

Chapter 4 – *To the Point*

Titus stopped and glared at the man who was half his size. He put out a shielding arm, halting Megan in her tracks. It was then she got enough courage to study this epitome of belligerence whose chosen name referred to the son of Satan.

Damian was not much taller than Megan. He had coal black hair that was swept back, flaring at the ends. His starchy and cold face made him look older than he surely was. And his furrowed brow darkened his eyes. He was medium built, and had defined muscle proportionate to his size. Damian's garments were similar to the others, yet the shirt was cut differently. It had a straight neck, was sleeveless, and it conformed to his shape. The sash was tightly twisted, methodically tied at the waist with the ends tucked neatly in from the center. The warrior had light tan gloves that stopped at the wrists. His pants were tucked into low unadorned boots.

Damian raised an eyebrow at Titus as he approached, "Ha! Don't tell me you are attempting to protect this one?" Returning his gaze to Megan, he stopped a few feet away, crossed his arms, and leered. "This could be quite rewarding indeed." The woman reached up and lightly touched Titus's arm—a gesture of unity. "Ah, two against one?"

Titus brushed Megan's hand away and pushed her back. "Leave her alone, Damian. Megan doesn't want to be here. She's wants to go home."

Damian spat. "Feh, home?" He closed the gap between them to look into Megan's eyes. He searched deeply for a clue to the woman's true intentions. Fear flashed across them, but she didn't look away. As Damian delved into the woman's heart, he quietly spoke her name, "Megan." She responded with a slight nod. "You want to go back?" Again she nodded. One side of his lip curled. He glanced at the giant, "We all have our wants." Then his eyes returned and

narrowed. “The question is how badly do you want *them*?” She was not able to answer. He sampled the overwhelming anxiety that had gripped the newcomer and had had enough.

Suddenly, Damian jumped up, twisted in the air, and landed a kick to Titus’s wounded arm, sending the giant to the ground. Megan stumbled back, but was stopped when Damian grabbed her wrist. He twisted it behind her, pulled her in front of him, and then grabbed her neck. He found her ear and taunted quietly, “To find the answer you will have to go through me.”

Titus got back on feet, but hesitated to retaliate. The bastard had Megan by the throat. Favoring his injury, he growled, “Come on asshole, you want to fight? I’m ready when you are.” New blood trickled down his forearm.

Damian chortled in triumph. “Finally! I was beginning to wonder how you could hold up that grotesque heap of flesh without a spine!” Damian pushed Megan away. She collapsed to the ground shaking. Her attacker stood over her, with fists on his hips. He added with a more formal tone, “Very well, Titus, I accept your challenge,” then he pointed at the giant’s arm. “But I want you at your best. I will come for you in the morning.”

Titus stood tall and walked up to the unrelenting man. He glared down at Damian and gave him a stern answer. “Fine, tomorrow then. But none of your break of dawn shit. I want to be awake when I eat my breakfast.”

“Agreed.” Damian smirked at Megan, “You should thank your new friend, Newcomer. He just bought you some time. I suggest you use it wisely.” He paused, made a quick scan of the hilltop, and then nodded towards it. “Today has turned out to be quite productive.” His malicious grin returned. “More casualties are on the way.” His roving eyes settled on Titus and he added, “Tomorrow will be promising as well.”

Damian turned his back on them and walked over to one of the great pines at the edge of the cliff. He easily climbed from branch to branch. He stopped on a large one that daringly twisted out over the abyss. Damian stood for a moment to peer down through the tree's canopy into the ravine. The blanket of mist that concealed its bottom was still there. The confirmation warranted a disappointing grunt. He then sat at the base of the branch with his back against the trunk. Damian crossed his legs at the ankles, folded his arms, dropped his head onto his chest, and closed his eyes.

"The vulture returns to his perch," murmured Titus, and then turned his attention to Megan. Her drained face looked up at him through misplaced strands of hair. He reached for her. Noticing the blood on his hand, he wiped it several times on his pants leg before offering it again. She accepted his help, and shakily stood up.

Megan's shocked state allowed her to only half comprehend what was happening. Damian's hushed words repeated in her mind ...*have to go through me...go through me...*

"Ut oh, this doesn't look good." Titus was watching the hillside. His words forced Megan to come back to reality. She blinked a couple of times, then tucked back her hair to get a better look. Three people were heading down the path. It was the twins and they were holding up someone between them. Two others appeared at the crest and followed. She recognized Pierce's golden hair. Someone was supporting him and carrying his bow. "Stay here Megan."

Megan grabbed his arm with a frightened expression. "I want to stay with you."

"Alright, but whatever you see, it is not as bad as it looks, OK?" With a hint of relief, Megan nodded, wrapped her arm tightly around his, and prayed the giant would continue to protect her.

Titus began to walk, moving as fast as he could with the clinging woman. “Hey, you can relax, Megan. King Cold will keep to himself. Believe me, he’ll save it for our fight.” He looked down at her and smiled. “I’m no pushover...despite what just happened. And don’t worry; I plan to hurt him good. He won’t feel like tangling with anyone after I’m done with him.” Megan let go of her safeguard and glanced over to see if Damian had moved...he hadn’t. She couldn’t help think that Damian was planning to do the same to Titus.

They stopped near the foot of the hill and the first group approached. Titus sighed, “Anyway, it looks like the others are done for the day too.” Then he called, “Hey boys, didn’t I tell you not to bring strays home?” T and J looked at one another and giggled.

The individual they supported was Kasha. Her head was dropped, but Megan recognized the oriental outfit, even though it was smeared with blood. A large dark red spot with a small hole in the center decorated her right shoulder just below the blade. A similar one was found on her left thigh.

Titus looked at her curiously. Neither wound seemed bad enough that she couldn’t walk, and Kasha was not one to accept help from anyone. “Damn, Kasha you must be slipping, he got you good this time.”

Kasha’s head slowly came up and proudly took claim to the victory. “You should concern yourself with my opponent.” Her face pained and she looked to Megan, “I must ask for your assistance, Megan.”

“Uh, alright.”

“The twins will take me to the bathhouse, but I would prefer a woman to assist me with the rest. If you do this, I shall keep in mind your act of goodwill.”

Megan looked to Titus who gave her a sign of approval, then she nodded to Kasha. The giant stepped aside and watched them leave. That's when he spotted the debilitating blow. One of Pierce's arrows was lodged in her left buttocks. The blood formed a bull's-eye around the arrow and had bled down the back of her pant leg. The arrow's placement amused the giant and he fought back the urge to show it, because it was Kasha. He knew that her pride was wounded far worse than her body. He was sorry he missed the conflict.

"You want to take this useless piece of shit?"

Titus turned around to find Mayon standing next to him with Pierce now draped over his shoulder. "The idiot faints every time he looks at his hand. I don't know if it's from the bones sticking out or the fact that it's his drawing hand."

Titus reached out for the injured man. "Did you see what happened?"

Mayon gladly handed Pierce over and began to chuckle. "Yeah I saw it alright. It was the most hilarious thing I've ever seen. I tell you, it was priceless." Then he looked down at his bloodied clothes. "Christ! Look at me. That shit-head owes me!" Pierce groaned, mumbled something and then he was out again. Mayon started to walk to the bathhouse.

Titus flipped the bowman over his shoulder and trotted to catch up, "Hey Mayon! How about filling me in?"

Mayon didn't look back. His focus was on the stranger that followed Kasha and the twins. "What's in it for me?"

Titus caught up Mayon. "Oh, come on. Does there always have to be something in it for you?"

The smirking conniver didn't answer.

"Ok, what do you say I give you my dessert, if I get one?"

Mayon snorted, “Shit, Titus you hardly ever get dessert.”

“Yeah but today I’m injured,” jutting out his wounded arm.

Mayon glanced at it, then looked forward again. His sight narrowed to watch the stranger and Kasha go into the bathhouse. “Tell me about the newcomer.”

“Not fair, Mayon.”

“Fine, get your story from them.”

Titus frowned. He thought of what might be of interest to Mayon without giving the newcomer away. “What if I told you what transpired between King Cold and Megan?”

“Megan is her name?”

Titus nodded. The trick was not to give away too much.

Mayon stopped. How Damian reacted to the newcomer should reflect what he thought of her abilities. “Alright, shoot.”

“Well, he did his usual approach. I told him to leave her alone. (Mayon’s eyebrow went up.) Did his whammy-jammy eye searching thing, and then the bastard kicked my wounded shoulder. Got Megan in an arm lock, so I challenged him. He accepted and went to his perch. End of story.”

“What did he say to her?”

“Not much. Said she had time before it was her turn, and that she should use it wisely.”

“Why did you defend her?”

Titus shrugged, “I don’t know, I guess because she’s not buying into this. Man, she hardly reacted when I showed her the mirror. Realizing he said more than he should, he added,

“Besides, it’s time I took his Highness on again.”

Mayon halted. Agitated, he licked his teeth before speaking, “Do me favor, Titus and stop addressing Damian as if he’s royalty. He’s full of crap and I’m going to be the one to prove it.”

“That’s if he survives me!”

“Ha! Yeah, you go get em tiger.” He clapped Titus on the back. “Save me the trouble...” The forceful gesture did little to Titus, but Pierce groaned from the jolt. Mayon started to walk again and Titus followed. Low and serious, he added, “In fact, you should kill the guy and save us all the trouble—don’t forget he’ll be after little Miss Megan next.”

The troubled giant stared thoughtfully at the ground and murmured, “Kill him?”

“Huh?” Mayon toyed with the idea that maybe the big guy actually considered his suggestion.

But Titus was quick to change the subject. “Hey, you going to tell me what happened?”

This little truce between them could prove to be in Mayon’s favor. He grinned as he recalled the spectacle. “When I got there they were both pretty beaten up. Pierce could barely stand and Kasha was nursing her shoulder. She claimed victory and started to walk away. Somehow, Pierce found energy to draw his bow and (heh) shot her in the leg. Then the idiot made the mistake of laughing at her. Kasha came back and kicked him in the groin. Ahh, you should have seen his face. She goes to leave again (I don’t know how he did it) but the dumb ass gets up, and shoots her again! Then he collapses face down in the dirt. The arrow hits her right smack in the ass! Kasha goes down, pounding the ground with her fist; screaming what had to be obscenities at the top of her lungs.” Mayon chuckled before continuing. His hands came to life to emphasize his tale.

“Pierce isn’t getting up, but you could tell he was shaking with laughter. So Kasha drags herself to her feet and limps over, jumps up, and comes down on the quiver on his back—probably breaking all of his arrows.” Mayon’s palms halt the air in front of him. “But she’s not done. The bitch kneels down beside Pierce, picks up a rock and slams it down on his hand.” Mayon sadistically mimics the move then nods with satisfaction. “He’s screaming while she grinds the rock through his fingers. Still not satisfied, she struggles to her feet again and spits on him...Mayon paused with outturned arms. “... then brushes off her hands in triumph. The best part was what Kasha did next.” Mayon whole body calmed. “God, it was so unexpected. You should have been there.” Mayon paused to quietly appreciate the final blow.

“What...what’d she do?”

Titus felt his load stir and heard Pierce’s forced words, “She...she sat down.” Silence followed as the men pondered the scenario. First Pierce’s painful chuckling was heard followed by Titus with a boisterous drowning laugh.

Mayon laughed quietly to himself stroking his goatee as they walked. “Like a jack rabbit catapulting in the air.”

Catching his breath, Titus spoke over his shoulder, “Hahaha, man, Pierce you really did mess her up good.”

Stamina regained, Pierce admitted, “I didn’t mean to hit her in the ass. I could barely see straight after she kicked me in the nuts.”

The men had reached the edge of the pool and bathhouse. Titus tipped forward to allow Pierce to find his footing. He braced the bowman until he had his equilibrium. “Thanks guys.” Pierce kept his eyes on Titus while he pointed to his crushed hand. “Have you seen the Boob?”

Maybe she can take a look at my hand to make sure it heals up O.K.” When Titus shook his head he turned to who replied.

“Christ, Pierce, don’t tell me you’ve bought into her shit too?” griped Mayon.

Pierce shrugged and mumbled, “It wouldn’t hurt for her to take a look.” Then he thought maybe Megan might have a medical background. “Hey, where’s the newcomer?”

Titus pointed with his head towards the bathhouse, “She’s with Kasha.”

“Oh, man, I wouldn’t want to be in her shoes right-”

Suddenly, there came a blood curdling scream from the bathhouse, causing the three men to jump. It was followed by incomprehensible cursing.

At his perch, Damian remained unmoved, except for his lips which couldn’t help but form a grin. He didn’t have to see what was going on. His keen ears and senses had heard and felt pretty much all of it.

Luckily “the Boob”, as Pierce referred to her, (Jeremy Hillary Boob or so *it* calls itself) was not around. Damian’s perception of the would be woman, and the name she had chosen was right on...the woman knew a lot about nothing...a real nowhere man, err, woman in this case. But she was the first to be able to read energy. Had “Jer” (as he called her) been present during his confrontation with Titus and the newcomer, his bluff would have been called. In his present state, a battle with the injured Titus would have turned into a complete farce. Tomorrow Damian would be in top form. And as planned, his ruling persona remained intact and he had a formidable contender to try his newly found abilities on. On the other hand, Megan perplexed him. For a newcomer, her strength was astounding, yet the woman cowered. Even now he could

sense her fear and building anxieties. But there was something deeper...a familiar sentiment. One he knew all too well—one that he had worked hard to block out.

Megan had removed the arrow and avoided being struck by the distressed warrior. Kasha's scream however, vibrated off the stone walls and left a ringing in her ears. Backed against the wall, Megan stared, afraid to look away. She felt something dribble on her hand and immediately dropped the bloody arrow.

After impulsively swinging at Megan for ripping out the arrow, Kasha fell to her hands and knees, cursing. The clacking noise of the discarded arrow got Kasha's attention. She stopped her ranting. Even though the pain was debilitating, the shadow warrior would get pass it with discipline. Focus on something else—*the newcomer*. She had to be disturbed by all this. Reaching for support, Kasha propped a hand against the cauldron, and came up on her knees. More pain—*Damn the bowman*. She spoke to Megan, her eyes remained lowered in shame. “Could you...bring me the arrow?”

Carefully, Megan picked it up by the end and brought it to Kasha. She held it in front of the warrior who grimly stared at it. Then the injured woman grabbed the arrow with both hands and with a growl, snapped it in two. Then with one hand, she threw them out the door for her rival to see. Kasha rocked back on her heels to stand, but another stab of pain forced her back. Focus—*I'll kill him*. Megan caught her arm and bent down to be her crutch. Kasha accepted, and with the help, she was able to stand.

“Are there any medical supplies?”

“No.”

“Will you be alright?”

Kasha spoke through gritted teeth as she limped over to the cubicles. Focus—*Newcomer's concerns*. “In time...much sooner than you can believe.” Pointing to her cubby, “These are mine. Will you bring them and a towel to me after we are cleaned?”

“Um, sure.”

Though things will be different between them, for now, the women were free of animosity, and Kasha wished no ill will towards the newcomer. The warrior was not one to casually offer thanks verbally. She expressed her gratitude with her actions. She would not overlook the kindness that this newcomer offered her.

Kasha spoke in a hushed voice, “When will you fight Damian?”

“Uh, I don't know. He fights Titus tomorrow.”

“Hmm, you will have at least one day then. Can you fight?”

Megan's eyes went wide with horror. “I-I can't. I won't.”

“You will fight, or you will be left far worse than I am,” retorted Kasha, then she calmed. “You can not avoid the inevitable. Damian will come for you and he will attempt to break you.” Tears formed in Megan's eyes and she dropped her head in despair. Kasha braced herself against the wall to face Megan, and snorted in disapproval. “Why do you cry, newcomer? You have been chosen. This is a great honor.” When Megan looked up, Kasha was made witness to her anguish.

“Chosen?! I was ripped from everything I hold dear, dropped into the middle of nowhere and told I must fight!” Her anger vanished with an alarming revelation, “Oh God! Are we even on Earth?”

“No. Planets orbit this world.”

“What?!”

“Tonight you will see when the sky is clear,” answered Kasha with a wince, as she pulled away from the wall.

Megan looked away and swallowed, but resumed her position as Kasha’s crutch. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” she murmured.

Kasha’s lips thinned in resignation, then offered quietly, “Megan, I will train with you tomorrow.” Kasha focused on her steps. Each was rewarded with bolting pain that had to be mentally denied.

Megan became skeptical. “Wouldn’t that be helping your opposition?”

“Temporary alliances are made to rid common enemies.” Kasha prompted Megan to head for the door. “Now if you will, take me to the pool outside.”

Megan continued to support the woman, as they slowly walked to the door. Kasha raised her voice, so that it could be heard outside, “And there is no need to concern yourself with that cretin, Pierce. I crushed his trigger hand. It will be some time before he will make use of it, if at all.” Then her voice lowered in confidence. “I also broke all of his arrows. Once he is well enough, he will have to take the time to make new ones.” They stepped outside. “I would have destroyed his bow too, if it hadn’t been for that weasel, Mayon.” She nodded toward the man that sat on the first step of the bathhouse.

Mayon looked over his shoulder and stood to face them. Tall, his build was proportioned to his height. His crew styled hair was uncanny, almost white in color, and the tight wave contrasted his mahogany skin. White sideburns connected to a slender beard that lined his jaw. On the end of his chin was a well groomed goatee. Crystal slate blue eyes gazed upon the newcomer warmly. He bowed. “I would have preferred a formal introduction, however, under

the circumstances I will excuse your manners, Kasha.” He took a step up and extended his hand to Megan. “I am called Mayon. I welcome you, Megan, to our little community.”

“Ha! Never turn your back on this one!” Kasha forced Megan to step past the man. Mayon grunted and retaliated with, “You see? This is how people are misjudged. The newcomer deserves to draw her own conclusions.” He stayed in step behind them, careful not to invade their space.

Ignoring him, Kasha glared at the naked Pierce in the fizzing water. He was half lying on the steps with his eyes closed. His crippled hand was cradled on his chest. “Pierce, the bathhouse is free. You and Mayon make use of it!” Kasha ordered.

Pierce didn’t open his eyes, “Hmm, I don’t know that I’m ready.”

For an instant, Megan felt like she was being carried instead of the other way around. Kasha had pulled them both, almost marching down the steps into the water, despite the fact that she favored one leg. She had made sure the water was stirred enough to wash over Pierce, causing pain to his injured hand. “Augh! Damn you, woman!”

“Get up!”

“Fine! I was done anyway,” grumbled Pierce.

Megan turned her head away from the naked bowman as he slowly stood up. She focused on the tiny bubbles that gurgled around her shins. Kasha jerked around to warn Mayon to leave, but he had already gone inside. The weasel’s cooperative attitude aroused Kasha’s suspicions.

Pierce waded out and stopped where his clothes were piled. He smiled at Megan’s modesty, and then frowned at his things. Keeping his bad hand close to his chest, he reached down to pick them up, grunting from the effort.

Kasha insisted on removing her own clothing, and then pointed to a lower step, and Megan helped her to ease down into the pool. The warrior grimaced from initial sting of water on wounds, but refused to make a sound. Megan winced from Kasha's gripping nails and she earnestly tapped the injured woman's arm. Kasha immediately let go. "Forgive me," she murmured then angled her posture to relieve the pressure on her injured rump.

The Bowman considered the two for a moment (as one would view a piece of craftsmanship), then shrugged his shoulders and went inside.

Taking in a breath, Kasha floated off the step and disappeared under the fizzing water. Soon she was at the surface again, floating on her back. "Megan, wash." The newcomer bent down and took up water to rub down her arms. "Submerge them; the water will do the rest." She did as she was told. The water's tiny bubbles had an almost sedating effect. Megan started to relax; feeling compelled to get in.

"It's quite extraordinary, isn't it?" Megan straightened and half-turned to see behind her. It was Mayon wearing fresh clothes. It was then she noticed the style of his outfit. More concealing than the others, the shirt had long sleeves and was un-tucked. His silk sash was wrapped around his neck like a scarf. The man leaned over, propped himself on his knees, and gave an authoritative opinion. "The effervescence acts as a scrub. You just relax and let the pool do all the work. You know, how jewelers clean precious jewelry."

Now decent, Pierce walked up behind Mayon. "It reminds me of a denture cleanser." His injured hand was wrapped with his sash, and the ends were tied around his neck as a sling.

Pierce laughed. "Ha-ha, well that puts a whole new light on the subject."

Kasha returned to the steps, moving along them with her hands. "There are those that would enjoy your companionship." She pointed over to the massive table that was behind the

sleeping quarters. They all looked to see Titus sitting alone; concentrating on his meal. The three of them knew the giant preferred companionship while he ate.

Pierce whined, “Awl, what about the twins?”

“Do you see the boys anywhere?” Kasha curtly replied.

Mayon straightened. “Let’s go, Pierce. I’m sure Titus would appreciate our company.” Then he smiled at Megan, “I will save a seat for the newcomer.” He started to walk along the edge of the pool with Pierce reluctantly following.

Without looking back, Mayon suggested, “Uh, you might want to grab your bow & quiver, William Tell. I am no longer responsible for your toys.” Pierce blinked away his fix on the bathing china doll, then possessively scooped up his weapon.

“Megan?” When Kasha had her attention she asked, “Will you get me a towel and my things?” Nodding, Megan stepped out of the pool and looked down at her wet pants and shoes.

“You should change as well,” suggested the shadow warrior.

“Right.” Megan returned to the bathhouse.

Kasha painfully stood up and mastered each step with all of her weight on her good leg.

“You are wasting your time.” Damian jumped from the branch and stood at the foot of the tree.

Kasha glared at the bastard for a moment, then focused on what she was doing. She was in no shape or mood for confrontation. Damian unexpectedly stood in front of her. His arms crossed and he frowned at the naked woman before him. “I mean Megan. Anything you teach her will make no difference.”

Standing unabashed, Kasha replied coldly. “Then you need not worry.”

Damian smirked, “Do I ever?” He sensed Megan’s return, and half turned to watch her emerge from the bathhouse. She gasped and froze when she saw him. “Humph, my fight with her is already won.”

“Then leave her alone.”

The tyrant looked back at Kasha, “You are not the first to defend her. Why? Why should she be treated any different from the rest of you?” The woman neither could nor would answer him which frustrated Damian.

Kasha reached out her hand coaxing Megan to bring her the towel. Megan was not going to go past him. Damian walked up and stopped on the step next to Megan, who backed up against one of the pillars. She shielded her neck, remembering their last encounter. Disappointed, he snorted, “Feh, I rest my case.” Then he continued on, heading for the second entrance down the pillared corridor.

Megan rushed to Kasha and handed her the towel. “What am I going to do?”

“Quiet, newcomer,” scolded Kasha. “The menace hears as well as any dog.”

A long howl echoed through the bathhouse.

After Kasha finished drying, she shoved the towel at Megan. “You wear your fear like a spring bonnet.”

“Sorry.” Megan handed over the woman’s clothes. With some assistance Kasha was dressed. She pointed to her soiled ones. “You know where they go?”

“Yes, but don’t ask me,” she whispered, “to go back in there, not with him in there.”

Kasha frowned, shaking her head, and pointed to the tree. Damian was back on his perch. “You could learn from him,” Now she pointed to her ear. “Learn to listen. Now take them in for me...please.” Seeing Megan’s apprehension, she added, “I will be here.”

Taking a deep breath, Megan dashed into the bathhouse and returned to find Kasha staring at her with a raised brow. “You’re fast. There may be hope for you yet.” She curled her arm around the newcomer for support, and then guided Megan around the pool towards the table.

Something puzzled Megan. “Inside, the bathhouse was clean. And our clothes, all the cubicles were filled again.”

“Ah, and you are observant too,” commented Kasha, with a hint of sarcasm.

“But, how?”

Shrugging, Kasha kept her eyes forward, “May I suggest you not question, but accept what cannot be explained.” She glanced at the puzzled newcomer and smiled. “No one has been able to solve this mystery, though there is one who is determined.” As they neared, the injured woman gestured to the long massive table with her free hand. “And the day is not over yet.

