1 – Rosen

Visiting Dad always brings me peace. For a little while, I'm not the head soldier of the Corsetti family, but simply a son. A regular person dropping by to see a family member.

The black, rusted, beat-up Jeep parked in the driveway confirms he's home, so I knock on the front door. I hadn't mentioned I'd be coming by, in case I got called away last minute.

Feet shuffle on the other side almost immediately, and the door I've walked through countless times growing up, swings open, revealing my father. His outfit of choice, a colourful wool cardigan, sweats, and slippers, always throws me, considering growing up, he was almost always dressed in clothing mirroring my own—all black and tactile.

"Rosen!" he exclaims. "My boy, how are you?" His arms come up to hug me, which I return, using the moment to check the strength of his aging body.

Dad retired a couple years ago, around the time Nico was made the underboss of the Corsetti family. After serving Lorenzo, Nico's father, for so long, being in a highly-trusted position, the doctor said he'd be struggling to keep up with the demands of the Corsetti lifestyle if he kept going. So Lorenzo authorized an early retirement with a full pension in Dad's name.

Dad releases me and backs into the house, waving me forward. After a quick, habitual scan of the quiet Outremont neighbourhood, checking for anything amiss, I shut the door, kick off my shoes, and follow him into the living room.

I drop onto the faded blue couch along one wall, examining the moderately-sized living room. Dad hasn't changed much in this place from how Mom had it before she died a few years ago. Breast cancer took her from us much too soon. Dad's determined to keep the environment the same, which means a house so tidy, it's like living in a museum.

"It's been a few weeks since you last visited," Dad comments, lifting a mug up from the table beside him. "How's the Corsettis been?"

"Well—" I grimace, thinking about the whirlwind of drama that fell upon Nico's shoulders in such a short amount of time. First, his father demanding he find a fiancée worthy of the Corsetti name, and then our enemy's stepdaughter, Della, trying to lure him to his death, who, despite everything, will soon be his wife. His younger sister is also coming home in a few days for the first time since being sent away when she was six-years-old. "That's basically why I'm here. It might be a while until I can visit again."

"Nico sending you away on a job?"

"Not away. I'll be in the city. They're bringing Aurora home and have asked me to be her personal bodyguard until her engagement in the coming months."

Over his mug, Dad's brows rise. "That's huge, Rosen. I'm proud of you."

Of course, he is. Dad's entire life has been about protecting the Corsettis. In hindsight, I have no idea how Mom managed it.

"That poor girl," Dad muses. "I mean, that entire situation was a lot on the family. First with Hawke's kidnapping and—" He stops, cutting himself off from detailing the abuse Nico's older brother experienced. "And then him leaving. As a father, I can understand Lorenzo and Caterina's fears about wanting to keep Aurora safe, but also," his expression pinches, as though in physical pain for disagreeing with the family he holds in such high regard, "forgetting your child in an entire other province is a bit much. Even for me."

At least we agree on that point. Even Nico does, which is why the moment he became underboss, he was determined to bring her home.

Fifteen years ago, Aurora Corsetti, who was six at the time, was sent to a private boarding school at a convent after Nico's oldest brother, Hawke, was kidnapped and raped by men who wanted to bring the Corsettis to their knees. When her parents sent her away, they were determined to hide her from the world, but she's never returned. Now, she's a twenty-year-old woman, still stuck at the school, two years after graduating.

I hardly remember her, barely interacted with her back then because my time was spent learning how to fight. Being around Nico and Rafael's age, and with Dad's role as Caterina's personal guard, I grew up with the Corsettis knowing one day I'd be inducted as a soldier as well. When Nico and Rafael trained, as well as Hawke before he left, I trained with them. In a way, it helped me become a better soldier; I'll not only die for them because of the oaths I have taken, but also because they're genuine friends to me.

"It's gonna be a long year," I murmur, blowing out a breath. Leaning back into the couch's cushion, I position an arm across the back and kick up one leg over the other, attempting to relax the gnawing making my muscles tight.

"It's an honour," Dad counters. "You know, during those dark days when Lorenzo stole Caterina away from her wedding, I was the soldier they had guard her door to ensure she didn't go anywhere. Lorenzo trusted me with her, and Nico feels the same about you with his sister. This is a good thing."

"Except, it's coming at an inconvenient time. Something's happening in the family." I don't say what because, with Dad's retirement, he's no longer privy to this information. "I should be working on that situation instead of babysitting." My tone turns harsher as I attempt to tamp down the growing frustrations expanding in my chest.

Dad tilts his head to the side. "Is that what you see it as? Look at it as a respected position, son. It's a sign of ultimate trust. Anyone could run around with a gun and get whoever's threatening the family, but only *you* can protect Aurora."

I should have known how this conversation would go. He's not wrong, I guess, if I wanted to look at it like that, but still…I throw a grunt into the silent air in response. "I guess. But you know me; I'd rather be in the field than following her on shopping trips."

Since Nico gave me the order a few weeks ago, it's all I've been considering. The girl grew up secluded from the outside world, with only younger children and damn nuns as her company. She's bound to be the meekest, most boring woman now, only interested in what this life has to offer her. Which means being around her will prove to be a very mind-numbing time.

Dad shrugs, showing no sympathy. "Well, this was your order. Besides, the months will pass quickly. Visit when you can, but don't stress yourself out trying to come here. I understand your job and what it requires. Aurora Corsetti comes before me." He pauses before adding, "Besides, think about *her* and what this means. She'll be brought back to a life she barely knows, let alone understands. Don't be an ass to the poor girl and make her life more miserable. You'll be the one constant around her, so play nice."

Again, Dad with his great advice, except he's forgotten one major thing: my role doesn't demand emotional support. Aurora Corsetti will have to search inside her family for that.

I'm guarding her. Nothing more.

"Be sure to visit Poppy in the hospital before you start this task," Dad suggests. "I'm sure they'd appreciate a visit from you."

"They're next on my list. Enough of all that. How have you been, Dad?"

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After visiting my sister and nephew, I return to the Corsetti mansion, heading straight to Nico's office, instead of down to my room. He's in his usual place behind his desk, with Rafael reclining in one of the two chairs across from him.

"How's your dad?" Rafael asks the moment I shut the door.

"Good." I drop into the free chair, focusing on Nico. "You wanted to see me."

Nico leans back, nodding slowly, the look of a man who has a lot going on. "I have the jet scheduled for takeoff at nine in the morning tomorrow. You'll fly to Toronto, pick her up from the convent, and then return to the jet right away. By mid-afternoon, you'll both be home."

I give Nico the nod of agreement he's looking for while my heart burns with empathy for the Corsetti princess. After speaking with Dad, my annoyance over the task hasn't lessened, but I suppose I understand why I was chosen for this job.

There's a lot of changes coming to Aurora's life very soon, and mine as well. All my focus will be on a single individual. My other tasks are secondary to keeping her safe. I'm not even sure how to act around her.

Most of my time is spent around Nico and Rafael, and the other men, where it's easy to be myself, but Aurora might require something else.

"Della had the idea of moving up our engagement party and wedding," Nico continues, "to get Aurora used to us quicker. Rather than having a welcome-back party with all the attention on her, Aurora might feel more comfortable sharing it. So she'll be re-introduced to society then."

Days ago, he became engaged to Della Lambert, Stefano De Falco's stepdaughter and the woman who was sent to infiltrate Nico's life. She managed to almost win, but stole his heart in the process, the same he did to her. She was forgiven when revealing the purpose behind her actions—protecting her younger sister, Ariella. I won't admit it, but I'm a bit afraid of a woman with so much ability within her small frame.

"That all sounds like it'll go south, Nic, if I'm being honest. You really think Aurora will enjoy being thrown into the thick of things?" Rafael asks, skeptical.

"And," Nico adds, completely ignoring his brother, "the Rossis are also invited to the wedding. Rossi and Aurora will not be engaged for many more months, but this is a time for them to meet."

Erico Rossi, Underboss of the New York *Famiglia* is a smart alliance for Nico to make. They're a ruthless crime family I can't help but admire from afar. Aurora will want for nothing by his side. Besides, the quicker this engagement happens, the sooner my babysitting duty will end.

A strange noise comes from Rafael's throat before he speaks. "Day one of her being home and she'll already despise you. You're asking for bloodshed at this point."

Nico's eyes shift from me to his younger brother, hardening in a cold look of contempt. "She'll learn. Mother and Father made a mistake by sending her away, considering Hawke's assailants had been dealt with at the time. She's been there too long, and it's time for her to claim her place."

All I see is the picture Nico showed me the other month when he first gave me this task. Amidst the noisy club, that picture captured the entirety of my focus. The way she was looking dismissively off to the side, like she couldn't be bothered to glance at the camera, the wind catching her blonde curls and waving them around, even in the still image.

Rafael laughs, leaning over, and sending a slap to my forearm. "Fuck, do I ever pity you, Rosen. Remember, she's a Corsetti. Raised apart from us or not, our stubborn-ass blood runs through her veins. She'll be interesting on the trip home."

"She knows what's expected of her," Nico cuts in. "She'll be fine."

Not that I'd admit it, but I side with Rafael in this. No person would be "fine" with being raised away from her true life and family, dragged home by a guard, and then shoved back into the life she was forced to leave, expected to be pleasant during it all. Not that I want to deal with her attitude, but I'd get why she'd have one if she did.

I also wonder if she's aware of her upcoming realities. Rossi isn't a *bad* man necessarily; I haven't heard of him abusing women or anything of the sort, but he is a Made Man, and the New York mafia is known to be more violent. He's the best of the worst, if anything.

"I'll handle it," I reassure them both—as well as myself. In the end, my empathy toward her is secondary to the vows I made to her family. I'll get her home, even if I must hogtie her to do so.

"Thank you, Rosen," Nico says, pushing himself further into his leather desk chair with the deep sigh of a man who carries too much weight on his shoulders.

Rafael shakes his head at his brother. "Dude, you're insane to be moving these celebrations up. Even you can't pull off the last-minute planning they'll require. Money won't make this happen, sorry to inform you."

Nico lifts his chin a fraction. "A wedding planner's coming here tomorrow. Mother, Della, and Ariella will be meeting with her. But that's beside the point because there's more." He glances at me for a long, bated second, and then his brother. "Della insisted I reach out to Hawke and invite him to the wedding…so I did."

"Shit!" Rafael and I both curse at the same time. Rafael slides to the end of his chair, his hands tightly gripping the edges of his seat. Of everyone, he was the one who took Hawke leaving the hardest.

"He's agreed to come."

What?

"What?" Rafael verbalizes, this time lifting to his feet. He almost falls forward, his hands landing on the desk's surface as he leans toward his brother. "Nic, you better not be fuckin' with me. This isn't a joke."

Without breaking eye contact, Nico reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a folded-up piece of paper. "I wouldn't joke about something like this." He slides the sheet of paper toward us, gesturing for Rafael to take it. "He had very clear stipulations, which is where you," his eyes flick to me, "come in. We do this right; we might get *both* our siblings back. Him and Aurora."

I reach for the paper that Rafael hands me after he's done reading over it and skim Hawke's response, answering the question I was about to ask.

"Protect his girlfriend." I toss the sheet back onto the desk in front of me. "Easy."

"He's killed for her, remember. He's made it known; he'll do it again if he feels he must. Rosen, you know I want you there as a guest. Job title or not, you're one of us. I don't want you working the same way everyone else will be, but watch out for Aurora, and Hawke and his girlfriend. Keep people away from them. If Hawke's coming here, we play by *his* rules. No one says shit to them, whether it be a cousin, my father, or the fucking staff, we shut it down."

In all my years of working here, Nico never bows down to others. The lengths he's going to ensure Hawke will not regret visiting speaks volumes as to what this means to him.

I nod. "Done, Nico."

“I can’t…” Nico trails off, speaking lower than before, with less force. He slumps back in his seat and his arms drop, limply, onto his armrests. “We can’t lose this opportunity. This is a miracle I never believed we’d get.” He focuses on Rafael, who I’m not sure has blinked since reading the letter. “When he asked for help, it was different. But the expression he had when telling me goodbye said everything. He’s determined to *not* be us.”

While I don’t have as large of a stake in Hawke’s visit as Nico and Rafael, once I trained alongside him, and the idea of seeing him again is exciting. Last I knew him, he was a scrawny kid who threw skillful punches.

“Are you telling Aurora about Hawke?” Rafael asks. “Personally, I don’t think we should shock her at the ceremony when he’s there. She’ll have enough to deal with.”

Nico slowly nods as his brother makes his point. “No, yeah, maybe. I don’t know. That’s a big thing to wrap her mind around.”

“Our parents?”

Nico points to the letter. “You read what he wrote. Hawke’s adamant I don’t inform them. I think he hopes to slip in and out and not even alert them to his arrival. But, you know what? We’re respecting that request because if he can get away without our parents knowing they’re here, good. It’ll avoid a fucking scene—because they’ll cause certainly one—and at the end of the day, the wedding is for Della and me. I won’t take that from her, so for the sake of everyone’s sanity, no, I’m not telling them.”

If Lorenzo and Caterina were to ever find out we all kept this from them, none of us would be safe. Heads would roll. Lorenzo Corsetti is ruthless, right from the moment his own father was killed, and he kidnapped Caterina in response. If he were to learn of Hawke being there, I can’t even imagine his reaction.

“It sounds like these next few weeks will be a shitshow,” Rafael breaks the heaviness lingering in the room, “between the wedding and all that’s involved, Aurora’s re-arrival, Hawke’s appearance…Fuck, bro. You can’t do simple.”

“Let’s not forget De Falco,” I comment, adding the final straw to that messy pile of hay he’s listed out. “No idea where he is at this moment, and with so much happening, he’s bound to use this opportunity.”

“To get farther away or to attack is the question,” Rafael finishes.

Silently, Nico grabs his glass and then his brother’s, and stands, heading for the small bar he keeps on the far side of his office. He uncorks the glass bottle of bourbon and refills the two glasses before adding a third to the mix. Then he returns to distribute them before retaking his chair.

“No, I don’t do simple,” he comments on his brother’s previous statement. “I don’t because I know this family lives by the oaths we take. Here’s to us making it through the next few weeks.”

He tosses back his drink, and I do the same, reflecting on the meaning behind that oath.

Unisciti a leale. Muori leale

Join loyal. Die loyal.