



SERENADING TEMPEST

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“Dogs and philosophers do the greatest good and get the fewest rewards.”
— Diogenes of Sinope

Chapter 1

Music pulses through Barcade, a Selini private arcade lounge, heavy bass vibrating beneath neon lights and flashing screens. Addictive gambling machines line the walls in endless rows, buttons blinking, bells chiming, digital coins rattling through speakers in hypnotic bursts. Old men with curling chest hair poking through the top half of button-down bowling shirts stretched over burgeoning bellies crowd the machines shoulder to shoulder, cigarette smoke curling thick through the room as they drink rum and Coke and stare glassy-eyed at the flashing lights. Moon-touched gamblers, thrill addicts, degenerates chasing luck they never seem to catch. Bodies press in close, laughter too loud, money moving too fast.

Abacus, the owner, one of the oldest Selini to come to the New World, opened the bar and arcade in 1950, at the height of the suburban boom in the outer New York City borough. The place was a time capsule, except for a few modern arcade games.

I stand beside Larissa, scanning the room, posture loose but ready. Something in the music snags my attention. A note threads too cleanly through the bass line, too

precise to be accidental. It doesn't belong to the music. It feels intentional. Like it's reaching for me.

I go still for half a second, listening harder. The sound slips away just as quickly as I catch it. Probably nothing. I push it aside and refocus on the job. That's why I'm here. Tonight, I'm undercover. Tempest Geryon, GBI agent and descendant of Medusa, I blend in among the other Genesis currently standing in an illegal betting hall on the outskirts of Staten Island, pretending not to notice half the crimes happening in plain sight while I wait for someone stupid enough to slip up. Dressed in couture skank, patent leather stiletto heels, a little black cocktail dress, and a hot pink faux fur shrug to cover my burgeoning chest. My snakes nest in my curly hair, extra teased with an absurd amount of mousse.

Beside me, Larissa scans the room with the calm patience of someone deciding which wall she's about to throw a body through. She sticks out like a sore thumb, a towering giantess among the short, fat, balding Selini men with their patchy goat legs, nicotine-stained teeth, and sweat-darkened shirts. They keep wandering over to hit on her anyway. Larissa ignores most of them or flicks them away like flies.

One geezer clicks his teeth at her and gives her a wink. "Love a leggy broad with a bad-ass attitude," he says, sloshing his drink onto the floor. "I'll be throwing chips on craps if you're interested in being my lady luck tonight."

Larissa visibly shudders.

I bite back a smile. Can't blame the guy for trying. Larissa looks painfully out of place in the club. An earth-born Giantess built like a warrior queen, stuffed into nightclub

clothes she clearly hates. Tonight, she's wearing a long platinum blonde wig that falls in soft waves down her back, the pale hair making her dark brown skin and sharp amber eyes stand out even more. Red lipstick. Thick fake lashes. A skin-tight black mini skirt that keeps riding up every time she moves.

"Stupid outfit." Larissa yanks the hem of her skirt down again. It does absolutely nothing to hide her ample backside or endless legs, which only seems to encourage the old Selini men circling her like starving wolves at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

I take a sip of my drink. "You look hot."

"I practically feel naked." Larissa glares at me beneath her platinum wig and fake lashes. "Some of us still believe in dignity."

"Some of us are single and having fun." I plaster a fake smile across my face and wink at a passing patron.

"One of us," she mutters, swatting away another drunk Selini trying to kiss her hand, "is about three seconds away from blowing her cover."

"Chill. We blend in well enough." Two non-human women drinking at a private adult arcade packed with Selini gamblers feeding coins and cash into flashing machines, cigarettes burning between their fingers as they chase another hit of luck they'll never catch.

Moon-touched addicts. Men who worship chance, bad odds, and self-destruction. The kind of people who would sell their own mother for one more spin of the wheel.

At the betting tables, the real story reveals itself. Illegal wagers. High stakes. Not just on arcade games. Exotic creatures, whispered deals, talk of underground circuits. I catch bits and pieces of conversation.

“Centaur.”

“Racing.”

“One million.”

This is bigger than a neighborhood hustle. I lean in, gathering what I can, filing away faces, voices, patterns, but the atmosphere shifts before I can go deeper.

The front doors slam open, and a Selini stumbles in red-faced and furious, cigarette dangling from his lips, stained polo stretched tight over his gut. Unlike the greasy gamblers glued to the machines, this one still has enough fight left in him to be dangerous. “You cheating bastard!” he screams across the lounge.

Abacus barely looks up from behind the counter. Heavy gold chains glint against his open silk shirt as he lazily sips his drink.

“Not my fault you suck at cards,” he says.

A few men laugh.

The Selini slams both fists onto a blackjack table, sending chips flying. “Your machines are rigged!”

“No, Kostas,” Abacus replies calmly. “You’re just addicted.”

More laughter.

The man shakes harder now, humiliation turning ugly. “Those debts ain’t real!”

“They got real when you signed the ledger.”

Kostas snaps, voice cracking. “Stay away from my wife.”

That gets the room’s attention.

Abacus leans back against the register, completely unbothered. “Maria came to me.”

Kostas freezes.

“She wanted your debt cleared,” Abacus continues with a shrug. “Everybody’s gotta contribute.”

My stomach tightens. Even Larissa stops tugging at her skirt.

Kostas lets out a raw scream and flips the blackjack table over.

Abacus calmly reaches beneath the counter and pulls a gun.

Chaos explodes.

People scatter. Chairs overturn. Glass shatters across the floor.

Larissa moves first, steady and controlled, pushing through the panic. “GBI! Put the weapon down!”

My snakes stir, lifting from my curls with low, warning hisses. Heat builds behind my eyes, familiar and dangerous. One look, one slip, and this ends in statues. I hold it back.

We move in sync, years of partnership guiding every step.

Larissa moves first. She grabs his wrist and slams it into the counter hard enough for the gun to fire into the ceiling. Plaster rains down. Before he can react, she twists the weapon free and drives him face-first onto the bar with brute precision.

“Done?” she asks.

Abacus immediately throws his hands up. Smart man. No screaming. No fighting. He knows when he's outmatched.

The scorned husband is another story. He comes at me wild, flipping chairs and throwing punches with all the sloppy rage of a man who's lost everything. I duck one swing, drive my elbow into his ribs, then catch his wrist before he can smash a bottle across my head.

He snarls, goat teeth bared.

I slam him into a slot machine hard enough for bells and coins to explode around us.

Still, Kostas gets back up, ready to keep fighting. I widen my stance and square up, but I wobble unsteadily in my ridiculously high heels.

"Fuck this." I reach down and pluck them off. Steady on the balls of my bare feet, I hold the stilettos in my hands like a weapon and swing on the Selini. He ducks and weaves. He miscalculated, and I swung the heel into the side of his ribcage and the other side of his head. He staggers back and falls backward, unconscious. I quickly chuck the shoes and reach into my purse and pull out a pair of handcuffs.

The room falls into a stunned silence. The pinging of the machines and the music fill the void.

I flip him over, and cuffs snap into place. I read him his Miranda rights. He slowly comes back to consciousness.

Dazed and bleeding, Kostas slumps against the flashing slot machine. He starts laughing, but there's nothing funny about the sound. Tears streak through the sweat on his face.

But beneath the ringing in my ears and the fading echo of the fight, I catch it again. That same note. Faint. Distant. Calling.

Then it's gone.

Just like that.

"You hear it too, don't you?" he asks softly. I freeze.

For a second, I thought he was talking about the faint music.

"That little voice telling you maybe this time will be different."

His eyes drift toward the glowing machines lining the walls. "Starts off sweet. Makes you feel chosen." He swallows hard. "Then you spend your whole life chasing it while it slowly ruins you."

I blink, jaw tightening, and shove it out of my mind. "Let's wrap it up," I say, like nothing happened.

Larissa hauls the owner to his feet. Abacus wipes the trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth and fixes his ruined silk shirt like he's more offended by the mess than the gunfight. He looks over at the crying gambler and snorts.

"Pathetic," Abacus mutters. "Man had everything worth keeping and still threw it away chasing a feeling."

"Shut up, Old man! I'm going to kill you for touching my woman!" Kostas struggles against his restraints.

I hold him in place. He looks surprised at my strength. As most do, I'm a petite woman, but my gorgon bloodline gives me a bit of an edge. I clamp down on his shoulder and hold him in place.

"I would never disrespect her the way you do." Abacus spits back. "She paid off half your debt in cash, you twisted beast."

Kostas lowers his head in shame.

"Maria loves you," Abacus says coldly. "But you keep choosing the machines over her. Cheap thrills over something real." He gestures toward the blinking rows of slots. "Now look at you."

The room goes quiet except for the constant chiming of the machines.

Abacus is talking about gambling. About addiction. About a man too weak to walk away from the rush of wanting something just out of reach.

Still, the words settle strangely beneath my skin.

Cheap thrills over something real.

For a brief second, I think about warm seawater wrapping around my ankles. About a voice echoing through my blood. About rough mortal hands brushing mine across a bar counter hard enough to make my breath catch.

The feeling twists sharp in my chest before I shove it down.

Because maybe the worst thing a person can lose isn't money.

Maybe it's the one person who loved them enough to stay while they destroyed everything else.