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ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

Quercus

ONE



HER MOTHER HAD ONCE TOLD HER THAT THE ONLY WAY TO TRULY know someone was to fight them. In Lore's experience, the only thing fighting actually revealed was the spot on their body someone least wanted to be punched.

For her opponent, that spot was clearly the new tattoo on his left breast, the one still covered with a bandage.

Lore brought up her fourteen-ounce gloves and let them absorb another sloppy hit. Her sneakers squeaked over the cheap blue mats as she bounced back a step. The lines of silver duct tape holding the makeshift ring together were, after five fights that night, beginning to peel from the moisture and heat. She grunted as she stamped the nearest one flat with her heel.

Sweat poured down her face until all she could taste was the salt of it. Lore refused to wipe it away, even as it stung her eyes. The pain was good. It kept her focused.

This—the fighting—was nothing more than a recent bad habit, one that had brought her a desperately needed release after Gil's death six months ago. But her original promise of *just this one match* had vanished as she'd felt that familiar surge of adrenaline.

One fight had been enough to break the deadening grief, to get her out of her head and back into her body. Two fights had disconnected the deep ache in her heart. Three had brought in a surprising amount of cash.

And now, weeks later, fight fifteen was giving her exactly what she was desperate for that night: a distraction.

Lore told herself she could stop at any time. She could stop when it no longer felt good. She could stop when it dredged up too much of what she'd buried.

But Lore wasn't there. Not just yet.

The cramped basement of Red Dragon Fine Chinese Food was sweltering. The hot press of too many bodies surrounded the mats. The crowd shifted as the fighters did, forming the unofficial boundary of the ring as they clutched their Solo cups and tried to keep from spilling their top-shelf liquor. Bills and bets flowed around her, hand to hand, until they reached Frankie, the ring organizer. Lore glanced to him as he adjusted the order and bets of the next two fights, forever less interested in the winner than the winnings.

Steam rolled down the stairs from the kitchen above them, giving the air a satin quality. The smell of kung pao chicken was a delicious alternative to the reek of old vomit and beer that haunted the boarded-up nightclubs the ring usually rotated through.

The crowd didn't seem to mind; whatever it took to give them some illusion of edge. Frankie's exclusive list seemed a lot less exclusive these days: models, art-scene types, and business guys passing around their small sachets of white powder were now frequently joined by private-school kids testing the limits of their parents' apathy.

Her opponent was a boy about her age—all soft, unmarked skin and unearned confidence. He'd laughed, crooking a finger at her as he'd chosen her out of all of Frankie's available fighters. Lore had decided to destroy him and lay waste to whatever tattered bit of his pride remained well before he ever called her *baby girl* and blew her a drunken kiss.

"Let me guess," she said around her mouth guard. Lore nodded toward the bandage on the teen boy's chest, covering his new body art. "*Live, Laugh, Love? Ros All Day?*"

His brows lowered as the crowd laughed. The boy swung a glove at her head, grunting with the effort. The movement, combined with his flagging strength, left his chest wide open. Lore had a clear target when she slammed her glove into his tender inked skin.

The boy's eyes bulged, his breath wheezing out of him. His knees hit the mat.

"Get up," Lore said. "You're embarrassing your friends."

"You—you stupid bi—" The boy choked a little on his mouth guard. Lore had wondered how long it would take before he melted down, and now she had her answer: five minutes.

"I'm *sure* you're not going to call me that," she said, circling him, "when you're the one on all fours."

He struggled to his feet, fuming. She rolled her eyes.

Not so funny anymore, is it? Lore thought.

Gil would have told her to walk away from the stupid kid—he had always been quick to remind Lore in that nonjudgmental, grandfatherly way of his that she didn't have to jump into every fight that presented itself. The truth was, the man would have hated this, and Lore suffered the guilt of that, too. Of disappointing him.

But Lore had tried other ways. None of them helped her move through the crushing tide of loss like a good fight did. And now it wasn't just Gil's death she needed to escape; there was a new dread clawing beneath her skin.

It was August, and the hunt had come back to her city.

Despite her best efforts to move on, to forget the shadowed life she'd left behind and step into the sunlight of a new, better one, some part of her mind was still attuned to the slow countdown of days. Her body had grown tighter, her instincts sharper, as if bracing for what was coming.

She'd started seeing familiar faces around the city two weeks before, making their final preparations for tonight. The shock had come like a knife to the lungs; each sighting was proof that all her hope, all her silent begging, had come to nothing. *Please*, she'd thought again and again over the last few months, *let it be London this cycle. Let it be Tokyo.*

Let it be anywhere else but New York City.

Lore knew she shouldn't have ventured out tonight, not while the killing would be at its most fevered. If a single hunter recognized her, the bloodlines wouldn't just be hunting gods. They'd be out to skin her, too.

From the corner of her eye Lore saw Frankie check his ridiculous pocket watch and give the *wrap-it-up* signal. Places to go, money to rub all over his face, she supposed.

“Done yet?” Lore asked.

Apparently, the alcohol had decided to hit the boy all at once. He chased Lore around the mats with his clumsy, swinging fists, growing angrier as the laughter of the crowd boomed.

As she turned to avoid a blow, her necklace swung out from where she had tucked it beneath her shirt. The charm on it, a gold feather, caught the dim light and flashed. Her opponent’s glove struck it. Somehow he must have hooked on to its thin chain, because as Lore shifted again, the clasp snapped and, suddenly, the charm was on the ground at her feet.

Lore used her teeth to undo her glove’s Velcro strap and slid her hand free. She ducked as her opponent swung again, quickly scooping the necklace up and tucking it into the back pocket of her jeans for safekeeping. As she pulled her glove back on, her body heated with a fresh wave of resentment.

Gil had given it to her.

Lore turned back toward the boy, reminding herself that she couldn’t kill him. She could, however, break his pretty little nose.

Which, to the cheers of the crowd, she did.

Blood burst from his face as he swore.

“I think it’s past your bedtime, *baby boy*,” she said, glancing back at Frankie to see if he’d call the match. “In fact—”

She saw the fist coming out at the edge of her vision, and turned just in time to take the hit to the side of her head, not her eye. The world flashed black, then burst bright with color again, but she managed to stay on her feet.

The boy crowed in victory, thrusting his arms into the air, nose still bleeding. He lurched toward her, and the moment she realized what was happening was the only moment she had.

Lore instinctively brought up her gloves to protect her chest, but that wasn’t what he was after. The boy locked an arm around her neck and crushed his lips to hers.

The panic was blinding, exploding out over Lore's skin like ice; it locked her out of her own mind. He pressed his body tighter to hers, his tongue clumsily licking at her as the crowd howled around them.

Something split open inside her, and the pressure that had been building in her chest for weeks released with a roar of fury. She drove her knee up hard between his legs. He dropped like she'd cut his throat, squealing the whole way down. Then she lunged.

The next thing Lore was aware of was being pulled up off the ground still kicking and snarling. Her gloves were splattered with blood, and what was left of his face was unrecognizable.

"Stop!" Big George, one of Frankie's security guards, gave her a small shake. "Honey, he ain't worth it!"

Lore's heart slammed against her ribs, beating too fast for her to catch her breath. Her body trembled as Big George set her feet back on the ground, holding her until she gave him a nod that she was all right. For his part, Big George stalked over to the boy moaning on the mat and nudged him with his foot.

As the pounding in Lore's ears receded, she realized the room had fallen completely silent, save for the banging and clattering in the kitchen just upstairs.

A slow horror slithered through her, knotting around her heart. Inside her gloves, her fingers curled to the point of pain. She hadn't just lost control. She'd slipped back into a part of herself she thought she'd killed years ago.

This isn't me, she thought, wiping the sweat from her upper lip. *Not anymore.*

There was more to life than this.

Desperate to salvage her night's pay, Lore ignored the bile, and the singular, sharp hatred she had for the whimpering piece of filth on the ground, and put a sheepish smile on her face. She held up her hands and shrugged.

The spectators rewarded her with cheers, thrusting their cups up in the air.

"You didn't win—you cheated," the boy was saying. "It wasn't fair—you cheated!"

This was the thing with boys like him. What he was feeling just then, that rage, wasn't the world falling in on him. It was an illusion shattering, the one

that told him he deserved everything, and that it was owed to him simply because he existed.

Lore tugged her gloves off and leaned over the boy. The crowd hushed, their faces as eager as hungry crows.

“Maybe your next one should be *Can’t Win for Losing?*” she said sweetly as she pressed hard against his bandage, this time with her bare hand. The bell rang over the sound of his outraged cry, ending the match. Big George dragged him back toward his huddle of friends.

Lore started back toward Frankie. It had been a mistake to come here tonight. Even now, she couldn’t tell if her body wanted her to break into a run, or scream.

She’d made it to the edge of the ring when he called out, “Next match: Golden versus challenger Gemini.”

Lore gave him an annoyed look, which he returned with his usual unbothered smile. He flashed her five fingers. She shook her head, and he added three more. Crumpled bills waved in the air around her, fluttering by as the crowd rushed to place their bets.

She needed to go home. She knew that, but . . .

Lore held up all ten fingers. Frankie scowled but waved her back toward the ring. She pulled her gloves back on and turned. If it was one of the boy’s friends, at least she might be able to amuse herself.

It wasn’t.

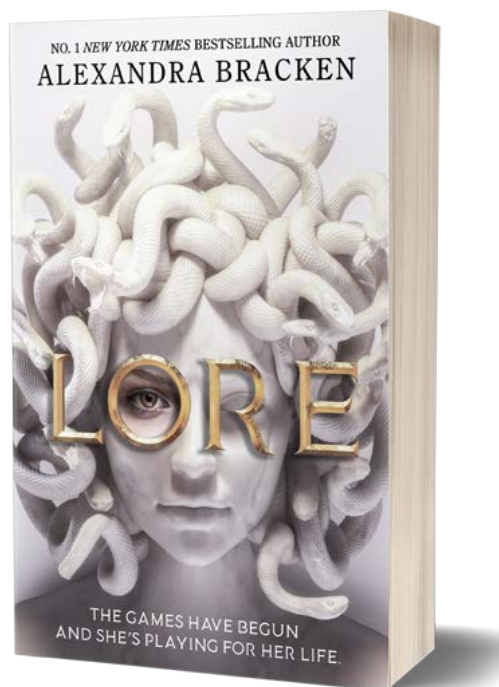
Lore reeled back. Her opponent stood just outside the light cast by the fixture overhead, clearly welcoming the darkness. The young man stepped forward, enough for the dim glow to catch the bronze mask that obscured his face.

Her breath turned heavy in her lungs.

Hunter.

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