

Steam drifted lazily across the surface of the water.

Beyond the enormous windows, the New Zealand evening had settled over the landscape in layers of deepening blue. Soft light reflected against polished stone. Somewhere beyond the treatment rooms, water moved quietly over rock.

Nothing screamed.

Nothing exploded.

No one was bleeding.

Orphius Marius considered this evidence of excellent management.

He reclined against the edge of the private thermal pool, arms stretched comfortably along the stone behind him. His eyes were closed.

Sera sat opposite him.

She had been watching him for almost thirty seconds.

“You’re pleased with yourself.”

Orphius opened one eye.

“Immensely.”

“I noticed.”

“I selected an establishment possessing excellent reviews, private facilities, competent staff, spectacular scenery and absolutely no expectation that either of us pretend sitting in mud constitutes spiritual enlightenment.”

Sera looked down at the mineral water surrounding them.

“We are sitting in water.”

“Expensive water.”

“That makes it different?”

“Profoundly.”

Sera smiled.

Orphius closed his eye again.

“You like it.”

“I do.”

“Then my work here is complete.”

“No, your work here was making a reservation.”

“A task I performed magnificently.”

“There he is.”

Orphius smiled.

This had been promised.

Not the spa specifically.

The time.

An evening in which wrestling did not consume every available minute simply because Orphius had convinced himself that thinking about wrestling counted as recreation.

He remembered promises.

More importantly, he remembered details.

Sera liked warmth.

Quiet.

Places where nobody expected anything from her.

She preferred privacy to spectacle and hated treatments involving strangers touching her face.

So there had been no facial.

There had, however, been a massage.

Orphius had booked that too.

He hadn't mentioned remembering.

He didn't need applause for paying attention.

Mostly.

“You’re doing it again.”

His eyes opened.

“Doing what?”

“Thinking.”

“I think constantly.”

“You’re thinking about Ethan.”

Orphius stared at her.

“That is an outrageous accusation.”

“You've been tapping your finger against the stone every time you disappear into your head.”

Orphius looked towards his right hand.

His index finger stopped.

Sera smiled.

“Four times.”

“That proves nothing.”

“Five now.”

Orphius immediately removed his hand from the edge.

“I dislike how observant you are.”

“No, you don't.”

“No.”

He didn't.

That was rather the point.

Orphius shifted forward.

“Fun House of Horrors.”

“There it is.”

“A remarkably dramatic name.”

“You're wrestling in it.”

“I remain aware.”

“You asked if the referee would be wearing a ballerina outfit.”

“I maintain that would improve proceedings enormously.”

“And mandatory boring breaks?”

“For athlete welfare.”

“Clowns?”

“Obvious.”

Sera laughed.

Orphius watched her for a moment.

Then his expression changed.

Not dramatically.

The smile simply disappeared.

“A room full of traps. Weapons. Doors. Corners. Things concealed deliberately from both competitors. Psychological games designed to make rational preparation supposedly impossible.”

“Supposedly?”

“That's the trick.”

Orphius stood.

Water rolled from his shoulders as he stepped from the pool and reached for a robe.

“People hear chaos and assume absence of structure.”

Sera followed him with her eyes.

“They hear unpredictable and decide preparation is futile. As though the inability to know precisely what waits behind a door means there is nothing useful to know at all.”

He pulled the robe around himself.

“That is nonsense.”

Sera tilted her head. “Because?”

“Because uncertainty is information.”

That earned him a look.

“Yes, I know how insufferable that sounded.”

“I wasn't going to say anything.”

“You were.”

“I was.”

Orphius tied the robe.

“I don't need to know what's behind every door. I need to know what Ethan Murphy does when neither of us knows.”

Silence.

There it was.

The actual preparation.

“Does he hesitate?”

Orphius began walking slowly around the pool.

“Does he charge forward? Does he test something first? Does he become more aggressive when frightened? More cautious when hurt? When something unexpected happens, does Ethan protect himself or pursue me?”

His fingers brushed absently across the back of an empty chair.

“A conventional match gives us familiar questions.”

He looked towards Sera.

“Distance. Position. Pace. Endurance. Technique.”

Then towards the darkened windows.

“The Fun House simply asks different ones.”

Sera rose from the water.

“And you think you have the answers.”

“No.”

That stopped her.

Orphius glanced back.

“I think I can find them faster.”

Sera stepped from the pool and reached for her own robe.

“That sounded almost humble.”

“Don't ruin the evening.”

“There he is again.”

Orphius waited while she tied the robe.

Then, without thinking, adjusted the collar where it had folded underneath itself.

Sera looked at his hand.

Orphius stopped.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You're smiling.”

“You pay attention.”

“Of course I pay attention.”

“To everything?”

Orphius looked at her.

The question remained between them.

Eventually he smiled.

“No.”

He smoothed the collar once.

“To things that matter.”

They walked.

The corridor beyond the private pool was quiet. Warm lights were recessed into timber walls. A member of staff passed them, glanced twice at Orphius, then finally surrendered to curiosity.

“Excuse me.”

Orphius stopped.

The young man hesitated. “You're the wrestler, aren't you?”

“Statistically there are several.”

Sera sighed.

“The one wrestling in that horror thing.”

“Ah. Yes. The horror thing.”

“You don't look nervous.”

Orphius considered him.

“Should I?”

“I saw what they're saying about the match.”

“And?”

“Sounds insane.”

“Most things do when advertised properly.”

The man laughed uncertainly.

“So you're not worried about what might be in there?”

Orphius looked towards Sera.

Sera already knew.

He turned back.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because whatever AWS has built inside that Fun House...”

Orphius paused.

“...has had considerably less time to become unpleasant than my mind has.”

Sera stared at him.

The staff member blinked.

“That sounded better in your head, didn't it?” Sera asked.

“Everything sounds better in my head.”

“That's probably the problem.”

Orphius nodded politely to the thoroughly confused local.

“Enjoy your evening.”

“You too?”

“I intend to.”

They continued down the corridor.

Sera waited until they were out of earshot.

“You frightened him.”

“He approached me.”

“He asked if you were nervous.”

“And now he knows.”

“You could have said no.”

“I did.”

“With several unnecessary steps.”

“Necessary is an oppressive concept.”

“That sounds like something Liang would say.”

“Please never tell her.”

Sera laughed again.

Orphius opened the door ahead of her.

Outside, the air was cooler.

The distant sound of the sea replaced the quiet trickle of spa water.

For several moments neither spoke.

Then Sera asked, “What happens if Ethan adapts faster?”

Orphius stopped.

Good question.

He didn't answer immediately.

That was why Sera mattered.

She did not ask him questions designed to make him sound clever.

She asked the ones that required him to be.

“Then I change the game.”

Sera folded her arms.

“How?”

“I stop trying to solve the room.”

Orphius looked towards the darkness beyond the path.

“And make Ethan solve me.”

His voice had lost its amusement.

“That’s the mistake people make with environments like this. They become so concerned with surviving whatever AWS has constructed that they forget there is another human being inside it.”

A beat.

“The Fun House isn’t my opponent.”

“Ethan is.”

“Exactly.”

Orphius turned towards her.

“Every trap matters only because of where Ethan is when it activates. Every weapon matters only because one of us can reach it. Every corridor matters because it limits movement. Every surprise matters because I get to watch his reaction.”

He tapped his temple.

“The room supplies variables.”

A faint smile.

“I supply the problem.”

Sera shook her head.

“There goes the humility.”

“It was exhausting.”

They started walking again.

“The tournament has been presented as a shortcut.”

Orphius’s voice softened.

“It isn’t.”

“No?”

“No. Shortcuts avoid difficult roads. Ethan and I have already walked the bloody thing.”

He looked ahead.

“Everyone else is gone.”

“Just you two.”

“Just us.”

For once, Orphius didn't embellish it.

There was no need.

“One match between Ethan Murphy and the AWS Pinnacle Heavyweight Championship.”

Sera corrected him.

“One opportunity.”

Orphius glanced sideways.

“Yes.”

“You haven't won the championship yet.”

“No.”

“You haven't even won the shot.”

“No.”

“And Ethan isn't going to give it to you.”

Orphius smiled.

“God, you're attractive when you're inconvenient.”

“I know.”

He stopped.

Sera took another step before realizing.

She turned.

Orphius was looking at her with an expression that was irritatingly pleased.

“What?”

“You said you know.”

“I've spent enough time around you.”

“My confidence is contagious.”

“Your confidence is a communicable disease.”

“Still counts.”

Sera returned to him.

Orphius offered his hand.

She looked at it.

Then took it.

No demand.

No assumption.

A choice.

His fingers closed around hers.

“You know what I like about games, Sera?”

“That you think you're better at them than everyone else?”

“I am better at them than everyone else.”

“Of course.”

“But that's not it.”

They resumed walking.

“Games reveal priorities.”

His thumb moved once across her hand.

“Give someone limited information, limited time and consequences for choosing badly...”

His eyes remained forward.

“...and eventually they tell you exactly what matters to them.”

The arrogance remained.

It always would.

“But the best players don't waste time pretending they control the board.”

Orphius looked towards the dark New Zealand horizon.

“They watch.”

“They listen.”

“They remember.”

His gaze briefly shifted towards Sera.

“And when the board changes...”

A smile.

“...they change with it.”

Sera squeezed his hand.

“So that's your grand strategy?”

“No.”

“No?”

“That was the romantic explanation.”

“Oh God.”

“The actual strategy involves considerably more violence.”

“There he is.”

“Ethan Murphy has survived the tournament because he's very good.”

No joke followed.

“He belongs in the final.”

Orphius let that acknowledgement breathe.

“And that's precisely why I'm paying attention.”

The sea moved somewhere beyond them.

“The Fun House can hide its weapons.”

“It can hide its traps.”

“It can turn the lights out.”

“It can change the rules.”

Orphius stopped once more.

“But it cannot make Ethan Murphy unknowable.”

A pause.

“And it cannot make me stop learning.”

He looked at Sera.

“Now.”

His smile returned.

“We had dinner promised.”

“We did.”

“And I have spent several minutes discussing another man during our date.”

“Several?”

“Don't be pedantic.”

“I learned from you.”

“Tragic.”

She tugged him forward by the hand.

“Come on, Endgame.”

Orphius followed.

“For the record, that nickname feels particularly appropriate this week.”

“I knew you were going to say that.”

Orphius's smile widened.

“See?”

He followed her into the evening.

“You've been paying attention too.”