

In chapter 1, Jolie completes her first mission for the Underlight that she planned and executed herself. It's a short chapter with action and some new information on Ananke. But I know what y'all REALLY want to see is the return of Hawk. So I'm posting Chapter 2 instead.

Chapter 2

A cry of “Churros!” silenced the laughter behind the abandoned electric company where Pussy Will-Oh! performed. They had a few minutes before the ordeal of costuming needed to start, so the eight ladies and two gentlemen of the troupe lounged around the loading dock in the light of an old flood lamp, some smoking, most just chatting.

With squeals of joy, dancers swarmed the new arrival to collect cinnamon pastries. Jolie stayed on the railing, kicking her high heels against the metal and letting the cool night air slip over her skin. A package was tossed her way, and she caught it.

“Gluten-free. Didn’t think I’d forget ya, did ya?”

Jolie grinned and opened the Tupperware to find four sugar- and cinnamon-dusted rolls made just for her. “You kick ass.”

“I know.” Madam Mercy—real name, Mercedes Salvador—winked. “But now you have to invite me to your birthday party next week. You are having a party, right?”

Jolie scrunched her forehead as she added up days. “Holy shit. Next week is my birthday. Twenty-five. Does hitting a quarter century make me old?”

She ducked a churro and laughed as several of the dancers—all of whom were older than her—grumbled in protest.

She’d known the day was coming up, but the last few months had flown by. She munched thoughtfully on a pastry, and the cinnamon, her favorite spice, had just the right amount of bite. “Okay. Party at my place. All of you are invited.” She waved the Pyrex. “Mercy, bring me churros wrapped in a bow.” Her first birthday in Austin, and she had a party full of people to invite and no pressure to include anyone from her father’s address book. The thought made her happy. Hopefully Hawk would be out of the hospital and well enough to attend, too.

Hmm...hopefully Hawk would be *willing* to attend. He didn’t like public events, which she understood, but she liked to think he’d make an exception for her birthday. It wasn’t like anyone she’d invite would call the cops on him, so it was only his self-consciousness that would stop him from attending. Hawk had been in a fire in Afghanistan, which had taken his leg and left burn scars on the rest of him. Jolie liked to think of herself as someone who didn’t judge people based on appearance, but at first she’d had a hard time seeing past the way the scarring drew a never-ending labyrinth on his skin, or the way dozens of skin grafts had made a patchwork of flesh tones that didn’t match up, or how the cartilage in his face had melted, leaving the impression that a kid had taken a blow torch to a wax sculpture.

Plus, Hawk had covered himself in tattoos and piercings. She was pretty sure it had been his way of reclaiming his skin. Many of the tats were beautiful—she particularly loved the phoenix spreading its wings across the back of his bald skull—but all the metal and ink did give his scarring a more menacing aspect.

Honestly, she’d been scared shitless the first time she saw him.

But then they’d worked together, and his sense of humor and generosity had helped her notice what pretty eyes he had. Working out with him had helped her realize what a perfectly shaped ass he had. She couldn’t wait to get her fingers on that. Somewhere along the way she’d gone from frightened to fascinated. Hawk was totally unique, and she itched to explore every bit

of him.

Hauk, however, knew he wiggled people out when they first saw him. He hated meeting new people and despised crowds—not that she blamed him. So was it fair of her to expect him to go to her birthday party?

And was she okay dating somebody who wouldn't go anywhere in public with her?

Jolie shook her head to clear it. No sense borrowing trouble, right? They'd deal with that when it became a problem.

The door opened behind her. She turned, expecting to see Catrina wagging a finger at her “girls” and demanding they get their asses inside.

Instead she found a knife pointing at her.

Four men in ominous black exited backstage onto the loading dock and spread out amongst the company. Everyone went silent. Mercy, the only other dancer who was also in the Underlight, caught Jolie's eye and glanced at her wrist.

Jolie grimaced. Ananke created the Hands of Atropos with a spell that forced them to be obedient and loyal. The spell was sealed by a magically inked tattoo Atropos usually wore on their wrist. These weren't any old thugs.

They'd gotten pretty damn bold, coming all this way for her evening's ill-gotten goods, which were, unfortunately, still in her trunk.

Jolie quirked an eyebrow, faking calm. “Hey, boys. What can I do for ya?”

He twisted the knife, slicing the air like a figure eight in front of her throat. “You know what we're here for, Jolie. Let's make this easy and hand it over. Nobody's gotta get hurt.”

Great, a verbal one. Most guys came out of Ananke's spell practically mindless, but every now and then someone with a particularly strong will would still be able to cop attitude to anyone not in Ananke. They were smarter than average, usually the ringleader of a gang of Atropos, and real pains in the ass.

But she didn't show her dismay. “Ooh, I'm famous. I'm sorry, but I don't know your name—”

He grabbed her arm and yanked her forward, painfully twisting her shoulder. With a shove he slammed her against the cement walls. Her face stung from impact, and the uneven grit of the wall dug into her cheek.

Crap, he was serious. She could hear the other dancers stirring behind her, debating their actions. She waved her free hand backwards. “Stay back, guys, I got this.” Somehow. Really. She had this.

The guy gave her a shake, pounding her bruised cheek back into the wall. “You got this, all right,” he said, his vodka breath in her face—vodka and something metallic. No, it wasn't coming just from his breath; his shirt was wet with it. “You ‘got this’ by taking me to wherever you put Grant Barnett's folder and handing it over real nice. Along with anything you took from the computer, so I'll be returning with this.” He rifled her pockets, fingers digging aggressively into her until he retrieved her phone.

“What's your name?” Jolie asked.

He leaned closer, pressing her into the sandpaper of the wall as he finished checking her pockets. “Why you wanna know?”

She shot him the nastiest smile she could. “Call me old-fashioned, but I'm gonna let my boyfriend kick your ass. It'll be a fun show. For me, anyway.”

The guy chuckled. “I heard that freak of a giant was following you around all puppy-dog-eyed. Decided to unlock those knees, eh? You must be desperate for a bodyguard to face that in

the night.”

Jolie stiffened as the protectiveness she'd always felt for Hauk rebelled against the remark. Unfortunately, kicking this asshole in the nuts was a bad idea when he already had her arm wrenched tight. She hated the assumption that a girl like her couldn't be interested in an awesome guy like Hauk just because of his looks. It was an insult to both of them. “I'm not dating him to—”

“I'm sure he'll take real good care of a pretty thing like you. If he's not dead or disabled, anyway. Last I heard, he got himself a few new scars to add to that mess he calls a face. Now, come on. We've got paperwork to return.” He hoisted her away from the wall. “You know you can hire a lot of muscle with that bank account of yours, right?”

“You underestimate the importance of strong fingers and a dexterous tongue.”

That got a laugh. “I got those, sweetheart.”

“And a moral compass.” Jolie shuffled toward the parking lot, surveying the crowd of dancers versus well-trained, overly aggressive fighters as she tried to plan her next move. She could fight a little, but staying out of trouble was her usual M.O. Right now that wasn't an option.

“Ooh, morality lessons from a stripper, her drag queen boss, her felon boyfriend and their anarchist club. I'm sure I'll learn a lot. Please, dazzle me...as you take me to the files.”

She would have to give him the file back. *Dammit*. Her first mission had gone so well, too.

“Party I'm not invited to?” a new voice rumbled across the gathering. A man stepped from the shadows. His face was hidden by a hoodie, but Jolie knew that towering profile, the raw power in those broad shoulders and the perfectly sculpted arms his baggy shirt couldn't hide.

She breathed a sigh of relief and called across the lot, “Be my guest.”

Hauk strolled to the edge of the dancers and dropped his hoodie. Blue eyes, bright as a summer sky, held hers for a breathless moment, and Jolie knew everything was going to be okay. The rest of the crowd, however, took a collective gasping hiss. Hauk's jaw clenched, but otherwise he ignored it. “I dunno, Red Hots. Three on one seems unfair. To them.”

Jolie's attacker tightened his hold. “Can you not count? There are four of us. Four on one.”

Hauk waved a hand dismissively. “Nah, I got these three.” He pointed to the crowd. “You're about to get your ass handed to you by a woman.”

Any lingering nerves dissipated. Jolie didn't have to worry about her troupe. Hauk would take care of them. Plus, his words were meant to remind her she knew how to break the hold her attacker had her in. Hauk winked, calm as he always was, and she smiled. With a twisting push, she had her wrists free and stepped into position for an arm lock.

Hauk was having a shitty day. Started in the hospital, a crap way to start any day, where he'd been attacked by a gang of these damn Atropos. Then he arrived here to check on Jolie and found her in their hands. Shitty fuckin' day.

Jolie knew the escape from that hold; they'd drilled it until it should be second nature. But if that ass so much as nicked her, Hauk was going to lose it in a murderous way. He kept Jolie in his sights as he turned to the other three goons. With the authority gained from his years as a drill sergeant he yelled, “*Down!*”

Most of the dancers dropped, clearing a path to a goon. Two strides forward, and Hauk grabbed him. Threw him over his hip.

Goon Number Two threw a punch.

Hauk dodged under and threw an elbow to his solar plexus. Rotated his fist up for a backhand to the face, and the guy's nose popped with a spray blood.

A back kick to One, already writhing on the ground, knocked the wind out of him. Knee up, and Hauk jammed it into the gut of Two. Two crumpled, and Hauk tossed him to the ground.

Jolie had her attacker on the ground. Good girl.

Hauk faced Number Three, threw his hands out and stepped forward, threatening. "You wanna pick up your friends and get out of here, or join 'em groveling in pain? Same difference to me."

Three stepped back, hands raised in a pacifying gesture.

"Then get the fuck out of here while I'm feeling generous." Hauk threw a glance at Mercy, and she started pulling dancers away from the sprawled goons, just in case they decided to do something fancy.

Hauk jogged up to Jolie.

"I asked you what your name was," she was saying.

The guy yelped, "Ric Suarez!"

"Nice thumb lock," Hauk commented with far more cool than he felt. He loved sparring with Jolie. He despised seeing her in a real fight.

"Thanks!" Jolie said brightly. Damn though, he did like to see that smile of success.

"Hauk, this is Ric Suarez. He threw me into a wall."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for the assist." She retrieved her phone from the guy's pocket then released the thumb hold.

Suarez stood up, eyes blazing like he was about to do something stupid.

So Hauk punched him.

Suarez stumbled back into the railing. His buddies had already scattered and, seeing that, Suarez turned tail and fled.

A scan to ensure they were really gone, and Hauk faced Jolie. "What happened?" A bruise had started to color across her cheekbone. He gently touched her jaw, tipping her head to give him a better view. "Did he give you that? I'm going to kill his ass." He turned to go do that.

Jolie tugged him back around. "You're out of the hospital."

"Yeah." Even with that bruise spreading down her jaw—Jesus, how hard did he throw her? Ric Suarez had better run in fucking terror next time Hauk saw him—Jolie was magnetic, grinning up at him with those gleeful green eyes. Every time she shot him that smile, he wanted to kiss every freckle on her nose and anywhere else she had them, too. He couldn't remember ever wanting a woman so much.

The anxiety he'd felt during the time they'd been apart started to close up his throat. For two weeks he'd lain in that damned hospital bed, fearing she'd change her mind, that once she had the space to think about it, she'd realize he was undereducated and over-ugly. A brilliant, talented, gloriously sexy woman like her could do so much better.

But her voice was a low purr as she said, "Yay." A hop, and her legs wrapped around his hips. He caught her, twining his arms around her waist as her wrists slid over his shoulders.

Jolie had jumped into his arms.

No hesitation, no consideration, she'd reached for him freely, as if wrapped around him was exactly where she wanted to be. Happiness lit him from the inside, relieving the tension that had increased with every beep of his heart monitor. She bit her lip and studied his wrecked face

with no hint of anything but joy, and he didn't know how she did it. Hell, he could barely look at himself in the mirror some days.

But in the end, it didn't matter how or why, just that she was here and she was happy. So he did what he'd been dying to do for two weeks. He kissed her.

Jolie squeezed him tighter as she kissed him back fiercely.

He didn't know what he'd been thinking earlier. Today was a kick-ass day.

God dang, Hauk could kiss. Jolie wasn't sure about soul mates or true love or any fairy tales like that, but she believed in chemistry, and nobody had ever made her insides sizzle and combust like Wesley Haukon. The pain in her cheek was gone. The fear was erased. Two weeks of worry for Hauk's health and safety and two weeks of loneliness without her favorite person to talk to, all of that pain vanished. Now the only thing she wanted was to curl up in Hauk's arms and feel the heat he inspired.

But she could hear the mix of "awwwws" and jeers from her troupe-mates, and she had a show to get ready for. The door to the backstage opened. Hauk pulled away to see who it was, that wariness he carried with him suddenly back. She loved the way he pulled her tighter to him and instinctively moved to place his body between her and the door.

This time, Catrina turned out to be the deep threat he protected her from. Her boss—the drag queen Ric Suarez had referred to—posed in the doorway, violet nails tapping on the frame. "Ladies and gentleman, do we have a show toni—" Her voice cut off as she flicked her gaze up and down their public display of affection. "About damn time. Everybody else inside. Jolie..." Satisfaction gleamed in Catrina's eyes and brought a smile to her shimmering lips. "Don't take too long. We need to prep your entrance. Something tells me our darling Hauk might get hard to handle should we wrap you up wrong and drop you on your head."

The crowd filtered inside, ribbing the couple as they passed until Catrina shut the door. Hauk focused back on her, and the raw need that filled his expression gave her a happy shiver. But he asked, "Do you need to get inside?"

"Pretty soon. I have a lot of makeup to apply."

"You're beautiful without it."

She grinned. "I knew I kept you around for a reason."

He loosened his hold, and she slid down his body. Not only was Hauk tall, but he was built. Every bit of him—at the moment, every single bit of him—was hard. Her feet touched the ground and she ran her hands up his stomach to his shoulders. He tensed as her fingers roved across him, almost as if he would step back. Again she was reminded that while he liked it, he wasn't used to being touched. After they'd started working out together, it had taken him a month before he would take his jacket off and let her see and interact with his bare arms.

They may have to take things a little slower than she'd been imagining.

Of course, in her imagination, she'd disobeyed orders last week and showed up at the hospital in her own version of a nurse's outfit. Jolie didn't sleep with everyone she found attractive, but once she'd decided to go for it, she saw no sense in waiting around. She'd never dated a guy who wasn't happy to hop to it the moment she made half a suggestion. If slow was what Hauk needed, though, she could do that. He'd be worth the wait.

He touched her cheek just above where it throbbed. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner."

She shrugged. "I'm glad you got here at all. I thought you were still in the hospital." She pulled out her keys. "They were after a folder I have in my trunk, if you wouldn't mind collecting it. I'll feel better with it in your hands."

He took the keys with a nod. "No problem. I'll get these back to you after the show."

"Thanks. I really should get ready. I don't want to delay curtain."

Hauk nodded, squeezed her shoulder and let her go. His feet shuffled back and forth nervously, as if he didn't know what to do with himself.

It was strange. He was always so at ease in a fight or training her to fight, places where she'd been completely out of her element until Hauk had taught her to be sure of herself.

Well then, she had a job to do. He was teaching her to be a fighter. She'd teach him to be a lover again. He'd been one before the fire had scarred him. Back then, from what she could tell, he'd been sure of himself and maybe even a ladies' man. Jolie hadn't thought much about their future; she wasn't really a future-thinking kind of girl where guys were concerned. But regardless of what that future held, Hauk deserved to have his confidence back. She could help him find it.

"I'll be thinking of you while I'm dancing," she said with a coquettish smile. "And when a burlesque dancer says that..." She winked and opened the door to the backstage.

Hauk sucked in a breath. "What are you doing after the show?"

"I had plans." She crooked her finger at him, and just as she'd hoped, he came to her. Carefully this time, she put a hand on his chest.

He watched the movement, stared at the connection. His breath heaved in and out once before his eyes found hers, a mixture of hope and hunger in them.

She curled her nails into him lightly. The tension in his muscles ratcheted up, and not from discomfort this time.

"But I could be convinced to change them." She lowered her voice to a hum. "Wesley."