateful for every one of you for taking the time to read this, and I'm proud that you enjoyed it as much as you have. Marilyn Cooke is dear to me, and I cannot even begin to express how much it means to me that so many of you stayed for her, even if you came for Jacob. In fact, his characterization is something many of you have praised and I'm infinitely glad for that as well. All in all, this story has been a huge success for me and I can't thank you all enough. I consider myself very lucky to have all of you as my readers.

Love,
Grace (and Mari :D)

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