

# Lifestyle Wedding

## Chapter Two

### Kallidora Rho

She was in the ocean.

Rather, that was what it felt like. It felt as though she was swimming and unable to touch the bottom beneath, gentle, foamy waves lapping endlessly at her face, the steady current insistently beating her backward into sleep. When she gathered the strength to open her eyes, the light of a dozen strange suns, cold and unfriendly, filtered through her hazy vision and left her blinking helplessly for the precious seconds before she again succumbed, slumping back and letting the warm, soft, cushioned waters support her. The utter comfort and unnatural drowsiness were almost more than she could fight.

But Amara Rodriguez had always been a fighter.

Little by little, pieces drifted back to her side like so much flotsam and jetsam. Her name, what she had been doing, little snippets of selfhood—she clutched at them like she was drowning and began to pry her eyes open.

“Look at that, my love! She’s beginning to come around.”

“Sooner than I expected.”

“You know what that means.”

“Yes, darling. You win our little wager.”

“Perfect! Now, what should the penalty be? How should I get you to let me hypnotize you tonight?”

Twin voices cut like knives through the susurrations of the tide. Amara was grateful for something to focus on, but the sounds awakened a creeping sense of unease in her. She recognized those voices. At least, she thought she did. It was so very hard to remember.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. I admit, I’m pleasantly surprised. Our Mel deserves a strong one.”

“We’ll have to make sure her strength remains intact. But as for the rest of her...”

“Hm. What should we change, do you think? We want her to be to our little girl’s taste.”

“Dumb, then?”

“Of course. At least, to a point. But what else?”

More unease. More alarm bells. The conversation the two women were having seemed to portend something terrible. Amara just couldn’t figure out what, or why. Perhaps, she decided, she ought to start with something simpler, like where she was. Mustering all of her beleaguered willpower, Amara blinked her way through the glare of the lights overhead and looked around. She was not in the ocean. She was in a room, although everything was so hazy, she could not discern much more than that. A large room. An unfamiliar room. An opulent room, judging from the fine leather armchair she was slumped in. A short distance away, silhouetted against a magnificent window, were two shadowed figures with something huddled at their feet.

“Girlier, perhaps? Pink is, I suppose, traditional.”

“Perhaps. I’m not sure it’d suit her. How about the muscles? Her other two are much more trim.”

“I like the muscles! Anyway, they say variety is the spice of life.”

“True, darling. And if Mel really doesn’t like them, she can always take care of it herself. She’s perfectly capable.”

“Oh, I know. I just want our present to be nicely wrapped.”

Amara was in danger.

That was what her instincts were telling her. The feeling grew stronger and more certain with each passing second. If only she could figure out what the danger was, exactly. The answer was right there in front of her like a word on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t quite grasp it.

What was this place? A room, yes, but... where? And how had she gotten there? There was something important about that. Something urgent. She could sense it.

“Where... am... I?” she groaned, struggling to sit forward. Her words slurred from her lips, thick as treacle.

The figures by the window turned to face her more directly, the wine glasses in their hands refracting the daylight through their contents and bathing Amara in a pink glow. The women seemed faintly impressed, but entirely at ease.

“Our guest room,” one of them replied. Then, much sharper: “Lucy. Take care of her.”

“Yes, Ms. Adams. I obey.”

Lucy. Ms. Adams.

Those names meant something to Amara.

While she was trying to puzzle it out, the silhouette huddled at the feet of the other two figures unfurled and rose, revealing itself to be another person who had simply been kneeling until given a command. She—Lucy—turned and began to move toward Amara, hips swaying.

Lucy and Ms. Adams. Not only were those names familiar to Amara, there was some kind of connection between them. But what? Amara’s foggy head throbbed. Her flagging energy was divided between trying to remember and trying to make herself stand up.

“Hi, Amara!” Lucy sang out, bubbly and blissful, as she reached her side. “Like, remember me?”

“You...” Slowly, Amara nodded. That voice served to jog her memory. “We... at... my gym. You...”

It was coming back to her now. This girl. Had she been a client or a project? Amara wasn’t quite sure. She’d been wearing something different then. Exercise clothes, not a crop top and a skirt. The memory brought with it a bubble of anticipatory glee—but as it burst, Amara was left with a lingering sense of disquiet.

“That’s right.” Suddenly, all the ditzzy cheer Amara remembered vanished. This was not the voice of a gym bunny bimbo, nor that of the perfect, obedient submissive Amara had seen kneeling. This was the voice of a hypnotist, sadistic and commanding. “Glad I left my mark. Nice and deep.”

A hypnotist. That was crucial. Amara’s instincts were screaming at her now. She sat forward, fighting against her own leaden limbs.

“You...” she drooled. “Did... Yes. You did something... to me.”

It was all coming back now. The phone call. Ms. Adams. The squats. And an unfathomable sense of danger and loss.

“Did I?” Lucy replied teasingly. “Tell me, Amara. How’s that strong body

of yours feeling?”

“Strong body.” It was a circuit connecting. Amara gasped and went still, and the words forced themselves past her lips, clear and without feeling. “Weak mind.”

That was all it took. She was drowning again.

Amara slumped back into the comfortable chair. Into the ocean of sleep. It was all she could do not to slip under completely. The memories she had gathered like precious pearls spilled through her hands and were lost to the froth. One mantra, and Amara could already sense the current claiming her.

“This... I... W-what’s...” she mewled. “Can’t...”

“Struggling?” came the voice. Lucy’s voice. “Good news. I have something that can help you.”

“H-help?” As eyes threatened to close once more, Amara seized on the suggestion like a life raft. “Help... meeee...”

“I’d be glad to,” Lucy promised. “I have your medicine right here.”

“M-medicine?” Amara repeated helplessly.

“Oh yes.” Lucy laughed. “It’s just what you need. But first, I’ll need you to sign this little consent form.”

“S-s-sign?” A little warning alarm sounded in Amara’s head. She was too far gone to heed it.

“Yes.” Lucy pressed something into Amara’s unresisting fingers. A pen. She placed a clipboard with a form attached into her lap and guided Amara’s hand toward it. “Do as I tell you, Amara. *Sign your name.*”

Amara could sense, somehow, that she was breaking some crucial rule of her own devising—but it didn’t matter. Her weak mind was helpless to fight the command, and so her strong body obediently dragged the pen across the form as best as she could manage. The result was an illegible scrawl—but enough to seal her fate.

“Good girl,” Lucy simpered, prying the clipboard and pen away from her and placing them on a nearby table. Then, she reached for something else. “And here’s your medicine.”

Amara had only an instant to register the glint of light reflecting off a needle before it was planted straight into her neck.

The pain of its sting and the ensuing sensation of something cold entering her veins provided exactly the surge of adrenaline Amara needed.

As she groaned and heaved, her eyes flew wide and were, for the very first time, unclouded.

The seconds before the drug began to take effect were just long enough for Amara to appreciate how utterly fucked she was.

She had been claimed by Aleksandra and Helena Adams, former clients of hers and among the most powerful hypnogarchs in the city. She was in their “guest room,” and they were both surveying her with pleased expressions on their faces as they sipped at their wine glasses. Lucy, the girl they had supposedly wanted Amara to train for them, was one of their assistants. She had come to Amara as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, lowered her guard, hypnotized her, and brought her here for the Adamses to brainwash and enjoy.

And she had just injected Amara with something.

“She is ready, mistresses.” Lucy bowed her head, shifting like a chameleon back into her role as a perfect, brainwashed servant. Her true colors—now, if not originally.

“Good.” Aleksandra Adams stepped forward, toward Amara; her wife, Helena, seemed content to hang back and watch. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Yes, Mrs. Adams.”

Amara’s body still refused to cooperate with her desperation to stand and run, leaving her helpless in the face of the supremely wealthy, powerful hypnogarch bearing down on her. Aleksandra was the taller, more immediately imposing of the two; even though Amara knew perfectly well that each of them was as dangerous as the other, the particular figure that Aleksandra cut, with her tailored suit, tall heels, and steely blue eyes was striking and terrifying. The very image of consummate domination. Amara sat as straight up as she could and tried to ignore the strange sensation of lightness beginning to spread through her head. If she was to have any chance at all, she needed to remain calm and self-assured. “Why are you doing this to me?” she demanded.

Aleksandra Adams smiled a shark’s smile. “You see,” she explained, setting her wine glass down on the table, “our daughter, Mel, needs a wedding present.”

To be sure, Amara was no innocent. No stranger to the arrogance and caprice of hypnogarchs like these. She’d spent her whole life working for them. In a way, she wasn’t so different herself. But even so, hearing Aleksandra describe giving a person to her daughter as a mere gift sent a chill down her spine.

“A... wedding present?” Amara spat.

Aleksandra nodded, untroubled. “You’ve worked with her in the past. You know that she has something of a softer touch. For most of her life, despite our best efforts, she had no interest at all in the family business. That’s been changing, but Helena and I worry that she still might not be prepared for all the challenges our singular lifestyle offers. She needs someone at her side. A right-hand woman. Someone with expertise. Someone she can trust to remain loyal without so much as a second thought.”

The pendulum swung, and Amara’s anger became panic. That was to be her future? To be just like the creature who had so efficiently subdued her, utterly deprived of free will, her every independent urge wiped away and replaced with pure, unthinking obedience? Amara knew there was a certain hypocrisy to her fear—but it was, above all, the monstrous, arbitrary unfairness of her fate that got to her.

“Why me?” she asked plaintively.

“You’re simply perfect for the role!” Aleksandra declared. The hypnogarch began pacing back and forth in front of Amara in a slow, unhurried rhythm. “You have all the requisite skills and talents, not to mention the reputation. Our Mel couldn’t ask for a more capable enforcer.” As she walked, her heels *clacked* audibly against the hard floor, a steady echo that stole away Amara’s attention. “And then there’s the personal connection. You brainwashed her beloved Emma. Mel harbors some... complicated feelings about that. You did it for her, yes—but you just as easily could have ended up doing it for someone else who wanted to take an activist journalist out of the picture.”

“But... but...” Amara found herself grasping desperately for any flaw in Aleksandra’s logic. Any deficiency in herself that could yet save her. The words wouldn’t come. Each clack of the hypnogarch’s heel dashed her gathering thoughts against the rocks. Why was it affecting her so much?

Oh. The drug.

“So you’re hardly Mel’s favorite person, to put it delicately,” Aleksandra went on, indifferent to Amara’s internal struggle. “But I think that’ll help soften the blow. Get her used to having assets like you at her disposal. It’ll strike her as a form of karmic justice. You deserve it.” *Clack, clack, clack.* “Or perhaps she’ll simply get a twisted little thrill from seeing that what you did to her new wife has been done to you too. Either way, you’re going to be very good for her.”

There was something monstrous about Aleksandra’s evident love for her daughter and her utter disregard for Amara. It made the captive hypnotist

furious.

It should have made her furious.

Instead, Amara felt nothing—nothing but a poisonous sense of calm steadily rising with the tide. Her emotions were drifting away from her and far out to sea. That strange, ebbing floatiness was back—and with it, the soporific haze that threatened to rob her of her wits and her freedom, a dozen times more potent than before. It was in her veins. It was seeping into her brain.

Amara tried to fight her way back to her anger. To clarity. To something. The harder she fought, the more she began to drown.

“It looks like it’s starting to really kick in,” Aleksandra observed. “One of our R&D department’s newest concoctions. Extremely potent. You’ll find yourself entering a highly suggestible state that we’ll be able to work with—although that, of course, is just one part of the process.”

Nothing was within reach. Only the dull depths. The numbness. The insistent *clacking* of Aleksandra Adams’s heels was the only thing that seemed to pierce it. Time was already losing all meaning; Amara lived in the moments between footsteps. There was the anticipation, then the sound, then the echo that rang on and on inside her head.

“W-what are... you... going to... do to me?” Amara drooled.

“We’re going to break you, Amara.” Aleksandra made her defeat seem a foregone conclusion. “We’re going to make you perfectly obedient and faithful to our daughter, Mel, and we’re going to strip out everything that she doesn’t need.” *Clack, clack, clack.* “Everything she doesn’t want, too. Which, I’m afraid, will account for much of your intelligence. Our little girl has rather specific tastes.”

To her fading horror, Amara found that she had already lost the capacity to be afraid of the fate Aleksandra described. All that was left to her was to grimly contemplate the gulf between the reaction she should have had and the reaction that she was having.

The next *clack* of Aleksandra’s heel on the floor robbed her of even that.

Desperately, Amara made her hands into fists. She was too skilled of a mind controller herself to fall victim to all this so easily. That was what she had to believe. She knew all the tricks; she could turn them to her advantage. Even if she-

*Clack.*

Amara went lax. She swayed for a moment. It took perilously long for her

to find her train of thought again.

Even if she couldn't trust her emotions, she could still exercise her will. She had to focus. She had to remain purposefully conscious of what mattered to her.

Which was-

*Clack.*

Amara groaned softly as her thoughts dissolved. Against the drug, she was helpless. It was so unfair.

Yes. Unfair. That was something. A defiant thought. A kernel of resistance.

"Bbbutttt," Amara forced out. "But... I..." As the thought crystallized, she became immediately aware of how meaningless and impotent it was in the face of a woman like Aleksandra Adams. Still, it was her only remaining life raft. She gathered whatever dregs of spite and resentment she could find and spat them at her captor. "I... always did... whatever you... whatever you hired m-me to do!"

The way Aleksandra cocked one eyebrow in amusement was all it took to convey that she considered the objection beneath contempt.

"Amara." Aleksandra's manner shifted with the swiftness and deadliness of a serpent's strike. Suddenly, instead of callous and imperious, she was impossibly sharp. Her every word, a fang biting down into Amara's mind. "It's time for you to *calm down*."

"N-nnoooo," Amara groaned, even as she felt the suggestion beginning to claim her.

"Are you sure? Wouldn't you like to calm down?"

"N...n..."

"Yes." Aleksandra was steel. There was no fighting her.

"Yyyesssss," Amara drooled. And just like that, it was true.

"I can help you to calm down," Aleksandra told her. "Would you like my help, Amara?"

"Y... y..." She wanted it so very badly. Thanks to the drug, Aleksandra's words exerted a tidal pull on her very soul. "Y-yes!"

"Then ask me nicely."

"P... ppplease!" Amara half sobbed in desperation. Her mood had turned. Her resistance was gone.

“Very well. Then look into my eyes.”

The hypnogarch bent down over her, and there they were. Two frozen pools that seemed to dominate Amara’s vision. A chill washed over her. Those eyes were so cold. So merciless. As soon as Amara met Aleksandra’s gaze, she could feel herself freezing over, her thoughts halted in their tracks, ready to be chiseled and sculpted. One final stirring of her sense of self-preservation made her squirm in her seat, fighting to break contact; a firm hand on Amara’s cheek quelled her utterly.

“That’s it,” Aleksandra told her. “Look nice and deep into my eyes. Nice and calm.”

“Yyyeahh...” Amara was an echo of herself. “Ccaalmmm.”

“Good.” Aleksandra’s hand moved across Amara’s face. Her fingertips found her eyelids, and pushed them shut. “Now go to sleep, and listen carefully.”

\* \* \*

When Amara next woke up, there was less of her than before.

The sensation of a sharp, cold scratch against her neck stirred her from the sleep of trance, but once she eventually surfaced, there was no needle in her neck. Just an empty vial on the nearby table.

Was that from just now, or the first time? Or some other time, perhaps, that Amara had already forgotten. Her memory was a mess. She could not tell how much time had passed since she’d first been captured. It could have been mere hours—or it could have been weeks. And that was far from the only thing Amara had lost; she had the sense of great sinkholes opening up at the core of her being, sending memories, convictions, urges and willpower all plummeting into the abyss. It was tempting to reach down into that underworld, to dig deep into herself and fight to recover what she had lost, but she had the strange sense that if she tried to peer over the edge, she would find the ground crumbling beneath her feet, and end up losing more than she could ever hope to save.

Either way, Amara was left a shade of herself.

“How are you feeling, Amara?”

The voice turned Amara’s attention from herself and outward. She became aware that she was in the Adams’s guest room, as before, and that she

wasn't alone. This time, Aleksandra and Lucy weren't present. It was only Helena Adams.

Compared to her wife, Helena seemed almost a comforting presence: far shorter, and sweetly soft and curved everywhere that Aleksandra was sharp. Her face told her aristocratic background well but, despite her aquiline nose and fierce cheekbones, still folded into a disarming, dimpled smile as she gazed down at her captive. Amara knew perfectly well that the appearance was deceiving. The two hypnogarchs were as ruthless as each other—and as dangerous.

“Confused, I'm sure.” Helena was clearly not about to let Amara's silence dissuade her. “My wife's methods can be rather forceful, and they leave quite the mark. Trust me, I'd know. I've been in your shoes many times.”

Despite everything, Amara's curiosity was piqued. “She... hypnotizes you?” she asked blearily.

“Oh yes.” Helena replied. “And I her. We make quite a game of it, in fact, and I certainly don't begrudge her for usually being the winner. We have so much fun together. That sound of her tapping her heels—one of her signature techniques. It does such wonderful things to me.”

Amara struggled to wrap her addled mind around the idea of a hypnogarch willingly submitting to such control. It seemed all but suicidal—and perhaps it offered her a lifeline. Perhaps Helena Adams was growing careless, insulated against danger as she was by her vast power. She had just handed Amara one of the keys to her mind.

“And you... trust her?” Amara asked. It was still a struggle to speak—her head wasn't clearing—but if she was to influence Helena, she needed to keep her talking. Get her at ease.

“Of course.” Helena answered smiling, and without hesitation. “We're in love.”

Amara was only mortal; she could not help but feel a faint flicker of envy directed at Aleksandra Adams. Helena, lounging against the chair in which Amara sat slumped and helpless, looked utterly resplendent in her long, ravishing slit dress. A goddess in love.

“You middle fish are always so surprised by that.” Helena giggled to herself. The sound rolled through Amara's core. “Always so scared.”

“Middle... fish?” The sensation of swimming threatened to claim Amara anew.

“Hypnotists who have enough to lose, but not enough to feel safe,”

Helena drawled. Her voice was a song, intonation dancing from one word to the next in a gorgeous, lilting pattern. The kind of voice Amara could listen to all day and never tire of the sound. “Always terrified of a shark coming to swallow you up. But it’s not so bad. You’ll see.”

“It’s...” Amara tried to summon up her willpower and indignation—but they wouldn’t come. Something in Helena’s easy, charismatic manner made them seem somehow inappropriate. She was so conversational. So friendly. Amara knew better than to think her a friend, but she could not find it in herself to resist the feeling. Besides, she needed to keep her talking. “It’s not?”

She sounded more curious than she meant to.

“No, Amara.” Helena’s hand glided down to rest comfortingly on Amara’s shoulder. Amara could not find the strength to brush her off. Her barest touch was so warm. “It simply means an end to that fear. You’ll be able to relax at last.”

“Rel...” Amara almost echoed the word before truly processing it. Helena was trying to hypnotize her. It should have been so much more obvious. “N-no.”

“Just think about it, Amara,” Helena soothed. Her hand stroked across Amara’s shoulder. Her expensive perfume wafted into her nose. She was encompassing. “No more looking over your shoulder. No more worrying about strange phone calls, or ticking clocks, or screens covered in static. You could finally, truly, relax.”

“N... ngh...” Amara could not believe how susceptible she had already become. Helena’s words were birthing a great, yawning yearning inside her. How long had it been since she had truly been able to relax? To set all her worries aside? “Nnnnoooo.”

“No,” Helena echoed softly. “No, I know it’s hard. But I promise. Our family will take care of you. Just look at Lucy. Does she seem unhappy to you?”

“N...” The stuck record of Amara’s weak protest transformed denial into agreement. “N-no.”

“No, of course not,” Helena’s evident pleasure sent a warm glow of reward across Amara’s skin. Her hand, too, was moving. Caressing. Stroking. Luring. “She wasn’t so different from you, once. Young. Ambitious. A prodigy, really—but, like you, she lacked the social position to secure a true throne. Once she fell into our orbit, it was as simple as pointing her ambition in a different direction. Now, service to my wife and I is the greatest pleasure she can fathom—and she still has room to indulge all the appetites that remain to

her.”

Lucy’s face flashed through her mind. The way all feeling and personality fled from it whenever Helena or Aleksandra issued a command. The way that, burning beneath that blank mask of servitude, was the glow of bone-deep satisfaction. Her heart skipped a beat. Her yearning deepened. All of this was affecting Amara far too much. She was drugged again. That had to be it. Or was it? Maybe she was already this far gone. She had to fight. Or... she had to keep Helena talking? Amara wasn’t sure. The various ideas and impressions danced before her mind for only moments before they popped like stray bubbles, leaving her with nothing but Helena’s infinite embrace.

“Do you want to relax, Amara?” Helena asked, and the very question, the very word, was a warm blanket across Amara’s mind, quenching her will. Helena made that one word—relax—into a promise.

“Y-yes,” Amara whimpered. Her strength was already so drained. What else could she do but relax and try to recover? There was something wrong with that line of thinking. She could tell. But she didn’t want to think about it. She wanted Helena’s warmth.

“Good girl.” The reward-feeling doubled; Amara mewed with gratitude. The song of Helena’s voice echoed in her ears. “Then close your eyes. Surrender your strong body, and your weak mind. And *relax into my control.*”

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“You work for Mel Adams.”

Aleksandra Adams’s voice sliced effortlessly through the fog in which Amara now lived. She had long since given up trying to track the amount of time she’d been in the guest room, or even how many times the hypnogarchs had visited her. Only a sense of the rhythm persisted. Always one, then the other. A steady, alternating pattern, both wives working together in tandem to work loose the locks of Amara’s mind.

“I...” Amara fought to muster her strength as she forced her bleary eyes open. She would need it. Aleksandra’s sessions were always so hard. And Helena’s, so poisonously easy. “I don’t. I’m my own wom-”

The needle pierced her neck and her words, its narcotic kiss delivered with the swiftness of a serpent striking. Amara shuddered as she felt the soporific substance begin to flow through her veins, draining her will, making her soft and moldable. Her body was so used to it now. It accepted the

drug like a lover.

“You work for Mel Adams.”

As Aleksandra spoke, Amara felt a distinct sense of pressure that grew with each repetition. Aleksandra was implacable. It was as if the weight of all her wealth, all her authority, of all the buildings bearing her name, was pressing down on Amara’s will, bending it into shape.

“N-no!” It wasn’t only Aleksandra’s implacable presence that made it difficult to fight her. It was the sure knowledge that Amara couldn’t hold out forever. Even if she resisted, they would simply keep working her until she broke. She had only the slimmest of chances. Inevitability was her greatest weakness. “I d-don’t work for-”

*Clack.*

The sound destroyed Amara’s clarity. A single tap of Aleksandra’s heel was all it took to leave her aimless and adrift. Above her, looking down, Aleksandra’s face was a sneer of command.

“You work for Mel Adams.” More pressure. Amara felt the walls of her own mind creak and bend. “You know that. You remember that. You remember brainwashing Emma Park for her.”

“I...” Amara did remember that. Why was Aleksandra reminding her? Was it a trick? The drug was hard at work on her now. She could not tell what was real. “Y-yes, but-”

*Clack.*

“You work for Mel Adams.”

It rang through Amara’s melting head like a bell. Past and present were blurred. She could not make sense of it. Only the memories Aleksandra had called forth remained intact. Memories of taking phone calls, obeying instructions, providing service.

There had been a reason for it. Amara was sure of that. She just couldn’t quite grasp it.

“N-no, I...” she flailed. “I was... you... I take... jobs? She j-just hired-”

*Clack.*

“You cannot remember that.”

The proclamation of a goddess. Amara could not bring herself to question it. Not when its truth was so obvious. With the strike of Aleksandra’s heel echoing through her skull, she could not remember anything at all.

“I...”

“You have a strong body, but a weak mind.”

Amara gasped. There it was. The one clear thought she’d been so desperate for. She clung to it desperately, and let it fall from her lips gladly. “S-strong body, weak mind.”

“Strong body, weak mind,” Aleksandra pressed.

“Strong body, weak mind,” Amara echoed. The interplay between the mantra and the drug left her a blank page.

“Strong body, weak mind.”

“Strong body, weak mind.” There was an elation to saying it. Amidst all Amara’s confusion, that simplicity was bliss.

“Strong bodies are for service,” Aleksandra told her. “Weak minds need commands.”

“S-strong bodies... strong...” Amara twitched and frothed. Even she could not fail to see Aleksandra’s sinister intent—but she was already so vulnerable to the words she used.

“Strong bodies are for service,” Aleksandra repeated. She was not angry. She was not frustrated. She was simply telling the truth. “That’s why you made yourself so strong, Amara. You were always meant to be a slave.”

“I...” Amara couldn’t fight it. Her own memories and feelings were warping out of shape to fit the commandments being handed down to her. Countless hours in the gym. Sweat dripping down her face. Muscles screaming. Following her workout regimen like it was scripture. Craving something more. “I... was?”

“Strong bodies are for service.” Aleksandra Adams had no mercy. “Weak minds need obedience.”

“Strong bodies are f-for service,” Amara moaned. “Weak... w-weak minds...”

“Weak minds need obedience.”

“W-weak minds n-need o-o-obedience.” Amara had controlled too many others to question the doctrine. It was her own way of life, turned against her. Her mind was hopelessly weak. Only Aleksandra’s commands left a firm impression. Only they made sense.

“Strong body, weak mind, Amara.”

“Strong body.” Amara chanted. The drug was making her an eager puppet.

Strings pulled her face into a mindless smile. “Weak mind.”

“Good.” That one rare word of praise was enough to dissolve Amara into bliss. Now, she was blank. Now, she was ready. “You work for Mel Adams.”

Amara nodded in mindless agreement.

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“Strong body, weak mind.”

“Strong body, weak mind.”

Amara could scarcely tell which words were hers, and which were Helena’s. It was another day, or another week, or another month. She no longer worried about it. Her beloved mantra was never far from her thoughts.

“That’s right,” Helena affirmed, purring. “And look at this strong body of yours.”

The plump goddess was lounging across Amara’s lap, her hands everywhere. Her touch was avaricious and golden. Amara thrummed with pleasure. It did not occur to her to notice her own nakedness.

“S-strong bodies are for s-service,” she moaned.

“That’s right,” Helena whispered. “And service is pleasure.”

Her every caress punctuated the point. Amara was drowning in her ravishing glow, in awe of the superior being laid across her.

“Weak minds,” Amara recited. The words demanded to be spoken. “Need obedience.”

“They do indeed,” Helena giggled.

Her evident enjoyment was enough to banish all of Amara’s doubt and hesitation. Nothing mattered but Helena. Her touch, her perfume, her siren’s voice. Nothing else—not even the fact that she had drugged Amara mere minutes ago. Amara had stopped resisting or resenting that. Only one secret kernel of resistance remained. Everything else had been taken. Everything else was being forged anew.

“Weak minds need obedience,” Helena mused, as she groped and fondled Amara’s well-honed body. “And only obedience. Do you know what that means, Amara?”

Amara shook her head. She had learned by now that she did not need to think for herself.

“It means you can let everything else go.”

Beneath Helena, Amara squirmed. The idea of forfeiting so much was now as enticing as it was terrifying. Helena’s presence soothed away the fear little by little, replacing it with an endless desire to please. She needed obedience so very badly.

“But...” Amara whimpered reflexively. “But-”

“Strong body, weak mind,” Helena shushed her. “You made your body strong for service. But your mind? Your mind has always been weak, Amara.”

“S-strong body,” Amara repeated, as that thundered through her. “Weak... mind.”

Her mind had always been weak?

After all this time, there was so little she could still be sure of. Her mind and her memory were so much putty, soft and ready to be reshaped by even a seemingly offhanded comment.

“That’s right,” Helena encouraged. “Weak mind. For as long as you can remember.”

Disparate, long-treasured memories lost their shape and cohesion. Like droplets of rain returning to the sea. No more could Amara remember being the smart kid in class, covertly cultivating her aptitude as a hypnotist with clever wordplay and mind games as she brought the pretty girls around her under her thumb. In its place, her current, foggy trance was projected back into the past.

Her mind had always been weak.

“Always weak,” Helena giggled. “Always dumb.”

“D-d-dumb?” Even now, Amara blushed and recoiled at the word. It was a badge of shame she had pinned on many other women’s breasts.

“Dumb,” Helena confirmed, tracing the lines of Amara’s abs. “I like you dumb.”

“You...” Despite herself, Amara smiled.

Helena liked her dumb. That seemed to outshine any inarticulate objection she might be able to form.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?” Helena wheedled. “The dumb jock girl. Oh, sure, you’re a good hypnotist. A savant, even. But that doesn’t change

anything. Strong body, weak mind. You're dumb."

"S-strong body. Weak mind." Amara could feel it becoming true. Could feel her mind emptying by the moment. Dumb jock girl—that stereotype, the one she'd always resented, was weaving itself into the core of her being. Enough imagination remained to her to supply the rest. To forge connections with other things she had been told.

A dumb jock girl with a talent for hypnosis—but without enough initiative to make good use of it.

No wonder she needed someone to serve.

"Go on," Helena urged conspiratorially. "Say it."

"I..." Amara could not think of a reason not to. Perhaps that was the ultimate proof. "I'm dumb."

"Good girl!" Helena cooed. Amara whimpered. "And since you're a dumb jock girl, I think we both know exactly what you need to do with all those useless things you've been holding on to. Useless memories. Useless smarts. Useless ideas of your own."

"What?" Amara had already become too dumb to answer even that. The drug was enveloping her. Helena was enveloping her. Her weak mind needed obedience.

"Just relax," Helena purred. "You've become so good at that for me. So just relax, and let it slip away."

Obediently, Amara relaxed. Trance was waiting to claim her.

She let go.

\* \* \*

"You work for Mel Adams."

"I work for Mel Adams."

A nail could be driven into even the hardest wood. Strike it enough times with a hammer, and even the densest grain would split. After countless hours of drugging, of conditioning, of hearing the same words driven into her over and over, Amara had yielded utterly. Her new truths were buried deep into her skull. They pushed out everything needless. Her new self was being born.

"You serve Mel Adams."

“I serve Mel Adams.”

Aleksandra Adams’s words rang from far above. At some point between waking and sleeping, Amara had slipped out of her chair and was kneeling on the floor of the so-called guest room. A short distance away, an empty needle lay on the floor, discarded. Amara didn’t notice or care. Her strong body was bent forward, planting reverent kisses on the tips of Aleksandra’s shoes. Her weak mind was wide open.

“You worship Mel Adams.”

“I worship Mel Adams.”

And it was true. She did.

Every part of Amara Rodriguez that might have resisted or resented the sentiment had been steadily broken down, eroded by steady, lapping waves of brutal conditioning. She had been bleached clean. Unmoored from her very sense of self. She was ready to accept anything she was told.

It made perfect sense for her to worship Mel Adams. She worked for Mel Adams and she served Mel Adams, and her weak mind needed obedience. Her strong body was for service.

Amara’s kissing became more energetic and frantic, pious kisses melting into long, sensual tongue-licks of rabid adoration. She did not worship Aleksandra Adams—not precisely, anyway—but she was Mel’s mother and missionary, and so bore a rub-off spark of her true master’s greatness.

She worked for Mel Adams. She served Mel Adams. She worshiped Mel Adams. Amara knew those things. She believed them with all her heart.

Besides them, she knew nothing at all.

“Strong body, weak mind,” Aleksandra commanded.

“Strong body.” Amara let herself melt into her mantra’s embrace. “Weak mind. Strong body, weak mind. Strong body, weak mind.”

It echoed through her. It reshaped her.

“Your strong body is for service,” Aleksandra told her. “Your weak mind needs obedience.”

“Y-y-yes,” Amara moaned, as she kissed the hypnogarch’s heels.

She finally understood. Her strong body was for serving Mel Adams. Her weak mind needed to obey Mel Adams.

Even a dumb jock like her could put that together.

*Clack.*

One more hammer blow. Aleksandra tapped her heel, and the sound drove all of the brainwashing still deeper into Amara's unresisting skull. But so too did it stir one final rebellious thought, buried so deep for self-preservation that even Amara herself had forgotten it. But now she remembered, even if the ideals of escape and freedom had all but lost their meaning.

She still had one last chance.

\* \* \*

Amara waited as long as she could. She needed Helena to be so utterly sure of her defeat that she became complacent. She waited until she felt as though, after just one more session, she might no longer be able to trust herself.

"Relax," Helena beckoned. As she often did, she was lounging across Amara's lap, treating her brainwashed captive like her own personal throne. She herself was the very picture of regal repose, casually enjoying the strong body beneath her as if Amara was nothing more to her than another prized possession.

Strong body, weak mind.

Amara tensed herself to fight off the mantra. She had been saving all her strength for this moment.

"Relax..." she drooled absently. "So... relaxed. So... easy... to sink."

It was hardly a pretense. The words came to her so naturally.

"That's right," Helena told her languidly. "It's all dumb, mindless girls like you need. Just sink into submission."

"Sink..." Amara echoed carefully. "Into... submission."

And she tapped the sole of her shoe onto the ground to make a distinctive *clack*.

A tiny but distinct shiver raced through Helena Adams.

Amara's heart skipped a beat. It was precisely what she had been resting all her hopes on. In the rare moments of lucidity afforded to her while she was alone, she had practiced imitating the sound Aleksandra made with her heels, hoping for this exact outcome. Amara fought to keep her excitement concealed. She waited for Helena's reaction with bated breath.

“Yes.” Helena’s voice was slow and a touch stilted. Like she had lost her train of thought. “Sink into service.”

Another skipped beat. She hadn’t registered what Amara was doing.

“Sink...” Amara repeated. “Into service.”

*Clack.*

Amara felt Helena stir against her. It was like the hypnogarch was trying to rouse herself—only to end up settling even deeper into Amara’s lap.

“Right.” Helena sounded absent. “Sink into service.” Her brow furrowed. “Sink... sink...”

“Sink...” Amara clacked her heel again. As Helena’s guard fell, she seized on the moment. “Sink into trance.”

It was so natural and unobtrusive a suggestion, Helena yielded to Amara’s leadership without a fight. “Yeah. Sink into trance.”

*Clack.* “Sink into hypnosis.”

“Sink... into hypnosis.”

“Sink into my lap,” Amara dared. She was grateful that the Adamses had kept all of her aptitude as a hypnotist intact. She had an instinct for the natural ebb and flow of trance. She could tell Helena was ready.

“S-sink...” Helena seemed to roll around the thought for a moment like it was an unfamiliar taste in her mouth. Amara *clacked* her heel one more time; Helena acquiesced. “Sink... into... your lap.”

“That’s right.” Helena seemed even more susceptible than Amara had dared hope. “Sink. Slump. Relax.”

“Sink... slump... relax.” Helena’s head was lolling against Amara’s shoulder. Time for the final push.

“Sink into sleep,” Amara urged, imparting the word with special inflection that a hypnotist like Helena Adams could not help but respond to.

“Sink...” As she spoke, Helena’s voice slowed and slowed. Her face slackened. She slipped beneath the surface. “Into... sleep.”

Amara had successfully hypnotized Helena Adams.

It should have been the most thrilling coup of Amara Rodriguez’s career. Instead, as she stared down at the entranced hypnogarch in her lap, Amara struggled to feel anything more than a pang of longing. She looked so peaceful. So serene. Amara had come to know intimately the bliss of sinking into trance that way. She craved it. She knew that was something she had

been brainwashed to believe—but knowing didn't help. Amara's free will was in tatters. She was a husk. The pleasure of submission was one of the only left to orient and define her.

What was she supposed to do now? Escape, go back to her home gym, and... what? Amara could scarcely imagine. She barely remembered what her old life had been like. The very need to decide was a niggling burden Amara found herself resenting. She shouldn't need to make choices. Her weak mind needed obedience instead.

With Helena Adams wrapped around her little finger, Amara could have been plotting to take over the city. Instead, she was tempted to simply fall at the hypnotized woman's feet.

But she wouldn't. Amara had come too far to fall victim to quite such a humiliating defeat. She just needed to escape and make it to safety, and the rest would start to come back into focus. That was what she had to tell herself, anyway.

"Stand up, Helena," Amara instructed. She had no time to be subtle or indirect. Fortunately, with the slow, unsteady manner of a sleepwalker, Helena obeyed. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to take me out of here. You're going to use your authority and authorization to make sure nobody gets in our way. Understand?"

"Yeah..." Helena answered dreamily. Amara tried her hardest not to envy her.

"Good. Let's go."

Slowly, Helena began to lead Amara over toward the door. Amara followed, footsteps unsteady. She had been in the guest room for what seemed like forever. Never restrained physically—but the psychological and pharmaceutical bindings had proven more than sufficient. Only with Helena in front of her could she so much as fathom leaving the room. Helena's clumsy, trembling hand turned the doorknob. Amara's hopes surged.

And instantly fell once the door opened, and Aleksandra Adams was standing right there.

"Hi, darling," Aleksandra said, bemused, to her hypnotized wife. "Right on time."

She raised a hand and snapped her manicured fingers.

Amara could only watch helplessly as, before her eyes, her precious control over Helena Adams shattered like glass. The delicate trance she had managed to weave over the hypnogarch was swept away by an infinitely

more powerful trigger, one honed by years of experience and love. Helena collapsed, limp—only for Aleksandra to step forward and catch her in her arms. As she regained consciousness, the two of them were posed like two dancers.

“Hey there, my love,” Helena purred as she woke. “Here you are to rescue me, as always.” Aleksandra bent to kiss her.

Inside, Amara was already dying. In a way, her ego had perished a long time ago, but this last, foolish hope had been a single, ghoulish string keeping its bones upright. Her transformation had been slow, her breaking done by inches, but she was now on the cusp of the final change. She was ready to become the creature Mel Adams required. Still, though, a few traces of curiosity persisted.

“You...” Amara murmured. “You knew?” Aleksandra must have. She’d been waiting right there for them.

“Of course.” Aleksandra handled her victory gracefully. Not with smugness, merely with the infinite self-possession of a queen. “You told us about it yourself a few days ago. We simply ensured that you didn’t remember. This seemed a perfect way to drive home your new status. To extinguish any last traces of doubt.”

Amara’s stomach churned and her mind sank.

“And we knew exactly how to pry it out of you,” Helena added, giggling, “because we’re the ones who put this little plan into your head in the first place. You didn’t think I mentioned Aleksandra’s trigger working on me by accident, did you?”

Amara nodded numbly. “Then... you were just pretending?”

“Not quite,” Helena replied, rising out of her wife’s arms on her own two feet. “I was more than happy to enjoy letting you put me under. There’s always a little thrill to be had in it. Besides, what better way to make sure you still have the skills we need?”

Not pretending, then—but the next worst thing. If she’d been actually resisting, Amara might never have stood a chance.

“What now?” Amara asked—and it felt good to ask. To yield the decision. To accept that she was dumb, and that others knew better. This was the way of the world. There was no resisting it. Middle fish like her were destined to be snapped up. That she was finally free from the anxious burden of wondering when, or by who, was a mercy. More than ever, she yearned to be controlled—above all, by Mel Adams. She had met the girl only a couple of times, but in Amara’s mind, she now took on the presence of a distant

goddess.

“What do you think?” Aleksandra replied.

To her own surprise, Amara found that she knew the answer. Now came surrender, and she knew exactly how.

“Strong body,” she intoned. “Weak mind.”

That was all it took. Trance, deep, heavy, and blissful, rushed in to claim her.

“Good.” Helena nodded approvingly, then turned her head. “Lucy, come here. Take a look at her, and tell us what you think.”

“I obey, Ms. Adams.”

Lucy Song, ever at her mistresses’ heels, entered the room. She came to stand opposite Amara and met the brainwashed amazon’s dull, glassy gaze. As they stared into one another’s eyes, Amara had just enough awareness left to reflect that, now, the two of them were a perfect mirror to one another. However different their outward presentations, however marked the personas their respective owners might have them wear, deep within each of them lurked the exact same captured spark. Amara could recognize it now, in Lucy; she could see Lucy recognizing it in her. The aptitude and ambition of a dominant and a hypnogarch, blunted just enough to make it safe without making it useless, and then overwhelmed with layers upon layers of devotion and obedience. There was no longer any fighting it. Not for either of them.

That was simply the way the world worked.

“Yes,” Lucy pronounced, as Amara sank into the mirror. “She’s ready.”

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