



Consort of the Crime Queen

Author: *Persephone Black*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Lesbian Romance

Description: The queen of Chicago's criminal underworld, Hadria "Hades" Imperioli, is no stranger to power and danger.

When she set Aurora Verderosa free, Hadria thought she was doing the right thing—for once in her life.

But now the only light in her dark world has been ripped from her, and Hadria faces a vulnerability she never knew.

As Hadria frantically searches the city's underbelly to save her lover, the Syndicate she leads becomes fractured, with some questioning her right to lead.

Hadria is forced to confront the idea that saving Aurora might mean giving up her criminal kingdom. But the crime queen is determined to reclaim her love—whatever it takes.

Can Hadria save Aurora and claim her forever?

Or will the darkness she revels in overtake her at last and destroy any chance at love?

Total Pages (Source): 66

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

CHAPTER 1

Hadria

I leave the cafe with the bitter taste of disappointment sharper on my tongue than the increasingly-bad coffees I was served today.

Aurora hasn't shown. Of course she hasn't. What made me think she would choose me over the freedom I gifted her?

Stupid.

Weak.

Distance. I need distance before this foreign ache in my chest shatters me completely. Aurora has made her choice clear with her absence, and I promised to honor her choice. I just didn't ever really think she'd...

But I should have seen it coming. Of course I should have. A billion dollars, a dozen fake passports, and a whole world to explore, versus a dangerous criminal life lived in the dark hours of night—what other outcome would there be?

It's hard to walk away, though. I force myself to keep moving, barely noticing the people rushing by on the way home. They give me a wide berth, some primal sense warning them away from the predator in their midst.

If only they knew how utterly harmless I feel in this moment. How powerless. I give

a hard laugh. This must be how Aurora has felt for her whole life. Ah, the irony...

I shove the vulnerability down deep where it can't touch me, like I have my whole life. I have to get out of here. Now. Before I do something stupid, like—like burst into tears.

I should never have allowed the foolish, fragile part of myself to hope she would return. I should never have set her free at all—but no. I can't think that. I've done a lot of bad deeds in my life, and I've done a few things I regret, but I can't regret giving Aurora Verderosa a chance at the freedom she deserves.

The freedom that her strength and her suffering earned her.

The knowledge that I've done one good thing in my life can be the cold comfort I cling to in a lonely bed back at Elysium.

Ah, God. Elysium. Where I'll finally have to admit to Lyssa and Mrs. Graves what I've done. What I allowed Aurora to do. I haven't even lied to them about her absence this week—told them only that she was safe and well and that her whereabouts was none of their concern.

It was true. But it didn't go down well. Mrs. Graves in particular insisted she had a right to know, was much angrier than I expected her to be, and took to avoiding me this week. I'm glad she did.

But now I'll have to explain. I'm really not sure how to go about it—or when, for that matter, since it's still so raw, so painful...and I can't even say that she said goodbye to them.

I'm halfway down the block by now. My steps slow, come to a halt. Because what if she has said goodbye? To them...or to me?

What if she left a note? One final message for me in that empty apartment?

The thought twists deep into my brain, excruciating and irresistible. Even the cruelest rejection from her in writing would be better than the endless silence awaiting me back in my fortress. And at least then I'd know for certain that she is truly gone.

I stand still like a rock in a stream as the foot traffic weaves around me, occasionally cursing at me for obstruction, but I ignore everyone. My chest is aching as though I've taken a knife to the ribs. Go back, whispers the shredded remains of my heart. Leave this place behind, insists the cold pragmatism of my mind. In the end, the heart wins out.

I was always a fool where Aurora was concerned. Why stop now?

I turn and force my leaden feet to carry me back across the distance, each step heavier than the last. Soon I'm pushing open the door of the apartment block, steeling myself to face the silent space upstairs. But I stop dead as soon as I cross the threshold, a massive bouquet of moon-pale blossoms sitting on the unattended front desk catching my eye. It only twists the jagged blade deeper. Jasmine, angel's trumpet, ghost orchids—all those ethereal flowers that flourished under Aurora's nurturing touch fill the bouquet in extravagant profusion.

I can't resist reaching out to touch it, and as my fingers brush the soft petals I'm transported back to the night garden at Elysium, to Aurora patiently coaxing out delicate new blooms in the darkness. Even then, when she was still my hostage, she'd filled my bleak world with light and beauty.

And now here stand these ghostly blooms, reminding me of all I've lost.

But something prickles my skin as I study the flowers. They are suggestive of a wedding, so white and pure...so like those flowers that filled the church at the

wedding from which I first stole her.

Too alike.

And when I look around the foyer, there's a shattered electronic tablet on the marble floor nearby, its screen a spiderweb of cracks. Dread runs a finger down my back, cold and creeping.

This is wrong. All wrong.

I'm moving before I'm even aware, punching at the elevator call button with the side of my fist as I take out my gun. Come on, come on. The waiting is interminable, seconds stretching endless before the doors slide open. I slip inside and jab the button for Aurora's floor.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

The soft chime announces my arrival and I slide out, senses heightened. Too quiet. The hush shrouds the hallway as I pass all the shut doors with their impersonal numbers until I reach the one I want, pausing outside it with my heart lodged in my throat and my fingers clenched tight on my gun.

Just get it over with. I've faced far worse, after all.

I enter silently, and I know at once that she's not here. No one is here. The apartment has that unmistakably empty feeling of a place deserted. And I prove it to myself as I walk through. Aurora's clothes—the few that she brought with her from Elysium—are packed neatly into her suitcase, her toiletries along with them, left here as though in polite rejection of anything I ever provided her. She wants nothing that I gave her, except the money and the passports.

There's nothing else. No note. No explanation.

I got excited about a bouquet of flowers and a broken tablet, two unconnected things, no doubt. I let my imagination run wild over nothing.

I sink down onto the bed for a moment. "What the hell did you expect?" I ask myself, trying for the vicious, cold voice of Hades, the one that gets my people in order.

But all that comes out is a shaky whisper.

I reach out a hand to the suitcase, plunging my fingers into the silky clothes she left behind, as though I could pull her back through sheer will alone.

But after a moment, the heavy stillness begins to feel...wrong.

Yes. Something is very wrong. Because when I search through the suitcase, then through the rest of the apartment—nightstand, coffee table in the living room, the drawers of the small stand next to the door—I can't find her phone.

If she wanted to leave me behind for good, surely she would have left her phone as well. Even Aurora, naive as she is, must be aware of the usefulness of tracking devices on smartphones. She's heard me talking about them often enough, and the others in the Syndicate.

As for Aurora's, her phone was fully tracked and connected to my own, one that I bought specifically for this week. I pull it out and check her location.

If she's halfway to Bermuda, I'll destroy my phone and never attempt to contact her again. But if?—

There.

A pulsing red dot shows Aurora's phone, stationary in the building.

I bolt from the room and down the stairs, too impatient and worried now to wait for the elevator, back down to the foyer and that enormous bouquet of flowers. I look around the desk that they're sitting on, and then I see it—not her phone, but something that gives me just as much pause.

A hypodermic syringe. Used.

But she's not here, though she should be nearby, or her phone should. I take the staff exit into the back alley and it doesn't take me long to spot Aurora's phone tossed aside on the grimy pavement, screen cracked and dark.

I run back to the flowers, tearing them apart as I search for a clue. There's nothing. No name, no florist shop—but of course there won't be. I should have understood the moment I saw them, but I was distracted by my perceived rejection. I grab up the tablet from the ground, as smashed as Aurora's phone, but it does turn on when I try it—unsecured, even, as though whoever it was who sent someone for her wanted me to know what they'd done.

Wanted me to be as enraged and panicky as I feel right now.

Her signature is still half-formed, traced over a fake acknowledgment of receipt. I know it's fake because the rest of the tablet is entirely blank of any other information, not even connected to the internet.

Whoever took her has been waiting. Watching. Biding their time, snatching her at the time it would do most damage to me. And I was oblivious. Foolish. Weak.

Always so damned weak where she's concerned.

The rage surges higher, and I embrace it gladly as it turns from hot into the more familiar icy sharpness. It fuels me, forges my resolve into steel.

I knew there were risks. So did she. I thought the greater risk would be never allowing her the chance for freedom, but now I see how foolish I've been.

I failed her.

But I won't fail her again. No force on heaven or earth will stop me from getting her back and destroying anything—anyone—that tries to keep her from me.

I stare at the broken tablet in my clenched fist, imagining it's the neck of whoever dared lay a hand on what's mine. But of course, I already know who it was.

And I will hunt Nero down and end him like the rabid dog he is.

CHAPTER 2

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Hadria

I return at once to Elysium, needing the quiet of my war room to come up with a plan, but the familiar sight of home does nothing to lift the leaden weight pressing down on my chest. For the first time, the dark, hulking exterior of the house seems desolate rather than dangerous. For a moment I flash back to my earliest nights on the street, the deep sense of dread as I was cornered by three men.

It was Lyssa who saved me then. Perhaps she can save me now—and Aurora, too. She has a soft spot for "Suzy," I know it, though she'd never admit to it.

At the gate I sent word ahead for Lyssa to meet me urgently, and by the time I reach the front of the house, she's already there in the foyer, waiting impatiently for me. Her head snaps around as I enter, eyes narrowing when she takes in my face. I must look like death warmed over from her reaction.

"What happened?" Lyssa demands. She grabs me, none too gently, angling my face into the light as she scans for any outward signs of injury. Finding none, she releases me, but her expression is no less concerned.

I open my mouth to reply, but I have no voice.

Aurora, my bright and beautiful Aurora, is gone. And I can't say the words. Saying them would make this real.

Mrs. Graves appears then, drawn from the east wing by some kind of intuition. Her kindly face creases with worry as she takes in my wretched state. She and Lyssa

exchange a loaded glance, their thoughts no doubt flitting to the darkest possibilities.

Lyssa catches the eye of the closest house guard, and says, "Get out of here. All of you."

They file out, and I'm grateful she took the initiative, although I dread the words I need to say.

But I have to hurry, if I'm to save Aurora. I take a breath, as Lyssa and Mrs. Graves stare hard at me. "I...lied about Aurora's location this past week. I claimed I sent her somewhere safe, and I did, but the truth is...more complicated." My voice hitches. I push forward, forcing out the words. "I gave her leave to experience a week of freedom, to decide her own path forward, away from Elysium and removed from my influence. But..."

Confusion wars with dawning horror on Lyssa's face as her mind supplies endless permutations of the rest of my sentence. Mrs. Graves presses a hand to her heart, face draining of color.

I finish in a ragged whisper. "She was supposed to meet me this morning if she wanted to return to Elysium, but she never came. At first I thought she'd made her choice, turned her back on me. But when I went to check the safe house, I realized...she's been taken. By Nero, I believe."

For a long, terrible moment, the foyer is filled only with stunned silence. Then Mrs. Graves moves forward, and when I look at her all I see is the depthless disappointment in her eyes.

"You foolish girl," she hisses, face pale with rage. "That poor child trusted you, and you cast her straight into the jaws of monsters." She steps closer, staring up into my face. "I warned you not to destroy an innocent with your coldness, your inability to

trust, your selfishness. But you just couldn't help it, could you?"

I say nothing. Inside, I'm shattering into a million pieces. Because she's right.

My selfishness, my fear of vulnerability, my need to test Aurora—that's what put her right back into Nero's clutches. And now she's suffering for my weakness.

Mrs. Graves makes a low, disgusted noise. "I am leaving here," she tells me. "Today." She turns on her heel and walks away. The sound of a door slamming in a nearby hallway echoes through the foyer.

In the silence that follows, I stand motionless, staring after her, struggling to rein in my emotions. Lyssa steps up beside me, arms crossed as she gazes after Mrs. Graves, too.

"Well you've really done it now," she mutters. "I told you getting all moony over Little Miss Sunshine was a bad idea. But did you listen? No. And then you had to go and rile up Nero, flashing his stolen bride right in his face." She makes a derisive noise in her throat. "Christ, Hadria, Nero must have thought Christmas came early when he realized she was right there for the taking."

My teeth grind together painfully. Lyssa's words hit their mark with bruising precision. But she's right, just as Mrs. Graves was right. I taunted Nero, flaunted my power by stealing Aurora away, dangling her in front of him in that dress at the meeting we had...

Then I served her up by letting doubt cloud my judgment.

"I know," I rasp finally, shame burning through me. I turn to Lyssa, hating the desperation in my voice. "I know I made a mistake. One I may not be able to fix. But I have to try, and I need your help. Please. Help me get her back, Lyssa. I'm begging

you."

My greatest fear is that she'll leave me, just like Mrs. Graves has announced. And when Lyssa searches my face, her expression is unreadable. Then she sighs, shoulders slumping. "You know I'd do anything for you, you silly bitch. But this mess..." She scrubs a hand over her face, looking suddenly exhausted. "Is Suzy even still alive?"

"Yes." I don't know. Can't know. But I can't exist in a world where Aurora doesn't, so I have to believe she's still alive.

"Then what's our move? And Hadria—listen—I'm not sure how we come back from this. Not just with Suzy, but the whole Syndicate...if they hear what happened, it will undermine everything you've worked for."

I know she's right. If my people hear how easily I've been undermined, my reputation will be shot. It won't matter a damn all the things I've done over the years—I maintain my position, maintain the Syndicate itself, by veiling myself in a mask of absolute power and competence. If Chicago discovers I'm not the untouchable fiend they think I am, the Syndicate will become a laughingstock.

And Elysium itself could come under attack.

I've endangered everything we've built with my hypocrisy and fear. But the thought of Aurora, scared and suffering, is the only thing that matters right now. I put her in Nero's path. Now I must do whatever it takes to get her back safely.

I look Lyssa dead in the eyes, pouring every ounce of my determination into my voice. "First, we focus on getting Aurora back. By any means necessary. But we keep it quiet. Just the two of us."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I sound very sure of myself, but uncertainty swirls inside me. All I can think about is the stinging reprimand from Mrs. Graves, my cheeks still hot with shame, and of my own colossal failure.

Lyssa studies me a moment, then nods, her typical sly grin returning. "Just the two of us, huh? Like the old days. Well, then, Hades. Let's go hunting."

CHAPTER 3

Hadria

I pace the length of the war room as Lyssa checks in with yet another contact, my thoughts as repetitive as my feet. No leads, no whispers, not even a shred of intel about where Nero might be keeping Aurora, and now more than twenty-four hours have passed.

In fact, the intel we have received suggests he doesn't have her at all. He's not acting like the cat who got the cream; he's gone about his usual day as though nothing has changed.

And Nero is not a man to whom subtlety comes easily. If he did have Aurora, the whole damn city would have heard of it by now. I'm sure of that. So it gnaws at me, this uncertainty.

Time is slipping through my fingers, and with each passing second, Aurora seems further from my grasp. I clench my fists till the knuckles turn white.

If not Nero, then who? Who would dare to snatch Aurora away from me? Every man and woman in this city knows exactly what my retribution would mean. I've spent years building up my fearsome reputation. I can't imagine who?—

Wait.

There's one person who might have had the nerve to do this...if he's still in Chicago.

Lyssa wanted to come, but I persuaded her to stay at Elysium, just in case any word came in from our contacts. "Or any Syndicate jobs?" she'd asked.

"Fuck the jobs," I snapped back. "Right now, you and I have only one priority, and that's?—"

"Finding Suzy," she agreed. "But you wanted to keep this mission between the two of us, and I gotta tell you, Hadria, turning away any job offers that come in will only cause more unrest in the Syndicate. We take the jobs and we give the work to the people who want it—while you and I focus on this. Agreed?"

I wanted to snarl, but I caught myself back. What Lyssa said was sensible. Smart. Letting the others know that there was a problem wasn't the right play...yet. So I'd just agreed with her and then left, alone, to track down my next target for interrogation.

Night cloaks the city now as I pull up at the diner I visited not that long ago with Aurora herself, and see that my gamble has paid off. Johnny "the Gentleman" de Luca is sitting there at the counter again, eating another slice of fucking pie, and shooting the shit with the waitress behind the counter without a care in the world.

He'll start caring fast if he had anything to do with Aurora's disappearance.

I stalk in and sit right next to him, this relic of a bygone era when men wore suits like armor and courtesy was their sword. But courtesies be damned tonight. Conversations taper off around us as people suddenly drop into whispers. This is one of those places where the people can sense the kind of work we do—and don't want to get involved.

Johnny de Luca sits still, without turning to me. He takes a sip of his coffee, and waits for me to begin.

"Hi." My voice cuts loud through the soft clink of glass and hushed tones.

He turns slowly at last, his expression polite, almost friendly, but a little wary. "Hello again." A nod, his demeanor unflappable even now.

"We need to talk." I don't ask; I command.

He gestures to a private booth tucked away in shadows. Privacy for what's about to unfold.

We sit across from each other, and he waits with that same damn calm that irks me to no end, because it's exactly the same mask I put on to unnerve people. "I'm looking for someone," I begin.

"I gathered as much," he replies smoothly. "But if you need wet works done, I've told you before, I'm no longer?—"

"It's not a job. I'm looking for a—a woman."

His eyebrows go up. "I'm not in that kind of business either, Ms. Imperioli."

"This woman is..." How to explain? "A member of my Syndicate. She's gone missing."

He nods slowly. "Well, if you're wondering if I've taken your lost lamb, let me remind you again: I'm retired."

"That's not entirely true, though, is it?" I challenge. "Last time we met, you suggested Juno Bianchi might be interested in?—"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"A friendship," he finishes for me quickly. "And that was just an old man looking to be more useful than he currently is."

That's straight-up bullshit. Johnny the Gentleman is an important advisor to the head of the Bianchi Family. He's still neck-deep in the business, and I'm tired of all the euphemisms. "Do you have her?"

He regards me with those keen eyes that have seen decades of this life we lead—the life that chews you up and spits you out if you're not careful enough or cruel enough or smart enough to survive it.

"I assure you," he says evenly, "I've had no hand in whatever trouble has befallen your...associate."

I lean toward him, elbow on the table, and let my jacket fall open to show my gun in its holster. "And why should I believe you?"

"Because if I had taken her," he says, quietly but with meaning, "you'd never have found me to ask."

I hold his gaze for a moment to see if I can read his face. And I find, to my own surprise, that I believe him.

"Then help me," I say before pride can choke the words in my throat.

A flicker of surprise crosses his features before he schools them back into neutrality. "The fearsome Hades is asking for help?" His tone is almost amused, but not

mocking—never mocking.

"Yes," I admit through gritted teeth. "I need help." The word tastes like bile but desperation overshadows pride. "Help me—and I'll consider it a personal favor."

He consider that, then nods once, decisively. "If it's within my power to assist you, then yes, I will."

Relief floods me—a dangerous sensation when nothing is yet resolved—but it's there nonetheless. For a moment we simply look at each other—two killers acknowledging an unexpected truce.

"Thank you," I say at last, the words unfamiliar but necessary.

He inclines his head again—a gentleman even now—and then reaches into his inner pocket and slides a card across the table toward me. "Call if you need anything. I'll ask around in the meantime."

My hand hovers over the card for a moment before snatching it up swiftly and tucking it away. Allies are rare in this world we've built from blood and secrets; one does not dismiss them lightly—even those found under strange circumstances.

"Be subtle," I tell him. "This can't get out."

"And what name will I give?" he asks. "For when I'm asking around."

"Her name is..." I have to pause and swallow. "Aurora."

I can see his eyebrows go up. He knows the history there, obviously. He might be in town on vacation, but he got the lay of the land pretty damn fast, is my guess. He knows exactly who Aurora is and what she was meant to be.

My brother's victim.

"I see," he says, his voice uncharacteristically grave. "In that case, I will make every effort. I don't like to see innocents taken advantage of by those who live with violence and cruelty." He pauses. "I must tell you, though—if I find her, and she does not wish to be returned to you..." He trails off before adding, "Well, this budding friendship between us might be over before it starts."

"You're an honorable man," I tell him. "Aurora will wish to return. I have no doubt of that." I rise from our table without another word.

But the drive back to Elysium finds me replaying Johnny's words over and over in my head. What if Aurora really doesn't want to return? She might have been taken against her will—certainly the bank account I created for her has not been touched—but that doesn't mean she intended to return to Elysium.

I might have been working on a false assumption, just like I was so certain at first that Nero had taken her. And now I'm back to square one. Because if not Nero, and if not Johnny, then...

Who?

CHAPTER 4

Aurora

I wake slowly, my mind still foggy with sleep. The soft mattress cradles me and for a moment I imagine I'm back in my suite at Elysium. But as awareness returns, dread creeps in. I open my eyes.

This isn't my bed. It's not any bed I've known before.

The room is large, almost grand, with heavy brocade curtains and dark mahogany furniture. Old fashioned and it smells...stuffy. When my gaze lands on an old man sitting vigil in the corner, watching me, my breath stops along with my heart, before sputtering on.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"Good morning, Ms. Verderosa," he says, his voice a gravelly purr. "I'm so pleased you're finally awake."

Every muscle in my body goes taut. I know this man, though I've never met him. I've only seen his photograph. Giuseppe Imperioli, known to his friends as Zepp. Hadria's father. The head of the Imperioli Family.

Don Imperioli himself.

Fear tightens around my heart as I think back. The flowers...the needle...

I've been kidnapped. By Hadria's father...and Nero's father, too.

Don Imperioli's eyes pin me, two colorless chips of ice boring through my skin. Hadria has his eyes, but where hers are striking, his pale eyes merely make him look terrifying. "You've caused quite the commotion between my offspring, haven't you? Petulant children fighting over a favored toy." His smile is a cruel slash, devoid of warmth. "So I have taken their toy away."

I stay silent, unsure how to respond. I don't know what he has planned for me. Will he try to marry me off to Nero again? Kill me? I'm helpless, at the mercy of this ruthless old man. Because he looks ancient, but I know how merciless the Imperioli Don is. I've seen the results of his cruelty not only in Hadria, but in Chicago itself over the years.

When he smiles again, I shrink away. "Come, now," he chides me. "You mustn't be afraid of me. I have no desire to hurt you."

Somehow I know, with a deep certainty, that he is lying.

"W-what are you going to do to me?" I ask at last.

He gives a shrug, a mannerism that reminds me so much of Hadria I feel ill. "I need to bring my children to heel, Ms. Verderosa."

"And I am the reward for obedience?" My voice is steadier now, clear and calm, and he laughs in appreciation.

"My children think me a fool, you see. Think that they can do things in this city without my knowledge." He raises a finger slowly and taps the side of his nose. "But nothing is beyond the knowledge of Don Imperioli. Now—" He stands, movements steady despite his age. "—you must be hungry. I'll have some soup brought up straight away. Eat slowly, my dear. The drugs my man gave you may make you queasy."

Before I can reply, he exits, locking the door behind him with an ominous thunk.

I take deep breaths, willing myself not to panic. I am not powerless, I remind myself. Not anymore. And I'm definitely not a piece of meat to be waved around as bait, and not an object to be stolen away on a whim. Swinging my legs out of the bed, I make my way unsteadily to the attached bathroom on trembling legs.

I avoid my reflection at first, splashing my face with cold water again and again until the last cobwebs of disorientation clear. Looking up, I take in the stranger staring back at me. Dark circles under frightened eyes, limp hair, wan skin... I seem to have faded, becoming a pale specter of the woman I thought I was.

So much for using my beauty as a weapon, as Hadria always encouraged. I sneer at myself in the mirror, hands fisting on the marble countertop. I refuse to be anybody's

pliable little captive. Not anymore. Not again. If Zepp Imperioli thinks me some naive pawn he can manipulate in this sick game of family power grabs, he is gravely mistaken.

I am a survivor. I endured my father and adapted to Hadria's no less dangerous domain. And during my time there, I found myself.

I will do whatever I must to return to Elysium. To Hadria. To the life I want to live.

I give the bathroom a quick search and find it stocked with unopened toiletries. I shower and then comb my hair until it gleams, pinning it back neatly in a way that makes me look about five years younger than I am. Good. A touch of gloss on my dry lips, and then I pinch hard at my cheeks until the color transforms me from wraith back to poised young woman.

The weapons at my disposal may not be guns or knives, but my mind, my charisma—and yes, my beauty...until I know where I stand with Don Imperioli, these are assets I dare not squander.

When I emerge, the food has arrived, set on a small table to the side on a tray, and Zepp is back as well, settled in the same chair as before. His eyes travel me head to toe, but all I see is surprise there. Not desire.

Well, at least that's one thing I don't have to worry about.

"Sit and eat," he commands, and I even give him a small grateful smile before I do. He watches me eat the bowl of mushroom soup with those pale, hooded eyes so much like Hadria's, and yet so alien. I keep my posture demure as I sip the rich soup slowly despite my hunger. I want to maintain a facade of frail femininity.

"I know you have been through an ordeal, little one," he says finally. "I want to help

you, but you must tell me everything you know about my daughter and her...organization."

I widen my eyes, the picture of earnestness. "Oh, it has been an ordeal. Please forgive my poor manners earlier, Don Imperioli. I was overwhelmed, as you can imagine. And you have my deepest gratitude for delivering me from that wicked woman's clutches. Forgive me, I know she's your daughter, but..." I break off and bite my lip, casting my eyes down.

He blinks, clearly not expecting my attitude. But I'll need to play this very carefully, if I'm going to lull him into thinking me a nitwit while I gather information.

"Of course, of course," he murmurs. "She is quite insane with envy, my poor daughter. We must pity her for it, and remember at the same time, she is a dangerous woman. But tell me what you know. Where did she keep you while you were at this compound of hers—what does she call it?"

"Elysium." I put down my spoon, the picture of earnestness. "But it wasn't anywhere as beautiful as this." I gesture around the lavish suite. "My room—it was very run down, and she only had a handful of men working for her. She's desperate for money, she told me that herself, which is why she takes on any job that comes her way, no matter how immoral. Please, you must stop her quickly, before she hurts anyone else!"

He nods, seeming to relax.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Clearly he has underestimated his daughter if he's so ready to believe she's commanding a ragtag group out of a ramshackle house.

"She kept me locked away most days with hardly any sunlight or fresh air. And she had so few allies, always raving about how people would turn down her offers of friendship due to fear of you, Don Imperioli. It's almost sad, really..."

For a moment I fear I've gone too far with my flattery, but Zepp actually smiles. "You said a handful of men. Be more specific, if you can. How many people work for her?" he asks. "What types of weapons and other resources does she have access to?"

I furrow my brow, affecting deep thought. "Well, there were maybe...ten men that I saw? And of course that scary woman, Lyssa." I give a shudder. "I'm not sure if there were more. They had guns and knives, I don't know what types."

"And where is this Elysium located?"

He must know that. Surely. Everyone in the city knows where Elysium is, Hadria boasted to me once. Or at least, everyone who has a need to know where it is. There's a lot of dirty work the different criminal organizations of Chicago like to carry out against each other without taking direct credit.

So Don Imperioli must be testing me.

"It was well outside the city, but I couldn't see anything out of the windows. They kept them shuttered all the time." I shake my head woefully. "And as I said, she's barely holding things together, from what I could tell."

Zepp rubs his chin. "What connections does my daughter have beyond her Syndicate? Who supports her?"

I look down, twisting my fingers in apparent distress. "She mentioned trying to form an alliance with someone called...the Bianchis?"

Zepp's eyebrows go up. "She reaches out to Juno Bianchi?" he demands, and for the first time, I think I see worry in his pale eyes.

"But of course they refused her," I tell him at once. "No one wants to back someone so volatile." I peek up at him, judging how my words are landing. "She seems quite...isolated, Don Imperioli."

He considers me with those unreadable eyes. "But if the Bianchis would not ally with her, why is Johnny the Gentleman still in town? What is his role in all this?"

"Johnny? I'm sorry, I don't remember any Johnny. Like I said, she only had a few men guarding me, and none of them were called Johnny—or not that I heard."

Zepp seems less satisfied by this than I hoped he would be. But I still have one more card to play.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am that you've rescued me, Don Imperioli," I tell him with a bright smile. "How soon do you think we can reschedule the wedding?"

"Wedding?" he repeats blankly.

"To Nero," I say. "I was so excited for my wedding day, and then it was ruined by Hadria. But now that you've saved me, we can reschedule as soon as possible. Can't we?"

I really have surprised him now. All thoughts of Johnny the Gentleman seem to have fled his mind. He leans back, steepling his fingers. "You know, I may have misjudged you, little Aurora. Perhaps you are naive, but I believe you would make a fine wife to my brother, and a good mother to my grandchildren."

I smile tremulously. "You're so kind, Don Imperioli." I hesitate, but if not now, when? "I wonder if I could see my parents soon? I've missed my mother so much..."

He considers this for a moment before replying. "Well, they will need to be told you are safe. But won't you want to see my son first? Your fiancé?"

My breath catches. I should have seen that coming, I suppose. But refusing Zepp's suggestion now would rouse his suspicion. I lower my eyes demurely.

"Don Imperioli, I was brought up very sheltered, as you say. I think—well, it would be improper for me to spend much time alone with Nero before our wedding, wouldn't it?"

It's weak. So weak. But Zepp's stern face slowly creases into a smile. He nods gently. "You are a good girl. I will send for your parents first, and Nero can be patient a while longer. He doesn't know that I have you, yet."

After he leaves, I allow myself a small, relieved sigh. The opening gambits are made. I can reach out to Hadria through my mother, and I'll avoid Nero at all costs until—well, until Hadria comes for me. Because she will.

I know she will, because I know Hadria.

Her father clearly has no understanding of her at all. Zepp believes Hadria weak and desperate, and assumes I'm some foolish girl he can easily control. For now, let him keep thinking so.

The more he underestimates us, the better.

CHAPTER 5

Aurora

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I see no one else that whole day and night except for a stern housekeeper who snaps at me in Italian when I shake my head at the dinner tray she brings in. She slams it down on the same table where I had the soup at lunch, making me jump. But I still refuse to eat. I'm not hungry, for one thing—and for another, who knows what they'll put in my food? I ate the soup earlier because I had to, to gain Don Imperioli's trust, but I don't want to leave myself vulnerable if I can avoid it.

Because I'm afraid. I'm afraid that Don Imperioli is a liar, that he'll send his son in here while I'm asleep, and that I'll wake to find him looming over me.

But I can't just stay awake all night. Exhaustion is not going to help me. In the end, I pull the bedding into the bathroom and make up a sleeping place for myself in the bathtub, then lock the bathroom door. It's not exactly safe—a man of Nero's size and strength could kick the door open in one blow—but at least I'll have some warning.

I take the silverware from the dinner tray in there with me. One dull knife and a fork might be poor defense, but they're better than nothing, and Lyssa taught me to use anything in the environment to my advantage. Silverware is all I have right now.

So I'll make it work...if I have to.

I get a little shut-eye at least, though I'm cramped, stiff and cold when I wake to bright sunlight streaming in through the small bathroom window. Not even I am small enough to crawl through it—I already checked last night—and this morning I find myself wishing it was even smaller. The sun is way too bright.

I give a sad smile as I shield my eyes. I hated living in darkness all the time at

Elysium, but I'd give anything to be there right now.

I get up and drag the sheets back through to the bedroom, then shower and dress. My muscles ache, both from the tension and my makeshift bed last night, but I'm as alert as ever, awaiting the inevitable visit from Don Imperioli. I spent my sleepless periods last night preparing, thinking about every word I will say, every reaction I will show.

And I've been thinking about what to do if my mother—once again—fails me.

I'm so bored that it's almost a relief when the door creaks open and Don Imperioli comes in again, that same false smile on his face. "Buongiorno, Aurora," he greets, taking the same seat that he took yesterday.

I'm sitting cross-legged on the bed in one of the dresses I found in the closet, the one I thought would make me look the youngest and silliest. Judging by the approval on Zepp's face, I've succeeded in that aim, at least.

I give a timid nod in response. "Buongiorno, Don Imperioli."

He launches into his new interrogation without any preamble. "So, little one, Hadria's resources... what do we know about her weapons?"

I shrug helplessly. "As I said...her people have guns. Knives."

"What kind?" When I give a hopeless, wide-eyed shake of the head to indicate that I have no idea, he gives a frustrated sigh. "How many?"

"I'm sorry, Don Imperioli. I just never saw?—"

"Manpower?" he presses.

And the questions keep coming—about Hadria's strength, her plans, her loyalists—just as my answers remain vague and unhelpful. Each question is a landmine that could blow up my carefully crafted facade of innocence, and I get slower and slower in my responses as I try to judge how my words might land.

Then I see it. The spark of doubt in his eyes. It's faint, but it's there; he doesn't trust me. He's trying to find out whether I'm really as innocent as I claim to be.

I search my mind frantically for a new play, something to stop the rapid questions, something to get a little breathing room?—

Ah. Of course.

I let the tears of frustration I've been holding back well up in my eyes and overflow. Before I know it, they're streaming down my face. "Please," I choke out between sobs. "I just want to see my parents."

Hadria was uncomfortable at best with emotion, and her father recoils visibly at my tears. "Alright, alright," he mutters, standing abruptly. "I'll arrange for your parents to visit this afternoon."

As he retreats, I try to wipe away my tears, but they keep coming despite myself. Inside, I'm churning with a mixture of relief and fear. I've bought myself some time.

But when I think about the fact that I might never see Hadria again, the tears keep on coming.

Breakfast and lunch are brought by the same cranky housekeeper, and this time I do have a few bites of the cheese sandwich at lunchtime. I don't know whether she's been told I'm a vegetarian or if she just wasn't going to make much effort. And as I pace the bedroom and watch the clock ticking, my nerves make my stomach churn

around those few bites that I managed to eat.

Any minute now, my parents will arrive. The thought of seeing my father again fills me with dread. But I need to maintain my composure, act like some grateful little fool.

Everything depends on it.

At last I hear the heavy tread of footsteps outside the bedroom door, and the lock snicks open. My father's voice, laden with contempt, precedes his entrance. "Where is she? Where's the little whore who's caused me nothing but trouble?"

I steel myself and turn to face him as he bursts through the door, my mother trailing behind.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"Well, well," he sneers, looking me up and down. "Doesn't this room suit you nicely? Fit for a princess. Or should I say, a mafia whore."

I bite my tongue to restrain the torrent of vitriol I'd love to unleash. Antagonizing him will not help me now, nor showing him the power I've built up within myself since the last time he saw me.

He grabs me roughly. "You've made a goddamn mess of things, girl. I ought to give you the beating you deserve."

I wrench my face from his grasp.

"Enough, Jimmy." My mother's soft voice slices through the tension. "She's been through so much already."

He rounds on her. "You stay out of this, woman. It's none of your concern." Dismissing her, he turns back to me. "Well, despite trying your best to ruin my deal with the Imperiolis, I'm going to make this right." His smile chills my blood. "Let's get Don Imperioli and Nero in here. We'll have a priest perform the ceremony immediately. No more games."

My chest constricts. "Nero is here?"

"Of course. I told him the news right away. He's here to make you his wife. Today."

"I want a proper wedding." My voice comes out steady, betraying none of the panic roiling inside. "In a church, before God."

He scoffs. "Are you clinging to some childish notions of romance? There's no time for that."

I see my opening. "If you care nothing for what I want, at least consider Mama." I turn to her. "Surely you wish to see your only daughter wed formally? To have that memory?"

She can see I have something planned, and she nods at once. Her eyes glisten with tears as she takes my hand. "All I've ever wanted was for you to be happy, safe and loved." Her voice breaks over the words.

My father's scornful laugh interrupts us. "Still a naive little fool. This isn't about your happiness, girl. It never has been." He moves towards the door. "I'll go tell the Don we're finishing this business now."

As his footsteps recede, I clutch Mother's hand urgently. "Listen, you need to help me. You must get word to Hadria. Tell her I?—"

Loud noises echoing down the hallway outside stop me short. Nero's voice rings out. "Where's my bride, Papa? I've come to claim what's mine."

I feel sick to the stomach. My first reaction is to bolt back to the bathroom and lock myself in. But I have to be strong.

Mama leans in, whispering, "Your father told Nero as soon as he heard."

Don Imperioli won't be happy with my father, that much is certain. And now I've lost all that time I hoped to bargain for, time for Hadria to come for me.

Unless...

The murmur of raised voices drifts up from below. Time is running out. Gripping my mother's wrist tightly, I force her to meet my gaze. "The wedding must be delayed. Insist on the full ceremony, in a church. Tell the Don it's only proper. You need to convince him."

Her brows knit in confusion. "But how can I?—"

"The Don doesn't trust either of his children's intentions. And he never wanted me to marry his son in the first place—play on that."

"I'll do what I can."

I feel a rush of gratitude, even as doubt wars within me. Can I truly rely on Mama, of all people, to outmaneuver them? She's always been so meek, bowing before my father's wishes.

Taking my hands, her eyes glisten with remorseful tears. "I should have protected you from all of this. Can you ever forgive me?"

"The past is done," I say impatiently. Doesn't she realize we don't have time for this? But I gentle my tone as I take in the expression on her face. Perhaps regret will make her bold. I squeeze her hands, drop my voice. "I need you to be strong, Mama. Like never before."

For perhaps the first time in my life, I see her eyes turn resolute, and she gives a nod. "Come on," she says, leading me by the hand out of the bedroom—out of another prison cell.

We travel the hallway and descend the grand staircase, and I try to memorize the layout of the house as we go, just in case. Don Imperioli stands between my father and Nero, who are exchanging venomous words in an undertone. Nero's face is

twisted in a scowl. But at my approach they look up, and Nero's demeanor shifts, eyes traveling over me possessively and making my skin crawl.

"There's my beautiful bride. I've waited long enough to make you mine." His entitled words curdle my stomach.

Stepping forward, chin raised, I meet his brazen stare—and say nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

He bristles, but before he can respond, Mama steps smoothly in front of me. "Good day gentlemen," she says brightly. "How wonderful that the happy couple have been reunited. My husband and I will be delighted to discuss wedding plans."

"There's nothing to discuss. The wedding will happen today," Nero snaps.

Don Imperioli is a head shorter than his son, but when he turns on Nero, it's Nero who takes a step back. "Have you forgotten yourself, boy? The girl is under my roof. Under my command. I decide what is to be done with her."

"She's mine by rights." Nero's tone borders on belligerent. "Her father sold—gave," he quickly amends. "He gave her to me."

Sensing her opportunity, Mother interjects sweetly, "Don Imperioli, surely you understand the sanctity of marriage vows, being a God-fearing man." Claspng his hand deferentially she entreats, "I beg you, let us have a proper church ceremony, to make sure everyone bears witness. For my daughter's honor."

And for his, though she doesn't add that. My mother is very good at this kind of thing when she wants to be. I wonder when my father finally began to get wise to her ways. He's glaring at her now, but he dares not speak as the Don preens under her attentions. "Yes, of course. We Imperiolis value tradition." He casts a glowering look at Nero. "The boy can wait another week for a formal affair. I want the city to understand who holds the power here."

There's a dangerous spark of in Nero's eyes and Mama presses on smoothly before the Don can be distracted. "How generous of you, Don Imperioli. The whole of

Chicago will see your power and your grace."

The Don straightens up. "That's right. I won't have anyone usurping my authority. And certainly not my children." Pointing his cane at Nero he declares, "One week, at St. Stephen's. Tell the priest there I'll double my donation if he clears the schedule for us. No, I'll not hear another word," he goes on as Nero begins to whine. "You'll do as you're told or you'll regret it. This is my command as head of the Family."

It's very clear which Family he means. Scowling, Nero bows stiffly. "As you command...Don Imperoli." The set of his jaw suggests barely-leashed fury. For now, he's yielded. But there's no telling at all when that leash might snap.

"Perhaps Aurora might come home with us to prepare," Mama goes on. "She'll need a new dress, of c?—"

"No." The dismissal is final. Even Mama, with her new-found backbone, understands Don Imperoli will not budge on this. "You may attend her, Sylvia. But any dressmaking will happen here. Aurora is under my protection until I hand her over to my son. We don't want her falling into...other hands." He gives a grim smile.

I try to look grateful. At least I've bought myself a little more time. One week. Surely Hadria will be able to come up with a plan by then.

I fall into bed feeling less scared that night, and more inclined to sleep in the bed than the bath, after Don Imperoli's command to Nero. Nero might be unpredictable, to put it mildly, but he's still under his father's thumb.

Not like Hadria.

Hadria...God, I miss her. I choke down a sob, annoyed at myself. Tears are useless right now. I need to be tough and smart and brave and strong, like Hadria has spent

the last few months teaching me. And if I can do that, I might stand a chance of getting back to her.

CHAPTER 6

Hadria

The war room of Elysium is a place of strategy and secrets, the silence-soaked walls privy to countless decisions. It's my sanctuary, the place where I am most in control—or so I like to think. But tonight it echoes only with uncertainty, the kind that has gnawed at me for the past twenty-four hours.

Lyssa is out looking, though she's due back within the hour to go over what little information we have for the fifteenth time. And I'm slumped helplessly in my chair at the head of the table, a black void in my chest growing larger and larger, when my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

It's from Johnny de Luca, and all it says is St. Stephen's anonymous wedding next week.

I know it's bad form to call, but I want to hear it from his lips. Johnny's voice is as warm and polite as ever when I call him. "That's all I've heard, Hadria. Nothing more to add. But I thought it could be your girl. And if so, it would seem to suggest a certain Roman Emperor."

My father named us both after Roman emperors. I was supposed to be a boy. Hadrian was my father's favorite emperor. I've always wondered what possessed him to name Nero after the most infamous of Roman rulers, the one who burned the whole place down.

Was Nero cursed by his name, or does he merely try to live up to it?

My fingers tighten around the phone as I think about what Johnny is saying. "Perhaps," I say vaguely, but doubt gnaws at me. Nero's ego is a live wire, something he can't control.

If he had Aurora, he'd be gloating, not keeping it quiet.

"I appreciate the heads up," I say at last. "Keep digging."

I end the call and the silence swallows me whole again. I never used to mind the quiet here at Elysium, not like I do since Aurora left. Even before I found out she'd been taken from me, the week she was away, I felt like the house wasn't just quiet but...silent.

Silent like a mausoleum.

I press my palms against my eyes, feeling the weight of helplessness trying to sink its claws into me. No, not now. I won't crumble and give in to those useless emotions—not when Aurora needs me.

I stand and pace the room, letting at least the sound of my footsteps break the silence, and helping my mind tick over. Despite this church wedding that Johnny turned up, I can't believe Nero has her. I've had someone watching him for months, anyway, and there's been no suggestion in the last week that he was anywhere near the apartment safe house, or had any idea she was there.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

So if not Nero...

The door opening interrupts my thoughts. Lyssa steps inside, looking tired. She never looks tired. She's like me: fucking indestructible. I wish it was more than a small comfort to know I'm not the only one worrying about Aurora.

"Any news?" we say simultaneously.

I give a wry smile. "Word came through about an anonymous wedding at St. Stephen's," I tell her, and add, as her eyes widen, "But I don't think it's anything. If Nero had her, we'd know."

She processes this information. "You really don't think it's Nero?" she asks slowly. Doubtfully.

I shake my head. "Come on. What would Nero do if he had her? On the restrained end, he'd have sent me a finger as proof."

And on the non-restrained end, where Nero usually lives, he'd do much, much worse.

Lyssa nods slowly and then sighs. "I agree. It's the only good news about this whole thing, that Nero's not involved. We'll find her."

The confidence in her voice should bolster me. It doesn't. I start pacing again, unable to remain still under the weight of my own thoughts.

"Lyssa," I say after a long silence, during which I've wandered the entire length of the

room.

"Yes?"

"I want you to go to St. Stephen's. Find out everything you can about this anonymous wedding."

She gives me a long look, but in the end, she just nods. "Consider it done. I'll go get the priest out of his bed right now—or pull him from his prayers, whatever he's doing." She leaves without another word.

Alone again, I pour myself a drink from a decanter—I need strength from somewhere, anywhere—but I pause before drinking it.

My thoughts circle back to Aurora. Her resilience masked by softness; her tenacity cloaked in kindness; her innocence paired with an underlying steel that she doesn't realize she possesses.

My little sunbeam isn't as delicate as she appears. I hope whoever took her won't punish her for that.

My phone buzzes again, jolting me out of my reverie. The caller ID flashes Gatehouse. This is something that someone else should be dealing with—I instructed the guards that I was not to be disturbed, and to put all job requests through to whichever lieutenant was available. So it's with irritation that I answer.

"There's a woman here, Boss," the guard on the line says, his voice tense. "She's asking for Hades, won't take no for an answer. But she...well, she won't show her face."

That's not exactly unusual. So why does the guard sound so...

Wait—surely it couldn't be—no, it's not possible—but—"Did she give a name?" I ask, keeping my voice steady.

"She gave a code name. Demeter."

Demeter? I'm taken aback for a moment, though I use a name from Greek mythology myself. Demeter. Goddess of harvest and...

And motherhood.

"Send her up."

I jog down to the foyer and wait for the car to appear, waving away the house guards and bodyguards who try to attend as well. Moments later, a car slowly approaches, winding its way up the drive. The anticipation knots in my stomach as I watch it draw closer, pull up at the door.

A hooded figure steps out of the driver's side, scarf pulled over her head so that her face is in shadows. But she has the same bright and lovely eyes as her daughter, and they are not so easily hidden.

Sylvia Verderosa pushes the scarf back from her hair and looks up at me where I stand on the steps of Elysium. She is pale and strained, as if she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"In here," I say, without preliminaries, and lead her through to the sitting room where I usually receive supplicants.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I seize her arm. "What are you doing here?"

Her face is cold as she pulls free. "You promised me she would be safe with you. So

tell me, Hades. What is my daughter doing back in the lion's den?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"The lion's den? You—you know where she is?"

"There's no other reason I would be here. What concerns me is that you clearly have no idea. How could you be so reckless?"

I lost my mother at quite a young age. Mrs. Graves is the closest thing I've had to that in my life. And right now the look in Sylvia's eyes is making me feel exactly the same as when Mrs. Graves told me off, then left Elysium without another word.

They're disappointed in me, both of them. And it's devastating.

"What do you mean?" I demand, shoving aside my emotions. "Just spit it out, for God's sake."

Sylvia takes a deep breath before saying, "Aurora is currently imprisoned with Don Imperioli. He plans to wed her to Nero in a week's time."

My father? "How do you know?" I rasp out.

"I've seen her with my own eyes. And I managed to head off my husband and Nero's plot for him to marry Aurora on the spot." Sylvia's face grows stern. "So tell me, Hadria. What exactly do you plan to do about it?"

CHAPTER 7

Hadria

After Sylvia leaves, my ears ringing still with her recriminations as well as her revelations, Lyssa hasn't yet returned. I don't need her information now, if she even returns with any—though I know she will. Few can resist the Wolf when she's determined to sniff out intel.

Thanks to Sylvia, I know everything I need to know, but it's still no help. I have no idea what to do about it. I stammered out some assurances to Aurora's mother, but I could tell she didn't believe me, either.

I pace back and forth, wondering what to do next. There is only one thing I can think of, and I hate to do it. It makes me seem weak. Puts me at a disadvantage. But it's the only move I can think of, short of storming my father's house, and I'm not willing to put Aurora into such danger.

Lyssa comes back an hour later, looking triumphant. She bursts into the war room, eager to share the news. "Guess who booked the wedding?"

"Don Imperioli," I say, completely deflating her. "I had a visit from Sylvia Verderosa while you were out. It was never Nero who took Aurora. It was my father."

Lyssa sighs. "So it was a whole waste of time making that priest piss himself. Well—what next? We can hardly burst into the church and steal her back again. They'll be expecting us this time."

I brace my hands on the table, staring down at the sturdy oak wood. "I have already contacted Don Imperioli." Lyssa's eyebrows shoot up, and I go on before she can respond. "My father has extended an invitation to the opera."

The heavy velvet curtain sweeps closed behind me as I step into the privacy of my father's opera box. From the stage sounds the soaring refrains of the singer on stage. I glance around warily, every sense attuned to potential threats. But it's only my father

waiting here as stated, ensconced in a high-backed chair with his two hulking bodyguards stationed behind him.

I take the chair that one of them gestures to, and only then does my father acknowledge me. He steeples his fingers, regarding me with predatory focus. "Hadria, my dear daughter. So good of you to accept my invitation."

I incline my head slightly, refusing to relax my defensive poise. "You made it clear it would be unwise to decline."

He chuckles, a low rumble like stones grinding together. "Come now, let's not be so hostile. We have important affairs to discuss."

"If this is about Aurora?—"

He holds up a hand. "Patience. All in good time. Listen to the music. Let it soothe your heart."

I'd rather drive a dagger into his, but he has the upper hand here. The swell of music underscores our strained silence. He's playing with me, forcing me to endure this excruciating moment when my every thought strains toward Aurora's fate.

"How do you find the performance?" he asks mildly. "Her interpretation of Aïda is excellent, wouldn't you agree?"

"The singing is admirable," I reply through gritted teeth. "But we both know you didn't summon me here for a critique of the opera."

"Fine, fine." He sighs regretfully, as if denied a genuine moment of father-daughter bonding. "Let's get to business then, shall we?"

He stands, bracing his hands on the chair to help himself up, and I follow him out of the box and into the quiet hallway outside.

"You've been a very foolish and disrespectful girl, Hadria."

I stiffen. "Because I claimed what is rightfully mine?"

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

He scoffs. "Please. You lead a band of thugs grasping at power beyond your capability. You're destined to fail without the bonds and unity a Family provides."

Anger kindles in my chest but I tamp it down. Lashing out will only play into his hands. I ask in a carefully measured tone, "What must I do to get Aurora back safely?"

He smiles, satisfied at having forced this concession from me. "I see the ice queen's heart is not entirely frozen after all. You care for the girl."

My nails bite into my palms but I remain silent.

"She tried to hide it, too, but I could see the...fondness growing between you." He shakes his head with mock regret. "Love is a dangerous weakness for a leader to reveal."

"Enough games," I snap, composure fraying. "What are your terms?"

His eyes gleam. "I believe you already know, my dear."

Realization dawns. He means for me to publicly abdicate all claims to the Family and revoke leadership of the Syndicate.

Everything I've fought for. Bled for. Nearly died for.

"You've promised Aurora's hand to Nero in marriage," I counter tightly. "Already arranged the wedding next week. Surely he will object."

My father shrugs. "Nero must learn his place. He has been too bold lately—as have you. I know that you and your brother met behind my back." He leans forward. "Let me be clear. You will renounce all claims to the Imperoli Family and dissolve your silly Syndicate. Then, and only then, will I return Aurora to you, assuming you keep your word."

I stare at him, battling the helpless fury rising inside me. He's maneuvering me into an impossible corner. I have no other options. So, with immense effort, I force out the words. "I will renounce my claim to the Family and dismantle the Syndicate."

He claps his hands together, beaming. "Excellent! I'm so pleased we could come to an agreement."

Rage simmers in my blood like molten steel.

"I didn't realize the infamous Hades could be swayed by such a frivolous emotion," he muses as I turn to leave. "How the mighty have fallen."

I have to walk away before I throttle him, just as the doors open for intermission. As opera-goers stream past in a cloud of perfume and mingled voices, I blend into the crowd, his taunting laughter echoing in my ears.

I retreat to my motorcycle, emotions churning. How could I have let this happen? I've sacrificed everything, only to once more be bent beneath my father's heel. And Aurora—her fate dangling by the thinnest of threads, dependent on the whim of that monster.

I ride back to Elysium without seeing the roads. Aurora's face fills my mind, luminous and soft. I imagine the curve of her cheek, the fall of her hair, the way light seems to gather around her as if she's its source. So lovely. So precious.

And I've failed her. Again.

I reach Elysium and am relieved that Lyssa is not around. I go to the war room and into my private study, where I turn off my phone, sit down at my desk, and rest my head on my arms, letting my eyes fall shut.

Even if I tear down the Styx Syndicate and succeed in getting Aurora back safely, what comes next? Now that my father knows she's my weakness, he'll always have power over me through her. I've endangered Aurora more than ever by revealing the depth of my devotion.

A knock interrupts my brooding.

"Come in," I call, schooling my features as Lyssa enters.

"Was wondering when you'd be back," she says in greeting, sprawling into the chair across from me. "I take it your chat with Daddy didn't go so well?"

"The old snake played his hand masterfully, I'll grant him that," I reply.

"And what was his offer?"

Of all the people in the world—and the Syndicate—I can't lie to Lyssa. "I've agreed to break up the Syndicate and renounce all claims to the Imperioli Family in exchange for Aurora."

She stares at me for a moment. "So that's it?" she asks incredulously, after I don't say any more. "You're just rolling over for him? Everything we've built, all those years clawing our way out of the gutter...you're tossing it away for a pretty face?"

Her blunt words spark my smoldering temper. "Don't talk about Aurora that way. I

need you on my side, more than ever. I need to find a way to get out of this. I don't want to give up the Syndicate, but if he kills Aurora—or worse, marries her off to Nero—" I break off, unable to force the words out. "Please. I don't want to do it. If you can see a different way, then for God's sake, tell me."

There's a short silence before she asks, more gently, "You care for her that deeply?"

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"I've never felt anything like this."

It's as much a confession to myself as to her. Putting this sentiment into words somehow makes it real, undeniable. A vulnerability I can't take back.

Lyssa nods slowly, scrutinizing me. She smirks. "Who would've guessed the big bad Hades would be brought down by love?"

I scowl, because the words are too much an echo of my father's, but there's no heat behind it. Love. Is that really what this maelstrom inside me is? I suppose no other word fits.

I love Aurora. Unwisely, dangerously. And it's beyond my power to stop.

"Then we'll get her back." Lyssa rises smoothly to her feet. "But not by giving up the Syndicate. And we'll make your bastard father regret the day he tried messing with us. But first, I need some sleep. And so do you, Hadria. You haven't slept since...since she was taken."

She's right. I haven't been able to rest, haven't even thought about it.

But as we both exit my study and head back into the war room, the door bursts open, and a panting guard rushes through. "Boss," he says in relief, though his expression remains troubled. "We've all been looking for you."

For God's sake, what is it now?

CHAPTER 8

Aurora

I'm so bored that I've begun comparing prisons.

Elysium had a lot of cons. The never-ending darkness. The unpleasant architecture—no matter how much it suited Hadria, I always felt oppressed by all those modern, stark walls and polished concrete, though I suppose that was the point of the place.

Here, the architecture is much more pleasant, and the windows aren't shuttered over. If I wanted to, I could sit all day in the patch of sunshine that comes in the window, moving like a cat to follow it across the floor as the earth turns.

If I wanted to. But I don't want to. Sunshine is the least of my concerns right now.

Because at least at Elysium I could leave my room whenever I wanted. Here, in Don Imperioli's estate, the door to my bedroom suite remains locked at all times, and no one comes in to visit—no one except the surly housekeeper who is only getting surlier as time goes on and I refuse to eat.

I stare at the four walls of my suite, lavish yet devoid of any personal touches. Silk curtains, antique furniture, the adjoining bathroom larger than my bedroom back home when I still lived there—and yet I'd give anything at all to be back even there, under my father's roof.

How long have I been here now, awaiting my fate? Time is blurring together in endless monotony, measured only by the jittery pounding of my heart each time footsteps approach. Don Imperioli came to see me earlier, to tell me he was going out tonight, meeting with Hadria.

"She bargains for you, girl," he said to me. "Should I allow her to take you back? What do you think, hm?"

I've given up trying to pretend with him. I said nothing, only stared back at him. He didn't like it. I think he's as cruel as Nero in his own way, though less physically violent. He wanted my reaction, and I didn't give it to him. So when he left, he threw one more barb my way: "You must smile more while you are here, little one. The time is coming when you will forget how."

I tense up again now as I hear footsteps again. Don Imperioli once more? No, too quick. And they don't sound like the housekeeper's measured tread. No, they sound?—

The door slams open to reveal Nero Imperioli, posture slack as he leans up against the doorframe, eyes glassy. The pungent smell of booze hits my nose even from this far away. His suit is rumpled, shirt half untucked.

Fear leaps in my throat.

He's followed by several house guards, who try to pull him back, but he shakes them off. "You dare to put your hands on me?" he slurs to them, shoving them away. "I'll have your heads for this disrespect!"

It would probably sound more threatening if he wasn't swaying on his feet.

One of the house guards sends a nervous glance my way, and I'm out of the bed in a flash, wishing like hell I wasn't wearing the pajamas Mama brought in for me.

The guard steps around Nero, trying to get his attention, though those dark, stony eyes are fixed on me. And a vile, wet grin splits his face. "Sir," the guard begins firmly, "Don Imperioli instructed that the lady remain in isolation until the wedding."

Nero's hand lashes out, seizing a fistful of the guard's shirt. "Do you know who I am? I am Nero fucking Imperioli! And I got a long, long memory, buddy. If you don't get outta my way, I'll have you gutted like a pig when I take over!"

His face pales. Wordlessly, he steps aside, and to my horror they all retreat and close the door behind them.

Nero's grin widens and he staggers toward me. "There's my blushing bride."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Panic claws my chest but I force myself to meet his bloodshot gaze. Show no fear. I am no longer the timid waif he met that day of the wedding, traded like chattel to pay her father's debts.

No. I'm quite a different person these days.

I glance around the room, trying to see it through the eyes that Lyssa and Hadria have taught me to see with. What can I use to defend myself?

What can I use as a weapon?

Nero looks me up and down. "I thought you'd be happy to see me. Did you miss me?"

Ignoring the spike of nausea, I tilt my chin and eye the dinner tray behind him. The knife is as dull as always, but it's still something. I don't reply.

His smile twists. "Playing hard to get won't make me want you less." He moves as I move, blocking my path, and leans in, sour breath hot on my face. "Tell me, did you spread your pretty thighs for my sister too?"

Anger replaces fear. "I owe you nothing."

"Whore," he hisses, spittle spraying my cheek. "I know Hadria corrupted you. Made you her little plaything. I saw you at that meeting—" His hand clamps my wrist, wrenching me against him.

Everything becomes clear to me in an instant.

My weakness has always been an easy trust in others. Trusting that others have good intentions toward me. Trusting in someone else's ability to save me. But I need to be able to save myself.

I'm alone here. All I have in this moment is...me.

I bring my knee up sharply, satisfaction flaring as it connects squarely with his groin. Nero chokes, grip loosening, and then I shove him away. He stumbles but recovers, rage in his eyes, fist drawing back. I twist sideways and his blow glances off my shoulder.

My eyes land on the lamp on the nightstand. I grab it and swing up as hard as I can, hard enough to rip the cord right from the wall, and I smash it straight into the side of Nero's head. He collapses without another sound, shards of heavy pottery surrounding his limp body—and blood seeping from his temple. The carpet around him stains red, but his chest rises and falls.

He's unconscious. But alive.

I freeze, listening for running footsteps, but there are none.

Now is my chance. The door is still unlocked, and the guards have retreated, all the better to claim ignorance of Nero's presence here. And Don Imperioli must still be out, since there's no way Nero would have tried this with his father home.

I should run. I should run right out of here and never look back, but my feet remain rooted to the floor as I stare down at my would-be tormentor. Defenseless. Bleeding.

I could kill him.

The thought comes unbidden. I stoop, lifting up the electric cord of the lamp.

Kill him.

Garrote him with this cord and be free of his threats forever. Hadria would want it, too; want me to prove I'm not the weakling everyone believes me to be. Show my ultimate and eternal loyalty to her.

Become the monster I know I need to be if I am to survive—to thrive—in Hadria's world.

My hand trembles as I tighten the cord between my hands. Nero's eyelids flutter and I freeze, poised over his neck. Hesitation wars with anger inside me.

What am I becoming?

I don't think I can do this. I'm not a killer. Not yet. I lower the cord, ashamed of myself. I'm too weak to do it. Not like this. There will be another day to confront Nero, but I can't do it like this.

I don't bother to even glance back at him before I slip into the hallway outside the bedroom, heart slamming painfully in my chest. Now comes the true test. The Imperioli estate sprawls before me. And somewhere beyond this sea of marble and money lies freedom.

Somewhere beyond is Hadria, and my way back to her.

Pressing my back against the wall, I slide towards the shadows pooled at the end of the corridor, ears straining for any sound. Muffled exchanges drift from an open doorway ahead, and I have to pause, check carefully to make sure none of them are facing the door. But the guards are oblivious as I creep past.

Moonlight from an arched window illuminates my way as I descend the grand curved

staircase, wincing at each creak of my steps. The cavernous foyer lies still and silent, empty of Imperoli men. I scurry across the parquet floor, my bare feet silent. Almost there. Almost to freedom.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

But with a sudden snap, light floods the room. I freeze, trapped in the blinding glare like an insect under a microscope, my hand on the knob of the front door. Squinting against the brightness I make out two hulking figures in black to the left—guards doing their rounds.

They shout in surprise and charge toward me. Without thinking I grab the nearest object, a large, exquisite vase atop a nearby plinth, and hurl it at them. It shatters spectacularly. Porcelain shards pepper their faces and the men cry out, temporarily blinded. I bolt through the front door, astonished but grateful to find it unlocked.

Cool night air kisses my face as I burst outside. A cobblestone driveway unfurls before me, wrought iron gates gleaming far away at its end. Shouts sound from inside, and I see movement at the end of the drive, too—more guards.

Without thought, I run left, charging around the side of the mansion, past a patio and then a large pool. I'm looking for some way through or over or even under the looming walls, topped with spike-tipped iron. The guards are closing in, and any moment now?—

Then I see it, a small gardening shed set up against the wall. I hurtle toward it and scramble up the side, using a log pile to help me up, and knocking it down in the process. Once on the roof I can just reach the top of the wall, and I yank myself up, heedless of scraping my knees and bare feet on the rough stone wall. I have to be careful to get through the spikes, but I'm skinny enough to slip through them.

For one horrible second I'm falling head-first toward the street below, but I grab on hard to the iron bar at the top of the wall and slam against the stones, my shoulder

giving an agonizing jerk. A second later I have to let go, and I land hard on the sidewalk, jarring my ankles and wrists as I land on hands and knees. I lurch upright and into the street, just as blinding light spears my face. Brakes squeal, and I throw up my arms in a useless attempt at protection. Shielding my eyes I make out the silhouette of the taxi that nearly ran me over.

I rush to the passenger door, and the cabbie shrinks away as I wrench open the door and throw myself inside, a bedraggled fugitive in dirt-and-blood-smudged pajamas.

"What the hell?—"

"Please!" The plea tears from my throat. "You have to drive, get me away from here!"

The cabbie stares with an open mouth at the formidable walls to the side of the street. The shouts of the guards echo over the stone walls.

"That's the Imperioli place," he says. I ain't gettin' involved in whatever the hell is happening there, lady. I'd like to stay alive."

I grab his wrist to get his attention and my voice drops, smooth as honey. "Fifty grand. Cash. That's your payment if you get me away from here without questions."

"Fifty grand? Get outta here. You think I'm stupid?"

"Fifty grand. No lie. Or you can take me back here and earn whatever they'll give you for me."

He gives an uneasy glance at the walls of the Imperioli estate, and I smother the impatient scream rising up in me. Another second and I'll have to threaten him instead of cajole, force him out of the cab so I can?—

"Up front?" he asks.

"Upon safe delivery. I promise you, the place we're going will be very grateful to have me back. And if you want that money rather than a bullet in your brain, I suggest you get moving. Fast. The Imperiolis tend to shoot first and ask questions later."

I have no idea if that's true, but it sounds believable. And the driver only eyes me shrewdly for one more second before throwing the car into gear with a grunt. "Buckle up. Where to?"

Relief floods my body as the taxi peels away from the curb. I tell him to just drive, that we need to get out of the city, north-east. The mansion's imposing outline recedes behind us.

I never want to see that godforsaken place again.

As chrome and concrete blur past, tears prick my eyes. Soon the sprawling lights of the city center fade into the haze of suburban streetlamps zipping by. I nestle into cracked vinyl, lean my head against the window, and watch the city as we leave it behind.

Free.

I really am free right now. I could disappear entirely if I wanted to.

But I don't want to. I want Hadria. I want to see her face again, to feel her arms around me, her mouth on mine. God, not soon enough. But every mile brings me closer to her.

Yet disappointment tempers my triumph. When I stood over Nero with vengeance

singing in my blood, weapons in hand, I faltered. Lyssa's ruthless lessons should have hardened me beyond restraint. But perhaps even Lyssa can't undo a lifetime of gentleness.

And so Nero lives, free to hunt me down again, free to harm those I love.

Have I damned us all with my weakness?

CHAPTER 9

Hadria

"There's a taxi here, Boss. With a, uh, special passenger," pants the guard who's just burst through the door of the war room.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

The guard looks...almost afraid. And he's breathing in a manner that suggests he was running hard up until he reached the door.

"What are you talking about?" I ask the guard. "Be clear."

"It's...the girl," he says awkwardly. "Ms. Verderosa?" He ends on a question mark as though unsure of my reaction.

"What did you say?" I ask sharply. "You mean?—"

"Aurora, Boss. She's in a taxi at the gate saying we need to pay the guy fifty gees, which is a pretty steep rate on a ride if you ask?—"

"Aurora?"

He just nods this time, his babble cut off as he worries about what my reaction will be. All I can do is stand stock still waiting for my body to catch up with my brain.

Aurora. She's come back.

Or so this guard says. "Let her through the gate," I say. As he mutters into his walkie, Lyssa gives me a sharp look.

"Dear old dad just...sent her back?" she asks.

"No, that's not what we..." I trail off. I very much doubt that my father has sent Aurora back to me without seeing proof positive of my dismantling of the Syndicate

first.

Lyssa tilts her head to one side, watching me. "You think it's a trick?"

"If it's a trick, we'd better go down and be ready for it," I tell her.

On the way downstairs to the front of the house, I struggle to rein in the fragile, traitorous spark of hope. After all this torment, not knowing if Aurora was even alive, then hearing that my father was the one who held her, and now...could she really be here?

I force my expression into impassivity, hiding the turmoil roiling beneath the surface. Lyssa eyes me curiously. I avoid meeting her gaze, knowing she will read too much there.

The guards fan out around the entrance, as is usual when we have a guest, hypervigilant.

Waiting is its own exquisite torture. I clench my fists, willing the taxi to crest the hill of the drive. Begging whatever powers may be for this not to be some cruel joke or mistake.

Then, in the distance, I see the light of the cab. The guards shift, hands dropping to holstered weapons in unison. Lyssa tenses, ready to unleash hellish fury at the first sign of deception.

The taxi rolls to a gentle stop at the base of the steps. For an endless moment, nothing happens. The world holds its breath along with me.

The door opens. A slender figure steps out, ephemeral as a mirage.

Aurora.

She pauses, squinting up at the assembled guards, and then beyond, to me, standing in the doorway. Our eyes lock.

Then I'm moving, bolting, feet flying down the steps before I realize it. Dimly I hear Lyssa's startled exclamation, but it fades beneath the pounding rush of blood in my ears. The world narrows down to the woman in front of me.

Aurora. Here. Real.

I reach her just as her lips curve into a tremulous smile. A glad cry tears from my throat as I crush her against me. She stumbles but I hold her fast, inhaling the delicate scent of her hair. My heart threatens to crack open completely. I'm shaking, shaking so hard I can't keep standing, and I fall to my knees, still clinging to her, in front of Lyssa, in front of all the guards, but I don't care.

She came back to me.

"Hadria," Aurora whispers, carding her fingers through my hair. I can't look up at her. Aurora doesn't pull away, her fingertips tracing gentle patterns on my back.

The sound of boots scuffing against the gravel reminds me we have an audience. I raise my head, not relinquishing my hold on Aurora. She gazes down at me, thumbs swiping across my cheeks in a tender caress.

"Leave us," I say, relieved when my voice comes out imperious and steady despite the tumult going on inside. The guards shuffle away, exchanging looks, but I still don't care. Lyssa, thank God, comes down to deal with the taxi driver.

"I'm sorry," Aurora says with a shaky little laugh just this side of a sob. "It was...an

expensive ride."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"I've got it," Lyssa says, after conferring with the driver, and he gets out of the car and follows her into the house. The front door shuts with a solid thud. And Aurora and I are alone now in the driveway.

I look up at her, wonderstruck. "You came back," I whisper.

Aurora's luminous gaze doesn't waver, though her eyes are a little watery. "I'll always come back to you."

The simple promise undoes me. I surge to my feet and capture her lips fiercely, trying to convey everything I lack the words for—my fears, my longing, my desires, and this all-encompassing tsunami of feeling that threatens to engulf me. She responds in kind, twining her arms around my neck.

We cling together as the kisses turn salty with her tears. And I am stripped raw and vulnerable in her arms, terrifying and freeing all at once.

At last Aurora draws back, scrubbing at her face and sniffing.

"Are you alright?" I ask, suddenly realizing where she has been and what might have happened to her. "Are you hurt, did they?—"

"I'm okay," she says, grabbing my hands as I start running them all over her, looking for injuries. "I'm just cold. And my knees hurt." We look down together and I see the bloody scrapes on them.

I put my arm around her and pull her close, helping her walk gingerly over the stones

and up to the steps of the house. "Come with me," I tell her, rubbing her arm as I hug her tight. "I'll look after you."

Lyssa, no doubt, has spread the word for everyone to make themselves scarce, because the house appears completely devoid of any life but our own as I lead Aurora upstairs to my bedroom and close the door behind us. The click of the lock echoes in the sudden quiet. I'm almost shy as I turn back to her, not knowing where to start—but Aurora wastes no time, her fingers threading through my hair as she pulls me into another searing kiss. I try to match her passion but my roiling emotions won't be tempered, relief and guilt warring within me.

Sensing my turmoil, Aurora draws back, concern in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

I take a shaky breath. "I thought I'd lost you. That you were gone forever." The words catch in my throat. "I failed you."

Aurora cups my cheek with a sad smile. "You saved me. I used what you and Lyssa have taught me here to get out, get away. Thanks to you, I was strong enough to escape."

Her words only deepen the twisting in my gut. She's endured so much because of me, was forced to use skills she never should have learned, just to gain her freedom. Freedom I have stolen from her in the past.

I turn away, shame burning through me. "You never should have had to learn those things in the first place. The things I've put you through..." I shake my head.

Aurora's arms slip around my waist, her forehead coming to rest on the back of my shoulder. "My whole life, I've let other people tell me where to go. What to do. How to behave. And I still didn't realize how...how passive I was." She pulls away from me, anger in her voice, but when I pull her back, worried, I see she's only angry at

herself. "You know how they got me? The man who took me? He played on the fact that I'm a-a people pleaser. I wanted to run across to you at the cafe—I knew you were there waiting for me—but he played me like a fool."

"You're no fool. And having a kind heart isn't a goddamn weakness." I hate hearing her speak like this. And the next thing she says makes me go cold all over.

"I could have killed Nero, you know. I had him at my mercy."

"Killed...Nero? You didn't, did you?"

Aurora drops her eyes, and the self-disgust is evident in her reply. "No. I was too weak."

My knees nearly buckle in relief. I crush her against me, bending to press my forehead against hers. "Thank God. Don't ever change, Aurora. Not for me, not for anyone." I take her face in my hands, holding her gaze fiercely. "You're my light, and I thought I'd lost you forever. Stay pure, stay—stay you. Promise me."

Aurora frowns, confusion clouding her eyes. "But I wanted to make you proud. I used my training, I fought?—"

"You fought to survive, not to kill," I interject. "When I asked Lyssa to train you, all I meant was for you to be able to defend yourself. I don't want to destroy that light inside you, Sunshine." I smooth back her hair, heart aching. "I never wanted this darkness to stain you like it has. Protecting you, Aurora, that's all I care about now."

If only she knew how much. But now that she's back with me, I won't have to honor my promises to my father. That's the cherry on top of Aurora's sudden reappearance.

"We can discuss that later," Aurora says, in a way that makes me think I haven't heard

the last about her so-called weakness. "There are more important things I need tell you." Her face sets in that stubborn way I know so well. "I need to tell you everything that happened while I was with the Imperiolis. I think your father?—"

"My father can go to hell right now," I tell her. "And so can the whole world. All we need to do right now is get you patched up." I brush my thumb over the shadows under her eyes. "You need to recover your strength."

A smile spreads across her face, a smile that I have been torturing myself with the whole time she's been gone. "A bath would be nice. But I don't need to rest, not yet." Her voice drops, warm and throaty. "I've missed you, Hadria." She winds her arms around my neck again, her eyes sincere but seductive. "I've missed the way you make me feel..."

A sharp need stabs through me at the suggestion in her words, the fire in her gaze. This captivating, maddening, miraculous woman who somehow sees light even in the endless shadows I've cast over her.

"Come on," she says. "Come with me."

And she takes me by the hand and leads me to my own bathroom.

CHAPTER 10

Aurora

Hadria pulls free of my grasp as we enter the adjoining bathroom, but only so she can start to run the water into the huge bathtub set in the middle of the room, rising up black and gleaming from the dark slate tiles. "I missed you, little sunbeam," she murmurs, turning her attention back to me. "May I?" Her fingers hover over the first button on my pajama shirt.

"Please," I breathe, and she begins to slowly unbutton my top, smoothing the material down over my breasts.

"You've had a terrible few days," she says, her fingers playing over my nipples, still covered by the thin silk of my top. "I'd like to erase them from your mind—for a little while, anyway. Would you like that?"

Would I like that? My body is responding to her touch already, the aching in my muscles beginning to melt away as the tingling in my core increases. "Yes," I say, my voice barely a whisper, "I would like that very much."

Hadria smiles, that dark, wicked smile that she reserves only for me, and her fingers begin to dance again over my nipples, teasing and tantalizing. They harden under her touch, and I arch my back into her hands, wishing she'd pull off my clothes already, fuck me as savagely as she has in the past. I want to obliterate the past few days from my mind completely.

But she only watches my reactions carefully, and seems content to torment me for the moment.

"Please," I beg, my voice husky with desire. "Touch me properly."

Hadria's pupils are blown wide, dark with lust, and she finally slides my shirt off my shoulders, tossing it aside. "Gorgeous. As always." She pets my breasts, weighing them in her hand—barely a palmful each, but they've always been so sensitive, so that I whimper as she rubs her thumbs over the hard, aching nubs of my nipples. Her fingers slide down my stomach, and she crouches down, her eyes on mine as she undoes my pajama pants, and tugs them down. I step out of them, entirely naked now. My arousal is growing stronger, but I can't help my hands fluttering over my curls when she leans in to press her nose to me.

"I need a bath first," I protest. "I'm all dirty."

"Yeah you are," she says, grinning up at me. "My dirty little girl. Don't be shy, Aurora," she goes on, leaning in and inhaling deeply. "I love your scent. Drives me wild."

"Hadria," I groan as her fingers glide up the insides of my thighs, prying them apart. "Oh, God."

The water in the bathtub has been running this whole time, a soothing white noise that fills the room and calms me even as Hadria's hands are building up the tension in my body. I can feel her lips on my inner thigh, and she gives a little nip, making me yelp, then giggle as she soothes it with her tongue.

"I could eat you all up, right here," she murmurs against my belly, then stands in one fluid motion. "But I want you lying down nice and relaxed when you come for me, or your knees might give out—because I'm going to make you see stars, Sunshine."

She turns off the water and helps me step into the steaming tub, the hot water enveloping my body in as welcome a caress as Hadria's own. I sink down with a sigh, the heat already working to unravel the knots of tension in my muscles.

"You just float there a moment," she tells me, as she strips down beside me. I turn over and rest my chin on my wet arm as I watch her, drinking in the sight of her toned body, my pussy more insistently pulsing now. She pulls over a wooden chair and sits on it, brandishing a loofah.

"Just relax," she murmurs, pushing me back to lie face-up, and begins to gently wash me. I melt into the warmth of the water and Hadria's sure touch, closing my eyes as she works over my skin, lulling me into a state of relaxation I haven't felt in days.

My time in the Imperioli estate left me much more tense than I even realized; I must have lived each moment with my muscles bunched up, ready to act at any moment. Hadria washes down my arms, and then my sore, scraped knees, as gently as possible, so that I don't even wince under her touch. Then she makes me sit up, wrapping my arms around my knees, so she can do my back.

"I should tell you about what happened," I murmur. "While I was being held by your father."

"You said you were unharmed." Her hands still on my back, and I turn my face to look at her over my shoulder.

"I was. I mean, I am. I barely had contact with anyone except my mother, until...until Nero stormed in. And then I smashed a lamp over his head."

Her eyes widen, and she gives a little snort. "Well. He'll think twice next time."

"There won't be a next time," I say savagely, and then sigh and let my head fall

forward again as she continues stroking over my body gently. I let the stress and fear drain away as she massages my shoulders.

"I'm very proud of you," she says softly, and I smile with satisfaction. "So very proud, Sunshine. Both that you protected yourself, and held back from acts that...well, that can't be undone. Right now, though, I think you've earned a little hands-on care. If you'd like?"

"If you mean you're going to finger-fuck me into a frenzy, then yes. Yes, I'd very much like."

I startle a full laugh out of her, and she guides me gently into laying down again in the bathtub. She begins to caress my breasts once more, squeezing lightly as she soaps them up, taking her time with each and every inch of me. Her hands turn firmer, squeezing and kneading as I moan, arching into her touch, my hips rising up involuntarily, making the water rock dangerously close to the high wall of the tub. My nipples are stiff and aching, red and needy when I look down at her hands as they tease, and I spread my things wide, hopeful that she'll take the hint.

"You look very comfortable," she says. "I think I'll get in there with you. I want that wet little body pressed up against mine."

She slides in behind me, the tub more than big enough to accommodate us both, and I give a content sigh as her arms wrap around me, tight and secure, and then her fingers find my nipples again and begin to play with them once more. I find myself wriggling around against her, until her thighs clamp around me as well and keep me still. She relentlessly teases my nipples, squeezing and flicking them.

"They've missed my attention, haven't they?" she murmurs in my ear. She gives each one a sharp little twist that borders on pain, but sends a spike of pleasure straight to my clit. I gasp, pushing my chest further into her hands, silently begging for more.

Hadria gives it to me, rolling the stiff peaks back and forth as I shudder against her, my skin running cold with goosebumps despite the heat of the water. She gives a light sigh of pleasure. "I wonder if you could come just from having your titties played with, just like this."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I let out an anguished groan. But I've missed this connection with her so much, this intimate dance where she teaches me how much my body needs her touch, both familiar and new, every sensation heightened by our time apart. I run my hands over her long, long legs, wrapped around me.

"I missed you so much," I tell her, and she slides her hands under the water, down over my stomach, heading closer to where I'm so desperate to have them. "Oh, God. Yes. Yes?—"

She caresses my inner thighs, fingers teasingly close to where I ache for her touch. "I missed you too," she murmurs against my ear, her breath hot on my damp skin. "But we have all night to make up for lost time."

I let out a needy little whine as her fingers trail up my inner thighs, hips bucking involuntarily, but Hadria holds me firmly in place with her strong grip. I've missed this, missed her commanding presence, the way she effortlessly takes control and makes me melt.

"Please," I gasp out, squirming against her. "Please touch me, Hadria."

She gives a long, low hum as her fingers slide feather-light over my slit. "You'd like me to stroke this little kitty, make you purr?"

"Yes."

And her fingers finally part my folds, tapping against my hard, sensitive clit. It's been too long since I felt her touch there, and she plays with me, teasing at first, then

diving deeper as she explores. Her other hand slips back up my stomach, cupping one breast, massaging with a firm grip, pinching my nipple hard while her fingers tease and dance over my clit. "Come on, sweetheart. Let me know how much you like it. Don't hold back."

I stop biting at my lip and moan without shame for her as she slides one finger inside me slowly, waiting for any signs of discomfort before moving on. There are none; instead she feels my muscles clenching around her finger greedily.

"You're so hot inside," she whispers. "Like a little furnace."

She adds another finger and then a third, stretching me slowly as she works her way in deeper. My moans get louder as she begins to thrust in and out slowly, hitting that perfect spot inside me with each motion while pinching and twisting at my nipples, harder than she ever has before—and God, it's exactly what I need. I'm writhing under her hands now, desperate for more. I whine and buck against her, but she only holds me tighter.

"Please," I gasp out between gasps for air, gripping the sides of the tub as she continues to torment me.

"Please what?" she asks, her fingers plunging in a regular rhythm, brushing my clit at the same time, over and over, pushing me closer and closer.

"Please let me come," I breathe, my body trembling with need. "Please, Hadria." My voice cracks with desire.

She smirks against my shoulder—I can feel her lips curving up—then begins to work another finger inside me until I'm filled up. "You're sure you can't take any more?" she asks, amused, fucking her hand into my soaking pussy in deep strokes, each one echoed by a hard pinch of my nipples.

"No!" I squeal out, throwing my head back against her as she slams into me again and again. "Please—I need to—" My words are lost in the sounds of pleasure escaping me as she takes control of my body. The water sloshes around us and finally, finally, her lips find my ear, and?—

"Alright, little sunbeam. Come for me."

She was right about the stars. They dance behind my closed eyelids as I fall apart on her fingers, my whole body seizing up as I crash over the edge into bliss, my pussy clamping hard on Hadria's fingers. Waves of pleasure roll through my body and I let out a long, choking moan, shaking all over.

"Oh, that's it, that's my good girl," Hadria murmurs, working me through my climax until I'm completely spent. I slump back against her, breathing hard, enjoying the lingering aftershocks still coursing through me and letting out a whimper when she pulls her fingers free from my sensitive flesh.

"Greedy little thing," she teases, licking up the side of my water-damp face. I've managed to splash half the water of the tub, just about. I turn, sloshing and splashing, and kiss her, hard.

"I am," I tell her. "Greedy for you."

"Good," she says, taking my face in her hands. "Because I plan to ride that sweet little mouth until I come—as soon as we get out of this bathtub and into a bed."

CHAPTER 11

Hadria

We get out and dry ourselves quickly, and then I pull Aurora over to the bed and help

her nestle into the pillows. I straddle her, bracing my hands on either side of her head. Our bodies nearly touch but not quite. I want to ratchet up my need until I can't stand it any further. "You're mine," I murmur, brushing my lips over hers. "All mine."

"Forever." Her arms wind around me and I let her pull me down onto her, her mouth seeking mine with a hunger that mirrors my own. I grind against her as her thigh slips between mine, reveling in the friction, in the slick heat at my center. And Aurora's fire is building again too, her hips bucking against me, wordlessly begging for more.

Breaking the kiss, I trail my lips down her throat, nipping and sucking at her pulse point. Her pulse flutters under my tongue, racing to match my own. I cup her breasts, kneading the soft flesh again, pinching her nipples until they pebble under my touch and she's whimpering with need.

A fierce surge of possessiveness floods me. She is mine, now and always, and I will never, ever let Nero get near her again.

I rise up to my knees, straddling her waist, and look down at her naked form. She's exquisite, even bruised and banged-up after her night on the run—especially so, knowing that each mark is proof positive of her desperation to get back to me.

I'm a little ashamed at the dark pleasure that thought gives me. I would never wish for Aurora to be in pain.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Not pain that I can't turn to pleasure, at any rate.

I move up until my cunt, wet and aching for touch, hovers over her face and I grip the headboard for balance. She must be able to smell me; I can smell myself, hot and musky. I can't wait any longer. I lower myself gently so that my lips are brushing against hers.

"Taste me," I demand, my voice ragged with need. Aurora obeys without hesitation, her tongue delving into my aching center. I moan, grinding down against her face as sparks skitter across my nerves.

Aurora eats me with enthusiasm, her lips and tongue teasing my clit as she nibbles and sucks. I card my fingers through her hair, grabbing a handful of it now and then to guide her, looking down at her with possessiveness and affection in equal measure. I groan as a particularly targeted swirl of her tongue sends shockwaves of pleasure through me, making me grind down on her. She grabs my ass and makes a hum of encouragement, and I have to hold on to the headboard tightly, fight to find some semblance of control before I smother her completely. But then she finds that deliciously sensitive spot once more, and I'm gone. I shudder and shake, fucking down on her face with wild, bucking hips, and I feel the flood of my juices coating her face. She doesn't stop, gentle laps of her tongue easing me through the aftershocks, her mouth turning soft and worshipful until I rise up again, let her catch her breath.

At last I shift off her and collapse to the side, pulling her into my arms. Aurora nuzzles against me, a contented sigh escaping her lips as I massage her pussy again, slowly bringing her to orgasm several more times until she sleepily protests.

I can smell myself all over her. She belongs to me now, marked as mine in the most primal way. The thought sends a surge of warmth through my veins, desire flickering back to life, even as I remind myself that she is free.

She has to be free, for moments like this to exist. Moments where, with our heartbeats and breathing in synchronization, there is only peace.

"Do you want to hear more about it?" she says suddenly.

Her abduction, she means. Her time with my father. "Of course. As long as you're ready to talk about it."

And so she tells me everything—or as much as there is to tell. I recognize my father's behavior, his insistent questioning, going over and over the same ground. It's the same tactic he used with men he thought were betraying him, testing for inconsistencies, forcing them to go over and over it again until he was satisfied.

And although I know my father would cut Aurora's throat as easily as he'd cut into a rare steak for dinner, he does not seem to have done harm to her during her time with him. There's nothing here to be thankful for, but I am glad at least that Aurora didn't have to face his true nature.

When she's finished her story, Aurora and I lay tangled together in my bed, my fingers trailing up and down her arm absently while my thoughts run wild.

"I'm sorry that it happened," I say softly. "I will never forgive myself for putting you in such danger."

Aurora tilts her head up to meet my eyes. "We both knew there was a risk. And I'm the idiot who let an obvious plant distract me long enough to stab me with a needle."

"You're not an idiot. And I never should have let you leave Elysium in the first place."

Aurora is quiet for a moment. "I hope you don't mean that," she says at last. "I hope...Hadria, I hope you understand that I can't be kept captive here, not anymore."

"Of course not," I say quickly. "You are free, little sunbeam, as free as the sunshine you remind me of. But..." I let out a shaky breath, emotions churning inside me that I can't quite name. This woman stirs something in me that I've never felt before. The ferocity of it frightens me.

Aurora seems to sense my inner conflict. She caresses my cheek with a soft hand. "But you want to keep me safe."

I nod. But that's not all that's going on in my mind. And she's too quick to notice.

"What's going on in that head of yours, Hadria?"

I remain silent, unsure how to put words to the foreign feelings coursing through me. Sensing my hesitation, Aurora goes on.

"You don't have to hide anything from me." Her voice filters through the haze in my mind. "I'm here for you, no matter what. You can trust me."

She already sees right through me in ways no one else has managed. "I've never felt like this before," I admit quietly. "About...anyone. You make me feel things I don't understand."

Aurora's answering smile lights up her whole face. "Well, maybe we can figure it out together."

"There's something else. But you must not tell anyone." I look deep into her eyes, making sure she understands how serious I am. And then I tell her about the meeting with my father, the agreement made to break up the Syndicate, renounce my claims to the Imperiole Family. "But now I don't have to," I say with a small smile. "I don't have to, thanks to your resourcefulness."

But Aurora has gone very quiet. After a while, she says, "You'd really give up all this for me?"

"In an instant."

"But if you disbanded this place, what would happen to your people?" She is gentle in tone, but her words hit hard. "You like to pretend you're some loner, but if that was true, you wouldn't have gathered all these people around you. You wouldn't have made a home for them. Elysium is more than just a big house and grounds. It's a place where they can be safe. Get support."

I give a little scoff. "Elysium is a place of work to them, that's all. And they're not looking for support. They're looking for money and the next job."

A crease mars her brow. "That's not true, Hadria. I wish you could see it."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I don't like the way this conversation is going, so I put an end to it. "It doesn't matter anymore, anyway. I don't have to do anything, because you are back with me, and no one ever need know."

"Your father knows."

"My father could hardly expect me to honor that promise now that he has lost his only bargaining chip." But what she says is true. Papa knows. Which means I need to make extra certain that Aurora is never in a position to be taken by him again. I tell her as much, but her frown only deepens. "I only mean that you will need guards with you if you leave the safe zone of Elysium," I add quickly. "I don't mean to restrict you. You'll go where you want, when you want—but until this is over, I want someone with you to protect you. Me, preferably—but when I can, then Lyssa, and if she can't, I'll find my most trusted people."

"Alright," she agrees at last. "I have absolutely no desire to go back there. But Hadria, I want you to understand, I'm staying here because it's my choice," she tells me seriously. "I wanted to come to you that morning, to meet you in the cafe. I wanted to tell you..." She hesitates, a pink blush coloring her cheeks, and I swallow hard against the tightness in my throat. Is she going to say...

No. I can't handle that, not right now. If she says what I think she wants to say, it will break me completely, and I can't afford that. The very idea sends me into a panic.

So I cut her off, sealing my mouth over hers again. She responds eagerly, and when we finally separate, her eyes are glazed and lips kiss-swollen. "You're back now," I tell her. "That's all that matters."

Crisis averted. For now.

Aurora's expression turns serious again. "There are still some things that will have to change, though. I can't keep living in darkness, Hadria. I mean—literally living in darkness."

I raise an eyebrow. "And what do you propose?"

"Maybe you could adjust your sleep schedule a little? Go to bed earlier. Get up earlier—after lunch, say, rather than after dinner? Experience more daylight, get outdoors more often." She levels me with an insistent look. "When's the last time you saw the sun? I'm sure you must have a vitamin D deficiency."

I have to laugh at that. Only my little ray of sunshine would be concerned about my vitamin D levels right now.

"Alright," I concede. "You make a fair point. There's no reason for you to be confined to the dark. And I will do my best to get up a little earlier in the day."

Aurora beams, clearly pleased. "What time is it now?" she asks. "I'd love to go and surprise Mrs. Graves."

My mouth goes dry. I'd been hoping to avoid this conversation a little longer. But Aurora notices my hesitation immediately.

"Hadria? What is it?" Worry creases her brow.

I sigh, taking her hand in mine. "Mrs. Graves has left Elysium. Permanently."

Aurora's mouth falls open in shock. "Is she—is she alright?"

"Yes, she's fine. She just..." I give an irritated shrug. "She was angry that you were taken. Angry at me."

I was angry at myself, too. Which is why I'm still so pissed at Mrs. Graves. I already knew how much I'd fucked up. I didn't need my nose rubbed in it.

"I don't understand," Aurora says, still frowning. "Where did she go?"

"She went back to her house. She still has the old place she used to live in." The old place where she took in Lyssa and me, gave us a home off the streets.

"I'd like to visit her," Aurora says. She's watching me closely, to see my reaction.

"That can be arranged, of course. But listen to me, Aurora," I go on, leaning up on my elbow and looking down at her. "You are free, but you can't just go running around Chicago whenever you please. Not until I've put down Nero, and dealt with my father. You understand? Even with guards, we need to be careful."

"I understand." Then her eyes narrow, a calculating glint entering them that I'm not used to seeing. "But Hadria, if you really want to defeat Nero and your father, you might need more allies. Your father kept asking and asking about how many men you had. Not women," she adds with an eye roll. "I don't think it even occurred to him to ask."

I give a cynical smile, though I'm habitually irritated at being told what to do. I'm not used to being questioned or given direction. But Aurora doesn't back down, holding my gaze unflinchingly as she waits for my reply.

Very few would dare speak to me this way. And I can't deny the wisdom in her words.

"You're right," I concede after a pause. "I do need to recruit more allies. Shore up our resources and intelligence gathering. It's why I've been considering Johnny de Luca's offer of an introduction to Juno Bianchi." And I need to see if that's still on the table, now that Aurora is safe.

I lean in and kiss her forehead, then gather her back into my arms once more. A comfortable silence settles between us. My earlier panic has faded. Having her here in my bed feels right in a way nothing else does. And I know one thing for certain—I will move heaven and earth to keep her safe.

"What happens now?" she asks sleepily.

"Now?" I run a casual hand over those soft, warm breasts again as I bury my nose in her hair and let sleep start to drift over me. "Now I make my father and my brother regret every decision they've made up to this point."

CHAPTER 12

Aurora

My sleep schedule is all over the place, and when I wake, Hadria has gone, though she left a note by the bed, telling me she had to go to work—and begging me to just stay in Elysium until she gets back. So I return to my own bedroom where I shower and dress, and discover that it's just coming up on midnight—one of the busiest times of day at Elysium, and the time I used to go out to my sanctuary.

I go there again tonight.

The night garden sprawls before me in all its moon-kissed glory. I pause at the edge, drinking in the sight. Lush flowers unfurl their velvet petals, releasing their siren scent into the darkness. It's just as I remember, and just as coldly beautiful as the mistress of this estate.

I follow the stepping-stone path deeper into the garden, running my fingers over midnight blooms as I pass. Part of me aches at Hadria's absence. But the rest of me is glad for a little space to breathe, to regain my own equilibrium away from her mercurial presence.

Still, even when she's not here, I feel Hadria everywhere within these walls. Her will shapes every aspect of this place. And I am not just some lonely night-gardener these days.

I have a new place here at Elysium, one that I intend to take up with all my heart. So

after drinking in the familiar sights and smells, I reluctantly leave the garden's shelter behind.

It's time for training with Lyssa and the others.

Down in the training room, the cavernous space hums with activity. My usual training group is already hard at work—grappling, boxing, practicing choke holds and joint locks. Under Lyssa's watchful eye, they transition swiftly from one exercise to the next. I arrived just in time for sparring.

At the sight of me crossing the mats, conversation sputters to a halt. Lyssa's head jerks up, eyes narrowing.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Her lips flatten in a thin line even as her gaze rakes me up and down, assessing.

I lift my chin, refusing to be cowed. "Why shouldn't I be here? No one else gets time off. Why should I be treated any different?"

The line of Lyssa's mouth softens a fraction and she inclines her head in acknowledgment. In this world, self-pity is akin to weakness. And weakness gets you killed. "Your shoulder okay?"

I windmill my arm in response. "It's fine." It's a little sore after that wrenching it took escaping the Imperoli estate, but it's improved a lot since yesterday.

Before I can say anything else, Mario bounds over to me, grin stretched ear to ear. "You're really back! We all thought you died, or something," he exclaims. "Where have you been?"

Several other recruits chorus their own greetings, curiosity in their voices. I suppress

a wince, hating the lies I'll have to tell.

"I just had a little bug." I wave it off like it's nothing. Mario's friendly puppy dog enthusiasm is impossible to resist, and I'm grateful he's here. It eases my return, stops anyone else asking pointed questions. Hadria wants me to keep quiet about what went down with Don Imperioli, and I intend to honor her request.

With Mario as my sparring partner, we begin our grappling holds. He's got bulk and strength on his side, but I've got speed and technique, and we know each other's moves almost too well after endless hours training together.

As we twist and torque into submission holds, I lose myself in the exertion, muscles burning. The familiar adrenaline of fighting washes away the last few days completely. This is where I'm meant to be.

Mario yelps as I catch him in an arm bar, holding just long enough to prove my point before releasing him. We trade playful taunts as we both catch our breath. The others are watching us, but curiosity has shifted to appraisal now. I've earned my place among them, proved my skills more than once.

Now I need to prove something to myself—prove that I'm not going to break. That I can handle anything this world throws at me.

Because there's a war coming. I can feel it, just like the rest of the Syndicate can, looming on the horizon like gathering thunderclouds. And I refuse to be unprepared when it hits.

After I pin Mario for the third time, he calls for a break, massaging his elbow with a rueful grin. "I'm gonna be feeling those holds for a week."

I can't resist flashing him a smug smile. "Better work on your defense then."

He rolls his eyes good-naturedly and heads off to get water. The others pair off to continue sparring, but Lyssa crooks a finger at me in a silent command. I follow her to a quiet corner of the gym, wiping sweat from my brow.

She crosses her arms, expression unreadable. "You've got guts showing up today. Not sure if it's stupidity or stubbornness. Probably both."

I resist the urge to fidget under that piercing stare. "I want to make sure I can protect myself. I never want to be a prisoner again."

Lyssa nods slowly. "Still, this group is for Syndicate recruits. Not sure the Boss wants you training in deadly force anymore."

I bite my lip but force myself to hold her gaze. "Hadria and I are still figuring things out, but she wants me to be able to protect myself." And I want to be able to protect her, too. But I don't add that.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I'm aware how laughable it sounds.

Lyssa's stare doesn't waver, but I sense her reevaluation of me in her subtle shift in posture. After a strained beat, I add in a smaller voice, "I need you to toughen me up more, Lyssa. I had Nero laid out on the floor back at the Imperoli place, and I couldn't do it. Couldn't kill him when I had the chance."

Admitting that failure out loud stings, but Lyssa's expression remains carefully neutral. "Nothing wrong with that. Taking a life changes you. Not everyone's made for killing."

I release a shaky breath. "But if I had been tough enough to do it..."

"Doesn't mean you're not tough." Lyssa reaches out to squeeze my arm, just once. "You've got steel in you, Suzy. We all know that."

I nod slowly, even as doubt niggles at me. "Maybe. But I need to be harder. We both know there's trouble ahead."

Lyssa studies me for a long moment. "I'll tell you this: Hadria needs soldiers at her side, not martyrs." She pokes a finger into my sternum. "So you better not go falling on any swords for her."

I crack a wry half-smile at that imagery. "Wouldn't dream of it."

We share a look of understanding before Lyssa steps back, expression smoothing over.

"Hit the showers. Hadria'll be back soon, and I know she'll want to see you right away." Just like that, the moment passes. I dip my head in acknowledgment and head for the locker room, lost in thought.

Once I've washed training's grime away, Mario and the others have also come into the locker room. The mood is light as they joke and tease each other. Mario makes space for me on the bench when I approach, inclining his head respectfully.

"You've gotten really good, you know."

I bump his shoulder with mine. "Guess all those bruises you gave me paid off."

His smile turns serious. "Nah, it's more than that. You've got, like, this fire in you now." He squints at me. "Not sure what's changed, but it's like you've decided...nothing's gonna stop you anymore."

I absorb his words as the others chime in with their own jokes and encouragement. He's right. I have changed. I don't know yet who I'll be when this is all done, but the old Aurora died the day Hadria claimed me, stole me away from a wedding I never wanted and was thrilled to escape.

I'm no longer some naive little girl. I'm not yet the hardened warrior that Lyssa or Hadria is—but I'm still changing. Still forming. Still finding my own identity in this world of Elysium.

And there's no going back now to what I once was.

CHAPTER 13

Hadria

I return to Elysium feeling no happier than when I left, but the moment I enter my private chambers, the stresses of the day melt away as my gaze falls upon Aurora. She reclines on the black satin sheets of my bed, dark blonde hair fanned across pillows, wearing nothing but a coy smile. Her body is displayed for my pleasure, all graceful limbs and soft curves.

Desire licks through me like flame. I pull off my leather jacket with fumbling fingers, suddenly desperate to join her.

"Eager, are we?" Aurora teases, as I strip off in a hurry.

I'm drawn to the bed, drinking in the sight of her. Aurora watches me, blue eyes darkening, lower lip caught between her teeth. I know that look.

"I want to do very wicked things to you, Sunshine. Will you let me?"

"Yes please."

I capture her wrists, pinning them over her head. She makes a soft noise of approval that shoots straight to my core. Leaning down, I claim her mouth in a bruising kiss, staking my claim. Our tongues tangle as I grind my hips against hers, letting her feel my need. I lavish attention on her slender throat, leaving love bites down to the swells of her breasts.

Aurora whimpers, arching into me. I take a taut nipple between my teeth, worrying it gently as she gasps. My hands roam her body boldly, tracing every hollow and curve until she trembles beneath me.

"Hadria," she breathes, "I need you."

I smile against her feverish skin. "Tell me what you need."

Her cheeks flush deliciously. "I need your tongue. Please."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

The desperation in her voice makes me groan. I kiss lower, over the taut plane of her stomach, then settle between silk-smooth thighs. At the first hot swipe of my tongue through her already-glistening slit, Aurora cries out, fists twisting in my hair.

I drink her up, intoxicated by her taste and scent. My tongue dances over her tight little clit until her legs clamp around my head, back bowing off the bed. Then and only then do I slip two fingers inside her sweet, wet cunt, pumping firmly as I suckle her bud.

"Don't stop," Aurora gasps, writhing against my mouth. I curl my fingers just so, stroking her inner walls in time with my tongue on her clit until she shatters with a sharp cry. I gentle her through the aftershocks, lapping up the juice dripping out of her.

I could live on this. No food. No water. Just Aurora.

I kiss back up her trembling body until we're face to face. Her hands come up to cradle my jaw, guiding me into a slow, sensual kiss.

"My turn," she murmurs against my lips before gently pushing me onto my back. I sigh in pleasure as she palms my breasts, plucking at the hard peaks until I'm tingling all over. Then Aurora's talented mouth continues lower, tracing my abdominal muscles.

I'm already soaked and aching for her touch, but I let her take her time, teasing me as she works her way toward her target. She inches her way down, hands roaming over my stomach, brushing lower. When her hot breath finally plays over my aching

center, I reach down to card my fingers through her hair. Gently, she parts my folds and gives me one long, slow lick. A moan catches in my throat. She focuses on my swollen clit, flicking it lightly, then letting her tongue glide up and down, around and around until I think I might explode from frustration instead of orgasm. I'm on the edge of sanity when she finally slides her tongue into me, flicking it in just the right way to make my toes curl. She's a natural at this, as if she's been made for me and only me.

"Aurora," I groan, digging my fingers into the sheets. The room around us melts away, leaving only the two of us and the inferno building between my thighs. She presses down on my clit again with a flat, deft tongue, and I tense, coiling tightly as the orgasm crashes over me, washes through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Aurora crawls back up my body, her smirk smug and satisfied as she rests her head on my damp chest. Her hand trails down my sweat-soaked breasts and I wrap her up tight in my arms and let my breathing slow.

"I want to visit Mrs. Graves," Aurora says, breaking the afterglow. My body tenses as I'm reminded of the housekeeper's disdain for me now. "You said I could."

"It's too dangerous for you to leave Elysium right now," I reply flatly.

Aurora's brows draw together, mouth turning down. "You promised I'd have my freedom. You said?—"

"I know what I said." That was much too sharp. I soften my tone, tracing her cheekbone. "Of course you may come and go. But only with an armed escort, for your own safety."

Aurora considers this compromise, anger fading. I resist the urge to kiss away her pout.

Finally she nods. "Fine. You can come with me to visit Mrs. Graves then."

I can't contain a scowl. Facing the housekeeper's judgment is the last thing I want. The sting of her words still remains.

"Let Lyssa take you," I counter. "I'm sorry, but a visit to Mrs. Graves is low on my list of priorities right now. I'm busy trying to find allies, Aurora, just like you wanted me to do."

Trying and not really succeeding. There are a lot of criminals in Chicago who owe me a favor, but expecting them to put their lives on the line for the Syndicate is a step too far.

And sometimes, when I try to speak to them, they are impossible to find. This means that my father has been there first. Has paid them or threatened them enough to make themselves scarce.

If things continue the way they are, I'll have to take on the Imperioli Family with only the Syndicate. One Syndicate member is worth ten Imperiolis—of that, I am certain—but I'd rather the odds were a little more on my side, all the same.

Aurora frowns again, but seems to accept what I'm saying, with my not-so-subtle reference to taking her advice. She settles against me once more and I wrap an arm around her bare shoulders, savoring her warmth.

This young woman can unravel my composure like none other. She slips past my icy exterior to expose the vulnerabilities within. And hell, for her, I would brave even Mrs. Graves' disapproving glare. If I really, really had to.

If only Mrs. Graves was the worst problem I had right now. Because the other reason I've been out tonight was because I got the call that another one of my mercenaries,

Eddie Torres, was found dead in a downtown alley, a stiletto to the heart, and no witnesses.

And he's not the first. Bulldog Brassi was killed in a similar fashion while Aurora was staying in the safe house. At the time, I assumed the job had gone wrong; that although Bulldog's assassination target had been successfully eliminated, bratva associates must have chased him down.

I was wrong. Torres and Brassi were both targeted attacks, meant to send a message. But I already know who's behind it. The tipster who called up the gatehouse with the news of this latest killing was very eager to leave his name.

It's Nero.

Nero's men are hunting down my people and killing them.

CHAPTER 14

Aurora

The war room thrums with tension as Hadria calls the gathering to order. Lieutenants and mercenaries are seated at the long table, trainees standing, and the expressions around that I see range from nervous to angry.

I'm so glad to be back here, even though I know there's no good news coming. Hadria told me when we woke this morning—well, late this afternoon, since she did make an effort to get to sleep before dawn—about Nero's attacks on some of the Syndicate members recently. Hadria stands rigidly at the head, radiating frigid authority, and I sit at her left side, feeling a little awkward.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I try to remember what Mario told me when I confided my worries in him earlier today in training, that people might think I slept my way into my seat at the table. "You saved the Boss's life at that meeting with Nero Imperioli," he reminded me bluntly. "I was shaking in my boots and you just took my gun and—blam!—girl, you took out that motherfucker who was aiming at Hades. If anyone got a right to be at that table, Suzy, it's you."

I didn't remind him that the man I shot survived. I guess it's a better story if he did, though secretly I'm relieved that he lived.

But right now, not all my fellow trainees seem to think the same as Mario. One of them in particular, a guy who goes by the name Diesel, is staring at me with hard, dead eyes. I don't like him much. He's skinny and tall and wiry, the opposite of Mario, and he fights dirty in training every chance he gets. Lyssa doesn't stop him—she told me once I need to be ready for reality, and people fight more than dirty in reality.

They fight to win.

But hell, he's not the one who took out an Imperioli soldier who was shooting at Hades, now is he? So I stare straight back at him until he looks away.

"Let's begin," Hadria states crisply, scanning the group with her piercing gaze, and I turn my attention back to the table. But my heart sinks when I notice the two empty seats around the table where Eddie Torres and Bulldog Brassi used to sit.

Both of them killed by Nero. I can't help feeling guilty. This is—in part—because of

me.

But before I can wallow in self-pity and before Hadria can get started, Ricky Half-hands speaks up from a little way down the table. "So is anyone gonna tell us what really happened with Aurora?"

I freeze, surprised. No one has mentioned my absence, neither the week I was away in the safe house nor the days I was being kept in the Imperioli estate. Around me, the others shift and murmur uneasily.

Hadria's eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

Ricky leans forward, undeterred. "Word on the street is Nero Imperioli snatched her back."

My breath hitches. Beside me, Hadria goes utterly still, fury gathering like an arctic storm in her icy gaze.

The table studies her nervously, waiting for her reaction—except for Ricky. He just waits with an even face. The trainees fidget and glance between Hadria and Ricky like spectators at a gladiatorial match, eager for the first clash of violence.

"That's not true," Hadria finally says.

Ricky leans back now and folds his arms across his broad chest. "Oh, yeah? Then where was she?"

The room seems to hold its breath. Hadria hesitates, and I can almost hear the rapid calculations going on in her head.

After an endless moment, she speaks. "My father took her. Don Imperioli."

A ripple of surprise moves through the room. I keep my eyes fixed on the table, humiliation burning my cheeks. I hadn't wanted them to think of me as so weak, so easily captured.

"But it doesn't matter now," Hadria continues dismissively, back in control. "Aurora is back where she belongs."

Ricky's fist slams down, making everyone jump. "The hell it doesn't matter! We should've been told the second she went missing. Nero's out on the streets looking to take us out one by one, and Aurora's one of us. We all need to be watching each other's backs."

I'm touched by the vehemence of his response. But Hadria just stares at him stonily. I can't remember ever seeing her so close to losing her temper. "Aurora is not a member of the Syndicate," she grinds out.

I can't stop my jerk of surprise as I glance at her. Not a member? After everything we've faced together? Not to mention that I'm sitting right next to her at the table!

Ricky looks affronted on my behalf, bless him. "What the hell is she then?"

Hadria hesitates again, clenching her jaw so hard I worry she'll crack a tooth. The whole room watches raptly, seemingly shocked that anyone would dare question Hades so openly.

When Hadria fails to respond, Ricky presses harder. "Why isn't she one of us? She's been training under Lyssa. She's fought beside us." His eyes bore into Hadria's. "She saved your damn life at that meeting with Nero."

Murmurs ripple around the table and heads nod in agreement. Ricky jabs an accusing finger at Hadria. "Aurora matters to more folks here than just you, Boss. So if she's in

danger, all of us need to know. So we can watch her back just like she watches ours. Like she was watching yours."

My heart swells, even as my stomach sinks. Hadria looks apoplectic with rage, her whole body tight as a spring. I'm amazed she hasn't leaped across the table and throttled Ricky yet. The rest of the Syndicate seem to shrink back instinctively.

Just when I'm certain violence will erupt, Tony the Taxman pipes up from down the table. "Alright, alright. How about showing some respect, Ricky? Remember who's in charge here."

Part of me wants to smack the smug tone from Tony's voice. But maybe he can diffuse the situation after all.

"Kid got off a lucky shot one time, that's all," Tony adds. "Don't make her one of us."

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Now I definitely want to smack him. Hard.

Ricky glowers at Tony. "Fuck off, Tony. I didn't see you with your gun out that night. You were hiding behind a fucking wall."

Before Tony can respond, Hadria cuts in, voice glacial. "That's enough, both of you. Are you questioning my leadership, Ricky?"

Every eye swivels between them. Ricky's jaw works, but he doesn't back down.

"Of course not," he says. "But I thought this was a Syndicate, not a dictatorship. As your lieutenant, I should get to speak freely."

"You are no longer a lieutenant," Hadria pronounces coldly.

"Hear, hear!" Tony crows, and I can barely stop myself from throwing something at his stupid head.

Hadria ignores Tony, piercing Ricky with her arctic stare. "Get out. But hang around, Ricky. We'll have words later."

Ricky shoves back his chair and stalks out. The door slams behind him with an ominous finality. My dread deepens. What will Hadria do to him for daring to question her so openly? Surely she won't have him killed...right?

I sneak a worried glance at Lyssa. Our eyes meet and her forehead creases in concern before she smooths her expression. Trust Lyssa not to openly react.

Abruptly standing, Lyssa addresses the group in a carrying voice, cutting through the mutters. "Enough chatter. Listen to Hades."

The Syndicate members obediently turn their attention back to Hadria. But as Hadria begins speaking, going over the precautions and protocols she wants Syndicate members to take on jobs for the near future, I drift into troubled thoughts.

Not a member, she said. So what am I to her? Just a pawn, still? Bait to control Nero?

A weak, pretty little thing for her to bed?

What the hell would earn me an equal place at this table in her eyes? Because this seat I'm in is obviously just for show.

Hadria concludes her briefing, oblivious to my turbulent thoughts, and then heads immediately to her office at the side of the war room. As the others file out, I slowly approach the door and knock on it, ignoring Lyssa's warning glance from across the room.

Time for some tough conversations.

Hadria sits ramrod straight, flipping through paperwork with feigned nonchalance. I know she's anything but calm beneath that veneer of control. Her knuckles are white around the pen.

Sensing my presence, she looks up with one eyebrow quirked. "Shouldn't you be training?"

I lift my chin. "We need to talk. About Ricky." And about me.

Hadria's eyes instantly harden. "He disrespected my authority publicly. I won't let that

stand unpunished."

She returns her attention to the paperwork, a clear dismissal. Anger sparks in my chest.

Striding forward, I plant my hands on her desk and lean down to force her gaze back to me. We stare at each other from inches away.

"Reconsider his demotion," I implore softly but firmly. "Please. He meant well, he just wants?—"

"It doesn't matter what he wants!" Hadria snaps. "I am the leader of this Syndicate. If I allow challenges and dissent, everything will unravel."

I press on gently. "I understand that. But you told me yourself, a kind heart can be a strength, too." I reach for her hand and she stares down at my fingers on hers. "Ricky is a good man. Loyal. He only wants what's best for the Syndicate."

Hadria remains silent, but her rigid posture relaxes slightly under my touch. Sensing an opening, I move closer.

"He cared enough about me to raise an uncomfortable truth." I gaze at her beseechingly. "Promise me you'll reinstate him. Please."

Hadria sighs, eyes conflicted. "Ricky should have known better than to raise it in public. He could have come to me privately."

"Or maybe he knew you'd never tell him the truth if he didn't confront you publicly," I counter.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

She sighs again, some of the fight leaving her. "Very well. I will reinstate him. But!" She levels a warning finger at me. "If he questions me in public again..."

"He won't," I assure her quickly.

Hadria nods, appeased for now. I come around the desk and brush a soft kiss over her lips in gratitude. "Thank you."

She cups my face, searching it with those strange, silvery eyes. "You continue to surprise me, Sunshine."

Her use of my pet name sends warmth curling through me. But our conversation is far from over. I steel myself for the next difficult topic.

"There's something else," I say slowly. "Why did you insist I'm not part of the Syndicate? After all this time, all we've faced together. What would it take for you to respect me?"

She tenses, withdrawing behind her icy mask once more. "I have nothing but respect for you, Aurora. But you're better off separate from all this, believe me."

"I'm already in too deep." I gesture around us. "This is my life now. I chose you, Hadria. I had a billion dollars and complete freedom—and I chose you."

Hadria is silent so long I fear she'll shut me out entirely. But finally she speaks. "I do respect you. And I know you can handle yourself physically. You escaped both my brother and my father, after all. But taking a life..." She hesitates, then meets my gaze

solemnly. "It changes you, Aurora. Stains your soul. I have plenty of blood on my hands; I don't want the same for you."

It's a strangely touching notion from my ruthless lover. I consider her words carefully. Perhaps she just wants to shield me from further trauma.

"I understand," I say slowly. "Thank you for wanting to protect me from that. But let me decide what stains my soul. Please. Freedom isn't just about going wherever I want. It's also about making my own choices, my own decisions."

Hadria nods reluctantly. "You may have a point. I'll consider it." She presses a swift kiss to my wrist. "Now go train with Lyssa. We'll speak later."

I know a dismissal when I hear one, but I'm satisfied with the discussion.

For once in my life, I feel like I've been truly heard.

And with a lightness in my heart, I run down to the training room, where I fully intend to show Diesel how I earned my place at the table.

CHAPTER 15

Hadria

I sink back into the supple leather of my office chair, the events of the past hour replaying in my mind. Ricky's response to Aurora's kidnapping was unexpected, as were his words about the way I run this Syndicate.

I formed it with no real intentions of it being more than a collection of mercenaries who found it useful to band together. But as time went on...I wanted it to be more than that. As Aurora pointed out the other night, I pretend to be a loner, but I haven't

just gathered together a convenient cohort. I've built Elysium around them, offering everything they could want: training, money, protection.

My father's cutting words from my meeting with him and Nero echo in my mind.

You don't have a new Family, girl. Mercenaries are only loyal to one thing: money. You have a group of people who'll put up with you ordering them around until someone pays them more than you do—and then you'll end up with a blade in your back.

The accusation stings more than I care to admit. He's right, of course. The Styx Syndicate was first united by money, not unshakable bonds of loyalty.

And I've done little to change that, although I wanted to sometimes.

I close my eyes, massaging my temples as regret washes over me. Ricky Half-hands has been by my side since the early days, quietly competent and unflinchingly loyal to me as a leader. Yet at the first sign of defiance, I stripped him of rank without hesitation.

What was I thinking?

Of course he questioned Aurora's safety. He cares about her. About our operation. About me. And how did I repay that loyalty? By punishing him.

A humorless chuckle escapes my lips. I've become my father in the worst possible way, demanding unthinking obedience and cutting down those who dare voice concern. Leadership through terrorization.

That isn't who I want to be.

Decision made, I reach for my phone. Ricky answers on the second ring, his gruff voice clipped and professional.

"Boss?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"Come up to my study."

He's here in minutes, and I can see from the look in his eye that he's expecting a dressing down. "I wanted to discuss our...conversation earlier," I begin.

"No need to explain, Boss. You're in charge. I'll fall in line, whatever rank you wanna give me."

His acquiescence only makes me feel worse. "That's not why I called up here. Listen—where Aurora is concerned, I'm not always...well, rational. I over-reacted."

Ricky is stunned speechless by my admission. He recovers quickly, though, tone gentle when he replies, "Hey, we've all got our soft spots. I get it."

"I don't like to show weakness in front of the Syndicate."

Ricky makes a derisive noise. "Boss, you're the strongest person I know. Ain't no one would accuse you of being weak."

"Perhaps." I pause to gather my thoughts, which turn inevitably to my father, to the way I was so quick to roll over and show my belly when he dangled Aurora in front of me. I am weak where she's concerned. "You may have noticed I overcompensate a little," I say with irony, glancing up at Ricky. "I squash any perceived signs of weakness."

"Even loyalty," Ricky finishes knowingly.

"Yes." I smile despite myself. "I should never have punished you for caring about our people. That's the kind of loyalty I want to inspire. The kind that will topple my father—and my brother."

I take a breath, steeling myself to show vulnerability—something I've trained myself to avoid at all costs. "What I'm trying to say is...you're important to me, Ricky. Not just as a lieutenant. As...as family. Thank you for still being here after all these years."

Ricky sucks in a sharp breath and clears his throat. When he speaks again, his voice is thick with emotion. "Aw, hell, Boss. You tryin' to make me cry over here? Course I got your back. That's what family's for."

I exhale in relief. "Good. Then we'll have no further misunderstandings." I infuse my tone with renewed authority. "You are reinstated as lieutenant, effective immediately. I'll need you by my side for what's to come."

"You got it, Boss."

I dismiss him, feeling infinitely lighter. Opening up goes against every single survival instinct I possess, but this is the kind of vulnerability required for loyalty. My father rules through fear and intimidation. That's what I learned from him, and it's how I set up the Syndicate.

But true loyalty comes not through fear—or even money.

It comes from...

God, I hate to admit it. But when I think of the people I am most loyal to—Lyssa, Mrs. Graves, Ricky, and of course, Aurora—that loyalty comes from love.

And love requires trust. Aurora's taught me that.

The thought of her sends a now familiar warmth blooming in my chest. I've lived my whole life behind impenetrable walls, unwilling to let anyone near. But somehow, without my even realizing it, that brilliant, maddening, beautiful girl slipped right through.

She's changed me. When I'm with her, the world seems brighter. The cold hollowness inside me thaws, just a fraction, but thaws nonetheless.

And I want more of that feeling.

Over the years there have been parts of myself I've had to excise to survive. Aurora makes me wonder if some small shreds can be salvaged. If I can find a way to balance the ruthless mercenary queen with the heart I've kept buried.

The heart that might be worthy of someone like Aurora.

I smile to myself, a foolish, private smile. Aurora has proven herself extraordinary. She may have come here as a captive, but she's evolved into so much more. An equal. A partner.

Certainly not bait, as I have used her in the past. A wave of shame washes over me as I think about dressing her up for that meeting with Nero, where it all went to shit. I treated her like some trinket, or a doll, and Ricky was right.

She saved my life that day.

I don't deserve her. But I want to.

Aurora is thrilled at my changing hours; Lyssa less so, though she hasn't said

anything about it—yet. I can tell she's thinking it, though. I'm really trying, but I can't help yawning as I scroll through my phone during the first meal after waking the next afternoon.

The text comes through just as I can feel the caffeine start to work its magic. It's from Johnny de Luca, terse and vague as always: Got something for you. Usual place, one hour.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

My interest is most definitely piqued. I abandon my food immediately, despite Aurora's protests. I can get something at the diner, instead. "Duty calls," I tell her, and I kiss her goodbye quickly.

Johnny has been a valuable ally these past few days, helping me where he could, and he's been able to gather a few contacts for me that haven't already been corrupted by my father. Johnny the Gentleman might be a New Yorker at heart, but his Chicago background still holds him in good stead.

So sixty minutes later I arrive at the greasy spoon Johnny favors for these little tête-à-têtes. I spot him tucked away in a corner booth this time, nursing a cup of mud-black coffee. Sliding in across from him, I catch a whiff of his cologne, something expensive and European that never fails to make my nose itch.

"Johnny," I say in greeting.

He nods, dark eyes flicking up to meet mine. "Hadria. Your girl. She's safe?"

"Back where she belongs," I say evenly.

"Good." He takes a sip of coffee.

Gratitude doesn't come naturally, but I owe this man a great deal. "I haven't forgotten your part in this. You'll be compensated, of course—" I take out the check I had my accountants prepare, but Johnny holds up a hand.

"Put your money away," he says, the corner of his mouth turning down in distaste.

"This isn't about personal profit."

I raise an eyebrow. In my world, everything is about profit. "Then what, exactly, do I owe you for your favors?"

He leans in, dropping his voice. "In my line of work, loyalty is worth more than money. I'm not here for your cash, Hades, but your friendship."

"You told me you weren't in town on business at all," I counter.

He grins. "Nor was I. Until a business opportunity presented itself to me, right here in this diner.

I give a wry smile. I suppose I did crash into his life in a rather spectacular manner, walking in here and demanding to know why he was in town.

A glint enters his eyes. "And speaking of friendship: as it happens, Juno Bianchi will be in Chicago in a few days, attending a charity event here that my daughter is hosting. And I know Ms. Bianchi is...amenable to discussing certain opportunities with you. Assuming you're still interested, of course."

A smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it. Interested in speaking to Juno Bianchi, the head of New York's preeminent crime Family? Her backing could cement my power in this city once and for all.

"I am very interested," I say.

Johnny nods approvingly. "In that case, I have something else for you. A gift, you could say, as a show of Ms. Bianchi's good faith." He slides out of the booth and jerks his head toward a staff door. "This way," he says cheerfully.

Senses slightly heightened—Johnny the Gentleman has a reputation, after all—I follow him through the dingy kitchen into a storage area. And there, waiting for me, is a bloody, battered figure tied to a chair. Surprise flickers through me—I know this man. He used to lead a cartel that the Syndicate had a disagreement with over payment for services rendered.

He's also the man who tortured and maimed Ricky for information about the Syndicate—information he never got, not before Lyssa and I freed Ricky, then tracked down the cartel members and killed them all...

All except this one, the ringleader.

"This," Johnny tells me, "is the bastard your father hired to snatch your girl. He's admitted it—proudly, I might add."

I go very still. This vicious animal is the one who dared lay hands on my Aurora?

"He's all yours," Johnny says.

CHAPTER 16

Aurora

The scent of flowers surrounds me, sweet and familiar, as I tend the midnight blooms in Elysium's night garden, and I find myself humming as I enjoy the simple pleasure of coaxing beauty from the earth. The events of today still bring a glow to my skin—Lyssa's praise of my roundhouse kick, the camaraderie during training, Hadria's lingering caresses when we woke together...

Sighing happily at that particular memory, I miss the whisper of footsteps over the grass behind me, until I hear my name. I turn with a wide smile to see Hadria

silhouetted in the moonlight, her ice-blue eyes still bright despite the dim light.

"Come with me," she says, face unreadable in the shadows.

That doesn't sound good. I rise up, dust off my knees from the dirt, and follow wordlessly as she turns back toward the mansion. She's tense, more than usual, and I dare not ask what's wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I'm pretty sure I won't like the answer.

We pass through endless corridors, delving deeper into the mansion's sprawling wings, into places I've rarely been. Hadria leads me to a thick, iron panel I've always assumed led into a security room, inconspicuous and blank. She presses her palm to a hidden sensor panel, just like the one on the underground gun range, and the door slides open soundlessly.

The thick stench of blood and sweat hits me as Hadria leads me into the dim room, and I instinctively cover my nose, turning away for a moment to steel myself. I waver on the threshold, but Hadria's fingers, gentle but firm, clasp my wrist and pull me inside.

My eyes struggle to adjust to the dim light, discerning only hulking shadows and a deeper darkness slumped in the room's center. Oh, God. What's going on?

A light comes on, shining straight into the face of a man in the middle of the room, bloodied, bruised, secured to a chair. Ricky paces behind him, the glint of a knife catching my eye. He pauses to glance my way, his face impassive.

Lyssa leans against the cement wall on the other side, paring down her nails with a knife of her own, as if bored. But her sharp gaze fixes on me like a hawk zoning in on prey, and I have to look away.

I forget how terrifying Lyssa can be, sometimes.

Hadria's cold voice echoes throughout the bare room. "Is this him, Aurora? The one

who took you from me?"

"What?" I'm still confused. What does she want from me?

"Take a closer look," she says softly. "This is the man who claims to have abducted you for my father. But I want to be sure."

I force myself to look at the man slumped in the chair, features obscured by shadows. His head lolls forward, dark hair matted with blood. My breath catches. Is it him?

I take a hesitant step closer, and the man's head snaps up at the sound. The last moments before I was drugged are hazy, just glimpses of a scruffy beard and dark eyes. But looking at him now, something clicks into place.

Yes. Yes, this is him.

I give Hadria a shaky nod, unable to tear my eyes away from the man who stole my freedom again in one terrifying instant.

Hadria turns toward Lyssa. "Get what you can out of him about my father's plans. Then let Ricky finish it."

My pulse jumps. Finish it. There's only one way that phrase ends in a room like this.

Lyssa's answering smile is wolfish and hungry in the faint light. She saunters to a table lined with sinister instruments that make my insides roil and twist. This is wrong. Hadria can't truly mean to let them?—

I back away, the reality of what's about to happen hitting me. "Hadria, wait?—"

A guttural scream splits the air as Lyssa goes to work, Ricky circling like a feral dog

waiting for his chance.

I can't watch this. Can't listen to this man's agony, sanctioned by the woman I've come to care so deeply for.

Spinning on my heel, I flee the horror behind me, racing for the hallway, my ragged breaths loud in my ears,

When I can stand it no more, I whirl and burst from the room, Hadria's footsteps echoing after me. Her hand clasps my shoulder, halting my panicked flight.

"Aurora." Her voice rings sharply with command, then softens. "I'm sorry. I thought—I thought you would want to see. To know that he is suffering like you have suffered. To understand that justice is being done."

I round on her, anger and revulsion churning inside me. "Justice? They're torturing him, Hadria!" My shout strains the silence of the empty corridor.

Hadria's eyes flash like the edge of the blade Lyssa was using to carve into the man's face. "And he stole you from me. He must suffer the consequences." She runs an agitated hand through her hair. "But I...I didn't mean to cause you more pain. And I can see that I have."

Her sincerity gives me pause. I know she inhabits a ruthless world where retribution and vengeance are everything. I understand it, even—in an abstract sense.

My next words come out a strangled whisper. "I just don't know how to reconcile the Hadria I love with the one who permits such cruelty."

"You...love me?" Wonder and vulnerability creep into her smoky voice.

Warmth creeps into my cheeks but I lift my chin. "Yes. But I wish the first time I'd said it wasn't tainted by..." I gesture weakly behind her, willing her to understand.

Hadria takes a breath, pauses, then speaks. "You don't understand, Aurora. He deserves to die. Not just for taking you, but for other evils. Ricky—" She pauses while a horrible scream carries down the hallway, and I flinch. "That rat back there is the one who took Ricky's fingers. Tortured him. Nearly killed him. I'm bound by the code of the Syndicate to allow Ricky vengeance on the man." She pauses, her lip curling. "And maybe it does make me a monster, but I'd burn the whole world down to keep you safe."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

My breath catches at the ferocity of her words, the protectiveness embedded in her anger.

I admire that part of her, her loyalty. I love it. But there's more in her that I love, too. I love the hidden Hadria who laughs at my silly jokes, who kisses me so gently under the stars, who fell to her knees when I returned to Elysium.

My voice drops, barely a murmur. "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind, Hadria. Where will it end?"

Conflict wars across her beautiful, terrifying face. But then her glacial eyes harden, icy walls slamming back into place. Without a word, she sweeps away, back down the corridor.

This shouldn't be a surprise to me. I knew before I returned here to Elysium that—if I'm to build a life at her side—I must be unflinching at the darker half of her world.

So, squaring my shoulders, I scurry after Hadria and re-enter the torture chamber before the door slams shut again. Lyssa pauses her work, surprise flickering in her eyes as she sees me returning.

The man's head lolls back, his face a mass of blood now. He moans, the sound thin and reedy.

I suppress a shudder at the sadistic pleasure on Lyssa's face. She looks to Hadria expectantly.

"That's enough." Hadria's voice slices through the man's wailing.

Lyssa's eyes narrow. "Enough? But Hades, we've only just started having fun."

"I said that's enough." I flinch at the whip-crack authority in Hadria's voice—and even Lyssa blinks.

With a shrug, Lyssa steps back and throws down the bloody pair of pliers she held in her hand back to the tray of instruments. The man slumps forward with a guttural moan.

"Clean him up."

Lyssa shakes her head in astonishment but does as instructed, pouring water over the seeping wounds she's just inflicted. The man groans, fresh sweat mixing with the sheen of blood on his skin as she works.

Hadria turns to Ricky, whose maimed hands are curled into fists. "You may take seven of his fingers in return for the seven he took from you. No more. Then I will send him back to my father with a message."

Ricky's scarred face twists in a scowl. "This piece of shit ruined my life. Made me a laughingstock. He deserves worse than just losing a few fingers."

Hadria just looks at him impassively. "Those are my orders."

My heart constricts. I understand his thirst for vengeance. But the thought of more disfigurement, more agony...

And for what?

Ricky looks past Hadria to me, his eyes softening slightly. "Is this on account of the little flower?" he asks gruffly. "She doesn't have the stomach for it?"

Before I can think better of it, I step forward and take one of Ricky's mangled hands gently in both of mine. "It's not that I don't think he deserves punishment," I say softly. "But killing him...it won't give you back what he took. And it wouldn't be justice. You still have your life. And I still have mine."

Ricky's brows draw together in surprise as he looks down at me. "What, you don't want to get a few licks in on the bastard who snatched you from us?"

I shake my head. "It won't change anything."

I know Ricky finds mercy a foreign concept. But perhaps he will grant it, just this once.

Ricky glances at Hadria again before inclining his head. "Alright, Hades. Seven fingers it is. Then we ship him back to the old man, as you ordered."

Relief washes through me. I retreat as Ricky steps forward to execute the punishment, unable to watch the outcome. But the man's muffled screams pursue me out of the chamber.

I barely touch my dinner, nausea roiling through me. Later, as I slide under the silken sheets of Hadria's bed, her arms enfold me. Her lips graze my temple.

"I'm sorry you had to see that today. Some of the things I must do weigh heavily on me as well at times." Her voice holds a rare vulnerability when she adds, "I hope it doesn't...change how you feel."

I shift to meet her eyes, gray and unfathomable as a winter sea. "I know you're not as

cold as you pretend to be." I kiss her softly, willing her to believe it. "I've seen glimpses of your humanity, Hadria. It's still there, even if you keep it locked away. And I will love you no matter what, because I know you. I know that hidden part of you."

She draws me close, her body warm and strong around mine. "Sunshine...I wanted to tell you earlier, but it—well, it wasn't the right time, as you said. But you should know, I..." She pauses, and I know what she wants to say.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

And I know why it's so difficult for her.

"You don't have to say it," I murmur. "I already know."

True pain shoots through her eyes. "I do have to say it, Aurora. For so many reasons. To prove I'm not like my father—he never said it to me, not once in my whole life. And I need to be able to say it to prove to you—to myself—that I'm not..."

"You're not a monster."

She gives a little half-sob and pulls me closer, nestling my head into her shoulder. And then she says it, a whisper, a ghost.

"I love you, Aurora. I love you."

I smile. "I love you, too."

She lets out a long, shuddery sigh. There, I want to say. That wasn't so hard, was it?

But it was hard, so hard for her, and I don't want to diminish her strength in finally being able to say it.

So I just focus on her hand, stroking my hair, and let my eyes drift shut, lulled by her steady heartbeat.

She is more than the ruthless name she chose, more than death incarnate. A warm, beating heart is in there too, buried beneath the pain and the hurt.

With time, patience and care, just like I showed with the overgrown night garden, perhaps that heart can flower again.

CHAPTER 17

Hadria

Another Syndicate member killed.

Another meeting scheduled.

And I know I'll face another fraught discussion about what I, personally, plan to do about my brother, to stop him picking us off.

The only good thing about the meeting tonight is that Aurora won't be present. Earlier I went to find her, to let her know there had been another murder and therefore another meeting, but I found her sleeping soundly still in my bed. Her body clock is all over the place since she got back, and I didn't want to disturb her; she looked like Sleeping Beauty lying there with her curls tumbling brown and wheat across the silk pillowcases.

Tony isn't here tonight, either, which is strange. He doesn't usually miss a trick. And given the news I've had to deliver about another killing, there's a part of me that wonders if he hasn't found himself on the wrong end of a knife, too. So I'm actually relieved when, halfway through my speech about what's happened, Tony storms in, face set.

And in his hand, clutched like a live grenade, his cell phone.

No one brings their phone into the war room. It's one of our firmest rules. But Tony is brandishing his defiantly as he advances on the table.

Lyssa's eyes narrow to dangerous slits. "You know the protocol, Tony," she snaps. "No phones during meetings. Now get that damned thing out of here before I take it off you myself."

Tony doesn't so much as blink, his jaw set stubbornly. He slams the phone down on the table with an ominous thwack. "Everyone needs to hear what I've got here. Including you, Lyssa. Unless...maybe you knew already?"

A warning prickle runs down my spine at his words. Whatever is on that phone, it won't be good. My mind races, trying to anticipate what's coming. But I come up empty.

Tony taps the phone's screen sharply, then cranks the volume to full. Tinny speakers broadcast the unmistakable sound of my own voice, followed by my father's. I recognize this conversation immediately, and my stomach drops.

My father's voice rings out, setting the terms for Aurora's return.

Let me be clear. You will renounce all claims to the Imperioli Family and dissolve your silly Syndicate. Then, and only then, will I return Aurora to you, assuming you keep your word.

And my past self's reply: I will renounce my claim to the Family and dismantle the Syndicate.

The discussion goes on, but the damage has already been done in those few words I spoke. When the recording ends, there's nothing but silence.

So the old bastard recorded us that night. I should have known he was biding his time with this information, waiting until it would cause the most damage.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I hold Tony's accusing, injured glare. "And where did you get that from?"

"Where do you think?" he snarls. "You saying it's fake?"

For a long moment, I consider it. But I've never been one to hide from the truth. "It's real."

Ilona is the first to react. She jumps to her feet, eyes blazing. "So what the hell was that, Hades? You were just going to roll over for Daddy and give up everything we've built?"

Angry mutters ripple around the table. I take a slow breath, keeping my face neutral. I need to get this under control quickly.

More irate grumbles sound from around the table, and then Ricky speaks over them, sounding calmer than the rest. "Boss, I have to say, we've been here before. This is not how a Syndicate is supposed to operate. The point is that we decide things together, watch each other's backs. Not make unilateral choices based on..."

He lets his sentence trail off, but the insinuation is clear.

Based on emotion.

Weakness.

But then Ricky reverses course, and throws me a lifeline. "On the other hand," he says loudly, "maybe it was strategy. I can accept that. And it doesn't matter anyhow;

nothing came of it. Aurora is back with us, we're still scaring the pants off these so-called tough guys in the Imperioli Family, and we know you'll get together a plan for dealing with Nero. We're all good, end of story."

I shoot him a grateful look, relieved someone still has my back.

Lyssa stands up, too. "Sit the fuck down, Ilona," she says. "And be quiet."

But Ilona shakes her head in disgust, upper lip curled derisively. "Come on. Our fearless leader folded like paper at her daddy's command. Just couldn't wait to lick his boots. Don't pretend that's not a massive fucking problem."

Beneath the table, my fingers dig into my thighs, yearning to curl around her throat instead.

But I force myself to relax my fists, keep my voice bored and indifferent. I can't afford to lose my temper. "As Ricky says, I did what was needed in the moment, Ilona. A short-term strategy to avoid bloodshed and complications. But the Syndicate remains fully intact, as you can see. My commitment has not wavered."

Ilona barks out a harsh, scornful laugh. "Bullshit. You've been useless as a leader ever since your pretty pet showed up. Face it, Hades, your judgment is shot to hell. Maybe it's time we had someone competent at the helm instead."

The atmosphere turns brittle as the rest of the Syndicate falls silent, waiting to see my reaction.

Beside me, Lyssa puts her hands on the table, leaning over to stare Ilona straight in the face. When she speaks, her voice is lethally soft.

"If you are questioning who leads this Syndicate, Ilona—" A razor smile tightens her

lips. "—then you know the protocol. Formal challenge issued. Fight to the death. Go ahead and put your life where your mouth is, if you're so confident. Or does Hades scare you too much?"

Ilona stares back, but I can see her bravado faltering. As competent as she is, she's no match for me in a fight. We both know it. A direct challenge would be suicide.

"I'm simply voicing concerns that others share," she mutters resentfully, sinking back down in her seat. "There's no need to threaten me for speaking the truth. As a lieutenant, I have a right to speak—unless, of course, Hades is going to pull my rank from me like she did to Ricky." She glares at Ricky. "Speaking of bootlickers..."

Before Ricky can retort, I hold up a hand. "That's enough. This in-fighting is pointless." I fix Ilona with an icy stare until she drops her gaze. "As Ricky said, nothing has changed, except that my father has successfully weakened us. Why do you think he sent you that recording, Tony? You've done exactly what he hoped you would do, run in here and started chipping away at the things that hold us together."

That earns me a few murmurs of agreement, at least, and Tony looks embarrassed.

So I press my advantage, standing up and looking around the room. "If you want to be angry, be angry with Nero, since he is the one thinning our ranks. It's time to put a stop to him for once and for all. I will finalize our plans in the next few days."

The reason I haven't moved against Nero yet is because I'd hoped to build up some allies. But now I'll have to rethink my strategy and find a way with the numbers we already have.

"So unless there's anything productive left to discuss tonight," I go on, "I will conclude the meeting."

I look to Tony, who glances uneasily at Ilona before giving a small shake of his head. "I mean, like Ricky said, it's moot anyhow," he mumbles. "Though if you've got any other surprises coming our way, I'd appreciate a heads up."

Lyssa bares her teeth in a smile that is more snarl. "Trust me, Tony. You'll be the first to know."

Tony stays silent. I survey the room a final time, watching resentment smoldering in some eyes, the rigid set of their shoulders. Doubts are written clearly across each grim face.

I'm damn close to losing my people.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Aurora was right. They are my people, as much as I'd like to deny it. They're my people and I've let them down. Badly.

"Very well," I say tiredly. "We're done here."

The Syndicate members push back their chairs and file out wordlessly. The door groans shut heavily behind the last of them, leaving Lyssa and me alone again.

I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose against the headache building behind my eyes. How did I allow things to unravel this far? I should never have let it get this out of hand.

After a moment, I lower my hand and meet Lyssa's gaze.

"Go on and say it," I mutter. "Get it out of your system."

"Say what?" Lyssa asks. "That you royally fucked this up? That your judgment's gone to hell ever since Little Miss Sunshine fluttered her lashes at you?" She leans in. "That I should have left you hung out to dry just now?"

I give a helpless shrug.

She studies me for a moment, a small crease between her brows. "Listen, you need to remember how you got where you are. Hades needs to be ice-cold. Even when she's messed up."

I let out an aggravated sigh, even as I acknowledge the truth of her words. Aurora has

me so tangled up and off-balance I can't even keep my own emotions in line, let alone the Syndicate. It's pathetic, really. "Point taken. Now how the hell do I fix this? Get my people back on side?"

"You're asking me?" she snorts. "I'm not exactly a people person."

I make a face. "And yet, still better at it than me."

"You got that right." Lyssa leans back in her chair. "Hmm...well for starters, get that plan together to take out Nero. And stop shutting people down when they make suggestions. Plus you could stand to get to know them a little better. Let them get to know you." She gives me a pointed look. "They'll follow you to hell and back if they believe you give a damn about them."

I make a dissenting noise low in my throat at the thought of making myself so vulnerable. Of letting anyone potentially wield power over me by getting too close. The very idea leaves a sour taste on my tongue. But Lyssa is right. Slowly, reluctantly, I nod. "Alright. I'll figure something out for Nero. And...do all that other stuff, too."

Lyssa seems to read my thoughts, her gaze softening by the barest degree. "It's salvageable," she says quietly. "They'll come around."

I nod, a flicker of hope rekindling inside me. Perhaps turning things around is possible, though it means confronting my own natural instincts of mistrust and isolation.

But if that is what it takes to regain control, so be it.

"Thank you for your advice," I say sincerely.

I see a flash of surprise on her face. I so rarely openly thank her or acknowledge her competence. Before she can respond, I push to my feet and stride for the door, anxious to put this taxing day behind me.

Right now, there is only one place I want to be. One person I need to see.

Aurora. Just the thought of her steadies something inside me, easing the turmoil of this disaster of a day. With her, things make sense. The world beyond these walls falls away, and it's only the two of us. No scheming underlings, no threats from my father.

Just...peace.

I enter my bedroom to find her freshly showered, hair still damp, and curled up on the window seat, gazing out at the moonlit grounds. She turns and smiles softly as I approach, opening her arms. I go readily, sighing as she draws me close and cards her fingers through my hair.

"By the time I got to the war room it was emptying out. You should have woken me," she chides me.

"Why should both of us be stressed?"

She frowns a little. "If you're trying to keep me out of Syndicate business?—"

I can't stop my groan. "Please, Sunshine. Just for tonight—let it go. You were asleep and you looked so peaceful, I couldn't wake you. That's all it was, I swear."

After a moment, she nods her acceptance, and I go to the other chair and slump into it, a weariness overtaking me. She comes over behind me and starts to massage my shoulders.

I'm too drained to protest.

"So...rough meeting?" she asks.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"The worst," I confirm wearily, savoring her touch, the way her hair falls over me like a comforter, the warmth and light floral scent soothing my soul. "Much better here with you."

She hums understandingly, continuing the work on my tense shoulders. I feel the tension finally easing up in my body under her ministrations.

"They know," I say at last. "About the deal I made with my father."

Her hands still on my shoulders. "Oh," she says. "You told them?"

I give a short, mirthless laugh. "If only. No, I didn't tell them." I fill her in on the meeting and, to my relief, she doesn't tell me—once again—how much I've fucked up.

In fact, she does just the opposite. "You'll figure it out," she says. "I know you will. And the Syndicate will get over it. Like Ricky said—it's all over and done with now."

Lyssa never fails to take a tough love approach, and I need that. I appreciate it.

But I find I also appreciate Aurora's encouragement and gentle positivity. I reach up and grab her hand, pulling her around the chair, tugging her off-balance until she falls into my lap, giggling. "Yes," I tell her, sliding a hand up her thigh. "It's over and done with, and I have something much more interesting to think about."

"What's that?" she asks with a grin.

In response, I slide my hand higher and trace down the seam of her pussy, making her catch her breath. Her thighs part in welcome and her eyes grow heavy-lidded.

"This," I tell her, "is the only thing on my mind right now."

Business can wait.

CHAPTER 18

Aurora

Hadria's hand slides up my skirt, sliding aside the fabric of my panties to explore me with her skilled fingers. She traces over my sensitive folds, making me squirm and writhe as I try to get her fingers closer to where I really want them.

Without warning, she seizes my panties in both hands and, with one clean yank, rips them right off me. "Hey!" I say, startled. "Those were expensi...ohhh." My head falls back against her shoulder as she pulls my thighs over hers and cups my sex. She must be able to feel how hot I am, igniting as she touches me.

"I'll buy you a thousand pretty panties to wear," she tells me, "just so I can rip them off you before I fuck you."

I moan in anticipation. She chuckles, her fingers trailing up my inner thighs now, sending goosebumps all over me. I arch my hips up in invitation as she teases me mercilessly, circling my entrance but never quite penetrating me. "Please, Hadria," I whimper, unable to hide my need any longer.

"I love the noises you make for me when I tease you. I want to see how long I can keep you on edge, making those delightful little whimpers and gasps." Before I can protest, her fingers part my folds, exposing me fully. "Look over there."

She turns my face with her other hand so that I see myself reflected in the mirror at the other side of the room, can see my pussy spread open, flushed with desire, and Hadria's long, slender fingers slowly teasing me. "Watch yourself," she murmurs in my ear, her breath tickling my skin as her fingers delve inside me ever so slightly. "I want you to see just how badly you want this."

I stare at my reflection, transfixed by the sight of her finger tracing over my wet heat. My cheeks warm with embarrassment but also the heady thrill at being on display like this for Hadria's amusement. I watch as her finger circles my clit now, rubbing it in slow, delicious motions. I pull up my top and tug my breasts up from my bra until my nipples are free, hard already though she hasn't touched them at all.

"Gorgeous," Hadria tells me. "Play with them. Twist those sweet nipples, make them pretty and pink for me."

I groan as I obey her command, pinching my nipples between my fingertips, rolling them around. With every little tug and twist, I feel the corresponding pull between my legs, each sensation heightening the other. Hadria's fingers, still holding me open, still circling my clit, are maddening now. I need more friction. I whimper louder, bucking into her touch.

But I'm at Hadria's mercy, and she's in no rush to grant me release.

"Oh, please," I moan, my hips rocking as if they have a mind of their own, "please, please..." I'm a slave to her touch, and I can see every move she makes as she plays with me.

"You like being watched, don't you?" Hadria says. "Look at you, all flushed and wet for me. There's nothing better than watching you gradually lose control, knowing that it's because of me."

"Please," I plead with her, my voice filled with need. "Let me come, please. I can't take it anymore."

"Not yet," she says, her voice like velvet. "I'm not done playing with you yet."

But she does take pity enough to increase the pressure and speed of her fingertips, working my clit with more intensity, another finger teasing my entrance, then sinking in deep. The duo sensations send me spiraling even higher, my entire focus narrowing down to the slick heat between my legs where she teases and torments me relentlessly. My breaths come in shallow pants, and I can feel the familiar buzz of my orgasm starting to build. "Oh, God," I moan "Hadria, I'm?—"

"I know," she says, amused. "I can see for myself how close you are, darling. And I want you to see it too. Look at yourself. Watch yourself while I make you melt completely."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

The need inside me builds to fever pitch as Hadria's fingers continue their relentless onslaught. I watch in the mirror as my back arches, my breasts heave, and my hips roll, needing more of her hands. I can see how soaking wet I am for her, and how she's playing my body to perfection, mastering me with eroticism.

"Please," I beg her, my eyes meeting my own in the mirror, reflected lust and desperation swirling in their depths. "Please let me come. I can't take it anymore."

Hadria's only response is a filthy chuckle, low and deep in her throat, as she adds a third finger, curling them inside me, stroking me deeper. She knows exactly where to touch me, finding that most sensitive place inside as she flicks a thumb over my clit in a regular, thrumming beat.

"I love how you look right now," Hadria murmurs against my neck, her teeth nipping softly, lips brushing against my skin. "So fucking desperate."

My eyes roll back in pleasure as I grind down on her fingers, desperate, just like she says, but also wanting to last forever in this moment where she has complete control over my body and pleasure. The mirror reflects the sight of our entwined bodies, her fingers working their magic on my sex while her other hand now trails up my stomach to tease my diamond-hard nipple.

"Mmmm," she hums when I gasp at the dual sensations assaulting me. "You like that, don't you?"

I'm beyond words. All I can do is pant and moan, watching as she pinches harder and harder at my nipple, watching my cunt take her fingers inside me, stretching me. I can

feel the burning sensation spreading throughout my body like wildfire, my walls clenching around her fingers in rhythm with each thrust. The sensation is exhilarating yet unbearable at the same time; it feels like an eternity since she began this tantalizing game, but I'm still an eternity away from her permission to come. In the mirror, my head is thrown back now, mouth open in silent screams as she pushes me closer and closer to the edge without crossing it yet. I'm drenched in need, must be soaking right through her clothes, too...

"Come for me," she commands, with one more firm twist on my exquisitely-sensitive nipple, one more thrust of her fingers, one more electric circle around my clit. "Come for me, Aurora. Now."

I shatter completely, my core clenching hard around her fingers, lightning tearing through me as she watches every moment in the mirror, her eyes capturing mine as surely as her hands have captured my body. My nails dig into the armrest as my orgasm whips through me like a sudden storm, leaving me shaking and unmoored in its wake.

"Now that," Hadria says, her voice low and husky, "was an absolute pleasure to witness. And now I want to come just as hard."

"What would you like me to do?" I pant out, still dizzy with delight.

"I want you to do exactly what I tell you, like a good girl. Come on—" She gives me a little push, and I stagger to my feet. "—over on the bed, Sunshine. Let me see that perfect ass of yours." She helps me over to the bed, pulling off the rest of my clothes along the way, though she only pulls down her black pants and underwear. With a little shove, she pushes me over so I'm face-down on the bed, and she straddles my thighs, squeezing at my ass. "I'm so hot for you," she tells me, her voice rough with need. "Look," she says. "Look how fucking hot you make me."

I set my chin on my folded arms and look ahead to the mirror again, at Hadria as she squeezes my butt hard, bunching the flesh in her hands. I can feel her pussy pressing into my thigh before she shuffles up a little so that her cunt splays open on my left asscheek. She presses one hand between my shoulders for balance as she begins to ride me, grinding against my ass, her breathing ragged and rough. As she slides against me, I can feel the hard nub of her clit going back and forth over my buttcheek, and I watch her face contort in pleasure. Her eyes, those icy grays, never stray from mine as she watches our reflection in the mirror, her other hand still gripping my hip to make sure I don't move.

It's a heady rush, knowing that I am the cause of her undoing, that I have this much power over someone who usually carries herself with such an impenetrable demeanor.

"Oh, fuck, Aurora," Hadria gasps, her words ragged and uneven as she rocks her hips harder against me. "You have no idea how fucking good this feels. You're so damn soft, you gorgeous little thing—" She breaks off, grunting as she continues to ride my ass, grinding her clit against my slippery skin. I can feel her juices seeping into my crack, and the thought of her losing control like this is almost enough to send me over the edge again.

"Can I touch myself?" I beg.

"Yeah," she pants, rising up a little so I can get a hand underneath and onto my clit. "Yeah, come while I'm riding your ass, darling. Moan for me."

My clit is still almost too sensitive, but I work it without mercy as she humps down on me. In the mirror, I see her lips part, tongue flicking out to wet them as she pants and groans. The sound of her skin smacking against mine makes my pussy clench. She hisses and gasps, fingers digging into my hips as she rides me harder, faster. Her moans mix with my own gasps and pleas for more as we rock together in perfect

harmony, chasing our highs together in a primal rhythm.

She leans over and grabs a handful of my hair, pulling my head back. "You're gonna make me come," she grits out. "You drive me fucking crazy, you know that, Aurora?" I moan in response, my second orgasm building. God, she's so close, too, dripping all over me so that I'm sure the wet coating my fingers is our combined arousal now.

"Fuck," she gasps, and in the mirror I see her arching, hips stuttering as she hits her peak, and she crushes down into my ass, hand still tugging at my hair. I come along with her, a sound escaping me that I've never heard before.

"Oh fuck," she pants, falling forward onto me. "You're incredible." She presses a kiss to my shoulder and then rolls off me, flopping her limbs out like a starfish. I snuggle into her, and she pulls my hand to her mouth, sucking on my fingers, tasting the orgasm that coats them.

We stay like that for a long moment, just breathing and enjoying the afterglow of our passion.

I wish it could last. But I know that outside this bedroom, there's danger and death waiting for any opportunity to ambush us.

At least in here, I can care for her. I can make Hadria remember that life has so many pleasures along with the pains. It doesn't all have to be darkness.

There can be a little sunshine here and there.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

I just smile. "Never mind that. It's time for another round."

She snorts. "You're insatiable."

But she rolls me over and starts kissing her way down my body.

CHAPTER 19

Aurora

I know it's unlikely, but I want to try to convince Hadria to visit Mrs. Graves today. She's refused every time I bring it up, always saying she's too busy. But I can tell a part of her wants to go back, even if her stubborn pride won't allow it.

Today—the early afternoon—I find Hadria in her study, pouring over a bunch of scribbled notes with a fierce scowl on her face and a tired look in her eyes. She's trying to adapt her sleep schedule, and I appreciate it, but I think she needs more rest than she's getting. She doesn't even glance up as I enter the room.

"Hadria," I say softly.

Her stormy eyes flick to me briefly before returning to the documents strewn across her desk. "Is something wrong?" she asks distractedly. "I'm trying to figure out how to get to Nero. He's always so goddamn protected..." She trails off, caught up in strategizing again.

I take a deep breath. "Why don't you come with me to see Mrs. Graves this afternoon? I'm sure she'd love to see you."

Hadria's jaw tightens, the only outward sign that my words have affected her. "I don't have time for social calls."

"It doesn't have to take long. Even just an hour or two. I bet it would mean the world to her."

"My answer is no." Hadria's voice leaves no room for argument, and the scowl she gives me backs it up.

I sigh softly, knowing further debate is pointless when she's in this mood. "Fine. Have it your own way. I'll be going with Lyssa as my guard, then."

Hadria frowns harder, and I can tell she's trying to find a reason to deny me, but I put my hands on my hips. "Don't even try," I tell her. "I'm going. And that's that."

Hadria simply inclines her head in acknowledgment, but as I turn to leave I glimpse a shadow in her stormy eyes, a flicker of longing quickly smothered by her iron will.

But it's enough to reaffirm my belief that a part of her wants to reconnect with the woman who was once the only maternal figure in her life. If only I could find a way to persuade her.

Perhaps when Nero has been taken care of, she'll have more time to heal that fractured relationship.

Later that afternoon, I'm sitting in Mrs. Graves' cozy living room, gentle sunlight streaming in through lace curtains. The aroma of freshly baked cookies fills the air. Lyssa lounges casually in an armchair, snagging cookies whenever Mrs. Graves' back is turned and shooting me conspiratorial winks.

"It's so lovely to have you both visit," Mrs. Graves bustles in carrying a fresh tray of tea and cookies, which she offers to Lyssa first with a knowing smile. "Make sure you eat up now. You're both far too skinny."

Lyssa rolls her eyes and snags another cookie.

I sip the fragrant tea, letting its warmth seep into my bones. "I wish Hadria could

have come, too," I say tentatively. "It's been too long since she's seen you. I know she'd love to be here if she could."

Lyssa snorts, undercutting my words.

But Mrs. Graves just sighs. "To tell you the truth, Aurora, I'm not sure I'm ready to see her again yet. I am delighted that you are safe and well. But Hadria behaved abominably to let you fall back into...well," she concludes briskly. "In any case, that girl has always been stubborn, even as a teen. She hasn't changed one bit."

Lyssa speaks through a mouthful of cookie. "You got that right."

"Manners, Lyssa," Mrs. Graves says. "And my issues with her recently do not cancel out Hadria's many fine qualities, too. I'll never forget what she did for me—and you, too, Lyssa. You both have my eternal gratitude. And I'm not the only one in this neighborhood who thinks of the two of you fondly."

I lean forward, eager to soak up these glimpses into Hadria's past. Lyssa launches into a story about the time Hadria picked a fight with a guy twice her size when he tried to play heavy with some of the local shopkeepers, demanding "protection" money. Her eyes dance with amusement as she describes Hadria getting her nose bloodied but refusing to back down until she beat him down. "And then she marched him around all those shops and made him apologize like a little kid. Funniest damn thing I've even seen."

Mrs. Graves laughs and shakes her head. "She certainly was a scrappy little hellion. But with a good heart, when she let it show." Her expression turns wistful. "Perhaps she's simply forgotten that part of herself exists."

Lyssa grows uncharacteristically somber. "Maybe so. But you know as well as I do, Mrs. G, the life she chose isn't for the weak." She looks my way and adds, "Even the

best intentions usually only lead to pain in our world."

I know she's warning me, but I refuse to hear it. "Mrs. Graves," I say, "these cookies are amazing."

"Thank you, dear. Lyssa and Hadria always liked them, too. And Sarah, of course. My daughter," she adds, with a smile that has a hint of pain to it.

Lyssa shifts uncomfortably.

"You must miss her," I say gently to Mrs. Graves.

"Indeed I do," she says, and that smile gets even more pained. "But thanks to Lyssa and Hadria, I have a measure of peace, knowing that justice was done in her murder."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I don't know what to say to that, so I just nod.

Mrs. Graves' face lights up a little. "Would you like to see some photographs of Sarah? I like to look at them these days, share her memory."

"Yes, please," I say. "I'd love to."

Mrs. Graves is right—she really does enjoy sharing memories of her daughter, and after an hour of looking through old photos, I almost feel like I know Sarah myself. Lyssa has barely said a word, and I think she's probably sat through this a few times before, but she has the grace not to fidget or sigh impatiently.

For Lyssa, it's surprisingly sweet.

But at last Mrs. Graves shuts the last photo album and gives a satisfied sigh. "Well. You've let me go on for quite a while, Aurora, and I thank you for that. You see, I've come to the point, finally, where I can remember the good times without having them tainted by the bad. I've resolved to stop living so much in the past. I want to move on, you see. Sarah would want me to move on. That's why..." She looks up at Lyssa.

"You're not coming back," Lyssa says after a moment. Her tone is matter-of-fact, but I think I catch disappointment in her eyes.

"No," Mrs. Graves says. "No, I don't think I can." There's a moment of silence and then she stands up. "Well," she says, with an air of moving on from the subject, "I should refresh the tea, it's gone cold. Lyssa, can you show Aurora to the bathroom, please? I'm sure she could use a comfort break."

I could. I drank a lot of tea.

Lyssa takes me upstairs, saying she's going to take a look in her room "for old time's sake." After I get out of the bathroom, I can't see Lyssa in the hallway, so I stick my head tentatively into the room to the right. She's lying on the bed in there, boots on the bed in a way that I know Mrs. Graves would tell her off for, hands behind her head as she looks up at the ceiling.

The bedroom is swathed in varying shades of pink, its walls cluttered with posters of bands that were popular twenty years ago, and stuffed animals stand guard from a shelf on the wall.

My eyes widen at a fluffy teddy bear perched on the bed next to Lyssa's head, fur worn smooth from too many loving squeezes. "Lyssa, is this...your old room?"

She grimaces. "Yeah, don't get too excited. The decor wasn't my choice. Honestly, it gave me nightmares." A glint enters her eyes as she thumbs at the teddy bear. "And if you tell anyone about Mr. Fluffikins here, I'll slit your pretty little throat."

I raise my hands in surrender, biting back a smile. "Your secret's safe with me." After a beat I add, "He looks very loved."

Lyssa's face softens for a moment. "Yeah, well, I never had the heart to get rid of him, since..." She trails off, a shadow clouding her gaze.

"Since what?" I ask gently.

She seems to debate internally before saying, "Straight talk? This was Sarah's room originally. Mrs. Graves had kept it exactly the way Sarah left it, and when Hadria and I moved in, she told me I could change it, do whatever I wanted. But I just...I knew she didn't mean it." She swings off the bed. "Hadria kept her room pretty empty. I got

stuck with the pink explosion."

Hadria's teenage bedroom. It's too enticing. "Can I see Hadria's room?" I ask.

Lyssa swings her feet off the bed and beckons me wordlessly after her, a little way down the hall to another door. She swings it open and makes an after you gesture.

The barren space inside contains only a bed, desk, and dresser. The minimalism is pure Hadria, along with the darkness of the furniture.

"At one point she wanted to paint the walls back, insufferable little Goth that she was," Lyssa says affectionately. "But Mrs. G nixed it."

I grin at that. But running my fingers over the plain walls, I'm struck by the lack of personal touches, of any sign someone once made this space their own. It reminds me eerily of Hadria's chambers at Elysium, stark and empty of photographs or mementos. Just blank surfaces veiling closely-guarded secrets and old wounds.

My chest aches at the thought of teenage Hadria lying alone on this plain bed night after night, emotionally walled off from the world, hungry for a connection she couldn't allow herself to need.

By the time I return downstairs, I've made up my mind. I take Mrs. Graves' wrinkled hands in mine, meeting her sad, knowing eyes.

"I wish you would come back to Elysium. Hadria still needs you, even if she refuses to admit it. And things are...changing there. She even sees a little sun now and then."

It's a weak joke, but Mrs. Graves smiles as she pats my hand gently. "You have a kind soul, my dear. But the darkness in that place...I wasn't just referring to the schedule Hadria prefers." The smile turns sad and she drops her voice so that Lyssa

doesn't hear. "I couldn't stand to see another daughter killed, Aurora. It would kill me, too."

My heart sinks at her words. I understand, now, why she can't come back. But it scares me that she assumes Hadria will lose this fight she's started.

As Lyssa drives us back to Elysium in the dusk, I gaze out at the cheery houses passing by, each bursting with life and light. An ache fills my heart, followed by fear.

"Lyssa—if Nero is killing people from the Syndicate, shouldn't we have, well, warned Mrs. Graves?"

Lyssa gives a dark chuckle. "You think Mrs. G could take him? Don't worry about it," she goes on impatiently, when I try to protest again. "Seriously, Suzy. You really think Hadria's so cold she wouldn't—" She breaks off.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"Wait," I say slowly. "What do you mean?"

With a roll of her eyes, Lyssa says, "Look, she didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but you know that job that comes up every week at meetings, special protections?"

"Special protections is—watching Mrs. Graves?"

"Yep. And Mrs. G would be real pissed about it if she knew, so keep it to yourself, okay?"

"Okay." I can't help grinning. I should have known Hadria would already have thought of that. No matter how difficult things might be, I know Hadria will always protect the people she loves.

She can't help herself. She's built that way. Loyal, down to her bones, though she hates the idea.

"You won't change Hadria, you know." Lyssa's words jolt me from my thoughts. "And it's not a good idea to try. You think you're helping her by making her soft. You're only putting her—and you—in more danger. The Syndicate only respects strength."

I turn in surprise to meet Lyssa's eyes, rather like Hadria's in their intensity, though not color. "I don't know if that's true, Lyssa. I've seen the camaraderie among the Syndicate. Felt it, myself, with the training. Things could be different in the Syndicate, if Hadria let them change."

Lyssa makes a face. "Change sucks," she says bluntly.

I laugh. "Maybe. But it's inevitable."

She shrugs, face unreadable now. "Look, all I'm saying is, the way you make her seem soft...it'll only end badly. Yes, there are people in the Syndicate who care about her, about each other. The rest of them? They see that kind of bond as a weakness. So watch your back, Suzy. Not everyone who smiles at you is thinking happy thoughts. Just some friendly advice."

I sit back against the leather seat, watching the cheerful houses disappear behind us, and I think about Mrs. Graves, too, who refuses to come back to Elysium.

"Do you think Hadria will die?" I ask suddenly. "In this quest of hers, against the Imperiolis?"

Lyssa is quiet for a long time before she says, "I think Hadria is consumed with the need for vengeance. It's a strength of hers, that single-mindedness. But these days, she has a distraction."

I whip my head around toward her. "Are you saying you think I'll get her killed? By being a distraction?"

But Lyssa doesn't reply.

CHAPTER 20

Hadria

I stare at the embossed card in my hand, reading Johnny de Luca's looping handwritten addition inviting me to a charity function on the Gold Coast. I received it

yesterday and I still haven't made up my mind. While the prospect intrigues me, I distrust walking blindly into unknown territory—even if it's very unlikely that Nero or my father would try to gatecrash a function at the Chesterfield Club of all places, a storied private membership club located in the Gold Coast.

Still, if I ever hope to expand my reach in Chicago, such a top-tier connection as the Bianchi Family would prove useful.

I turn the invitation over in my fingers, debating. I make a mental note to have Lyssa quietly look into the guest list and scan for trouble. My thumb brushes pensively over the thick cardstock as I weigh the benefits against the risks.

Risks that will only increase if I bring Aurora along, as Johnny suggested in his additional note.

My eyes drift to where she sits curled in an armchair, engrossed in a book. Her long hair spills over her shoulders, glinting in the golden afternoon light slanting through the window. She absently tucks a strand behind her ear and I feel a twinge low in my belly at the innocuous gesture.

Her nearness disorients me, scattering my thoughts like autumn leaves in a gale. And if I go tonight, I cannot afford distraction. Not with Nero circling like a shark, waiting for a moment of weakness.

When she first saw the invitation, she squealed in delight at the idea, until she saw the look on my face.

"Oh. You don't want me there," she'd said quietly.

"It's not that," I'd hedged.

"It's fine," she'd told me. "I understand. You want me safe."

But she'd looked bitterly disappointed, and refusing to allow her to attend seems needlessly cruel after the liberties I've already granted. She glances up, meeting my eyes, and the decision is made.

"Get dolled up, Sunshine. Something formal. You're coming with me."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Her answering smile lights up her whole face, and I know I made the right call.

Later that evening, I adjust the collar of my crisp white shirt before shrugging on a black blazer, the silhouette nipped in at the waist over black satin pants. The sound of Aurora's footsteps draws my gaze to the bedroom door. My mouth goes dry at the sight of her. A pale pink cocktail dress clings to the alluring curves of her body, ending just above her knees. She's swept her waves up on top of her head, giving her several extra inches of height. Dark liner rims her bright eyes, her lips a playful red. She smells of something rich yet delicate—woodsmoke mixed with vanilla.

"Well? How do I look?" She gives a coquettish twirl.

"Incredible. I'm going to want to tear that off you all night. Perhaps you'd better change?—"

She laughs. "The car will already be waiting for us," she mock-scolds, and takes my hand. "Come on. This is almost like a date, isn't it? I can't wait!"

A date. Yes. I...suppose it is.

I've never had a date before. I'm pretty sure Aurora never has, either. I like the notion that our first dates are with each other.

During the drive, with Rocco—my most experienced bodyguard—behind the wheel, I catch Aurora admiring the Chicago skyline, the city lights washing over her lovely features. She chatters brightly about the extravagant galas she glimpsed on society pages growing up. Under my taciturn demeanor, I'm pleased to see her so openly

excited. I know these freedoms help temper the cloistered world at Elysium.

And hell, at least this gala is at night, when I'm functioning at my best. A brunch would have been out of the question. I think I've reached my limit of re-tooling my sleeping, starting to rise around one p.m. these days. Aurora finds it acceptable, though she still retires earlier than I do, and gets up earlier, too.

We pull up to a discreet gold-plated door along Lake Shore Drive. Valets in crisp uniforms usher us inside after checking the invitation Rocco holds out. He shadows us carefully, and he's not the only protection in the building tonight—I was worried at first that taking a guard along would make me too noticeable, but I can see that's not at all the case. When we reach the function room, I think there must be a score here for Juno Bianchi alone, obvious with their New York suits and heavy accents as they talk amongst themselves, then glare around the room. I don't see Juno herself, though, not yet.

The soaring ceilings buzz with elegant socialites and politicians from Chicago's upper crust. Aurora stares around wide-eyed, dazzled by the extravagance. I keep one hand resting lightly on the small of her back, hyperaware of the envious glances thrown my way as we weave through the crowd.

"Ah, Hadria! So pleased you could make it." Johnny appears with his charming golden-boy grin, and this must be his daughter Alessa at his side, a curvy brunette with bright green eyes. Despite myself, I'm impressed by her poise as we're introduced. She has her father's easy charisma, her smile wide and charming. And there's a shrewd intelligence in her emerald eyes that suggests a savvy businesswoman.

"But you must excuse me," Alessa says at last. "As hostess, I need to spread the love around. Make sure you bid high, ladies!"

There's a charity auction tonight, and I half wondered if it might be a money-laundering scheme for the Bianchis. But Lyssa's background check on Alessa de Luca showed that she really does do a lot of charity work, and is now looking to expand one of her charity ventures—Anna's Kitchen—into Chicago after some solid success in New York.

"Enjoy yourselves, ladies. The silent auction is just starting if you're interested in contributing to the cause. I'm going to see if our mutual friend has arrived yet." With a nod, Johnny also melts back into the crowd.

"I've never seen so many celebrities outside of magazines," Aurora breathes as we stroll through the gathering. She rattles off several names that mean nothing to me. My focus is on discreetly surveying the room, taking stock of the attendees. Most appear innocuous enough—I spot a few familiar political faces. Chicago's police chief in full dress uniform, laughing heartily beside Judge Callahan.

No Imperiolis or Imperioli-aligned guests. That's good to know.

A passing waiter offers champagne from a polished silver tray. I pluck two slender flutes, handing one to Aurora. She sips gingerly, nose scrunching adorably at the dry bite of the bubbles. We eventually wander into the bustling auction hall just as bidding commences on a Degas landscape. I observe silently as sums quickly soar into six digits. When the auctioneer approaches seeking a donation, I scrawl a cheque for one million without blinking. Aurora inhales sharply, pressing closer against my side.

"That's more money than most people would earn in a lifetime," she whispers. I simply smirk, enjoying her awe.

As the extravagant auction continues, a flash of crimson draws my gaze across the hall. Juno Bianchi holds court at a table of elegant socialites, sitting next to a striking

redhead I presume is her wife.

Johnny de Luca appears at my elbow again, making me start a little. I can see how effective he must have been as a working mafioso. "Up for a private tour?" he asks me casually. "You can leave Aurora here. She'll be well looked after."

"She stays with me."

"Come now, Natalie will keep an eye on her." He gestures to a blonde hovering nearby. "This is Natalie Miller, Alessa's partner." I eye her dubiously. Johnny adds, "She's highly trained. Ex-FBI."

I raise an eyebrow. "That hardly inspires confidence."

The woman—Natalie—offers a wry grin. "Very ex-FBI. I'll keep an eye on things. Promise."

Aurora touches my wrist, a subtle intimacy that makes my breath catch. "You need to start trusting someone sometime," she murmurs, "and I can handle myself." Her full lips quirk up on one side. "I did brain Nero with a lamp, remember?"

The comment startles a huff of laughter from me. I signal Rocco to come closer and shadow Aurora instead. Then, with great reluctance, I finally nod. Johnny guides me towards a dimly-lit corridor, his footsteps soundless on the carpet. I cast one lingering glance back at Aurora before slipping into the gloom.

Johnny leads me through a maze of hushed corridors to a small, secluded reading room. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line the walls, save for where elaborate oil paintings hang lit by subtle accent lighting. Two deep scarlet wingback chairs frame an ornate marble fireplace carved with lions.

"Make yourself comfortable, she'll be along shortly," Johnny says before slipping out, door snicking softly shut behind him. I remain standing, fingertips trailing over leather spines as I peruse the shelves.

Aurora likes reading—fiction, though. Most of the books in here are about history or business or studies of ancient war. I wonder if she'd like a better library at Elysium. The one we have now is all non-fiction. I make a mental note to ask her on the way home.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

And then a hidden door set seamlessly into the bookshelves swings silently inward. A woman steps through, a little shorter than me, but not by much in her skyscraper heels, with a shiny black bob, lips painted a deep blood red to match the color of her sheath dress.

She emanates effortless authority. We stare at one another in cool assessment for a moment.

I wonder what she thinks of me.

Finally she inclines her head in tacit approval. "Hadria Imperioli. We meet at last." She settles gracefully into one of the wingback chairs, beckoning me to do the same. "I must admit to being intrigued after hearing Johnny's reports. Chicago could use some new...stabilizing blood."

I raise a brow at that. "Stabilizing?"

"Mmm. There's so much potential here, yet it's been so fractured lately." Her dark eyes sharpen. "I hear you recently had a spot of unrest yourself when your lovely wife was taken."

I stiffen. "Aurora is...not my wife."

"Oh?" One sculpted brow lifts delicately. "My mistake." Juno sighs, smoothing an invisible crease from her tailored dress. "The thing is, Ms. Imperioli, I prefer conducting business in a climate of civility and order. Much easier that way." Her eyes flick up to my face once more, and she weighs how her words are landing.

"Were things to settle things down here, I believe we could have a very fruitful rapport. I know that Johnny thinks so, and I am always very interested in his opinions."

I incline my head slightly in acknowledgment. Message received. "I think you'll find that Chicago will stabilize—as you put it—in the near future."

"I hear you intend to take over the Imperiola Family."

She's blunt. I like that. "I do," I say with conviction. Maybe a little more conviction than I actually feel. Because lately...

But for the first time, Juno gives a smile. A small one, but a smile nonetheless. "It is no small thing, as a woman, to take over a Family with such a masculine history. But I'm sure you will make a very fine leader."

I look down with a small frown. "If my ambitions were elsewhere," I say slowly, and then I look up to see her reaction, "would that impact any potential friendship between our houses?"

Only a slight flutter in her eyebrows betrays her surprise. After considering, she says, "No. I don't believe so. I am not interested merely in the name of a Family. If the Styx Syndicate continues on, I don't see why it should make a difference. As I say, all I care about is stability. I want to know that there is potential for steady growth."

I nod. "That's good to hear."

She smiles again, giving me a curious up and down look. "You are an interesting woman, Ms. Imperiola. I'm glad Johnny asked me to meet you."

I stand as she does. "Likewise."

I put out my hand, and she takes it, clasping it warmly. "Do send my regards to Ms. Verderosa. You two make a striking couple. And if not your wife yet—perhaps some day?" She laughs at my rapid blinking. "It's nice being married," she says in a stage whisper. "You should try it. Some day," she adds, and then nods her farewell before leaving through the hidden door once more.

I stay in the room another five minutes, mulling over her words.

Aurora is chatting happily with Natalie and Alessa de Luca when I return to the function room, the color high in her cheeks from a few more glasses of champagne, I believe. She beams at my approach, and tells me happily all about the work of Anna's Kitchen.

"That sounds amazing," I say sincerely, looking down into her earnest face. "Perhaps we can donate regularly."

"I'd love that," she says. "And maybe I could come and volunteer!"

"Maybe," I agree, though the truth is, Chicago will have to be—as Juno Bianchi put it—stabilized before I let her do anything so regularly.

We stay a little longer for appearance's sake and then I escort Aurora out to the waiting car, the lakefront gleaming under the moonlight.

Back at Elysium I shed my jacket and roll up my shirtsleeves, content in the comfort of home. Aurora appears in the doorway of the bedroom, limned in lamplight. Wordlessly she comes to me, guiding my hands to the back of her dress. I oblige, slowly lowering the zipper to reveal inch after inch of smooth golden skin. The dress slides to the floor, pooling in pink silk at her feet. Then she is in my arms, warm and supple, an anchor pulling me home amid turbulent seas.

And later, when I lie spent beside her, fingertips tracing lazy spirals over satin skin, I think again about tonight; about Juno's words to me.

It's nice being married.

I've never thought about it before. It was never a part of my life's plan. And what difference would it make, really, to have some piece of paper affirming our love for each other? Ridiculous.

Still.

I suppose there must be benefits to marriage if Juno Bianchi is so content in her own.

CHAPTER 21

Aurora

The overhead lights gleam on the weapons rack as I enter the training room the next night, steeling myself for another session under Lyssa. I got out of it last night thanks to the charity gala, but I'm glad to be here again. It's become almost a ritual for me, a grounding part in my life here at Elysium. The other recruits are already here, limbering up and bantering good-naturedly. Mario spots me and flashes a grin.

"Hey, look who decided to show up! We were starting to think you'd gotten too good for us."

I roll my eyes dramatically. "As if I could ever abandon my adoring fans."

The others laugh—most of them. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Diesel, one of the male recruits, staring at me intently, just like he did in the meeting the other night. But now his gaze bores into me like he's sizing me up.

Before I can dwell on it, Lyssa strides in and barks at us to pair up for sparring. I glance around, hesitant. Normally I'd partner with Mario, but he's already facing off with Nico, who wanted what he calls a "rematch" from whatever happened yesterday in training.

The stare-y guy swaggers up. "Wanna go a round, Suzy?"

"Sure," I say slowly. I chalk his odd behavior up to typical macho posturing. God

knows Mario was just as bad that first day.

We take our stances on the mat. He's got a good fifteen pounds of muscle on me, so I'll need to rely on speed and technique. I take a deep breath and wait for him to make the first move.

He feints one way then the other, trying to get me off-balance. I pivot smoothly out of reach. We continue exchanging moves, neither gaining advantage. He's better than I expected.

Lyssa has moved to the other side of the room to critique some other pairs. She isn't watching us. And then Mario slams Nico to the mat with such a cheer of triumph that I have to laugh.

Diesel uses my momentary distraction to get behind me, looping a muscular arm around my throat. I tap his arm in the sign for release.

But he doesn't let go. He only crushes my throat hard, stars bursting across my vision as he cuts off my airway.

Panic lances through me, followed by anger. Summoning all my strength, I stomp down hard on his foot, then shove a hard elbow into his solar plexus. His grip loosens fractionally and I slip free, grabbing his arm and using his own momentum to flip him onto the mats. He lands hard, the breath exploding from his lungs. For a second I think it's over.

"Take it easy," I tell him. "This is just a sparring match."

But he rolls to his feet fast, pure murder in his eyes. There's a flash of silver as he pulls a knife from his belt. My blood turns to ice. I back away, raising my hands.

He slashes at me wildly. I twist away, but the tip of the blade slices my forearm, hot blood welling up.

This isn't sparring.

He's trying to kill me.

Diesel comes at me again, knife first, and I stumble back—but suddenly Mario is there, shoving me out of the way. I fall hard, scrambling to my feet as I hear a sickening thud. Mario cries out. When I look up, the hilt of the knife is protruding from his bicep, blood dripping down his arm.

For one heartbeat, everything seems frozen in time. Mario's agonized face swims in my vision. Diesel grins viciously, yanking the knife out, and then advances again.

Someone screams for Lyssa.

I think it's me.

Then Lyssa is there in a blur of motion, disarming Diesel easily and slamming him to the ground. He struggles as she pins him, trying to get his knife hand free, but Lyssa is ready for him. With a chilling detachment, she turns his hand away and helps him sink his own blade into his throat, before tearing it open.

Dark arterial blood sprays across the mats, and Diesel gurgles.

Then he stops gurgling.

The rest of us stand frozen in horror until I see Mario is trembling. He looks dangerously pale. I rip my shirt off—I have a cropped sports top on underneath—and wrap it around his wound tightly, trying to slow the bleeding.

"You okay?" I ask him urgently.

"Yeah," he says hoarsely. "Shit, Suzy. What the fuck just happened?"

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"You saved my life," I tell him, sounding just as shaken as he is. I try to smile. "My hero."

He gives me a weak grin, though his face is still contorted with pain. Lyssa, who has been studying the spreading pool of blood with interest, looks up.

"Hades needs to be informed. You—" She points at someone. "Go and find her."

I swallow hard. Hadria is going to be furious that someone made an attempt on my life right under her own roof.

Not five minutes later, the doors to the training room slam open and Hadria stalks in, gray eyes like thunderclouds. Her gaze sweeps the bloody scene before settling on me. Then she's at my side, hands all over me as she checks me for injuries.

"Are you hurt?" she demands. I shake my head mutely, trying not to lean too much into her touch. Just having her close steadies me, though my hands still tremble with delayed shock.

Hadria turns to Mario next, assessing his injury with a critical eye. "I already sent for the Doc," Lyssa tells her. "He'll live, but I didn't want to take any chances. He jumped in front of the blade for Suzy—uh, Aurora."

Hadria puts a hand on his shoulder. "You have my thanks," she says seriously. "And you will be rewarded." She turns to address the remaining, shell-shocked group. "Mario showed excellent work defending his fellow Syndicate member. I know the rest of you will, as well. Unity and loyalty are what make us strong."

They stand taller at her words. But while her tone is calm, I can feel the fury simmering beneath the surface. Someone will pay dearly for this betrayal.

Hadria draws me aside into one of the side rooms, out of view and earshot. Her thumb gently brushes the crusted blood on my arm. "I'm so sorry, Sunshine. I never thought you'd come to harm here in Elysium—especially under Lyssa's eye."

My heart twists at the regret in her voice. "This wasn't your fault, or Lyssa's either. How could you have known?"

She smiles sadly, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. "You're too kind to me, as always." Her eyes darken. "But I can see it's past time that I moved against Nero and my father. They've gone too far this time."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't kill him myself," I admit softly.

Now Hadria looks startled. "That's not who you are, Sunshine." She brushes her thumb over my lips. "You made this place live again. Made my heart come to life along with it."

Overcome with emotion, with the events of the last hour, I cling to her. "I love you," I whisper into her shoulder.

Hadria exhales sharply. "And I love you." She holds me so tightly it's as if she fears I'll slip away. For a few blissful moments we just breathe each other in.

But in our world, tender moments rarely last. The infirmary team hurries in to tend to Mario and the harsh reality of the situation crashes back in.

Hadria is already pulling away, but she turns back for a moment, cradling my face in both hands. Her eyes are furious.

"I'll find out who ordered this hit. But one thing is certain—whether it was my brother or my father, they just signed their own death warrant."

My breath catches at the deadly promise in her voice. She kisses me fiercely before stepping away to speak with Lyssa again, her expression smoothing back into that implacable mask.

Her words from the other night come back to me, when she told me that she would abandon the Syndicate in a heartbeat if it meant my safety, burn the whole world down for me. And now Hadria will happily start a war to protect me, regardless of the cost.

Lyssa is already hauling the lifeless body away. "Did you have a chance to question him?" Hadria asks.

"No time," Lyssa says regretfully.

"No matter," Hadria replies. "I'm done holding back. Let the whole Syndicate know it's time, and get them to meet me in the war room in three hours. That goes for all of you, too," she says, raising her voice to the other recruits. "Congratulations. You've graduated, baptized in blood right here tonight."

They all glance at each other, and most of them can't help exchanging grins.

"Yuri—" Lyssa calls over to one of them "—give me a hand."

They heft the lifeless body and move it onto a plastic sheet, dumping the blood-stained mats on top. Maybe I should be repulsed by Lyssa's casual attitude as she orders another recruit to get a bucket and mop, but I'm simply grateful she was here to end the threat.

My moral code has become a slippery, ambiguous thing since coming to Elysium.

Hadria's hand circles my arm, gives a little tug. "Come with me," she says, and I'm more than happy to follow her out of the training room.

CHAPTER 22

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

Hadria

I'm furious, fucking incandescent with rage, but I can't let Aurora see. I don't want her to think I'm angry at her, when I'm angry at myself.

I take her back to my bedroom, where I look at the angry red cut running down her forearm, and think about all the ways I plan to make Nero suffer for this.

"Hadria," she says, touching my face to get my attention. "Hey. I'm fine."

"You're not fine," I snap, and then take a breath. "Sorry. But you're clearly not fine."

"I'm alive and well, which is more than I can say for that Diesel guy. Lyssa was..." She trails off, eyes wide when I glance up at her face. "She moves so fast," she says helplessly. "I could never move like that."

"She is the best of us," I agree, bandaging up her arm again. "Are you in pain? Do you want something to take the edge off?"

"Yeah. I'd very much like something to take the edge off."

I'm scrabbling through the various pills in my medicine cabinet when she replies, and I have to stop and look at her to make sure I read her tone right. "What exactly are you?—"

"Sex," she says firmly. "Please, Hadria. I'm all wound up. And it's not that watching—that—what Lyssa did—got me hot, but I..."

She trails off, biting her lip, and her eyes drop.

"You have all that adrenaline still pumping through your body with nowhere to go," I say gently, taking her hands in mine. "It's perfectly natural."

Also perfectly natural that I should want to wreck her right now, I tell myself, though I think it comes from a much darker place. I want to drive her out of her mind for an hour or two, make her forget this terrible thing.

Make her remember who she belongs to. She's not my captive anymore, but my God...I still want to know that I have her completely.

"Please," she whispers, looking up at me. "Could we...?"

I don't bother with words. I just dive in for the softest, sweetest, tenderest kiss I can manage right now, with all this hot need coursing through me, my tongue caressing her lips gently as I pull her up and guide her out of the bathroom, back into the bedroom. She whimpers into my mouth, a vibration against my lips.

"How do you want me?" I ask. "If you need me kind and comforting, I can do that."

"I don't want you kind and comforting," she tells me, husky with desire. "I want to know I'm the one who makes you lose control."

Her words ignite the fuse of my lust. I growl, unable to contain the sound, and I pin her against the wall, roughly taking her mouth in a bruising kiss. Her hands claw at my back, fingernails digging into my back as her normally sweet mouth turns sharp with desire. I strip her fast, let her strip me, and then I know exactly what I want to do. "I'm going to fuck you," I tell her. "Fuck you hard and fast, fill you up completely. Would you like that?"

"Yes," she gasps out.

"Then give me a minute. Go bend over the bed, face down, and get that sweet little pussy wet and ready for me." I watch as she obeys, while I rummage around in one of my drawers. "Spread your legs," I call over. "Let me see you playing with yourself." I keep my eyes on her as I slip my legs into the harness of my strap-on, getting it securely in place. I can feel the cold, hard length between my legs, pressing insistently back against my own sex as I adjust it, looking at Aurora's fingers as they work over her cunt. I come around the other side of the bed so she can see what I'm wearing, and enjoy the way her eyes go wide. "What do you think?" I ask, stroking the dildo as though it were my own flesh. "Do you like what you see?"

"Yesss..." Her response is a sibilant hiss, shaking with so much need that I waste no more time. I'm in the zone now, my senses heightened by my anger and my lust. I grab a bottle of lube from the nightstand, slicking up my fingers as I approach Aurora from behind. She's breathing heavily as I bend over her to push her hair aside and press a kiss to her neck, tasting her skin there.

"I'm going to enjoy fucking you," I murmur against her. My middle finger slides into her slick heat without hesitation, and she gasps softly. "Feels good, doesn't it?" I whisper, pressing another kiss to her spine as I thrust my finger deeper inside her. "You're so tight around me. Imagine how my cock will feel inside you."

The wet squelching sound of the lube only fires my blood more as I add another finger and then a third, stretching Aurora wider. Her whimpers grow louder as she starts to fuck back onto my hand, clutching the sheets beneath her. I hear her breath hitch as I remove my fingers and line up the head of the toy instead, butting it against her clit. She groans, arching her back, inviting me in.

"Hadria," she pleads. "Please...give it to me."

I let the thick tip of the dildo press into her entrance, holding her still with a hand in the small of her back. "You lie there and take it," I tell her. "I'm in control. You take what I give you. Understand?"

"Yeah," she gasps.

I press in a little further, pulling her ass open too so I can feast my eyes on her pretty pink asshole as I breach her body. And then, with a final shove, I thrust home, sheathing the fuck toy in her welcoming cunt. "Good girl," I breathe. "Oh, you're taking it beautifully." I start to move in and out of her gently at first, teasing us both as I watch her reflection in the mirror across from us, seeing not only how she cedes all control but also how much she wants this. "That's it," I murmur. "Take it, darling. Take it all."

Her body spasms around as I pick up speed and depth, thrusting into her over and over again until we find the perfect rhythm. My thighs slap against her rounded asscheeks as I pound into her, letting the dildo work against my clit as I fuck her, sweat starting to bead on my skin under the leather straps.

But I want more. I want her completely full of me, with no room for any other thoughts in her head. I reach under to dip my fingers into my cunt as I fuck her, get them nice and soaked, and then I lean forward, tapping against her lips. "Open up." Her lips part at once, and I shove my wet fingers into her mouth. She takes them gladly, sucking and swallowing hungrily, moaning around them. I watch her in the mirror as I slam into her harder and faster, feeling my climax building unbearably quickly. "That's it," I whisper, grinding my hips against her ass cheeks, feeling the dildo inside her grind against my clit. "Take my cock...take all of it."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I slam into her over and over again, and she's panting now, eyes closed tight as she tries to take as much of me as she can—cock and fingers both—and I lean down to nip at her earlobe softly. "You're mine," I tell her. "Do you understand that? You belong to me."

She gasps and mumbles her agreement around my fingers, her hips pressing back to take even more of me, her body trembling all over. I can smell her juices, feel them running from her, sticky and thick. The stink of sex fills the room and heightens my arousal even more.

"Every part of you," I grit out between my teeth. "Every single atom." I press my thumb against her asshole and she moans encouragement, spreading her thighs wider. "Your ass is mine, too," I tell her, pulling my fingers from her mouth. "Isn't that right?"

"Y-yes," she pants, her eyes squeezed shut with the intensity of her pleasure. "All of me... I'm yours... Hadria, please!"

I don't need any further invitation. I press my thumb deep into her hole, already wet with the lube from the dildo, and she lets out a squeal of delight. I grab her hip with my other hand, wet with her spit, and hike her up on the dildo as I piston into her.

Her ass clenches tight on me, and I start to pump my thumb in her, stretching her, playing with the tight rim, making her moan. "Good girl," I tell her again, rewarding her by reaching underneath with my spare hand to rub over her clit. She just about hits the roof. It feels so fucking good to have this kind of control over her body, knowing every inch of it is mine, stretched wide for me. The leather straps creak as I

grind my hips into her, the pleasure sending shivers through me, but the anger is still there too, making my orgasm build unbearably fast.

I pull out and give her a slap on the ass. "On your back," I tell her. "I want to see your face when you come on my cock." She rolls obediently, eager to have me back inside her, but I push her legs up, knees pressing into her hard-nippled tits, doubling her over so I can sink back into her as deeply as possible.

Her moans turn to full-throated cries as I pound into her deeper than ever before. She's mine—all mine—and nothing can compare to the way she calls out my name while I'm fucking her. Her skin is hot and slick under my palms; I thumb at her clit roughly, making her wriggle around, flicking at it just to hear that squeal she makes. "Yeah, that's my good girl," I rasp out. "You'll never let anyone else touch you like this, will you? Only me."

"Only you!"

It's too much, watching those sweet little tits bounce under the onslaught of my fucking, and I slam into her one last time, white-hot pleasure surging through me as I grind into her pussy. I groan out my release, collapsing over her sweat-soaked body, panting heavily, even as she writhes around, pleading for me to let her come.

"Yeah," I say at last, "I'll make you come, baby." I get back on my knees, the dildo still buried in her, my clit still pulsing against the base of it, and spread her lips wide, let spit drop slowly from my mouth onto her hot clit. And then I rub it in, slow and firm, massaging her hard clit while I watch her face, flushed and sweaty, still beautiful, always beautiful, her mouth making a wide, silent "O" as she hits her orgasm. "That's right," I croon. "That's right, Aurora. Come for me. Prove to me who you belong to."

She lets out a wail, jerking and shuddering under my hands, and I milk her through it,

my own clit recovering enough that I fuck her a little more, too, grind out one more short, painful orgasm for myself.

"Oh, God," she groans at last, as I pull the dildo from her. "I feel so empty now."

I'm already pulling off the straps, but I reach over to pet her still-open, still-soaking cunt gently. "Don't worry. There's plenty more where that came from."

"What time is it?" she mumbles. "We should shower..."

I check my phone. An hour or so until the meeting I called. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Don't shower yet. I'd like to know my scent is all over you tonight." I pause. "Is that okay?"

She's grinning in delight. "Oh, Hadria. That is more than okay."

I check her bandage and change it, despite her complaints. "Just let me do this," I tell her at last. "Let me make sure it's done right."

"Okay," she sighs. "But we need to get to the meeting."

Yes, we do. And although fucking her so thoroughly has left me sexually sated, I still feel the bloodlust in my veins. The idea that Nero could reach out and hurt Aurora under my roof...

I am still livid. And I can't fuck away the rage.

No, there's only one thing that will calm my anger tonight. And that is putting an end

to Nero, for once and for all.

Tonight, I plan to kill him.

CHAPTER 23

Aurora

Despite being thoroughly wrung out by Hadria, I'm nervous as I slip into the war room and find my seat. The murmurs are darker tonight; violence hangs heavy in the air and I have never felt more aware that I am in a room with a lot of very, very dangerous people.

But I'm dangerous, too. Or at least, not as fragile as I look.

Hadria enters into the tension-filled room with the same impassive face as always, and the murmurs die away as Lyssa calls the meeting to order. Hadria might look cool, calm and collected, but I can see something simmering just below the surface. She stands rather than sits at the head of the long table, hands planted firmly on its scarred surface, and looks around at her gathered lieutenants and soldiers.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"I'm sure you've all heard about what happened in the training room a few hours ago," she begins, voice crisp and clear. There's a rumble of acknowledgment around the room. "Soon after it occurred, I received a message from my brother, confirming he was behind the attack on Aurora's life. And as you all know, he's been worrying at our heels these last two weeks, taking bites where he can like the rabid dog he is. But tonight Nero will pay for all of these attacks." There are a few cheers and hear, hears. But others remain silent. Listening. "And once we have captured him, I plan to execute Nero publicly as an example."

I'm taken aback by her blunt statement even though I know how ruthless Hadria can be. Has to be, when blood is crying out for blood.

The reactions around the heavy oak table range from nods of approval to skeptical frowns. I can feel an undercurrent sweeping through the room that I haven't felt before—or not so openly. Hadria senses it too. Her eyes track from face to face, assessing the mood.

One of the lower-ranked members speaks up, shattering the uneasy silence. "What about your father? You plannin' on icing old Zepp too?"

Hadria's expression remains unchanged, giving nothing away. "My father will be dealt with in due time," she says vaguely, deflecting the question for now. I let out a small breath, relieved she didn't immediately declare her intent to kill her own father too.

But her non-answer doesn't sit well with many others in the room. Lyssa catches my eye, one sculpted eyebrow raised slightly in a subtle warning. She senses the

changing winds just as I do. Even Tony and Ricky, two of Hadria's staunchest lieutenants, are leaning back in their chairs looking wary. Murmurs of discontent ripple around the table.

"So what happens to the Syndicate once you become the new Don Imperioli, huh?" asks a bald man sitting across from me, his scarred face set in hard lines. "You won't have any use for us small fry once you're swimming with the whales," he grumbles on. "Is that how it's gonna be?"

Hadria shrugs, the picture of unconcern, downplaying the challenge. "Positions within the Imperioli Family will be offered to all current Syndicate members once I assume control."

Her nonchalant answer sparks an outbreak of protests and accusations at once, and I flinch as the raised voices get louder and louder, trying to speak over each other.

"You expect us to join the same Family that's been picking us off?"

"The Syndicate's been my home for ten years, you think I wanna give that up?"

"I ain't joining no Italian mob."

"I've bled for this outfit! You telling me that was all just for fun?"

Their voices clamor together until I want to put my hands over my ears. Hadria's eyes flash with irritation, but before she can respond, Ilona pushes back her chair and stands, arms crossed over her chest.

"Enough!" she shouts, and the complaints die down. I'm almost grateful for a moment until she turns to Hadria. "I challenge you for leadership of the Syndicate, Hades." She spits out the name like a curse. "And I accept the terms of such a challenge. A

fight to the death. Winner takes all."

A stunned silence envelops the room, and I find I'm holding my breath. Surely Ilona can't be serious? She has a reputation as a ferocious fighter, but she can't really think she can best Hadria?

Then come murmurs of approval at this bold challenge. The seeds of dissent have clearly taken root over the past few weeks, and I'm horrified to see that there are a number of Syndicate members who actually seem pleased that Hadria's leadership is being challenged.

Not all are happy about it, though. About two-thirds of the room still supports Hadria, if their expressions are any indication.

But that's fewer than I would have hoped.

Hadria merely inclines her head. "I accept your challenge, Ilona. I'll kill you, and then later tonight, I'll kill my brother."

Fear lances through me, cold and sharp. Ilona is cunning; I've heard Lyssa say that before, with grudging admiration. But even if Hadria wins, she'll then have to go on to find and fight her brother, and Nero is a much tougher opponent.

I meet Lyssa's worried gaze. In that shared look, I know she's thinking the same thing.

We could lose Hadria tonight.

CHAPTER 24

Hadria

Ilona sits down with a smirk that grates on my nerves. No matter. She'll be smiling with her throat soon enough when I open it for her.

No one has ever formally challenged my place as head of the Syndicate before tonight. It's not unexpected, especially given Ilona's attitude over the last few weeks. But her bullshit ends here.

"Well?" I say, when the Syndicate has finally fallen silent and looked to me for the next steps. "What are you waiting for? Out on the front lawn. All of you."

When I pulled the Syndicate together, I suggested that any challenges should be settled for once and for all by a fight to the death, for those foolish enough to push things so far. It was Mrs. Graves who insisted that such fights should happen outside, on the lawn, because she certainly wasn't going to clean up any blood left behind.

Lyssa and I found it amusing at the time. It's less amusing now. But the Syndicate files out of the war room with some eagerness. Ilona meets my gaze before she turns to go with them, arrogance and disdain clear in her haughty features.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

I stare back unfazed. I will make an example of her that no one will soon forget.

Still...

It's strange that she should challenge me at all. We both know that, of the two of us, I'm the better fighter. So that suggests she's planning something.

Well, let her plot and scheme. I'll keep my eyes on her every second, and she'll learn the foolishness of her arrogance when her blood is pouring out of her to water the grass lawn.

"You better kill her good and hard, or I'll do it for you," Lyssa hisses at me.

I give a humorless smile. "Oh, I intend to. Her death will be a lesson."

Tony sidles up. "You make sure it is," he says, tone serious for once. "And don't make it quick. The ranks need a little entertainment, know what I'm saying? Spin it out."

He holds out his hand and I take it in surprise. "Thanks for the advice," I say, trying not to sound too ironic. "I'll do my best to make it entertaining."

He walks off just as Aurora approaches us, her delicate face pale but set with determination. "You can take her," she says confidently, and I almost smile.

Of course I can take down Ilona. But I don't want to do it in front of Aurora, especially not if I need to be as brutal as I think I do. I don't want her to see that side

of me any more than she needs to.

"I want you to stay inside. Lyssa will keep you safe."

Aurora starts to protest but Lyssa beats her to it. "No way. I'm acting as your second."

"It's not a suggestion," I say softly, but with all of my authority.

Lyssa wants to argue. That much is clear. But in the end, she gives a nod.

"But Hadria—" Aurora begins.

"It's an order," I tell her. "Unless you plan on challenging my leadership, too?"

She gives a half-sob, half-laugh. "I would never dream of it."

"Then off you go with Lyssa. Stay inside the house until this is finished. But first—will you go and get my favorite knife from my study?" I describe it to her, and she runs off.

Lyssa arches a brow. "Since when do you have a favorite knife?"

I force a thin smile. "I needed her gone for a moment. If this goes south, promise me you'll protect her."

Lyssa scowls. "I should be at your side. I can end that backstabbing snake faster than she can blink."

Probably true. Unlike Aurora, Lyssa was born for this ugly work. But Aurora's safety is paramount.

"I know. But I'm trusting you to guard Aurora. The ranks may turn on her if I fall." Voicing that possibility twists my gut. But only fools ignore unpleasant realities, or fail to plan contingencies for them.

Lyssa clenches her teeth. "You damn well better not fall, you silly bitch. Or I'll have to kill every last one of them myself."

Before I can respond, Aurora reappears clutching an ornate antique dagger. I take it and our eyes meet, the air between us heavy with unspoken words.

Come back to me.

I smile at her, a cool, confident smile. "There's really nothing to worry about, Sunshine. I'll be back with you soon. Go on, now, both of you."

Lyssa guides her away and I place the knife down on the table. It's a heavy, clunky old thing despite the sharp blade, and I don't plan to use it to dispatch Ilona. I draw a thinner, sleek-handled knife from my boot instead. It's not what I'd call a favorite, but it's practical, and it's more than competent for the job.

And then I head outside to meet my fate.

Outside, it's starting to rain, a light drizzle that threatens to turn heavy. Tony falls into step beside me as I cross the lawn. "No Lyssa?"

"She has other responsibilities."

"Ah," he says knowingly. "Then I'll stand as your second."

We've arrived where the Syndicate is massing now, and Ricky pushes through the crowd to come over to me. I pause at Tony's question, because I intended to ask Ricky instead. Having a "second" in this circumstance is more of an honorary position than anything; I certainly won't expect either of them to fight my battles.

But before I can reply, Ricky, who overheard Tony's offer, chuckles roughly. "Well, I guess Tony called first dibs. I'll second you next time."

"You're that convinced I'll win?"

"Of course."

"And you also think there'll be another challenge?" I give a short laugh at his expression. "Thank you for your loyalty," I tell him. "When this is done, I think I'd like to make a few changes. You were right, what you said the other day—a Syndicate is not a dictatorship, and I need to remember that."

Ricky thumps me on the shoulder. "Then kill her fast, so we can get on with killing Nero."

I nod. "We'll head out right after this; I think excitement should be high." I turn to Tony. "Thank you for your offer. I would be honored if you'd stand as my second." I pause, arching an eyebrow. "And you also seem pretty certain I'll win?"

Tony grins. "Oh, I only ever back winners, Hades."

"Then let's get on with this."

I enter the makeshift circle of people, who part for me like the Red Sea so that I can make my way to the center, where Ilona is waiting for me.

"You're sure you want to do this?" I call across.

She just smirks.

"On my mark," Tony bellows, and a hush falls over the crowd. A brief pause and then: "Begin!"

In a rush, Ilona strikes. I block her dagger with my forearm, countering with a punch that glances off her ribs. We trade blows, neither landing a decisive hit, as the rain gets harder.

She's fast, I'll give her that. But her eyes betray her every move. If I didn't agree with Tony that I need to make this a bit of a performance for the sake of the watchers, I would already have been able to strike a mortal blow several times.

Ilona moves with grace, her strikes precise and practiced, but that's the problem. They're too perfect—too textbook. She's got training, but not the desperate experience of the streets I earned clawing my way to the top.

You don't fight fair on the streets. And this is less than what I expected from Ilona, too, given her reputation for cunning.

I absorb her attacks, forcing calm through my veins. Watch. Wait. Defend. Let her tire before I bother to make my own attack. The crowd is cheering, and I think they're

cheering louder for me than Ilona.

Well, that's a good sign.

The rain is driving down now. Frustration flickers in Ilona's eyes as her breath grows labored. Her reactions slow by a fraction. An opening.

I smash my elbow into her nose as I dodge the next strike. Blood sprays hot and wet. She screams, launching herself at me in a frenzy. I feint left then sweep her legs out from under her. She hits the ground hard.

This is it. It's enough. The cheers are deafening as I drop my knee into her chest, pinning her down. Triumph blazes through me as I draw back my fist, readying the kill strike?—

A massive explosion shreds the night, echoing up from the gates, sending a fireball up into the night sky.

Ilona's lips curl in a bloody smile. "That's the signal!" she screams out.

And before I can kill her, someone is dragging me off—it's Ricky, judging by the tell-tale hands hooked around me, and Ilona disappears from view as chaos erupts.

Gunshots—deafening, unexpected—half the Syndicate seems to have turned on the other, a coordinated betrayal orchestrated to perfection.

It was a set-up. A distraction.

And I fucking fell for it.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

"Aurora," I gasp out to Ricky, and I struggle free from his grasp. If this is a mutiny, I need to keep Aurora safe.

But as I turn to run for the house, I feel it—the burning shove of a blade in my back. It shocks the air from me, but I keep moving, stumbling forward even as people are falling around me.

From my right, someone approaches, a shout of triumph already sounding from them—cut off in an instant as I pivot and open their throat in one vicious swipe. Hot blood drains out of my would-be killer—one of the rank-and-file, he should've known better?—

But I'm going down on my knees as the pain of the wound in my back really hits me. Darkness swarms my vision. I sway, clinging desperately to consciousness through sheer force of will, but someone leaps on me, pinning me to the ground.

So this is it. Thank God Lyssa is with Aurora. The two of them should be safe as long as...they can...

Aurora's beautiful face is the last image I have before the cold darkness rushes up to swallow me whole.

CHAPTER 25

Aurora

Lyssa and I are each pacing up and down in the training room when a deafening

explosion sounds from outside, stunning us both.

"What the fuck was that?" she says sharply. She's not expecting a reply, gun already in hand.

"Hadria might be—" I begin.

But Lyssa shakes her head. "Came from a ways off, whatever it was, not from the direction of the lawn. Down at the gate, maybe. In which case..."

"Someone's attacking," I finish for her. "Nero?"

Her hands are moving over her body in a habitual gesture that I know well: She's checking that all her weapons are in place and easy to reach. "Possibly," she says at last.

We both know it's more than a possibility. "Hadria," I say again, with urgency. "Lyssa, if Elysium is under attack?—"

"We stay here," she says. "As ordered."

We wait a few more minutes. Nothing happens. No more explosions, at least. But I'm getting more and more worried.

"She hasn't come back," I blurt out at last. "Lyssa?—"

"She gave me my orders. Gave you yours. We stay safe in the house."

I grab Lyssa by the wrist. "She might need you, Lyssa. You, at least, should go. I'll stay here. I'll—hide, or something."

She stares at me for a long moment, and then starts moving, pulling me along with her so I hear her instructions. "I will lock down the room once I exit. That means the door can't be opened by anyone but Hadria or me. You can open it from the inside, if...if there's a fire, or..." She stops at the door and grabs my shoulders. "Do. Not. Leave. You hear me, Suzy?"

"I hear you. Please, Lyssa—please, just go."

She's out the door and locking me in before I take another breath, and that's how I know she's just as worried as I am. Alone, panic constricts my chest like a metal band. What the hell happened? Is Hadria okay? I pace the huge, windowless room again, anxiety tightening my lungs with each ragged breath.

And then gunfire cracks in staccato bursts somewhere beyond the door, the throaty rapport unmistakable.

I jump back, cautious, but I know the door and walls on this side of the room are solid steel. Hadria told me that once.

Hadria...

I can't just cower here waiting. I promised Lyssa I'd stay, but Hadria is mine, and the thought of sitting alone in here while something terrible happens out there...

No. I can't do it. I need to help.

All the weapons in the training room are blunt edged to avoid injury. So the first thing I need to do is find something I can use for protection. Mind made up, I listen carefully at the door, then punch the code into the panel. The door slides open and I slip into the dim hallway, moving as stealthily as I can toward the source of the ongoing fight. The sounds of frenzied combat amplify with each step—grunts and

curses, furniture smashing, bodies hitting the floor. I hug the wall, slinking from alcove to alcove whenever running footsteps near.

At the corner of the hallway, I cautiously peek around into the marble foyer. It's chaos—Syndicate members grappling desperately with black-clad strangers and—oh God—and with each other.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:34 pm

An earsplitting crack shatters a vase near my face. I recoil in shock as shards cut my skin, slicing like shrapnel. One of the men in black has spotted me.

I bolt back down the corridor, his shouts echoing behind me. I've got to arm myself. I sprint for the underground gun range, lungs burning, ignoring the sting of cuts on my feet as my heels crunch broken glass. More gunfire spiderwebs the plaster walls around me. I duck low, trying not to stumble on the debris now coating the once-pristine floor.

The gun range door is locked when I get to it, and it won't take my code, even the third time I punch it in. Lyssa must have locked down this room, too, which was smart...but unfortunate for me. I'm out of time, so I abandon the plan and sprint on, breathless and terrified. Heavy boots pound the floor somewhere behind me. I careen around a corner into the east wing, scanning wildly for an escape route.

The kitchen. If I can get to the kitchen?—

I swing myself around the door of the kitchen and head straight for the service door, unlocking it with shaking fingers, then slamming through it and out into the night. It's raining heavily, and I slip on the wet step, fall headlong, and hit damp earth. The impact knocks the air from my lungs. A stabbing stitch pierces my side but I stagger up and keep running, my shoes sinking into the muddy ground with each step.

If I can make it to the gardening shed, I know there's a rifle stashed inside, left over from a rabbit infestation—one of the gardeners told me once, when I ran into him during the day.

But I'm in my element now. No one knows these gardens at night better than I do, and very quickly, I hear my pursuer leave off, cursing and crashing through bushes. Shadows swallow me as I plunge through the night garden and keep going. In the inky, wet dark, I navigate more by memory than sight. The little wooden shed is just ahead, barely visible beyond a weeping willow's cascading tendrils.

I sprint the last ten yards to the locked wooden door. Grabbing the wrought iron handle, I yank desperately with every ounce of strength. It doesn't budge. The hinges don't even creak. Out of time, I resort to throwing my shoulder into the weathered wood over and over, ignoring the pain exploding down my arm.

"Need some help with that?"

I whirl at the unexpected shout, heart leaping into my throat. Tony melts out of the rain, panting a little, and overwhelming relief crashes over me.

"Tony! Oh, thank God. What's going on?" I ask urgently.

"Nero," he says. "Nero's what's going on. You gotta come with me, kid. I need to get you somewhere safe."

He grabs my throbbing arm, firmer than needed. I wince at the pressure, but I can't deny how relieved I still am to have Tony with me. And the rain is easing up, finally, as a loud rumble of thunder suggests the storm is moving away. Tony pulls out his gun and looks around, as though trying to figure out which way to go.

"Where's Hadria? Is she okay?" I hated how my voice shakes, betraying my fear.

"Shh," he says, listening to our surrounds. "Okay. Let's go."

I pull back a little as he starts pulling me with him. "Tony, tell me. Is Hadria alright?"

He looks down at me. I can't see his face properly in the dark, but his voice sounds strange. "I didn't wanna tell you like this, kid, but...she's gone. Ilona put her down."

Hadria...dead?

No. That can't—she can't be?—

"No!"

"Hush up!" he hisses at me. "You want someone to hear us?"

Sorrow and boiling rage surge within me, but Tony's strong grip forces me to stumble deeper into the shadowed trees, uncaring of the branches whipping at us. My mind reels, struggling to process his impossible words.

Hadria can't be dead.

She can't be...

I don't know how long Tony pulls me with him, but when I look around, we're getting close to the gates, and I can hear gunfire up ahead. "Wait," I croak, trying to slow down. "Wait. We're going the wrong way."

Surely we should be going away from the noise?

"Get a move on," Tony snaps, and gives me a hard tug.

"Where's Lyssa?" I demand.

"Dead. Probably. Who gives a fuck, girl? Get moving, or I'll—" He breaks off.

"Or you'll what?" I ask, my voice oddly calm. "Kill me?" Because I understand at last. Tony isn't an ally at all.

He's defected to Nero's side.

I drive my heel into the side of his knee with all my strength. He grunts in surprise and buckles, grip loosening. I whirl to sprint for safety, and I make it as far as the night garden, but he's right behind me. With a triumphant snarl he snags a handful of my long hair, wrenching me violently back into his chest. I let out an agonized scream, and he tries to smother it, cursing when I bite his hand.

"Dammit, hold still!" he growls, and slaps me hard across the head, patience fraying. "I'm not here to hurt you, understand? But Nero is taking Elysium tonight, one way or another."

I'm seeing stars from his slap, but I scream again in defiance and claw at his restraining hands, ignoring the tangled hair ripping from my scalp. We crash backward into the bushes in an awkward tangle of limbs, branches whipping at us both. Tony hauls me up and pins me bodily against a tree, hands around my throat, squeezing hard. Darkness creeps into my vision as he cuts off my airway and a primal panic closes in.

"You just need to keep quiet, kid," he croons, as if gentling a scared animal. But all the while his hands grow tighter.

I buck and gurgle futilely, strength rapidly fading as the night grows darker and darker, consuming me utterly...

Then Tony's eyes blow wide, body jerking oddly. His strangling grip slackens and I gasp hard for air. Wet warmth splashes over my cheek. I drag in ragged mouthfuls of

sweet air as Tony staggers back, hands clutched to the sudden gaping wound beneath his ear. Blood, black in the silver light of night, spills over his fingers.

"You should have made sure you killed me, Tony." Hadria's voice slices through the shadows just before she does the same to his neck once more. I watch in shock as she rips her dripping blade back out of Tony's throat in a graceful crimson arc. Tony collapses, gurgling wetly, limbs flailing as he lands among the lilies, painting their white petals scarlet.

The world spins and I'm falling to my knees, half in exhaustion and half in joy. She's alive! Hadria is alive...

She's with me before I hit the ground, wrenching me roughly to her. Our mouths meet in a frenzied collision. I cling to her desperately, heedless of Tony's hot blood soaking us both. I need physical proof she's real. Whole. Here.

We break apart gasping. Hadria's hands brace my shoulders almost painfully, her gaze burning into me. "Are you alright?"

"He told me you were dead," I say, fighting back tears. And then I forget all about myself as my hand moves on her back, finding a large, wet stain as she winces. "Oh, God—you're bleeding, you're hurt—" I stammer urgently.

"Tony stabbed me in the back—literally and figuratively," she says, wriggling so that I can't touch her wound.

"But Hadria?—"

"Don't worry about me, are you okay? I saw him strangling you and everything went red. I wish I'd made it a cleaner kill. I didn't mean you to see...well, quite as much as you've seen during your time here."

I let out a laugh, of all things. "Are you kidding? I'm thrilled he's dead." I give a shudder. "He always gave me the creeps. The way he looked at me...like he was pondering the best ways to kill me."

Hadria stares at me. "You never told me."

"Last time I mentioned a guy staring at me, you had him killed," I point out. She looks blankly at me. "Remember that guy Vinny? At the safe house? You told him if he looked at me again he'd lose his eyes. And then later, you..."

"I what?"

"You had him killed," I mutter.

This time, Hadria is the one to laugh, and it startles me. "Oh, Sunshine. I remember who you mean now. Vinny D'Amelio, one of the recruits...I never had him killed."

I frown. "But I heard you. You told the rest of the Syndicate not to touch me, unless they wanted to end up like Vinny."

She's still grinning. "Aurora, my sweet little sunbeam, I kicked him out of the Syndicate. That's all. He'd only been with us for a few weeks and—obviously—he wasn't the kind of person I wanted in the Syndicate."

"Oh!" I breathe out. I'm actually relieved to hear that. "I did think it seemed...kinda harsh," I admit. "Although I really am glad you killed Tony," I add.

Hadria's grin fades fast. "So am I," she says, and the tone in her voice makes me shiver a little.

"Your shoulder," I start again, but Hadria shakes her head impatiently.

"Later, we can worry about that later!" She presses a pistol into my hand with an air of grim ceremony. "First, I need to end this war, once and for all. Nero is here. And I swear to every demon in hell, he will not leave Elysium alive."

I grip the cool, heavy metal, drawing courage from its lethal promise. She twines her fingers through mine and pulls me close again to kiss. When she breaks away, she presses her forehead to mine. "Let's send my brother back to the hell he crawled out of."

I match her predatory smile with one of my own. Nero will regret coming here tonight—for a brief moment, before he never feels anything ever again.

I've never felt more powerful, more alive than in this moment...or more dangerous.

CHAPTER 26

Aurora

We slip through the trees, Hadria moving with grace despite her injury, her hand a steadying pressure on my lower back. I match her silent footsteps, hyperaware of our synced breathing, our shared focus. The sounds of combat grow louder, but still muted by the patter of rain on leaves.

Hadria pauses, head cocked. She glances at me and presses one finger to her lips. Eyes wide, I nod. In the distance, a man shouts orders. Hadria's eyes gleam, hungry. We move forward silently.

The fight at the gates is over, now, as far as Nero's men are concerned. We find three of them clustered by an idling van at the gate, guarding the vehicle while fires still burn in the remnants of the gatehouse. That must have been the explosion, I realize, as I spot the mangled iron gates several feet away on the grass. They blew open the gates.

Hadria glances between them, assessing. She makes a hand gesture, telling me to stay here and stay down.

Then, wordlessly, she draws her gun and stalks forward as I wait and watch.

I hear her pistol crack twice. The closest two men drop boneless to the mud. Before the final man can react, she's splayed him up against the van with a gun to his head. "Where is my brother?" she asks.

"I—I don't know, he went looking for you. I can help y?—"

A shot from her gun finishes the sentence for him, and she lets him fall to the ground dismissively, returning to where I'm crouching in the bushes. "If Nero is looking for me," she says softly, "we don't want to disappoint him, do we, Sunshine?"

"No we do not," I agree firmly.

Hadria's bloodied knuckles caress my cheek with unexpected tenderness. For a suspended moment, her stern mask cracks, a glimpse of the woman within peeking through.

"Then let's go greet our visitor."

The mansion looms in from the darkness, a hulking shadow lit up occasionally inside by gunfire and flashlights. The air tastes of iron and gunpowder. The Syndicate—those who are still with Hadria, anyway—are battling savagely to repel Nero's black-clad men still swarming the grounds.

The rain has stopped and the clouds have cleared, letting the half-moon shine down on the grounds. Hadria slows, eyes scanning the chaotic melee, landing on a cluster of men converging on a lone woman in silhouette. Hadria raises her pistol without hesitation. With a trio of shots, all three men collapse lifeless. The woman—oh, God, it's Lyssa, thank God!—looks over her shoulder and gives a little salute before running fast to help out another overpowered Syndicate member.

"I can't see Nero," Hadria mutters.

"He'll be inside," I say with conviction. "He'll be looking for me. And he'll think you bundled me up safe somewhere inside."

"Well," Hadria says grimly, "I suppose I did try."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I couldn't just sit there and...wait. If we're dying tonight, I'd rather die together."

She gives a wry smile. "Me, too. Well, come on, Sunshine. Let's go hunting."

The house has lost all power, either through deliberate vandalism or from the thunderstorm. But it's perfect for us, as we make our way around and into the house via the kitchen door again, and head slowly through the dark hallways toward my room. I've never felt so alert, so attuned to every creak and murmur around us. Hadria moves silently ahead of me. I try to mimic her slinky creeping, since one misstep could betray our presence.

And every now and then, we come across Nero's men, or a Syndicate member who has turned—easy to spot by the way they immediately attack Hadria. And each time, Hadria unerringly shoots them clean through the head, then strips their bodies for useful ammunition, leaving behind the heavier assault rifles many of them are carrying.

They came prepared for war, these men.

And I feel less and less prepared as we go. This is nothing like training with Lyssa. Each second stretches out, saturated with raw adrenaline.

I duck around a corner after Hadria, gripping my hand tight around the gun, and almost cry out as three figures burst out of a room nearby. I stumble back, but Hadria is a whirlwind, dispatching the first two attackers with brutal efficiency, and the last with a bullet in the back as he turns to run.

And then she's back at my side. "This is getting tedious," she sighs, looking down the

next corridor. "Nero is probably upstairs by now, and who knows how many others he has with him." She glances back at me. "I don't suppose you'd let me take you to the war room? My study can also function as a panic room, so you could be safe there until?—"

"No," I insist. "You have to let me do this Hadria. You have to let me...let me help."

I'm not much help, obviously. But I can't bear to let her out of my sight again. When Tony told me she was dead, I really did think she was, just for a short time.

I can't ever feel that way again. Not without dying myself.

We head upstairs, taking the back stairs, and instead of traversing the hallways, Hadria leads me through the rooms themselves. Upstairs, there are at least five rooms that connect to each other, and I can see what she's thinking: the rooms offer a lot more opportunity to hide than the blank hallways.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

We hide our progress well, not coming across any further pockets of men until we enter what I always call "the disappointing library" in my own mind.

When I first saw it, I was thrilled—so many books, all in one place! And then I realized that about half the books were encyclopedias, and the other half were mostly non-fiction, and mostly about business or the history of Chicago, and there was only so many times I could read about Al Capone before I figured I knew everything there was to know.

The most interesting things, it turned out, were the glass-cased treasures set on thick, tall squares of marble. In those cases were everything from a set of prehistoric hunting tools to Roman coins, ancient jewelry to modern ceramics. Sometimes, Hadria had explained to me, the Syndicate's clients gave her gifts along with payment, and these were some of those gifts.

And it's here in the disappointing library that we realize we're on the right track—because we get ambushed. The door bursts open ahead of us as we're creeping through the room, and Hadria immediately shoves me to the side, then helps me scramble behind the thick marble plinth that holds a case displaying a Spartan helmet.

Thank God it's bullet-resistant glass, because the shots showering our location are taking chunks out of the marble, and if the glass were to shatter, it would rain down on us.

Together we make a little ground, Hadria calling out commands as she fires, and I stick my hand around the corner to fire wildly toward the men, providing cover as she moves from pillar to pillar, trying to get into a better position to take them out. But

the shooting and noise has attracted another of Nero's men; a hulking brute barrels in through the opposite door, seizing me up in his arms while Hadria is distracted.

Terror liquefies my limbs as he starts carrying me away, keeping me carefully between him and Hadria. I writhe and scratch like a cat but his grip is iron. I watch helplessly as Hadria battles back toward me, despite the attackers harrying her from all sides. She's magnificent and terrifying all at once, but the further away I get, the more afraid I am.

Two more steps and the man will have me through the door, and then he'll be able to turn and run.

And then, like an avenging angel, Lyssa appears out of nowhere, her blonde hair soaked black with blood, a sleek shadow slicing through Hadria's assailants from the other side of the library.

Together they cut down the enemy and then head straight toward me with renewed ferocity, easily dodging the wild shots of the man holding me. With a roar, my captor hurls me aside, drawing a smaller handgun. I crash to the ground, trying to roll like we learned in training. I see Hadria on him when I look up again, her knife finding his temple and twisting viciously. He crumples immediately, and I have to look away as Hadria begins to pull her knife free.

Lyssa is leaning against one of the bookshelves against the wall, breathing heavily, her hand over her side. I stagger to my feet and go to her, concerned by the drawn look in her face, but before I get there, she stumbles and goes down on one knee with a pained hiss.

Hadria's head snaps toward her, concern overtaking her blood lust. We pull Lyssa's arms across our shoulders, bearing her weight between us. She squirms.

"I can walk fine. Let me go, dammit."

Hadria's tone brooks no argument. "Stop being stubborn and shut up. We don't know where Nero is yet."

Lyssa acquiesces with a grumble, sagging between us. I glance sideways at Hadria, reading the tightness in her jaw, the furrow between her brows that belies her worry. Lyssa's labored breathing and occasional whimpers of pain seem loud in the silence after the deafening gunfight.

"She needs help," I say. The fact that Lyssa doesn't even complain that I'm talking about her over her head doesn't bode well.

"Yes," Hadria replies grimly. "Let's get her to the war room. There are first aid kits there."

"Nero," Lyssa rasps.

"I will come back for Nero," Hadria says. "And you will protect Aurora in the war room. Deal?"

I start to voice a protest, but Hadria gives me a look over Lyssa's head, and I understand in an instant what she means. Lyssa is in no condition to move, let alone protect me.

It will be up to me to protect her.

There's only one problem with that plan. When we get to the war room, it's locked from the inside.

"Who the fuck is there?" shouts a voice from inside.

"Mario?" I exclaim. "It's—it's us!"

There's the sound of several locks undoing, and the door cracks open to allow the barrel of a shotgun to poke through, and then, to my intense relief, I see Mario's face, suspicious and angry, glaring out. In an instant, it changes to surprise and then ragged relief.

"Holy shit, Suzy!" He yanks the door wide. "Uh, and—holy shit, Boss, sorry about that, if I'd known?—"

"You were cautious," Hadria tells him as we drag Lyssa in. "Continue being cautious and we will survive the night."

After we place Lyssa carefully down on the floor and Mario puts his balled-up jacket under her head as a makeshift pillow, I have the chance to look around the war room.

And for the first time tonight, my heart lifts.

The room is filled with Syndicate members. A little bloody, a little tired, but when they realize Hadria has come into the room, and Lyssa too, the atmosphere changes from exhaustion to exhilaration. "Hades!" someone calls.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

And the others pick up the cry, shouting out Hadria's pseudonym as she straightens up and looks around. She holds up her hand for quiet, but I'm sure I see the faintest smile cross her face before she does.

"Alright," she says evenly. "We've still got problems."

"Maybe not as many as you think," Mario pipes up. "We killed every last goddamn one of those traitors who turned on us down there."

I'm not sure if mass slaughter is a cause for celebration, but a murmur of fierce assent goes around the room, threatening to erupt louder until Hadria raises a hand. "Good. And I killed Ilona myself, after that rat Tony tried and failed to stab me in the back." She pauses. "Someone saved me," she says, looking around the room. "One of you threw yourselves over me and protected me through that first part of the fight out on the lawn. Who was it?"

The room goes silent, but there's an undertone to it that I can't place until Mario speaks again. "Yeah," he says. "It was Ricky. He's over here." He beckons Hadria over, and I follow, though I don't want to leave Lyssa alone. But a few more from my trainee group have come over to help tend to her, so I hurry after Hadria after assuring Lyssa I'll be back in a few seconds.

"Oh, no," I breathe, when I reach Hadria and Mario. They're both bending over Ricky, who is slumped in his usual chair at the table having his wounds bandaged up by another Syndicate member.

He doesn't look good.

"Hades," he says with a pained grin when he sees Hadria. "Knew you'd...pull through..."

"Mario tells me you threw yourself in front of Tony's knife for me when he tried to finish the job," Hadria says, crouching down next to him. "You stupid old man."

He laughs and then groans. "Well, someone had to have your back after that motherfucker put a knife into it. Where is he?"

"Dead."

"Good."

Hadria reaches out to squeeze his hand. "Thank you."

"Eh, anytime. Though maybe not again. Not sure I'll pull through. But as far as ways to go..." He gives a smile, a real smile that reaches his eyes and softens his whole face despite the lines and the weariness and the blood all over it. "I'm glad I could be useful to you."

"You'd better not die on me," Hadria says. "That's an order. I'll need your help making a few changes around here once the dust settles." She stands and touches his shoulder. "I'm off to kill Nero, Ricky. Wish me luck."

"I wish you cold fury and a warm blade."

She gives a half-smile and a nod, and then we go back to Lyssa. She's passed out by now, as Mario bandages up her wounds. As Hadria looks down at her, I can't quite read her expression. Then she says, "I will kill all of them for this."

"There aren't many of Nero's guys left," Mario says. "Lyssa went through them like a

fucking wrecking ball on her way to try to find you, Boss."

Hadria's jaw clenches tight. "She's been saving my ass her whole damn life," she mutters. She turns to Mario. "I need you to take charge in here, just like I think you have been doing. Can you keep doing it, while I go and finish this?"

Mario stands, bringing himself up to his full height, and gives a nod. "Hell yeah I can, Boss."

Hadria puts an arm around me and leads me to a quiet corner. "I need to find Nero. This ends tonight."

"I'm coming with you."

"I want you to look after Lyssa for me. If she dies, I..." Hadria hesitates. In the dim overhead lights, she looks suddenly weary, almost fragile.

Mortal.

She goes on. "Aurora. I need to kill my brother. And I need to know you're safe while I'm doing it. My focus will be split if you're with me."

I hate that I know she's right. Panic flutters in my chest. I can't lose her. Gripping her hands fiercely, I stare into the eyes of the woman I love. "Promise you'll come back to me."

A score of emotions flicker across her face. Then she leans down, kissing me with heartbreaking tenderness. Pulling back, she says in a low, firm voice, "Never doubt it. You're my fate, Aurora."

Before I can respond, she turns and walks to the door, giving me one last look before

she exits again.

Mario locks it behind her and tries to give me a reassuring smile. "She'll be fine, Suzy. She's indestructible."

She's not, though. Hadria bleeds just like all the rest of us. I have the proof on my hands, which I look down at now, and I find myself praying hard to whatever will listen, a repetitive mantra.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

Let her be okay. Let her come back to me.

CHAPTER 27

Hadria

The mansion is silent as I stalk the shadowed corridors, senses heightened. My footfalls make no sound, the only light coming from the occasional window casting moonlight across my path. For a moment I wonder if the usual shutters would have made any difference on the assault.

No.

We were vulnerable not because of a lack of defenses, but because of the lack of confidence some of the Syndicate had in me. Perhaps if I'd encouraged loyalty and unity from the start, instead of emphasizing money...

Well, no point worrying about that now. I can have a million regrets once the final head falls.

Tightening my grip on the knife in one hand, gun in the other, I sweep through the upper story of the mansion methodically, clearing each room. All I find are corpses, but I know Nero lurks here still.

He always did prefer to bring up the rear, swaggering into the battle only after his grunts had done the dirty work, surveying the carnage with that triumphant smirk. I've watched him over the years without him knowing, analyzing his tactics. Always

likes to play the conquering hero come to claim his prize, the last man standing.

Not this time. His bullshit ends tonight.

Nearing Aurora's original bedroom, I nudge the half-closed door inward, body coiled tight. The sight within makes me cold with anger. She's been staying in my room since her return, but hasn't moved all her things in. Now the belongings that remained here are strewn across the carpet, dresser drawers ransacked, bedsheets torn off—even the bed and pillows slit open as if the man holding the knife wished he could do the same to her.

It has all the hallmarks of a Nero tantrum. And the message is loud and clear. While he lives, Aurora is not safe from him.

I picture wrapping my hands around his throat and squeezing until his eyes bulge. I want to charge blindly to defend her honor, scream out his name and challenge him to come and face me. But I've learned strategy and patience in my rise to power. I won't be so easily manipulated my emotions.

I move on. I already know where he'll be: my bedroom, lurking there in the most insolent power play possible.

I reach the doors to my master suite and kick them open, sliding to the side to avoid any immediate gunshots. But he doesn't want to kill me quite so quickly, it seems. Just as expected, there he waits, lounging by the cold hearth in the chair Aurora likes to curl up in herself, like he owns Elysium. He's arranged himself in exaggerated leisure as if he hasn't a care in the world. As if this is all merely foreplay before the real fun begins.

And there's not a goddamn scratch on him.

Coward.

That infuriating smirk tugs his lips when he sees me enter, sheer amusement flickering there. Like my disgust in him is the most hilarious joke.

"Hey, big sister. So glad you could join me." He spreads his hands, encompassing the room's dark opulence. "Welcome to my humble abode."

"Would you prefer to die there, or will you stand up and face me?"

He grins wider. "You girls sure like your toys, huh? I went looking around a little while I waited for you."

I certainly don't intend to let him bait me into reacting blindly, despite the rage building up in me. Play it smart, I remind myself. Nero has always been ruled by ego and impulse, so of course he tries to goad others that way.

Use it against him.

"You're free to take one, if you like," I tell him. "Perhaps for once it will help you satisfy a woman."

He growls, literally growls, like an angry dog.

"Unfortunately you won't have time to try it out," I go on. "Your men are all dead, and now I have come to kill you. You'd better stand up, little brother. I'm sure you'd rather die on your feet."

He stays sitting where he is, and I try hard to see if he has a gun on him, or only the knife I see glinting against his thigh.

"You should have known better than to walk into the lion's den," I say, moving to the side.

At that, Nero barks out a harsh laugh and unfolds from the chair at last, prowling closer. He does have a gun, I think, tucked into the back of his jeans like the fool he is.

"This is no lion's den. It's just a filthy rat's nest." He's near enough now for me to smell the sickly sweet stench of wine on his breath. See the malevolent hatred in his dark eyes. "And I'm here as the exterminator, to cleanse the Imperiola name of your taint."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

He lunges, switchblade swiping at my torso. Agility born of countless fights for my life has me twisting aside, the whisper of the blade slicing past my shirt the only sign of how close it came. I counter, driving an elbow toward his jaw, but Nero just shakes it off.

He comes at me again, and we dance our way around the room. I stick to evasive maneuvers as I judge his style, feinting and dodging the wild slashes of his blade, biding my time. I'm unwilling to grapple when his heavier build could overpower me through sheer force.

We pause for a moment, circling each other like wolves, and I force steadiness into my voice. "I don't know which of your men took out my Syndicate members, but please give them my kudos in the afterlife. Clearly it wasn't one of your usual brainless thugs. There was actual finesse involved for once."

Nero's lip curls in a cruel smile. "Oh, that? That wasn't me. I figured since no one else was going to take credit, I might as well. I guess it must've been Dad, though he kept it quiet. But whoever it was, they did me a favor. Taught you and your band of freaks that you're not as untouchable as you thought." He lashes out with a punch I barely block, following it up with a kick to my ribs that I fail to dodge entirely. The blow makes me stagger back and steals my breath.

He presses the momentary advantage, looming closer. "Or, hell, we both saw how fast your precious Syndicate turned on you when money changed hands. Maybe it was one of your own, thinning the crowd before I attacked tonight."

I tamp down on the red haze threatening my vision. Focus. He wants me furious,

unthinking.

"Money won't help the dead. Tony, Ilona, all those turncoats—they're all dead, too, and the Syndicate survives." My smile holds only teeth as Nero falters slightly. Good. "Who's really untouchable here, little brother? Who just lost their entire crew? I wonder what Papa will have to say about that?"

With a roar, Nero charges me. Under normal circumstances, he'd be easy to avoid, but I'm slower than usual tonight after a long fight and several injuries. Nero is fresher. Stronger. He manages to crash into me, his superior weight bearing me to the floor.

I bring my knee up sharply, aiming for his balls, but the blow doesn't land with full force. I'm still able to use the precious seconds it buys to flip our positions. I land a solid strike across his jaw before he recovers, grappling me onto my back again.

He brings his knife down hard, forcing it toward my face. I barely catch his wrists in time, every muscle straining. But Nero has gravity and mass on his side as he bears down, face a rictus of rage. The blade inches closer to my eye by increments, no matter how I resist.

My arms tremble with opposing effort and I try to think, try to find a way out. I should have come in shooting. Should have gone for a killing blow just now instead of trying to dodge him.

But it's too late for should haves.

I twist and buck, but Nero easily keeps me pinned. His grin makes my skin crawl as he pants, "Give it up, bitch. You were never going to win this."

This close, the sickly heat of his breath washes my face, makes me want to retch. My

wrist burns with strain, barely holding him off. Biding time. Seeking an opening, a weakness, anything. My mind flashes to Lyssa's eternal advice to me, given fresh just a few months ago, before I made my move and stole Aurora away from her unwanted wedding.

"You think too much, Hades," Lyssa had said bluntly, as we grappled together in the training room. Her hits met the mark more often than not, and I'd always found her the most difficult opponent. She's too unpredictable. "Don't get me wrong," she said between strikes. "That big brain of yours took us to the top. But you need to trust those killer instincts more. Shut your head up and let your gut take the wheel."

And then she'd kicked me hard in the chest, sending me flying to my back, winded. I'd been thankful at the time that there was no one else around to see the great Hades wheezing for air like an overturned turtle.

But she was right, wasn't she? My ever-turning brain meant every move I made was a split-second slower than hers.

As for Nero, he has brute force but no finesse. I have the finesse but find myself with too many possible strategies in the heat of battle.

"I'll look forward to breaking Aurora," he pants into my face.

And it's that vile promise that makes me do what Lyssa always told me to do.

I stop thinking. Just react.

Bring my leg up again between his legs, shove his hands—and the knife—to one side, and crash my forehead into Nero's nose with all my might. Cartilage crunches. As he recoils I use his own force against him, shoving the knife still locked in our hands further sideways across his momentarily slackened grip. It tears a gash along his

forearm. The pain startles him just long enough for me to roll away.

My body is moving on its own before my mind can interfere, my hand flashing out to grab the gun from the back of his jeans as I get to my knees. He sits up, grabbing for the gun, but I pistol-whip him as hard as I can, catching his nose again. It gushes crimson and he slams to the floor with a howl as I flick off the safety.

And then I empty the entire clip into his face.

I stagger to my feet slowly. The only sound is my own ragged breathing as I look down at the ruined face of my brother.

I expected to feel triumph. I thought I'd be screaming my victory to the skies, the day I finally killed Nero.

But I feel nothing but relief. Relief that Aurora is safe.

Relief that this is over.

Ah, but it's not over. Not yet. The rabid dog might have been destroyed. But the more dangerous viper remains.

It's time I paid a visit to my father.

CHAPTER 28

Aurora

My breath catches in my throat as Mario opens the door to let Hadria stride back into the war room. The remaining Syndicate members gathered here visibly relax at the sight of our leader, bloodied but alive. I run over but stop myself from throwing my arms around her neck.

But I don't have to stop myself. She puts her arm around me, pulling me close before she turns to address the rest of the Syndicate.

"Nero is dead," she announces, and there's a brief, tired cheer from the Syndicate. "And we'll celebrate that fact later," she adds. "All of you, get medical attention if you need it, and then rest." She turns to me to give me a big, comforting hug, holding me so tight I can barely breathe. "You are safe," she whispers in my ear. "Safe, little sunbeam. He'll never come after you again."

I cling to her just as tight, trembling with all the adrenaline of the night. "I love you," I murmur.

"I love you, too." Her arms relax a little after a moment. "But we need to keep going a little longer. Now listen, Aurora—don't go into my bedroom. Not before I've had a chance to..." She scrunches her nose a little, and I try not to imagine the horrors I would see in that room right now.

"I won't," I tell her, and for once, I mean it. "I'll stay right here."

"How're Lyssa and Ricky?"

"Lyssa took two shots to the abdomen, a few knife slashes. She's still passed out. Ricky lost a lot of blood from those knife wounds from Tony." My voice shakes only a little as I continue. "We need to get them urgent medical care, as soon as possible."

Hadria nods. "And Nero's forces?"

Mario pipes up from behind me. "Dead or fled, boss. Looks like we wiped them all out."

"Good," Hadria says. "You did well holding the fort here, Mario. I knew I could count on you."

I can tell Mario is thrilled at the praise, even though he just shrugs and says, "Yeah, of course."

"And what are the police doing?"

He grins. "Donut run, maybe? Scanners are quiet. Don't think they're gonna bother getting involved in our business. They're happy enough for us to tear each other apart, I guess."

"One blessing, then," Hadria mutters. She pulls me a little aside and speaks softly near my ear. "I have one more piece of business to handle. My father." Her words are flat and bitter. "Can you help Mario take charge here, Sunshine? Get medical help for those who need it?"

My brows knit together with concern. "You're going after your father now?"

She gives a curt nod, face impassive. I want to argue, to beg her not to confront that

monster again, but I know better than to undermine her authority. "Of course. I'll organize transport to the hospital right away."

She shakes her head regretfully. "We can't chance that. But there's an emergency contact list in my study, in the top drawer. Doctors and paramedics who can help discreetly, who will come here on request. Use the name "Hades" when you call them. And then check the grounds for any survivors, but make sure you have Mario or someone else with you who won't hesitate to put down any traitors." Her voice drops. "I'm sorry to ask that of you. It will be...messy down there."

I suppress a shudder, images of the bloodbath flashing through my mind. "We'll take care of it." I hesitate, then add softly, "Be careful, Hadria."

Hadria's stony expression softens, just for a second, and she gives a sigh, quiet and restrained so that only I can hear it. "Elysium has become a morgue tonight." With a bitter smile, she adds, "Though I suppose, in myth, Elysium was always a place for the dead."

"A happy place, though," I remind her. "A paradise."

"True. And when we regroup, it will be time for some changes around here."

I open my mouth to question her further but Hadria is already turning away, pulling on her long leather coat. "Get those medics in," she commands over her shoulder. "I'll be back soon."

I grab her arm. "Kiss me," I demand, low and urgent. "Don't ever leave without kissing me like..."

Like we might never see each other again.

I don't have to say it. She understands. And she kisses me, hard and passionately, as though we were alone in the room together.

And then she's gone.

I stare at the door for another moment before I hurry to her study off the war room, retrieving the promised list of off-the-books medical professionals willing to provide aid, and I start calling them in.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

The aftermath down on the lawn outside the house is even more horrific than I anticipated. I force myself to look at each fallen form, friend or foe. They deserve that much. Yuri is by my side, and I think he's relieved they're all dead.

I am, too. I hate the idea of skewering someone clinging to life, just because they chose the wrong side. And I have to face facts: I am never going to be like Hadria, or Lyssa, or even Mario or Yuri. I am never going to be able to kill coldly or even pragmatically.

If my life is in danger? Yes. Probably.

If Hadria's life is in danger? I already know I'll act on instinct in those circumstances. I would do anything, sacrifice anything, to save her—just like she would for me.

But I won't ever be like the true warriors of the Styx Syndicate.

And I think...I think that's okay. I've much preferred the last few hours in the war room, helping bind wounds and care for my people. Because they are my people, now, as much as they are Hadria's. What happened tonight was awful. Terrible. And I will have nightmares about it for the rest of my life. But it has bonded the surviving Syndicate members into something much more than a group of mercenaries.

They are beholden to each other now in a way they weren't before. They have become brothers and sisters through blood. And I think those bonds will only grow and strengthen over time.

Yuri and I have just finished checking pulses and covering faces when headlights cut

through the early morning dusk. The sun is rising at last, but this unexpected visitor makes me tense, ready to flee or fight.

"Get behind me, Suzy," Yuri says, but then a familiar figure steps from the car.

"Mrs. Graves!" I gasp, and I start running toward her.

The older woman surges forward to meet me, grasping my hands with quiet strength. "Aurora, dear, what happened here?" Her voice is low and urgent.

"Nero," I say. "He..." Her hands tighten on mine. "He's dead," I tell her. "Hadria killed him.

"Oh, thank God!"

I nod along with her, tears threatening to spill again. "But what are you doing here?" I ask, as we mount the front steps and enter the foyer.

She looks around at the carnage and goes pale, but true to the woman I've known in my time here, she pulls herself together quickly. "Oh honey, half the city knows something dreadful happened here last night. They're just averting their eyes as usual." She searches my face anxiously. "And where are my girls? Are they..." She can't bring herself to finish the question.

I smile as reassuringly as I can but my voice almost cracks when I tell her about Lyssa. Mrs. Graves looks distraught, and then I have to add, "And Hadria went to confront her father one last time—but she'll be back, I know it. We'll work everything out, I promise."

Mrs. Graves looks immensely troubled. "Oh, no. I wish...Oh, God, forgive me. The last time my Sarah left the house, we argued terribly. I can't lose another daughter

that way, with her last words heard from me said in anger."

My heart aches for her pain. "Hadria could never hold a grudge against you," I say gently. "As soon as she returns, you two will make things right between you again. I know you will." Mrs. Graves still seems upset, so I change the subject. "Lyssa might be awake now. Let's go and see her."

At Mrs. Graves' eager nod, I lead her up the stairs toward the war room, now a makeshift infirmary. Yuri trails behind us, and I'm grateful to know he's there. As I swing open the door to the war room, the coppery odor of blood hangs thick in the air and Mrs. Graves gives a little gasp of horror.

Lyssa is lying on a cot in the corner, awake now, gritting her teeth as a medic stitches up a vicious gash across her shoulder. Her face is bone white with pain but she manages a weak smile when she sees us.

"There you are, my dear," Mrs. Graves murmurs, immediately moving to Lyssa's side to smooth her sweat-and-blood-soaked hair back from her forehead. She continues stroking Lyssa's hand soothingly. "Everything will be alright. I'm here. I'm here for you."

Lyssa visibly relaxes under Mrs. Graves' caring touch. I slip away quietly, leaving them in peace, and duck back into Hadria's study for a moment to steady myself.

Alone, I sink into her chair and finally release the emotions I've been suppressing. Silent sobs wrack my body as the stress and horrors of the last twelve hours crash over me.

After a few minutes I take some deep breaths and dab my eyes dry, washing my face in the attached bathroom until the puffiness fades.

I can't fall apart. I need to be strong, as strong as Hadria and Lyssa and the rest of them—but in a different way.

I know my role here now. And as I walk back out to check on the injured, I vow I'll do my very best to be the Syndicate's sunshine, to help chase away the darkness lingering after last night's violence.

I straighten my spine and lift my chin, projecting confidence.

Time to get back to work.

CHAPTER 29

Hadria

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

The roar of my motorcycle engine fills my ears as I ride through the streets of Old Town towards my father's estate. I haven't been back here since the day I walked out, declaring I would never return. I pull up across from the looming wrought iron gates and high stone walls that once felt like a sanctuary in the city. It's been almost twenty years since I was a child inside those walls.

Now I'm a woman grown, tempered by blood and fire into someone unrecognizable from the wounded girl who fled from the only home she'd ever known. I wonder if traces of her still echo in these marble halls, memories imprinted into the cavernous rooms and manicured gardens.

But I shutter my heart against the restless ghosts of the past. Nero lies dead by my hand, and Aurora is safe. And I've come today to make my father reckon with the choices he has made over the years, the choices that set all subsequent events spiraling into motion.

I pull up to the intercom at the gate and kill the engine. Static crackles before a stern voice commands through the speaker, "State your business."

I raise an eyebrow in amusement as I tip my face back to be clearly seen by the camera. Do they not recognize me?

"Hadria Imperioli. I'm here to see my father."

A pause. Then three men with guns run out of the gatehouse and stand there pointing them at me through the bars.

"We have orders not to let you pass," the voice returns, edged with quiet menace. Too bad I don't scare so easily.

"Tell the Don who is here to see him. See what he says," I tell him in a bored voice.

I don't have long to wait.

The gates grind open and I roar through on my bike up the winding drive without hesitation, not bothering to acknowledge the guards training their weapons on me. I cut the engine again outside the front entrance, where more armed men await. Their eyes widen at the sight of me—face and clothes still spattered with blood and gore from the battle at Elysium. Their fingers hover nervously over their sidearms as I pull off my helmet and shake out my hair. Do they realize how laughably inadequate those weapons are against someone like me?

Wordlessly, I hand over my twin pistols from their holsters, and a switchblade from my boot. I smile as I do it, a reminder that I don't need weapons to kill them. They know I could end their lives empty-handed if I was so inclined.

But I'm not here for them.

One grunt jerks his chin, indicating I should follow. I stomp confidently over these once-familiar carpets, past gilded mirrors and oil paintings of Imperoli ancestors.

I am brought to the breakfast room first. Of course. My father keeps to his routines, sipping espresso and reading the paper still in his silk pajamas and brocade robe. The remains of his breakfast plate are hurried away by a silent maid as I enter.

He does not bother to rise when I enter, merely folding his paper neatly and raising one groomed eyebrow in that infuriating way.

"Coffee?" my father inquires politely, as if my arrival still spattered in the blood of Imperiola men is a common occurrence. He gestures to the silver pot on the table between settings for two. "Nero is late this morning. He will have to make do with what remains."

"No, thank you, Papa," I reply evenly, calling upon reserves of composure. My gaze drifts up to the portrait wall where generations of Imperiola patriarchs cast their implacable eyes down upon the room, confirming that regardless of era, women in this family are intended only to exist in the margins.

For two decades, I've been determined to see my portrait up there.

I wander the room, looking at the rest of the portraits. The family portrait that used to show me with Papa and Nero is conspicuously absent, my presence expunged.

"I must admit, you are the last person I expected to receive this morning," he says calmly. Too calmly. My fingers itch with the urge to wrap around that wrinkled throat. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I turn, meeting his hooded gaze. "I've come to tell you that your son is dead."

Shock flickers across his features before the mask slides back into place. "I had...not heard."

"No," I agree. "I don't think you would have admitted me so readily if you had. But that's a problem for you, Papa, that no one has let you know. Perhaps they worried about what your reaction would be."

His eyes are devoid of any soul. I see that now. "What do you hope my reaction will be, Hadria? Do you expect me to beg for my life?"

He's very calm still. But I detect the quaver of mortal fear beneath.

I lean casually against the heavy table, regarding him thoughtfully as I let him dangle a moment, awaiting my pronouncement.

We are so very much alike in some ways.

But he will never truly know me, only what haunts his own shadowed mind.

"No, Papa," I tell him at last. "One vendetta at a time is enough. And for all your faults, you did not harm Aurora. Not like Nero would have."

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

Papa nods slowly, processing, strategizing. Seeking the angle, the way to survive this encounter. Ever the master manipulator.

"Then what is your purpose here?" He pauses delicately. "Do you plan to press your claim as rightful heir with Nero gone? It would be...an easier sell, now that you have killed him. The men would be more inclined to consider following you, if they knew?—"

I laugh then, low and dangerous. For decades I've craved even the smallest scrap of validation from this man who by actions made clear he held me in no regard. Desperately sought to prove myself worthy of the birthright I was determined had been stolen from my grasp.

Over the last few weeks, that craving has been withering away, and the sight of my father now kills it off in an instant.

"No," I tell him. "I'm not here for the Family."

His face—very slightly—falls.

And I realize my father is almost relieved that I killed Nero. He must have known what a liability my brother had become, growing more volatile and out of control as the years passed.

By removing Nero from play, I've quite neatly tidied up one of my father's messes.

I sit down at the table opposite him. "Aurora once asked me why I was so eager to

prove myself to you. I've been asking myself that question a lot lately, too."

Aurora. Her face fills my mind, luminous and courageous. She's shown more strength than this feeble tyrant ever possessed.

I smile at him. "Why on earth would I want to lead such a corrupt, honorless Family when I have my own people who would die for me? People who respect me not because of my name, but because I earned their loyalty. The Styx Syndicate is more of a family than this travesty ever was."

My father blinks, clearly startled by my words. I press on.

"So, no. I have no interest in the Imperioli Family any longer. Nero is dead—a thing you were too weak to do yourself. As long as you stay out of my way from now on, I'll consider the matter concluded."

He sneers. "I see. So you came here only to gloat at an old man, to tell him you have killed his only son, and then?—"

"No," I tell him calmly, "I had another reason. I want information." I lean in, watching him closely. "The attacks on my people, recently—I assumed it was Nero. But he thought it was you. Were you behind them?"

He exhales slowly. "No," he says at last. "It was not me. You would have known if it was sanctioned by me. I would have made sure of that."

Something about his demeanor makes me think he speaks the truth, for once. And what he says is true—he would have wanted me to know it was him. This petty man clings to his crumbling empire, lacking the strength or will to test himself against me now. Perhaps Nero's failure will teach him humility, at long last.

Satisfied, I stand up and give him a dismissive nod. "Then I consider matters between us closed for now. Stay out of my affairs, and I will stay out of yours." I head for the door.

"Brava!"

His shout stops me, and he rises from his seat now as I turn back, applauding me as though I'm some opera superstar.

"Brava! Brava! Yes, Hadria. This is what I needed to see from you. Now—put aside your foolish pride and return to us, take your rightful place as my heir now that Nero is gone. Lead the Family into a new era. It's not too late."

I look back at him where he stands framed against the bay windows, the bright morning sun at his back casting his face in shadow. He seems small suddenly, despite his imposing stature. A frail, grasping old man desperate to salvage the only legacy he has left now that I have ripped his legacy from his faltering hands.

Not the monster who shaped my fate and haunted my nightmares for so long.

"You already have my answer," I tell him.

He scowls. "Stop being so stubborn. Come now, be a good girl, and?—"

"Don Imperioli, I have never been a good girl. I'm not about to start now." I turn and stalk from the room, calling over my shoulder, "You'd better pray you never see me again. Because if you do, it will be the last thing you see."

I think he probably will stay out of my way. Whatever schemes and secrets haunt his corrupted soul, he has no appetite for open war between us, not like Nero did.

I came seeking answers about the one who attacked my people, but leave having shed the last shreds of a child's need for a monster's approval. Let him rot in this fading prison of his own making. He's nothing to me now.

Still, I leave with unanswered questions.

If it wasn't on Nero's orders, and it wasn't Don Imperioli, who exactly has been killing off my people over the past few weeks? Johnny de Luca, for some reason I can't fathom? Or like Nero suggested, was it one of the bribed Syndicate members, trying to build tension and disunity in the ranks?

Or is it someone I'm not yet aware of, working in the shadows?

CHAPTER 30

Hadria

The sky has brightened to a bright midmorning blue by the time I pass through the gates of Elysium again, handing off my motorcycle to one of the sentries guarding the perimeter of the house when I get up there. Most of the bodies have already been removed from the lawn, I note with satisfaction. Basic order is being restored, and we will be able to honor our fallen dead.

As for the others...we will make them disappear.

But I'll make sure to send Nero's body back to Don Imperioli. Let the old man bury his own mistakes.

I hurry inside, but I find Aurora exactly where I left her: in the war room, ministering to the injured. She rises quickly as I enter.

"Hadria! You're back." She's relieved, but the worries fly away from her face as soon as I reach out to touch it.

"I'm back," I agree. She searches my eyes and then looks me over; I think she's searching for fresh wounds after the encounter with my father. I offer her a reassuring nod. "I left Don Imperioli alive," I tell her softly.

Her eyes widen. "You did?"

"I did. But I also put him on notice. I doubt we'll have any trouble from him again. And if we do..." I shrug. "Then I will pay him another visit."

Aurora's shoulders relax slightly. "I'm glad it went smoothly." She reaches for my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. Just that small contact soothes my lingering tension from facing my father. "What will you do next?" she asks.

What comes next is rebuilding the Syndicate—and Elysium, brick by brick. Restoring order and honor among those left. Thoughts of vengeance and conquest seem to have left me completely. When I look at Aurora, I see different possibilities spread before me. A future not only of necessary violence, but of shared joy.

"The Syndicate will regroup," I tell her. "And we will persevere." As I look around the room at the people there, I know without a doubt that I made the right choice to stick with my own people. "How's Lyssa?" I ask, moving past Aurora to crane my neck and find where Lyssa has been moved.

"Oh, well, she's much better, but—" Aurora begins, but I'm moving already, pleased to see Lyssa sitting up on a low cot, eyes as sharp and alert as ever. She's berating a medic who is attempting to check her bandages.

"I said I'm fine! Get away from me." Lyssa swats aside the man's hands impatiently.

I allow myself a small smile. If Lyssa has the energy to be abusive, it means she is recovering well. At my entrance, her stormy expression shifts to something softer.

"There you are. We were taking bets on how you'd decided to kill your father."

I raise an eyebrow. "Dare I ask if anyone bet I wouldn't kill him at all? Because that's

what happened."

Lyssa snorts in disgust. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm not. But there's an explanation, too—I'll discuss it with you once you're feeling better."

Lyssa stares at me. "I'm feeling better now," she says. "So spit it out. Or is this all thanks to that girl of yours?"

"Shh," I hiss, looking around. I perch on the edge of her cot. "If you have to know, I realized that what I want is...something very different to the Imperiola Family."

Lyssa stares even harder at me, and then scoffs. "You finally figured that out, huh?"

Annoyed, I start to snipe back, but a soft throat clear behind me makes me turn—and get to my feet, fast. "Oh! Mrs. Graves—I—" I swallow. Next to me, Lyssa is smirking, which doesn't help. "I didn't know you were here," I finish weakly. I'm finding it hard to look her in the eye, so I find Aurora across the room instead, who is making a Sorry face at me, her teeth clenched in a wide, apologetic almost-smile.

Mrs. Graves takes another step forward, looking up at me—I was always a head taller than her, even at fourteen—and she puts her hands on my arms. "Hadria," she says softly. "I'm so happy to see you."

"You...are?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake," she snaps, and pulls me down for a hard hug. Over her shoulder, I see Aurora again, giving me a double thumbs up and smiling brightly. "I'm so sorry for what I said to you," Mrs. Graves says in my ear.

"But it was true," I mumble.

"It might have been," she allows, pulling back to look me in the face again, "but I could have found a more helpful way to state it. I was angry with you and afraid for Aurora."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

"I was afraid, too," I whisper. "I was...terrified."

To my horror, Mrs. Graves' eyes fill with tears. "And I should have been here to help you."

I swallow hard. Any more of this and I'll be crying myself, and then my reputation will never recover. "I should've told you—you and Lyssa, both, what I was planning. You would have stopped me. Could have prevented...all of this." I wave a hand around.

Mrs. Graves is already dabbing away the tears as she squeezes my other hand. "I don't think anyone could have prevented this. Nero was determined. And as for what you did to—and for—Aurora, we will talk more about it and clear the air. But not today, dear. You've had just about enough, I'd say, from the looks of you."

"I have," I admit, "but I've got more to do before I can even think about resting."

"Best get on with it, then," Mrs. Graves says in that no-nonsense tone of hers that makes me know, for real, that she has forgiven me.

Just like I have forgiven her. The whole fight seems so pointless now, when lives have been lost.

I leave Lyssa to terrorize her caretakers, confident of her swift recuperation now that Mrs. Graves is here and looking after her, and I move on to check on Ricky. The medics have given him a transfusion and he seems much better, laughing and talking with Mario.

And then I check on everyone else, personally, and thank them for their service here at Elysium, for the blood they have shed for the Styx Syndicate. And each and every one of them tells me the same thing.

That it was an honor.

After a brief stop to tighten security protocols around Elysium, I seek out Aurora again. Mrs. Graves tells me she's out on the back patio, and that's where I find her, though she's fallen asleep curled up in her chair in the sun. Mario is with her, which I'm pleased to see, because Nero might have been vanquished, but there are always enemies out there. I nod my thanks as he wordlessly leaves me to wake her alone.

I slide a gentle hand up her arm, but she still startles awake before the familiar, bright smile comes over her face again. I sit down beside her with a contented sigh.

"It's quite pleasant out here in the daytime," I say.

"Who would ever have thought?" she replies, deadpan, then gives me a fond smile.

"You have a magic touch. The whole estate thrives under your care—and not just the flowers. The people, too." I reach over to take her hand.

She smiles quizzically at me. "And what about you, my fearsome Hades? Do you thrive too, these days?"

The question might have taken me aback only a few weeks ago. I was so accustomed to constant wariness, suspicion, intrigue. But being with Aurora has awakened a different side of me. Different desires.

Simpler, yet somehow more frightening in their vulnerability.

I tighten my hold on her hand. "I am...content, whenever I am at your side." I hesitate, then continue quietly. "You make me feel at peace."

Aurora turns to me, and the sight of that beautiful face in the full sun is breathtaking. She studies me with those clear blue eyes that seem to see through to my core.

"I want that for you, always," she tells me earnestly. "I know the burdens you carry are heavy, Hadria. And I want to help share their weight. Because I finally figured it out, my role here in Elysium."

She explains eagerly, happily, how she plans to make sure she cares for and supports me and my people, and the more she talks, the more I fall in love with her. This gorgeous girl, once my captive, is offering her help, her support...her love.

Perhaps she sees the naked need in my face. Aurora leans toward me and silences my over-worked mind with a kiss. I melt into it, sweeter than any I could have dreamed before I met her. I cling to her as though she is life itself.

And in a way...she is.

She has brought me to life. And Elysium, too.

Right now, in the gardens she has sanctified with love and care, the world beyond falls away as she scrambles into my arms. There is only Aurora, her body pressed to mine, her quickening breaths echoing my own. This passion she ignites within me is at once terrifying and transcendent. I am utterly consumed, yet somehow...set free.

With a herculean effort, I still the urgency of our movements, cradling her head tenderly against my chest so our racing hearts can calm. She makes a sound of frustration, but does not protest otherwise. Her arms loop around my waist, holding me close.

"Tell me you're mine," I sigh.

"I'm yours." She nuzzles closer. "Tell me that you are mine."

"Oh, I am completely and utterly yours," I assure her. I take another breath, a question hovering on my mind, but I let the moment pass and kiss her again, instead.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

There's plenty of time for that. And I don't want to connect the invasion of Elysium with what should be a happy moment.

The happiest of her life, I hope.

CHAPTER 31

Aurora

SIX MONTHS LATER

A whole half year has passed since the failed attack on Elysium, and Hadria and I are living in a hotel on the Gold Coast that overlooks the water. The extravagant hotel is owned by the Bianchis, and Juno Bianchi has given us—along with the rest of the Styx Syndicate members who needed it—an indefinite free stay while Elysium is rebuilt. I asked Hadria when we first arrived if she was certain we could trust the Bianchis, considering we still don't know who was behind those mysterious stiletto killings of Syndicate members. And because of the fact that when Johnny the Gentleman returned to New York, the killings conveniently stopped.

But Hadria had smiled. "My little Sherlock Holmes. Well, I wondered that myself, as you know. But no, Sunshine. I asked Johnny flat out, and he convinced me he had nothing to do with it. He had no reason to kill our people. I was already interested in talking to the Bianchi Family, and he knew that. And despite everything that happened while he was here...I really do think he was just here for a vacation." She'd seen my furrowed brow and added, "Besides, his killing style is—was, I suppose—quite different."

I'd looked it up after our conversation, despite the fact that I should have known better. Johnny the Gentleman got his name because he always spread a white handkerchief over the faces of his victims out of respect for the dead.

"And in any case," Hadria had gone on, more seriously, "the killings also stopped after the invasion of Elysium. If the killer was one of our own, someone who died that night, it would also explain why the murders stopped."

She had a point. But Hadria and the Bianchis have commenced doing regular business together now, which makes me think it's very convenient for her to believe them innocent. I know I should stop second-guessing our allies, but a sliver of doubt lingers in my mind.

I've learned the hard way that not everyone is what they seem in this world.

But I'm content to let Hadria be Hadria, and make the decisions for the Syndicate. I know my role, and I'm relieved it's not hers. I don't think I could carry that burden as well as she does.

Still, I'm delighted that Hadria seems lighter and freer these days now that she's dealt with Nero and her father. I was quietly astonished she didn't kill Don Imperioli, given everything he's done. But Hadria has changed—we both have.

The cold modern mansion at Elysium was razed to the ground and the new house being built in its place has a far warmer, more welcoming design. I made sure there was a library, and Hadria gave me a blank check to restock it with whatever books I liked. And it was Hadria who insisted that a conservatory be built onto the house—made of bullet-resistant glass, just in case—so that I can indulge in my passion for gardening even in the depths of winter.

That's how she put it: "your passion for gardening." I told her she couldn't make me

sound more boring if she tried, and she just laughed. "Am I wrong? Do you have no interest in plants anymore?"

Of course she wasn't wrong. Bringing things to life, tending to them, caring for them...that's what I was put here on earth to do, and not just with plants. With people, too. And so I'm thrilled that we're constructing extensive new accommodations on the grounds for any Syndicate members who wish to live onsite. My mother is one of them, in fact. She finally left my abusive father, and Hadria went herself to speak with him and explain that he would never have contact with either of us ever again...if he wanted to keep his tongue.

Right now, Mama is living in the cozy gardener's cottage that Mrs. Graves used to live in, and she loves it. I think she'll probably stay there—after Hadria and Mrs. Graves hashed things out, Hadria insisted on building Mrs. Graves the house of her dreams when she agreed to return to Elysium.

I'm so happy that they've reconciled. Lyssa is too, though she would never say it outright. She's recovering well from her injuries during the attack, and Ricky is, too. The Syndicate has changed a lot, just like Hadria promised. She's less autocratic these days. Now, when the Syndicate gets together for meetings in one of the function rooms here at the hotel, or at the Chesterfield Club, for which Juno Bianchi sponsored our membership, there's more of a family feel. Or, I guess, a Family feel. Hadria suggested changing the name, even floated an informal vote, but everyone raised their hand to keep the name. They were Styxies through and through, Mario told me afterward, and that was one thing that would never change, no matter how much everything else might.

Speaking of Mario, he was appointed a new lieutenant for his valor and leadership on the night of the invasion, which is so well-deserved. Hadria told me privately she wants to appoint a few more lieutenants as well; she's biding her time to see who might be a good candidate.

And as for me, I've settled into my role supporting everyone however I can, through the smallest acts of kindness and compassion, to speaking to Hadria on their behalf if there are issues—since people are still a little afraid of her. Syndicate members often come to me just to talk and say I brighten their days. Knowing I can spread a little light feels wonderful.

Tonight, Hadria and I have just arrived back at the hotel after a luxurious dinner at an exclusive restaurant, and we're alone in our suite overlooking the moonlit water of Lake Michigan and the glorious Gold Coast. As I stare out at the glimmering cityscape and waters, Hadria comes up behind me and slides her arms around my waist.

"What are you thinking about, Sunshine?" she asks, nuzzling my neck. Her breath is warm against my skin.

I smile and lean back into her embrace. "Just feeling so grateful to be here with you, like this. My whole world has changed so much."

Hadria turns me in her arms to face her. The adoration in her storm cloud eyes steals my breath away. After everything we endured to be with each other, I know this powerful woman would walk through fire for me. "I want the whole world to know you're mine," she tells me, and I feel that happy curl of desire in my belly as she smiles her wicked smile. "I want to make sure I leave my claim on every inch of you."

"You already have," I tell her, brushing my lips over hers. "But I'd be delighted to start again from the top."

Her lips curl in a smirk. "Strip."

I do. She watches me undress, eyes feasting on every inch of my body as it's revealed

to her, as though she sees me anew for the first time. When I'm naked before her, she twirls her finger, and I obediently turn in a circle, giving her a full view.

"Lovely," she sighs. She reaches out to turn on the nearby floor lamp, flooding me with a soft yellow spotlight, and then turns me, pressing me up against the full-length feature window that looks over the Gold Coast. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asks, her hand sliding between my legs from behind. "Our kingdom, stretching out before us. I want you to look at it while I make you come."

"Someone will see," I whisper, but it's not a protest.

"I hope they do," she says, her fingers opening up my slit, teasing and taunting my entrance. "I want them to know that you belong to me." Her confidence sends sparks running through me as she sinks her fingers into me, finding my most sensitive place inside with precision.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

I gasp at the feeling, my eyes locked on the breathtaking view outside. The city lights twinkle like diamonds from this high up, casting a warm glow over the dark sky. She presses me firmly against the cool glass, so that anyone looking into this window would get an eyeful. But they'd never be able to identify me at this distance, not unless they had binoculars or something equally voyeuristic.

Which isn't outside the realm of possibility, really.

The idea only makes me hotter.

"You like being watched, don't you?" she whispers in my ear. "You like knowing that everyone out there might be looking at you, seeing you like this...getting finger-fucked by Hadria Imperioli, the fucking queen of Chicago."

"Yes," I gasp out. "Oh, God, yes."

"Good," she tells me. "Because tonight, you're going to put on a show for anyone who wants to watch. Spread your legs wider. Fuck that greedy little cunt on my hand, Aurora, and let them see how much you enjoy this."

I spread my legs wide and lean into the window, my breasts squishing up against the glass. The cold glass feels so good against my heated skin, and I moan as Hadria continues to finger me relentlessly, her other hand joining in now to pluck at my clit. She leans forward and presses a kiss to my neck. "That's it, baby. Show them what they're missing."

Her fingers don't stop moving inside me, creating a rhythm that matches the pulse of

my need as she works her way in deeper and deeper. I grind back against her hand in a desperate need for release. Her fingers are stretching me to a level of pleasure I didn't know existed, the exhibitionist thrill lending an edge to something we've done many times. I look down to catch our reflection in the glass, see her fingers disappearing inside me while her other hand works my clit.

"Oh, fuck!" I moan, as she finds my sweet spot again and caresses it mercilessly. My hips jerk once more, and I'm gone, losing myself in the wash of an intense orgasm, and she works me through it until I'm spent, writhing away from her insistent fingers.

"We're not done yet," she tells me. "Turn around. On your knees. Show everyone how you worship my cunt."

I hit the floor so hard I'm surprised it doesn't crack open, and she grabs a handful of my hair, guiding my open, willing mouth to her pussy. Her scent fills my senses as I start to eat her out. I take her clit between my lips, teasing it softly at first before sucking harder, just the way she likes. She tastes like salt and power and sex, and I groan into her flesh as she grinds my face harder against her in encouragement.

She's as excited as I am, worked up, desperate for her orgasm. She explodes fast, my name on her lips as I lap up every last bit of her essence.

"You did say worship," I tell her with a grin, looking up into her face.

"You are amazing," she says, voice still raspy from her climax. "That was...one hell of a performance."

"Why thank you," I say. "Thought I think we both know who the real star of the show is."

She helps me up, eyes twinkling, but then she turns serious. "Aurora," she says

solemnly, "you are my entire world now. I never dreamed I could feel about someone the way I feel for you."

And then she gets to her knees. I'm reminded of my return to Elysium—that fifty thousand dollar taxi ride—and the way she fell to her knees then, hugging me tight. But tonight she doesn't fall. She very purposefully gets down on one knee, still holding my hands.

And I'm confused for a moment. I just came, after all. Why is she...

"I completely understand if you never even want to think about this," she says, "but I need to ask you. Because I really do want to tell the whole world you're mine, and I want the world to know that I'm yours, too, and this, well, it seems like the simplest way to do it."

I've never heard Hadria babble before. She's nervous.

She takes a deep breath. "Aurora Jane Verderosa, you have changed everything about me. You make me want to be better, for you and for my people—and for myself. I never thought I could let my walls down and give my heart so completely. But with you, it was effortless." She pauses, swallowing hard. "I know I don't deserve you," she continues, her voice thick. "But I will spend every day trying to be the woman you see in me. You are my light, my love, my life. Aurora, will you marry me?"

My hands fly to my mouth in shock.

"Aurora?" she prompts after a minute, anxiety in her tone.

"Hadria," I breathe, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. "Of course, I'll marry you!"

She springs to her feet, scooping me up into her arms as she spins us around, both of us laughing with joy. "Oh, my God," she says as we come to a stop. "For a moment there I thought you were going to say no."

"Never!" I throw my arms around her neck and kiss her passionately.

"Come here," she says, leading me to the dresser, from which she produces a small velvet box. She opens it to reveal the largest and most exquisite sapphire and diamond ring I've ever seen, glittering like the stars outside—no, brighter than the stars, because tears of joy are welling up in my eyes, making everything sparkle and blur.

Hadria slides the ring onto my finger. And then she kisses me again, tender and slow. When we finally separate again, she says, "We can just elope, if you'd prefer. I know weddings might be, well. A bit of a trigger."

"A while back I thought I'd never want another wedding day," I agree. "But marrying you, making that commitment officially, and having a big damn party over it? Yeah. I think I'd really love that." I giggle. "So if you're Hadria Imperioli, queen of Chicago, I guess I'll be your consort, won't I?"

Hadria laughs. "You know what? I have just the thing for you to wear." She goes over to the closet this time and rummages around, coming back out with a large velvet box in her hand. "I sent Lyssa to retrieve something for you. I've been waiting for the right time to give it to you."

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:35 pm

She opens the box with a flourish. Nestled inside is my mother's sapphire and diamond tiara, the one Hadria first took as collateral from my parents so long ago—and the one that Nero then took from my father to pay for his gambling debts.

"I thought you might like to wear it at our wedding," Hadria says. "And then we can return it to Sylvia, since it belongs to her."

I throw myself into her arms again, overjoyed. As we hold each other close, Hadria whispers in my ear, "I love you, Aurora. Forever."

"I love you too," I whisper back. "Always."

At long last, I'm exactly where I belong.

Epilogue

HADRIA

I'm startled awake by the buzzing of my phone on the nightstand. I glance over and see Aurora sleeping soundly beside me, her hair splayed across the pillow, hand curled next to her relaxed face...and my ring on her finger.

I smile, the memory of my proposal still filling me with joy, so that even Lyssa's text to meet her outside, right damn now, can't dampen my mood.

Lyssa needs to learn to relax. Switch off.

But I suppose duty calls.

Careful not to disturb Aurora, I slip out from under the sheets and grab my robe from the chair, the carpet soft under my bare feet as I pad out of the bedroom, through the living area, and into the hallway outside.

Lyssa is waiting for me out there, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. "This better be important, Wolf," I say, stifling a yawn.

"Oh, I'd say it is, Hades. Yuri is dead."

I stare at her. "Yuri?" Yuri is one of Aurora's cohorts, a trainee who shows great promise. Well. Not anymore, I suppose. "He's dead," I repeat unnecessarily. Lyssa just nods.

Aurora is going to be very upset by this. I am, too, in my own way. Yuri was a good man.

"How did it happen?" I ask.

"Well, that's the thing, Boss. Someone slipped a stiletto between his ribs and pierced his heart."

The haze of sleep vanishes. Lyssa watches me take it in. "I see," I say at last. "Then it seems we still have a problem."

"Yeah," she replies grimly. "Seems we do."