

Note from Kele: I think this is another one of those scenes that was cut for space. From the start of writing *Slayer*, I always believed Wyatt would have talked to Alaine at some point early on after Chuito arrived in Garnet, seeing how she was a young, single woman living in that house with a fighter Wyatt didn't know or fully trust yet. This was a scene I absolutely had to write for the process of the story. I needed to know how Wyatt would handle that situation, and I really like him in this scene. Ultimately, I write a lot more than I use and I cut things back later. This is one of those little scenes that in my mind happened, even if I didn't have the spot

to show it. Re-reading it now, I sort of wished I had fought my publisher for more space and left it in.

It always makes me smile.

I may even include it in an extended edition I like it so much.

It was Saturday. Alaine didn't have to work, but she did have to study.

Chuito needed to work out, which Alaine thought was a bad idea. Like the coffee, he assured her it was a very good idea, as if his genetic makeup somehow had a different set of rules than normal humans.

There was no rest for him. No allowing his body to heal from the abuse. It was strange, and unnerving, because she never thought to meet someone who had done cocaine once, let alone enough times to claim he had *lived* off it.

So she followed him to the old rec center that was under construction after Jules, her brother, Sheriff Wyatt Conner and Clay Powers bought

it. Not exactly the ideal place to study, but it was more than the sawdust and noise. She found herself constantly looking up from her spot on the floor to watch Chuito and Clay fighting.

She wasn't an expert on the sport, but she had watched every single MMA match Clay or Wyatt fought in and she knew enough to see that any man who could get into the cage with the MMA Heavy-Weight Champion of the World and hold his own was impressive.

Especially when he was crashing off a cocaine addiction.

Maybe Chuito *wasn't* human.

She chewed on pencil as she watched him dodge a hit from Clay, moving so fast for his large frame it seemed impossible. Then he hit back, catching Clay in the side hard enough to make the heavy-weight stumble.

“Hey, girlie, you wanna tell me what the heck you’re doing here?”

Alaine looked away from the cage, glancing up at Wyatt Conner, who was towering over her in nothing but a pair of fighting shorts. He was a huge man, all muscles and broad shoulders, but she never felt the need to get giggly around him the way some of her old friends used to.

She sort of thought of Wyatt as a pseudo-father figure the same way she thought of Jules as a psudeo-mother figure, if a mother was inclined to swear like a sailor and own a MMA gym.

“Just doing my homework,” she mumbled as she looked back to the cage to see that Clay had taken Chuito down to the mat, but her new neighbor was still holding his own. “Is it illegal to do homework in a construction zone?”

“No.” Wyatt sat down next to her, his back against the wall as he rested his arms on his knees and looked at her critically. “Just unusual. I wouldn’t consider this place particularly conducive to studying.”

“I’m studying,” she lied.

“Really? Cause I’ve been watching ya for the past five minute and you haven’t turned that page once.”

Alaine turned the page and gave him a pointed look.

Wyatt laughed, before he shook his head and looked to where Clay and Chuito were still fighting. “I used to know a girl who’d use the excuse of studying to come and sit in this rec center every day. A sweet redheaded girl like you who didn’t know better than to stay away from big, mean fighters.”

“What happened to her?” she asked curiously as she looked to Wyatt.

“She got wise, I guess. Probably serve you well to get wise too.” He shrugged, his gaze distant and lost, before he seemed to shake it off and turned back to her with a harsh look. “I can’t prove it, but I suspect that boy’s got a pretty dark past, Alaine. He’s not the best one to be wasting study hours on.”

Alaine arched an eyebrow at Wyatt. “Then why did you decided to sponsor him?”

He reached up and touched the small, stitched up cut beneath his eye that wasn’t anything odd to see on the sheriff. “I guess I reckoned any boy who could lay me out in less than three minutes needed a shot. That was



pretty damn impressive. He'll probably make me rich."

"You think so?" Alaine asked hopefully. She wanted that for Chuito, because she knew he truly did have a difficult life just like Wyatt suspected.

"I really think so," he agreed as he looked to the cage. "I'm not real sure how a boy with no training and no belts ended up being the most powerful sprawl and brawl fighter I've ever fought in my life, but I sure ain't gonna argue with good fortune. Hopefully he can stay out of trouble long enough do something with a gift like that."

“He will,” Alaine assured him as she thought about what Chuito was suffering through silently without complaint. To say nothing of all the loss he had told her about, his brother gone forever, his cousin locked up and unreachable. “He’s really strong. I think he’s the strongest fella I’ve ever met in my life. He can do this.”

“Oh, lordy.” Wyatt rolled his eyes. “You got it bad. My sister will lose her mind when she sees you looking at him like a lost puppy. Y’all should not be living in such close quarters. That’s a drama waiting to happen. Your daddy will burn this gym to the ground if he finds out.”

Alaine shrugged, because her father wasn't her favorite topic. Not when he hadn't spoken to her since Easter, and even then it had been tense. The last time she ran into him at Maple's One Stop Shop he had just turned his cart and gone in the opposite direction. Now Alaine made sure to shop on Sundays and Wednesdays, when she knew he wouldn't be at the store.

"It's nice to have a neighbor," she admitted to Wyatt. "That's all it is. Just knowing someone's next door if I needed him to help me open a bottle of pickles."

"Okay," Wyatt said in disbelief. "But, you tell me if he gives you any problems. Promise."

“He’s been real polite,” she assured him. “He’s not gonna give anyone problems. I think he mostly likes to keep to himself.”

Wyatt studied her again, as if unsure. “Make sure if he’s keeping to himself, you don’t do anything to encourage him otherwise.”

She nodded and flat out lied to the sheriff without even blinking. “I’ll make sure.”

“Good girl.” Wyatt squeezed her knee and stood. “I won’t tell my sister you were here studying.”

“Much appreciated,” Alaine said with a smile. “I don’t wanna lose my guaranteed pickle jar opener less than a week after he showed up.”

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“Hey, mami.”

Alaine looked from where she stood cooking dinner, seeing that Chuito was sprawled out on his floor looking at the ceiling. He still wore his fighter shorts and hadn't bothered to shower yet because the locker rooms were under construction at the rec center.

He told her he needed to finish sweating first, but planned to shower before they ate. That was fine with her, as he looked mighty fine laying there sweating.

“Yes?” she asked curiously, forcing herself to turn back to cooking.

“How come the sheriff told me to make sure I’m nothing more than a pickle jar opener when it comes to you?”

Alaine couldn’t help it, she laughed out loud as she turned back to him. “He said that?”

“Yup.”

“He got the wrong idea ‘bout me being at the gym. I told him I just liked having a neighbor around to open a pickle jar if I needed it.”

“It had to be a pickle jar?”

She turned to see him look at her with that one cocky eyebrow arched.

“What’s wrong with a pickle jar?”

“Chica, you’re not gonna be allowed in my apartment anymore if you keep telling people you want me to open the pickle jar for you.”

Her jaw dropped when she realized what he was implying. “That’s rude.”

“Dios mio.” He groaned and went back to looking at the ceiling. “I wonder what it’s like to be as sheltered as you.”