



# Lone Wolf

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** I'm the perfect solider. Feared. Respected.  
And utterly alone.

I don't need friends. I certainly don't need a partner. But the Styx Syndicate has paired me up with Sunny Santiago.

She's everything I'm not—reckless, warm, alive. She laughs during missions, flirts during combat, and treats danger like a dance floor. I hate her relentless optimism almost as much as I hate how perfectly we work together. Because somehow, despite every attempt to keep her at arm's length, we're unstoppable together.

One moment of weakness in the aftermath of a mission changes everything. I know better than to let anyone close—a weapon that cares is a weapon that fails.

But when a high-stakes mission brings Sunny's tragic past crashing into our present, I'm faced with an impossible choice: remain the emotionless killer I was created to be...

Or risk everything to protect the one person who makes me feel...something again.

Lone Wolf is a Red Rivals story starring one very damaged ice queen who loves her solitude and one very determined (but also damaged) ray of sunshine who has made it her mission to melt the ice. It's best to read the Red Rivals books in order because there are major SPOILERS for the rest of the series in this book.

This book also contains spoilers for the Colombo Family Duet.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

Ariadne

Elysium is quietest just before the dawn. That's when the night owls are heading to bed, and the early birds are still catching zees rather than worms. There's still activity, of course, but it's in that change between night and day that I prefer to rise.

It's where I feel most alive. A time of day that doesn't really exist.

Just like I don't really exist.

I press my fingertips against the cold glass of the window, momentarily transfixed by the contrast between the warmth of my skin and the cool of the outside world. A shiver runs through me, but it's not unpleasant. Cold is familiar.

Cold is reliable.

The dream from last night flickers back to life, a retrieved memory I would rather have left in my unconscious: Grandmother's voice, the sharp crack of a wooden cane against flesh, a line of girls standing perfectly still despite the screams.

My hand trembles against the glass, and I pull it away, clenching it into a fist, tighter and tighter until my knuckles complain.

Pain is clarity.

Another lesson from Grandmother that I can't seem to unlearn.

I wake at the same time every day in the recruit dorms, no alarm needed. I never needed one in Grandmother's house, and I saw no reason to change my habits and wake at a different time just because I live under Hadria's rule these days. I pull on my training gear mechanically—no thought necessary, because I set out everything the night before—compression leggings, tank bra, tight sleeveless top, all in black. And then I head to the main house, the mansion, and into the gym.

The gym is not the training room. The gym is a smaller facility, filled solely with exercise equipment, machines, weights. I feel equally at home in both the gym and the training room—which is to say, not much. But it sure feels more familiar than the dorms I'm staying in with all the other recruits. The air in the gym is thick with the scent of sweat, even though this room is basically brand new: a whole mansion full of brand-new rooms for Hadria Imperioli's brand-new empire.

Sometimes I wish I could have seen it before. That dark, night-based kingdom of concrete and steel, when everyone woke and worked during the darkest hours. I feel like it might have suited me better. When I hear Mario and Ricky reminiscing sometimes—when I hear my mother talking about how much nicer everything is now—I get a sense of faux-nostalgia for a world that would have suited me much better.

But I'm here now. I'm here in the gym, and I'm working my body, fully present in the moment, focused on my muscles, my tendons, my blood flow.

My mind doesn't wander. It doesn't have time.

I move through my drills—the ones given to us by Lyssa and Scarlett—and then I move into the more complex routines that I used to perform under Grandmother. My body flows through the patterns, muscle memory taking over as I execute perfect

roundhouse kicks against the heavy bag, the impact reverberating up my legs and into my core. The mirror-lined wall reflects my form—compact and lethal. A well-maintained weapon, which is exactly what Grandmother designed me to be.

But as I execute a flawless spinning back kick that would have shattered a human spine, I catch sight of something in the mirror opposite that doesn't belong: a hint of a smile on my own lips. I instantly suppress it. Enjoyment was never part of the equation. Perfection was.

I used to train others. I was the master. Still am, let's be real. But I've been kicked back down to student status, training with fresh-eyed new recruits, while everyone waits breathlessly to see if I'll lose it. Go postal. Try to kill Lyssa.

Again.

I still want to. There's still a burn in my belly when I look at that bitch. But it's a cold burn these days, like I recognize it was put in me by someone else. It's not my own rage.

It's still there, though.

A movement by the high window catches my eye—a small brown bird has landed on the sill outside, its head tilting as it watches me through the glass. For a moment, I freeze, mesmerized by its delicate freedom. Then it flies away, and something in my chest tightens.

But I shake it off. Sentiment is weakness.

The door opens just as I'm unwrapping my hands and flexing them out. I'm finished for the morning; these other recruits are just getting started. I recognize them—they're in my group—and I ignore their greetings. They enter in a pack, loud

and laughing, ruining the peace.

“Don’t you ever take a day off?” Enzo Rittoli calls over with a smirk. He’s tall with olive skin and dark curls, built like the college football player he probably was before whatever circumstances brought him here.

I ignore him. Ignore the way he mutters something to his friends that makes them snicker.

They stop snickering the second I walk by, the moment my gaze flicks their way—a warning. Their bodies instinctively create space for me to pass, shifting away as if I’m radioactive. I could take all five of them at once if I needed to. They know it.

Silence follows me out of the gym. And that’s how it should be.

After I shower and dress, I head down to the dining area, where there’s always food on offer, since the Syndicate works all day and night. We eat through a mountain of food each week, and the menu is overseen by my own dear mother. The scent of coffee and bacon hangs in the air, mingling with the lemon-scented cleaner the staff uses on the tables.

## Page 2

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On Sundays there are waffles. But you have to make them yourself on the waffle iron, and I don't know how to use it.

Today is Wednesday, so I heap scrambled eggs onto my plate, some turkey bacon, fried mushrooms, and grab a fresh-squeezed OJ to wash it down. I sit alone, an island even as the room starts to fill up with mercenaries returning from a good night's work, and sleepy recruits too lazy to head to the gym before they stuff their mouths.

They won't last, those ones. No discipline.

After breakfast, I have a mandatory therapy session. The Syndicate brings in Dr. Diana Khatri three times a week. It used to be daily; I pretended well enough to have it dropped back. But I struggle to pretend well enough to get her to sign off on me altogether.

The office she uses is always too warm, too intimate, too calm. I prefer cold spaces—they keep you alert, focused, ready for anything. Warm rooms like this are designed to make you relax, lower your guard. There's a happily-steaming humidifier in the shape of a lotus flower on the coffee table between us and the faint scent of sandalwood and jasmine in the air. I can never tell if it's her perfume or if she spritzes something around before I get there. We sit opposite each other, and I have to force myself back in the chair instead of perching on the edge, ready to flee as soon as we're done.

I know that Johnny de Luca was the one who recommended this therapist, and everyone acted like I should be awed that he took any kind of interest at all. But I'm not. I don't like him and I don't like his therapist and I'm tired of pretending I need

fixing when I'm not broken.

No one acts like Scarlett needs fixing. Or Lyssa, for that matter. They get treated like rock stars.

And I get...

Therapy.

"Good morning, Sarah." Dr. Khatri's voice is deliberately modulated, soft but firm. She sits with perfect posture, as if she's posing for a professional photo.

"Good morning."

"How are you sleeping?" She smiles encouragingly, her head tilting at a precise angle that she probably practiced in front of a mirror.

"Fine."

"Any nightmares? Because when we first started?—"

"No." I'll be damned if I'm going to describe my dreams to this sleek-haired woman whose only problems revolve around getting her manicure perfected each week. I know she gets it done each week because they're a different color each time, thick talons coated in shiny polish, sometimes with fucking sparkles on them.

I guess I do like the sparkles. I had a sparkly rug at Grandmother's house.

Sparkles and pink and girly things that made me feel...

I don't even know anymore. My current dorm room is spartan. Even the teddy bear,

Mr. Fluffikins, I left with my mother. She has him sitting on a bed in a spare room that she keeps telling me I'm welcome to move into any time I like.

Dr. Khatri leans forward and finally drops the cutesy act. "Any meaningful connections with the other recruits?"

This is when she starts digging, third question in, each time. I almost laugh at this one—because meaningful connections?

With these losers?

Right.

"Oh, sure," I say blandly. "I'm getting along real well with everyone."

She tilts her head to one side and, for the first time, I see the flicker of something in her eyes that makes me wary. "I see," is all she says.

And as I leave the office, I get the feeling I might have fucked myself over with that last little piece of sarcasm. But it's time for training now, my favorite time of day, because I get to beat up all these wide-eyed morons who think they're badasses just because they made it through round one of the Syndicate's intake process.

The training room is the largest space in Elysium, with soaring ceilings and walls lined with weapons. Training mats are everywhere, there's a full-sized MMA cage at one end, and a boxing ring down the other end of the room. Lyssa stands at the front of our group, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, dark eyes scanning the room. Scarlett moves among the recruits, adjusting stances with a gentleness I find contemptible.

I kick major ass—literally. When I'm paired up for sparring with Enzo Rittoli, I send



him flying several feet through the air. He wheezes as he lands, winded, and I allow myself the tiniest of smirks. His style is pure aggression—no subtlety, all force. A common mistake among men who rely on strength over skill.

I wipe the smirk away quickly, but one person has noticed. Lyssa, who never takes her damn eyes off me during training.

“Nice kick,” says a voice to my left, and I whip around to see—ah, yes. The golden fucking retriever of the group, Susana “Sunny” Santiago, with her crazy-dyed hair and wide grin, her golden-brown eyes sparkling as usual. “Think you can teach me?” she goes on.

“Step right up,” I offer coldly.

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“Enough.” Lyssa’s voice cuts in sharply “That’s enough for now, everyone. Hit the showers and then go get something to eat.”

I watch Sunny’s black-and-blond-and-pink dyed hair moving with the crowd as people flock to her. Sheep who like to get complimented, because she’s always so full of compliments. Girl needs to learn that the world isn’t so full of light as she thinks it is. She moves differently than the rest—lighter, almost dancing through the crowd, touching shoulders, laughing at comments I can’t hear. The others absorb her into their midst while maintaining their distance from me.

For a split second, she glances back at me, and I turn away quickly. That’s when I notice Lyssa is still looking at me, and I don’t like the look on her face—speculative—so I head after the group to get lunch.

Unfortunately for me, my mother is helping out in the dining room this afternoon, overseeing the food and making sure nothing needs refilling. She smiles brightly when she sees me, and I give her the slightest of up-nods. I know what’s coming and I wish she’d give it a rest. Maybe I can avoid it if I fill up my tray fast enough and find a seat.

I slop any old thing on there and head for a table at the back. It’s where I usually sit. Only two other people are ever there: Elijah, a stocky guy with a killer fade and a decent right hook from what I’ve seen in training, and Zach, thin and blond and almost as quiet as I am half the time. He’s fast, though. Fast and sneaky when we train, and pretty enough to be a decent honeypot. He’s also good with tech. If he plays his cards right, he could be a very useful Syndicate member.

None of us ever talk to each other, rarely even look at each other, but there's a sense of cautious acknowledgment. But today as I sit, my attention is drawn back despite myself to Sunny—but then, she's always the center of attention. Right now, Sunny is throwing an arm around Enzo and playfully stealing a fry from his plate. She's like a flame that others can't help but gather around, seeking warmth.

The dining hall feels divided into two temperature zones—the cold, shadowed corner where I sit, and the rest of the room where Sunny's warmth and light seems to radiate. She's wearing a bright yellow top today that somehow makes her look even more luminous, a stark contrast to my black attire. She's always loud, always laughing, always desperate for people to like her. I bet that's why she only ever flatters them. I've never heard her say a mean word about anyone, but I know she must think them.

Because I know what people are really like under the masks they wear.

I catch Elijah smiling a little as he watches the other table, and I have the sudden urge to tell him to go fucking sit with them, if he likes them so much. Instead, I get up from the table, meal only half eaten, and dump the remains in the trash before shoving my tray home in the receptacle we're supposed to leave them in. I glance back once, just out of habit—never leave your back exposed—and to my chagrin I meet Sunny's eyes. She actually has the audacity to smile at me. Not her usual megawatt grin, but something smaller, more genuine.

I look away at once, annoyed at myself. I just want to go back to the gym now, but I can't even do that; my mother puts herself bodily in my way before I can leave the dining room.

"Sarah," she says warmly. "Do you have a minute?"

"I—"

“Please.” She’s too firm and too pleasant, taking my arm before I can back away and leading me back into the foyer of the mansion and into a side room. This is her room in the big house: a sitting room with a cozy fireplace and big, over-stuffed armchairs that envelop you like a hug. Exactly what I don’t want from her. The warmth of the room is stifling after the cooler air of the dining hall and I feel instantly claustrophobic.

I shake off her hand as soon as we get in there. “What do you want?” I ask. “I need to get to the gym.”

“You just ate,” she points out. “You need to digest first. And can’t a mother have a moment with her daughter?”

I bite back my response to that, simply folding my arms.

She sighs as though I’m the one being difficult. “I wanted to talk to you about moving into the cottage.”

We’ve talked about this already. A million times. “I’m a recruit. Recruits stay in the dorms.”

“But you’re different,” she says softly.

“Yeah,” I snap. “I’m better. But I still need to prove myself. Going to stay with my mommy isn’t going to prove anything except that I’m soft.”

Her eyes grow shiny, and I hate that she always uses tears to try to manipulate me. Doesn’t she know how useless tears are? “But Sarah, you don’t have to be alone all the time. You have a place with me whenever you want it.”

“I have a room,” I snap, backing toward the door, away from the suffocating coziness.

“That’s not the same thing as having a home. The other recruits...they do see Elysium as a home. But you?—”

“Are we done here?”

She gives a helpless little shrug, and I wrench the door open and stalk off.

I don’t head to the gym. I head to the shooting range instead, where I have to sign in like some dumbfuck who never shot a gun in her life before. But at least it lets me blow off steam.

Lets me forget.

The range is in the basement, a cavernous space with concrete walls and specialized ventilation that still can’t quite eliminate the acrid scent of gunfire. The fluorescent lights are bright overhead, unforgiving, exactly what I need right now. I focus on the gun. The weight of it. The recoil, the sound of bullets hitting home in perfect shots, each and every time. No room for anything but the gun and the target.

I stand perfectly still while paper targets dance at the end of their wires. One by one, the outlines of human figures accumulate perfect holes where their hearts and heads would be. I hit again and again with mechanical precision. There’s a satisfaction in it—the clean simplicity of a bullet’s path, the absence of complication. The gun doesn’t care about therapy sessions or mother-daughter relationships or enigmatic smiles from rainbow-haired women who don’t know when to back the fuck off.

I shoot for two hours straight, until my hands and arms are aching and I think I might have a blister starting. But the anger and the emotional bullshit that my mother riled up in me, they’re gone.

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I head to the gym, and then to the outdoor training run to practice my parkour, and then I have dinner sent to my dorm. We're not supposed to do that, as recruits, unless we're sick, but no one ever objects when I request it.

Maybe, like my mother says, it's because I'm indifferent. Because I'll never fit in here, no matter how skilled and how perfect I am. At Grandmother's house I was rewarded for those things.

Here? I'm merely tolerated.

After dinner, I head out for my usual nine-minute-mile to clear my head before I sleep. The dorms are a new addition to the estate, a three-story brick building with large windows and tiny balconies for every room. The entrance is marked by two massive potted plants that Aurora refreshes seasonally to match the Chicago climate. And today as I make my way back, I glance up to see Sunny Santiago out on her balcony, smoking a contraband cigarette.

We're not allowed to smoke. Lyssa's orders.

But Sunny just takes another drag when she sees me staring at her and raises a hand to wave at me, like I couldn't get her stuck on toilet duty for a week if I reported her.

I don't wave back. I just head back inside, wondering when that mask of hers will finally slip. And wondering, despite myself, what lies beneath.

## CHAPTER 2

Sunny

Sarah “Ariadne” Graves is one tough cookie, but I’m gonna break her. I’m gonna make that girl smile if it’s the last thing I do—and hell, it might be. This morning, as I move down the breakfast buffet and accidentally reach for the same serving spoon she’s going for, she gives me the kind of look that should freeze me in my place.

I just grin widely and offer her the spoon instead. For just a second, I swear I feel the literal chill radiating from her skin, and her blue eyes are like icicles. She snatches the spoon from me like I’ve insulted her ancestors and turns her back on me. Her black tank top and leggings are spotless, her short, dark blonde hair perfectly in place. Not a thing out of order.

I decide to go for the tofu scramble this morning instead of the eggs, which I’m pretty sure must be frozen solid from their proximity to Ariadne.

I’ll thaw her eventually. I’m determined.

I make my way over to the seating area, ignoring the calls to come and sit from a few people. I want to make sure I have a particular view—ah, there’s one. My chair scrapes over the polished concrete floor as I slide in next to Enzo, who’s usually a cocky motherfucker, but at this time of the morning he’s still waking up, hunched over his coffee. I take the opportunity to steal a slice of his toast and bat away his hand when he tries to grab it back.

“You got a whole damn loaf there, Rittoli,” I tell him. “You can spare a slice.”

He grumbles, but he lets me eat it, muttering something about me being lucky I’m cute. “Cuter than that cold bitch, anyway,” he adds, nodding toward Ariadne, where she’s taken her usual seat right up the back of the room.

Heat flares in my chest. “Oh, honey, you don’t get to use that word,” I tell him. “You better not let me hear it pass those lips again. And as for her—” I look toward Ariadne, who is staring straight ahead, blanking the whole room as she chews mechanically. “—she could kick you the whole damn length of this room if she wanted, so maybe show a little respect.”

Enzo scoffs, but he doesn’t argue. I reach for another slice of his toast, not because I want it, but because this motherfucker needs to learn his lesson. His swat is easy to dodge, but his movement has slammed down on the end of a fork hanging over the table. It goes flying through the air, spinning in a silver blur.

I catch it without conscious thought, prongs a few inches away from Matty Barino’s face, and the table goes silent with surprise, before a low, teasingOoooohrises up.

“Nice reflexes, Santiago.” Vanessa Lascelles gives me an approving nod from next to me, her long dark braid swinging with the movement.

“Shoulda let it stick in his face, might improve his looks,” someone else calls out.

I just laugh it off. “Next time, I will. Now, do I get extra toast as a reward, or?—”

“Take it,” Enzo laughs, pushing his plate toward me. I don’t miss the flirty look in his eye, though, so I push it back.

“You keep it. Carbs only slow me down.” I flex my arm playfully, showing off the lean muscle there.

And then I turn my attention to my other neighbor. No point making things weird with Enzo, especially when he’s not my type.

Being a dude, and all.



But Vanessa, sitting on the other side of me with her perpetually judgmental expression, irritates me a few minutes later. “Look at her,” she mutters, nodding toward where Ariadne sits with Elijah and Zach at the back table. “She’s like a fuckin’ robot. Barely talks. Barely sleeps, I hear—up all hours, training.”

“Maybe you could stand to do the same,” I tell her, still smiling but with an edge to my voice now. “Since you sucked so hard yesterday. Lyssa was just about ready to kick you out of the Syndicate altogether.”

Vanessa pales. “Really?” she whispers.

“That chick ain’t normal,” Matty says across from me, shaking his head as he shovels eggs into his mouth.

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“She shouldn’t be training with us, anyway,” Vanessa agrees, still stung from my comment. “She’s too advanced.”

I’m getting really annoyed now, though I smile when I point out, “The only way we’ll get better is to train with people better than us. You should be grateful to her.”

“Come on, Sunny,” Enzo says, bumping my shoulder in a way that feels far too intimate. “I know you’re a ball of optimism, but even you gotta admit, Graves is one stone-cold bi—” He takes in my face and substitutes, “—lady. Plus she was working with Grandmother. That alone makes her unreliable. What if she’s still working for her dead boss, like that woman Lyssa and Scarlett brought back from Vegas?”

“Scarlett worked with Grandmother too.” I probably shouldn’t be pushing back so hard, but they’re all starting to piss me off, now. The thing about the Syndicate is, it can get real cliquey. And I don’t like that. Cliques mean information gets bogged down, people don’t pull together when they should, and shit goes south.

“Scarlett’s not a damn machine,” Enzo snorts, “not like Ariadne. Nope. There’s definitely something off about her.”

“What’s off is that none of you assholes ever try to talk to her.” My smile is as tight as my voice now.

Vanessa tosses her hair. “She wouldn’t respond if we did! You love her so much, you talk to her.”

I take a sip of my coffee and make up my mind. “Well,” I say lightly, “maybe I will.”

Anotherooooohrises, this one excited, eager to watch a show, which just means I won't give it to them. If I'm going to make forcible friends with Ariadne, I'll do it without an audience. So I let the conversation pass on to other topics and I just sit there and watch her from across the room.

Elijah and Zach leave the table a few minutes later. None of those three ever say a word to each other, and I don't really know any of them. But Ariadne's the one that interests me. I gotta be honest, part of it is because she's totally hot. She has this smooth, tan skin and short dark blonde hair that sits sleek against her head, and I know it would feel like silk to run my fingers through...

And let's face it, the Ice Queen thing? Also gets me going. I wonder what it would take to make her melt. Because as much as I defended her to the others, I know why they think the things they do. Sarah Graves—Ariadne suits her better, but I don't know what she prefers—is a stone-cold soft butch who fights with precision and near-mechanical perfection. But when I look at her now, really look and take notice, I can see a few signs of humanity.

She's tensed up in the shoulders, for one thing. A tightness that suggests hypervigilance. She eats methodically, stares either straight ahead at nothing or down at her plate. But she notices what's going on in the room without needing to stare around—I catch the minute shifts in her position that track movement, the way her head tilts slightly to catch conversations.

I know those signs—signs of someone who doesn't trust the people around her. And why the hell should she? No one's gone out of their way to make themselves trustworthy to her.

I wonder what it would take to make her react.

Just for fun, I stare hard at her until her gaze flicks to mine, instead of straight ahead.

There's a jolt of electricity when our eyes meet, like touching a live wire.

And she holds it. Doesn't look away.

I smirk and lift my coffee cup in a greeting, trying to ignore the quickening of my heartbeat. Something about her steadfast gaze makes my skin prickle with awareness.

She blinks once, slow and deliberate, like a cat assessing a potential threat. Then she returns to her meal.

Well. This is going to be a challenge.

And as I watch Sarah robotically putting food in her mouth and chewing, I'm caught by a flicker of memory. I used to eat just like that—like I'd better get the food into my mouth before it was whipped away. And opposite me, a girl who ate the same way, too. But she always pushed more onto my plate when our parents weren't looking.

A wave of sadness comes over me, and just for a second, my smile slips. But I push the memory away, taking another sip of coffee. This isn't about the past.

This is about Sarah.

Ariadne.

I looked up the myth about Ariadne in the library a couple of weeks ago. Ariadne held a string for Theseus, some Greek hero, as he went into the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur.

She got dumped on an island back on the way to Athens for her trouble. But then she hooked up with Dionysus, a God—definitely a step up from this Theseus dude—so

maybe mythical Ariadne did okay for herself.

The flesh and blood version sitting across the room from me looks like she's lost herself in a labyrinth somewhere. Maybe she's waiting for someone to walk in after her, hook her up with a string to lead her out.

Maybe I could do that.

Maybe I could be her thread in the darkness. I could find her, wherever she's lost, and bring her back to the light.

"You really gonna talk to her?" Enzo asks me, his shoulder bump more friendly than flirty this time. At least I got that settled quick.

I grin back at him, wide and easy. "Talk? Nah."

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“I knew it. Too scared, just like the rest of us.” He smirks as though he thinks he’s won something.

I raise my eyebrows, staring him down. “Talk is cheap. I’m going to get her tonoticeme.”

“That’s...basically the same thing.”

“Watch and learn, Rittoli. Watch and learn.”

The others laugh, roll their eyes, dismiss my comments as Sunny being Sunny.

But as I watch Ariadne clear her table and walk away, I’m already thinking of all the ways I could try to get under her skin. It’s the easiest and most direct way to get a reaction, after all.

Friendship? That can come later.

Later that night, after swapping out my training clothes for loose pajama pants in bright turquoise, and a worn tank top, I head out to my balcony again to sneak a forbidden cigarette. I don’t even like smoking, but there’s something about the banning of it in Elysium that makes me want to do it, just to break the rules. Plus I like my balcony. I have a collection of small potted succulents nestled against the railing—survivors, just like me. They thrive on minimal care, soaking up sunlight, turning harshness into beauty.

The other benefit? Being out here gives me a front-row seat to watch out for Ariadne

when she heads back from her late night run. She saw me last night, and I wondered if she'd turned me in for the smoking. I waved at her, but she didn't wave back. Tonight, I see her coming around the corner from her nine-minute mile, like usual. She's precisely on time, of course, and I've timed her before, just to check—she's like clockwork. She can run alotfaster when she wants to, so I think this is her idea of a leisurely stroll before bed.

And just like last night, she glances up toward the balcony.

Her stride doesn't break, but even in the darkness, I know she's looking straight at me.

“Hey!” I call down, raising a hand. “Hey, Sarah!”

She quickly looks away, and that's how I know she's not really that robot she likes to pretend to be. A real robot wouldn't need to avoid eye contact. She doesn't reply, just slows her jog to a walk as she reaches the doors and then glares back up at me. “It's Ariadne,” she snaps.

And then she disappears inside.

Technically, she noticed me. But that's not enough for me.

And now I have a plan.

## CHAPTER 3

Ariadne

I preferthe training room when it's quiet, empty, just me. But I'm focused enough to block out the noise of the other recruits as we gather for our next training exercise,

though the clamor makes the huge space feel smaller.

I hover around near Zach and Elijah, but I can't help watching Sunny Santiago as she jokes and laughs with the other recruits across the room. She's easy to spot—bright grin, bouncing on the balls of her feet like she can't keep still, and that mass of multi-colored hair. She's holding the pads for Enzo Rittoli, who's half-jokingly punching at them, guard way lower than it should be. Their laughter grates on me. Training is not a joke, and yet they look like they're on a playground.

I pull my focus back to my own routine. I've already warmed up, and now I'm strapping my wrists. It's something that Lyssa insists on for training, even though knows as well as I do that there's no time to strap wrists in the field. But I follow orders.

Even though I don't enjoy these sessions.

Fighting for one's life is not a game. Not a sport. Certainly not a bonding exercise.

It's about survival, which is why I always win. Today will be another sparring session, and I assume that, as usual, no one will want to pair up with me. I always end up with Scarlett. And I don't mind that—at least she gives me a run for my money.

Lyssa never offers to fight me. At first I was surprised, then confused, then annoyed—and then I realized it for what it was. She doesn't want me to have any extended practice with her in case she needs to take me down one day.

I can respect that.

When Lyssa comes into the room, Scarlett behind her, we line up in front of her in a square formation. The room goes from raucous to tense in the span of seconds, and even the squeaking of shifting sneakers stops as we wait for orders.



“Sparring today,” Lyssa tells us, as expected. As the recruits begin to pair up, murmuring, she says more loudly, “Shut up and listen to me. You’re not staying in pairs today. You don’t get to pick your fights in the field. So today we’re doing a round robin—winner stays in until he or she loses, and we’ll go as many rounds as needed to toughen you soft little fucks up.”

An uneasy laugh follows her words. Frankly, I think it’s about time. I catch Elijah watching me, but his gaze slides away to Zach. Even those two, who will put up with me at meal times, don’t like to train near me. I guess I can’t blame them. They tried sparring with me once; I put them both on their backs in tandem. People don’t tend to come back for seconds with me.

But this time, no one is going to escape me, and for the first time I feel a prickle of anticipation. Lyssa steers Matty Barino toward me in the middle of the mats and points at me, crooking a finger to bring me forward. “The rest of you better take notes,” Lyssa calls. “Let’s see how we go. Barino. Graves. Let’s go.”

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Barino gives me the kind of stupid grin I have come to associate with cocky men here in the Syndicate. There are a lot of them at recruit level. Far fewer in the senior levels, because by then, they know that everyone at their level is just as dangerous as they are. But these guys? They don't know yet.

It's time for Barino to learn.

Unfortunately for him, the lesson takes only a few seconds before I've kicked his feet out from under him and brought my foot down against his neck, stopping a fraction away from crushing his windpipe. His eyes go wide with the sudden knowledge of how close he's just come to death.

I pull back as Lyssa calls out, "Next!"

I even reach out a hand to help pull Barino up, but he ignores it, scrambling away on his hands and knees until he gets to his feet and saunters off, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment.

Next is a brunette—I think her name is Vanessa, but I don't know her surname. I deal with her about as quickly as I did with the first recruit. She sprawls, blinking in shock at how quickly it ended.

I offer my hand.

She doesn't take it.

"Next!"

I work through the crowd of them, taking each of them down in turn. One or two take a little longer than the others, and I see Lyssa give an approving nod and murmur to Scarlett, who has joined the training session to watch. It's then that I realize this isn't just a normal training session: Lyssa and Scarlett are looking for people. Scouting.

They're forming a team.

And I want in. So, to keep up the pretense that I have anything approaching respect for any of these people, I go on offering my hand to help up the vanquished. Some of them even take it. But as focused as I am on the impression I'm making on Lyssa and Scarlett, I can't help getting distracted by someone else.

Sunny Santiago is leaning against the wall, arms and ankles crossed, that bright grin never leaving her face. Every time I take someone down, she chuckles or shakes her head in what looks like amusement. And as I circle my next opponent, I overhear a snatch of conversation.

"She's so good." The admiration in Sunny's voice catches me off guard, but I'm still together enough to block the next blow when it comes, turn it against my opponent.

"She's a machine," the scoffed reply comes.

I'm actually pleased about it until I hear Sunny's response. "Nah. Machines don't get pissed off. She does."

Right then, the next attempted blow from my current opponent nearly clips my side, and I whip around to smash a kick into their midsection. They land hard on their back with a pained gasp. I don't bother offering a hand—I'm glaring across the mat at Sunny instead, something hot stirring under my ribs.

I point at her. "Next," I snap, before Lyssa can call it out.

I half expect Lyssa to tell me off, but Sunny is already bouncing onto the mats, cracking her knuckles like some kind of prizefighter, making everyone laugh at her antics.

I've seen Sunny Santiago fight many times before. She's lazy. Predictable.

This will be over fast.

"Guess it's you and me, Frostbite," Sunny laughs, as she begins to circle me, and a ripple of laughter runs through the onlookers. I narrow my eyes. The overhead lights glint off her hair, and she looks so...vibrant, while I feel stiff and coiled, even though I'm well warmed up.

She bounces on her toes, light and playful, and we circle a few times as I aim to confirm my opinions of her. Everyone else I've faced either froze up or rushed me. Not Sunny. She's waiting, light on her feet, coaxing me with that maddening grin.

Fine. I make the first move. My strike is perfect—wrist firm, a textbook approach?—

She dodges.

And she doesn't attempt to counter, just keeps moving, weaving, daring me with that wide grin.

I push forward again, dropping low for a foot sweep, and she literally hops over my leg, landing lightly and then darting to the left. For a second, her eyes flash with excitement.

I've never had to work this hard just to land a hit. And despite myself, I'm impressed.

Sunny Santiago is not just some bouncing golden retriever. If she took things a little

more seriously, she could be a player. She's not lazy or predictable—not with me. No. With me, she's chaos, and it's forcing me to adapt.

“You're fast,” Sunny says to me. “But I'm fa—oof!”

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My kick finally rams into her ribs. She staggers back, a quick flash of pain crossing her face, but she's still—laughing? “Okay, that hurt,” she concedes, “but nice hit, Frosty. What else you got?”

I scowl, pivoting for a head-level strike. Sunny ducks at the last second. We're not supposed to strike at the head in training, but there's no shout from the sidelines. Lyssa doesn't call time out.

And I can see a change in Sunny's attitude, too. She's done playing. Still bouncing, but her eyes have focused.

Almost before I register it, she's attacking me—fast, fluid, unpredictable. I manage to beat away her hands and the final kick that she gives, but she doesn't back off. She presses her advantage, an advantage that none of the other recruits would even notice, but I'm off-balance, caught on the back foot when I should be on the front.

And this time, her punch lands—just about, anyway. A fist glances off my shoulder, but once again, Lyssa doesn't call for a stop.

From the side, the recruits have stopped murmuring among themselves and are as intensely invested in this battle as I am. “Holy shit,” I hear one of them whisper.

As for me, my frustration is rising. Sunny Santiago, of all people, shouldn't be getting the better of me.

I breathe in, remember my center, and regain control. And then I counter, hard, abandoning the martial arts show and going instead straight for her, my shoulder

contacting hard with her lower ribs as I tackle her to the mats.

The mats squeak under our combined momentum as I pin her beneath me, knees braced, arms locked. She's smaller than me, lighter, but surprisingly strong. Her breathing is ragged. Mine is too, though I try not to show it.

She relaxes beneath me, her chest rising and falling fast as a smile lifts her lips once more. I should move. The match is done. The gym is silent, and every eye is on us.

Sunny's smirk turns more wicked than playful. "I think you like having me underneath you, huh?" she murmurs, so low nobody else can catch it. Then she rolls her hips—a subtle, intimate movement no one else sees.

Fire jolts through me, a rush so intense it makes me want to recoil.

There's a beat of silence and then I push away from her, shoving her a little harder than necessary into the mat as I scramble up.

She reaches out toward me. "Little help here?"

I hesitate too long, but at last I grudgingly reach down and yank her up, wary for a moment that she'll try to trip me down next to her. But she just bounces up again like the rubber ball she is, irrepressible, grinning away.

And she's still holding onto my hand.

"Damn, girl, that was fun," she says. "Go again?"

"Enough," Lyssa says from the side. "Everyone hit the showers."

I pull my hand away and turn instantly, heading for my water bottle and towel. The

hush in the room breaks as some of the recruits crowd around, congratulating her. She landed a single blow on me and managed not to die—that's apparently cause for celebration.

And I can't quite decipher the look on Scarlett and Lyssa's faces as they consult in a murmur. Maybe amusement. Maybe approval. I'm not sure.

Something in me is burning, hot and uncomfortable. It's hate, I think for a moment. But I know hate, and this isn't it.

I take a long swallow of cold water, trying to put it out, and I try my damn best not to glance over my shoulder as I leave the training room.

Self-control. That's what I've perfected. I straighten my spine, forcibly calming my breathing. My reflection in the mirrored wall is flushed as I head for the door.

But at the last second, I can't help it. I glance back over my shoulder.

And Sunny Santiago is still grinning right at me.

## CHAPTER 4

Sunny

After the showers, we have dinner, and then the schedule is free for a few hours. I wander around the mansion for a while—it's always fun to explore, brand new like it is. The west wing still smells of fresh paint and sawdust, and there are a dozen bedrooms here for full members of the Syndicate to take. One might become one day, if I make it through recruitment. I trail my fingertips along the walnut paneling as I walk, feeling the grain beneath my touch.



Eventually, needing company, I head to the common area in the mansion where the recruits hang out at night. It's bigger than the common areas in the dorms, and the room buzzes with energy—laughter, the click of pool balls, music from someone's portable speaker. Bodies sprawled across couches, perched on armrests, huddled in corners sharing secrets. Ariadne never does, of course. But that's okay. I get the feeling she doesn't plan to make an appearance again for a while. I might have landed one glancing blow on her, but I think her ego took the bigger hit.

And frankly, I'm happy to have some time out from her, too. I surprised myself making that obvious play when she had me pinned to the mat, her weight solid and commanding above me, her breath a whisper across my collarbone. At least no one else noticed the way my body responded to her...

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But she sure did. Those expressionless blue eyes widened just a fraction, enough for me to know she felt the heat rising between us.

Enzo comes in with a bunch of the others and leans over me where I'm sprawled out on one of the couches. "Damn, Santiago. You must have a death wish—you almost got yourself killed today."

I smile up at him, all teeth. "Yeah. It was fun."

The others gather around, ready to snark and gossip as usual, but I don't plan to join in. I get why they're so interested. Ariadne has been untouchable up until now. In fact, I've never sparred one-on-one with her before. But I've been watching her closely, learning her style, adapting my own unconsciously.

Because I admire her. Ariadne, the woman who survived Grandmother's house.

I know her history. I know she was trafficked, didn't have a choice. And I know how hard it is to break away from that kind of life. Maybe that's why all I have for her is admiration, none of the envy and ill will that the other recruits have.

They chatter on for a while, and I only half listen. I have to admit, I still feel pretty smug about the outcome of that fight, even though I lost. Because Ariadne lost something too: that reputation of hers as completely untouchable.

"You think she's pissed?" Vanessa asks, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger.

I shrug. “I think she’s confused.”

The noise in here is starting to get too loud. The air is thick with competing scents—someone’s cheap body spray, the lingering aroma of pizza, the faint staleness of a room filled with too many bodies. There’s still an hour before I can reasonably head to bed, but I feel like some time alone. I’m a people person, that’s for sure, but sometimes the people I need to be with is myself.

“Gonna get some air,” I announce to no one in particular, pushing up from the couch. A few nods, but no one really notices as I slip away. I’m good at making myself both seen and unseen when I need to be.

I go out the back door into the quiet of the Elysium gardens. Even at night they are spectacular, and the transition into silence is calming. I take a deep breath, letting the clean air fill my lungs, washing away the staleness of the common room.

My mind returns inevitably to Ariadne. She isn’t just a fighter, she’s a damn fortress. A locked door with no key—no lock, even. A glacier that’s been frozen for centuries, layers upon layers of ice protecting whatever warmth might exist at her core.

And I’ve always loved a challenge. The harder something is to obtain, the more I want it. I know I should let it go. For a second when she had me pinned there, I thought I saw a flicker of something in her eyes beyond the frosty fighter. But I was probably imagining things.

Yeah. I should let it go.

But I already know I won’t.

I’ve found myself in what I’ve heard people call the night garden before I really know it, the pale garden of night-bloomingflowers that gossip says was built by

Aurora Verderosa after Hadria first stole her away. Moonlight bathes everything in silver, making the white jasmine glow. A heavy perfume of the blooms hangs in the air, intoxicating and mysterious.

I like Aurora. She's my kind of girl—sweet and kind, always smiling. She's so completely opposite to Hadria Imperioli, I wonder how those two ever got it together enough to fall in love. The stories I've heard about when Aurora first came here suggest things used to be very different.

And it's Aurora that I happen to bump into now—literally, because she's on her hands and knees in one of the garden beds, pulling out weeds. The collision sends me stumbling forward, my hand catching on a trellis to steady myself.

“Oh!” We both say at the same time, and then laugh. Even kneeling in the dirt, Aurora manages to look like a fucking goddess. She pushes her long blonde curls back as she smiles up at me, and I have to suck in a breath at that beautiful face. It's the kind of beauty that doesn't get old, no matter how many times you've seen her. She must lead a very different life to mine, looking like that.

“Sorry,” I offer at once. “I hope I didn't kick you too hard.”

“I've had worse,” she says with a laugh, and dusts off her hands as she stands up. Dirt clings to her jeans in a way that would look messy on anyone else but somehow just emphasizes her beauty. “And you've given worse, I hear.”

“Yeah? You heard about me?” That's interesting. I've never seen Aurora in the training room, and sometimes I wonder just how involved she is in the business. But I know that Hadria always consults with her before making decisions. I've seen it with my own eyes at the few Syndicate meetings I've been able to attend. Aurora's presence may be soft, but her influence is undeniable.

“I have,” Aurora says. “That was an interesting sparring match you had today with Sarah.”

“Ariadne,” I say. “I mean—she prefers Ariadne.”

“Does she?” Aurora says, and she sounds almost sad. “I didn’t know that. But speaking of names, I have to say, I like yours very much. It’s bright—like you.”

“Thanks. My big sister gave it to me, actually. My real name is Susana, but she started calling me Sunny when I was little, and it stuck.”

Aurora’s eyes light up. “That’s lovely.” She glances around as if checking that we’re alone, then lowers her voice conspiratorially. “I’ll tell you a secret, if you promise not to spread it around.”

“Cross my heart,” I say, genuinely curious.

“Have you ever heard Lyssa calling me ‘Suzy’? Well,” she goes on as I nod, “it’s from ‘Little Suzy Sunshine.’ She called me that when I first arrived here.”

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I laugh. “Lyssa doesn’t seem like the teasing type.”

“I’m not sure she meant it nicely at the start—but now it’s definitely affectionate. And Hadria calls me Sunshine,” she confides with a small, private smile. “Only when we’re alone, of course. She’d be absolutely mortified if anyone ever knew she uses a pet name for her wife. The scandal!”

I try to imagine the terrifying Hadria Imperioli using a sweet nickname and almost laugh again at the contrast.

Aurora gives me a warm smile. “So you know what? As sunshine girls, we need to stick together. Make sure we bring a little light into the lives of those around us.” She gestures subtly toward the main house. “Especially the ones who’ve lived too long in darkness.”

I follow her gaze, understanding immediately who she means. “I think that’s a mission I can get behind.”

“So,” she goes on innocently, “Are you friendly with Sar—excuse me, Ariadne?”

I give a snort of surprised laughter. “Not really. But I guess I’ve spoken more with her than most other recruits.”

“You certainly fought her better than the others today,” Aurora says.

Now I’m intrigued. “You were watching?”

“Not live. Lyssa and Scarlett were reviewing the training footage from today with Hadria. I happened to be in the room.” There’s a pause, but I feel like she hasn’t finished, and after a moment, Aurora goes on, “You enjoyed pushing her buttons.”

I grin. “I was just trying to get her attention. She’s always so closed off, I think maybe it would do her some good to be reminded she’s part of the human race now and then.” I bend over to pull at a weed, feeling the satisfying give as its roots release from the soil.

Aurora tilts her head at me. “Is that the only reason?”

This time when I chuckle, it’s awkward to my own ears. Aurora just waits, with a patient and knowing smile. I pull another weed. “She’s... interesting,” I offer at last.

Aurora is studying me. “Because she doesn’t react the way people expect?”

“Because she doesn’t react at all—or at least, not until today. And it was barely a reaction. I mean, you saw. I lasted more than a few seconds sparring with her, but not much more than a few.” I remember again the pressure of her body against mine, the controlled strength in her muscles, the moment when something flickered in her eyes.

Aurora’s smile grows wider, and I’m struck again by her beauty. She’s not my type, but she’s undeniably the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in real life. “You want to keep helping me pull out some of these weeds?” she asks. “The gardeners do a good job, but I like to maintain these beds myself—keep my hand in.”

I kneel down with her in the dirt, happy to help. The soil is cool and damp. “Is it true that you planted these flowers after Hadria stole you away from her brother?” I ask, before I realize that that’s probably inappropriate to ask.

Thankfully, Aurora laughs. “I didn’t plant it, but I did bring it back to life.” She

gently disentangles a creeping vine, guiding it back to its trellis. “Before the new house was built, the culture of the Syndicate was to only work in the night hours. I spent a lot of time out here during that period. These days, things are different. I’m not sure if having the Syndicate function 24-hours a day is much better, but at least Hadria sees a little more sunshine since the old place burned down.”

I nod, feeling her words. Aurora is like me. We like to see the glass as half full. Sure, it must’ve sucked when the old place got razed to the ground, but there’s no point mourning things that are gone.

Well. Maybe I haven’t quite learned that lesson yet.

Aurora gently cups a moonflower in her palm, its petals luminous against her skin. “In the daytime, this garden doesn’t look anything like it does during the night, because the flowers only bloom at night. People might even think there are no flowers at all if they visit during the day. But those lovely blossoms are there, waiting. Waiting for the right time.” She looks my way. “I think people can be the same. Some take longer to bloom than others.”

I understand what she’s trying to tell me. And I appreciate it, even if I’m not entirely sure why she’s telling me. “I wish the other recruits would give Ariadne a chance,” I say at last, pulling out a particularly stubborn weed with more force than the others. “I know she doesn’t do herself any favors with the cold front she’s got going on, but none of us are here because we’ve had spectacularly happy lives, are we? If nothing else, I would’ve hoped that they could understand that.”

Aurora nods, and then replants the weed I just pulled up. Oops. I guess that was a flower. Her movements are gentle but sure, patting the soil around the delicate roots. “Maybe you can become a bridge between them.”

“What about that chick that Lyssa and Scarlett brought back from Vegas?” I ask, my



curiosity getting the better of me.

Aurora looks a little startled, though whether it's because I know about it at all, or because I asked so bluntly, I'm not sure. "There's a lot of gossip among the recruits," I tell her, apologetically. "We all know about her—we're just not sure of the details." I bite my lip, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. I've always had trouble with that.

"Why do you mention her?" Aurora asks cautiously.

"Maybe she's like Sarah. She just needs a bridge back to other people."

Aurora pats the dirt around the replanted flower in silence, then slaps the dirt off her hands again and stands. I stand with her.

"The woman from Vegas isn't your problem," she tells me, and for Aurora, it's with an awful lot of finality, her voice carrying the kind of authority I usually associate with her wife. "But I'm starting to think that Sarah is—if not a problem, maybe a project."

"A project?" I ask blankly. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that. People need to make their own decisions."

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“Of course they do. But sometimes people don’t know what options are open to them. Maybe you could show Sarah another way of living, give her an option.”

“Maybe,” I say, but I’m still cautious. Not long ago I was all gung-ho about making Ariadne my new special friend. But being told to do it just makes me not want to.

“Hadria will be back soon,” Aurora says. “I should go shower before she gets back. Have a good night, Sunny.”

“G’night,” I say uncertainly, as she moves away.

The walk I choose to take me back to the dorms runs along the perimeter of the estate, next to the fences where the security lights cast harsh pools of brightness against deep shadows. The temperature drops as I move further from the main house, a chill settling into the night air that makes me wish I’d brought a jacket. I rub my arms, missing the warmth of the day.

I’m just back to the dorms when I see her. Ariadne is coming around the corner at the end of her nine-minute mile.

“Are you stalking me?” she demands, pulling up immediately when she sees me. Despite having just run, she’s barely out of breath. Her body tenses and I notice how she automatically positions herself for a potential attack.

“If I am, I’m not doing a very good job,” I point out. “You saw me right away.”

She stares at me, her chest rising and falling hypnotically. My eyes can’t help dipping

down over her body, to the tight nipples under her exercise crop top. Her arms are muscled and strong, and I think again about her holding me down on the mat this afternoon, the weight of her, the control in every inch of her body.

“Any time you want a rematch,” I tell her, my voice dropping to a register that’s unmistakably flirtatious, “I’m up for it.”

Something flickers in her eyes, gone too quickly for me to register what it was. “Why would I want a rematch? I already beat you once.”

She pushes by me into the dorms without another word, shoulder-checking me lightly as she goes, and my irritation rises at the dismissal.

But that’s what Sarah does. That’s her defense mechanism, and I’m not gonna let her get away with it. Fire melts ice, given enough time.

“Because next time, I’ll pinyouto the mat,” I call after her, heading into the entrance hall. But she’s already gone up the stairs, her footsteps fading. For a minute I don’t think she’s heard me.

“You can try,” comes the answer at last, floating down from above.

I grin. Maybe Aurora was right. Maybe I should make Ariadne my new project. No, not a project. A mission. My first real mission with the Syndicate.

Operation Ice Melt has officially begun.

## CHAPTER 5

Ariadne

I'm alone in the training room and practicing my forms when Scarlett walks in and heads straight to me. I stop and wipe down my wet brow, hands on my hips as I wait for her to reach me. My breathing is steady, controlled. Always controlled, especially when I'm in the presence of Scarlett Fletcher. Old habits from Grandmother's house—never show weakness.

Scarlett used to be someone I hated. Not as much as I hated Lyssa, but Grandmother encouraged us to see each other as opponents. We were made to fight each other, again and again, until blood was drawn, until bones were broken. The strongest survived. The weakest didn't.

I don't hate her these days, or at least not with the same force. But given that I murdered her brother, I'm pretty sure Scarlett hates me. After all, she beat me to within an inch of my life once in Grandmother's house. I respected her for that. If anything, that was the day I stopped hating her quite as much as I had. There's a purity in honest violence.

She doesn't look like she plans to attack me right now, but I'm still on guard as she approaches. Scarlett doesn't speak to me unless she has to, and that's fine by me. We've established our boundaries, like wolves from rival packs forced to share territory.

"Sarah," she says. "How are you?"

"I prefer Ariadne," I say before I can stop myself. But ever since I said it to that little pest Sunny Santiago, it felt right. I'm not poor Sarah. Never was.

Scarlett's hazel eyes turn even more guarded than usual. "I thought your therapist said it would be better to try to reclaim your old name?"

"And I thought therapy was supposed to be private. I guess we both have some

adjustments to make to our expectations.”

She flushes slightly. “Of course your sessions are private,” she says. “But when Dr. Khatri spoke to us about how we could support you, that was one of the comments that she made. Anyway—I’m not here to argue about your name.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Am I finally getting a job?” I can’t keep the eagerness from my voice, though I try. Weeks of training with recruits who will never reach my level has been mind-numbing. I need purpose, challenge, something to prove my worth to the Syndicate.

“Of a kind. The woman Lyssa and I brought back from Las Vegas—she says her name is Katy.” She watches me closely. “Did you know her at Grandmother’s house?”

“The name isn’t familiar.”

“I guess she might’ve been called something else there—because she reacted to your name. Well...to the name ‘Ariadne.’”

“Maybe I do know her,” I say with a shrug, though my interest sharpens. “It’s not like I’ve seen her since she was brought back. Does Lyssa remember her from her time with Grandmother?”

“No.” She hesitates, just a moment, and then says, “I want you to talk to Katy.”

My eyebrows hike up despite myself. I’m surprised—pleased, too, but surprised more than everything. This is the first real task I’ve been given, the first thing that suggests they might actually trust me with something important. “You think she’ll listen to me?”

Scarlett gives a little sigh. “Well, she sure as hell won’t open up to me. Or Lyssa, for that matter. But I don’t want to give up on her. I know it’s a lot to ask?—”

“I’ll do it,” I say quickly, before she can change her mind.

I was too eager. Scarlett gives me a long look, as though she’s wondering if there’s some long play going on, and I don’t blame her.

“Maybe I did know her,” I point out. “If you give me a look at her, I’ll tell you if I remember her. And I’ll speak to her—I’ll say whatever you want me to. Just give me something to do here. I’m getting sick of stomping other recruits into the ground in ten

seconds flat.”

Except one recruit in particular, who somehow managed to last almost a full minute against me yesterday. The thought slides through my mind unbidden, unwelcome, but persistent. But I should’ve kept my thoughts to myself. Scarlett is just going to say something like, You never got tired of stomping me into the ground at Grandmother’s house.

But she doesn’t. She just shrugs. “I guess if anyone can get through to her, it would be you. Go clean up and then meet me at the cells.”

She gives me a curt nod, then turns and leaves. The Syndicate definitely has something big happening soon, and this is a test—another one.

And I don’t fail tests.

I shower as fast as I can, dress, and jog through the hallways to the secure wing. Everyone still calls this area “the cells” even though I’ve heard that the previous cells were underground and held a much different atmosphere. In the new mansion, they’re more like padded cells in a hospital ward, the kind where I thought I might end up myself for a while.

The temperature seems to drop as I move away from the living quarters and training spaces into the more sterile, institutional heart of the house’s secure wing. Fluorescent lights replace natural sunlight, casting everything in a yellow glow. There are guards posted at the reinforced door to the entry of the secure wing, but they seem to be expecting me, taking my weapons without comment and then waving me through the door.

It’s so easy, in fact, that my excitement gives way to wariness.

What if this isn't a test? What if it's a trap?

What if I'm going to end up in one of these cells and this was just a way to get me here quietly?

But as I pass through the door, I see Scarlett waiting for me at the end of the corridor. There are doors coming off on either side, but none of them are our target. We head through another reinforced security door opened with a panel that requires Scarlett's palm print pressed against it.

If this is a trap, I'll have to fight my way out. But Scarlett's troubled air seems more focused on where we're going than on me. I glance in an open door as we pass a cell. They don't even have beds. The walls are all padded—the floors soft enough to sleep on, and when Scarlett stops in front of one and opens the viewing slot in the heavy steel door for me to look in, I see that the woman they're keeping in there is huddled up on the floor under a blanket.

"Do you know her?" Scarlett asks me.

"She has her back to us," I point out, trying not to sound like I think Scarlett's a moron. I'm acutely aware that my future here depends on how I handle this interaction. But Scarlett isn't watching the woman, I realize.

She's watching me.

Lyssa silently appears from the far corner and strolls toward us, but I can tell by the way Scarlett doesn't react that she was expecting her lover. "Any luck?" Lyssa asks.

"We just got here." Scarlett knocks on the reinforced glass window, as though trying to get a reaction from a caged wild animal.



The woman in the cell doesn't move.

"She won't talk to us," Lyssa tells me. "Personally I think we should kill her and have done with it, but Scarlett is determined to see if we can pull her back from wherever she's gone in her mind." She and Scarlett exchange a glance, a conversation passing between them. "You sure you want to do this?"

Lyssa is speaking to Scarlett—but isn't it me she should be asking that? But I keep quiet. This is the most interesting thing that has happened at the Syndicate since I've arrived, and if I succeed where they've failed, they'll have to recognize my skills.

"We're all out of options," Scarlett points out. She turns to me. "Any weapons you didn't turn over to the guards?"

"No," I say, and try hard not to sound annoyed. "I'm not supposed to carry concealed weapons in Elysium and I don't." I follow the rules meticulously, hoping it will eventually earn me the trust I need.

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“All the same,” Lyssa drawls, and then flicks her head to the wall. I grind my teeth, but I stand up against it and let her pat me down. “When you go in there, keep your distance. You don’t want her getting hold of you.”

The resentment flares once more. “I might have been lumped in with the newbies, but I am not a newbie,” I can’t stop myself saying. “I know how to deal with this sort of situation. I thought that’s why you wanted me here.”

Lyssa arches one eyebrow. “Keep talking like that, and we won’t want you here,” she says.

“Give her a break,” Scarlett says. I stare at her. This is the second time today Scarlett Fletcher has surprised me.

Lyssa doesn’t respond to her lover, but I get the feeling they might have a discussion later. Scarlett hands me a list of questions and I run through them, memorizing them, and hand the list back.

Lyssa flips open the keypad next to the door of the cell and asks, “Ready?”

“Yes,” I say when I realize she’s talking to me.

She enters a five-digit code, her hand carefully over the pad so I can’t see it, and then there’s a three-second wait, a buzz, and the door clunks open, swinging inward.

I head into the cell. The woman doesn’t move.

“Hello,” I say calmly. I lower myself to the floor, sitting cross-legged near the now-closed door, my back straight but my posture deliberately open. Non-threatening, but ready to move in an instant if needed. The viewing slot has shut home again with a metallic click, and although I’m certain there must be cameras in here—probably concealed behind the padding in the upper corners—it does feel like we’re alone. “My name is Ariadne,” I go on. “I was at Grandmother’s house. Did we...” I trail off, because at the sound of my name, the woman has stirred, rolling over and up into a seated position.

“Ariadne,” she says, voice hoarse from disuse, and blinks a few times before her eyes focus on me. “Did they get you, too?”

Shit.

Idoknow this woman. Celine.

She was older, already formed when I arrived at Grandmother’s house. One of the elites, the finished products. She was part of the crew that administered the “corrections” to new arrivals—including me. “Celine. I...haven’t seen you since?—”

“Since I left to take up my position.” She pulls herself up proudly. For a moment, I see what she must have been before—confident, lethal, one of Grandmother’s successes. Her eyes, though hollow with exhaustion, still carry a spark of fanaticism. “I prefer Katy these days. For deep cover. What about you—did you ever earn Grandmother’s trust?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, though I already know. Part of me—the part that will always be Ariadne—preens at the rare memories of Grandmother’s praise. Her hand on my shoulder after I broke another girl’s arm without hesitation. Perfect form, Ariadne. You’re learning.

“Only her most trusted agents were allowed to go out into the field alone,” Celine—Katy—says, as though it’s something I should have known.

“She kept me with her,” I say. “Because I was so good, she wanted me to train the others.” I let my tone head toward bragging, so that later I can tell Scarlett and Lyssa that I was just trying to establish trust, playing a role to extract information.

But the truth is, I still feel pride in that accomplishment, even though I hate Grandmother, hate what she did to me. There’s still a small traitorous part of me that craves her approval, even dead.

And I wonder briefly what Sunny would think if she knew about that part of me, the unending darkness that lives beneath the thick ice crust. She seems to think there’s something different in me. Would she still believe that if she knew how good I was at breaking others?

“Then why are you working with them now?” Katy lifts her chin toward the door, indicating the outside.

“When was the last time you had contact with Grandmother?”

No response. Her face shutters, locking down into a mask I know too well. It’s the face we all wore at Grandmother’s house when we were hiding pain, hiding fear.

“How many other trusted agents did she have in the field? And what were your orders supposed to be if you ever found out she was dead?” I press, going through the list of questions Scarlett told me she needed answers to.

Katy looks away, fixing her gaze at the wall. “Why would I tell you anything? You betrayed Grandmother.”

“She betrayed all of us,” I say sharply. I force myself back to neutral, smoothing my expression. “If you just tell me what you know, you don’t have to live out the rest of your life in here. Things could be different. The Syndicate are going to make me one of their members, and you could also?—”

She laughs. A thin, brittle laugh. “If you think these people are doing anything but using you, you’re a fool.” She shakes her head, with a cynical smile. “Leave me alone. Tell them to hurry up and kill me. If Grandmother’s really dead, I don’t have a purpose anymore.”

With that, she lays down again and pulls the blanket over her head, turning her back to me. The movement is final, dismissive, yet carries a profound hopelessness that resonates somewhere deep inside me. I recognize it—the vertigo of a life built around a singular purpose suddenly rendered meaningless.

I wait a few more minutes, just to see if she’ll relent. And as I wait, I think about what I would have done at Grandmother’s house to get Katy spilling her intel. There are ways to make people talk. Methods to break the will. Scarlett and Lyssa know that.

They know I know that, too.

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Is that why they brought me here? To see if I would resort to those methods? Another test within a test.

So at last, I just rise to my feet and say sweetly, “I’ll come back another time, Katy. I hope you’ll consider talking to me then.”

I hear the clunk of the door lock opening once more, and I back out of the room, keeping Katy in view the whole time, never turning my back on her.

Inside, though? I’m seething.

“You actually got her to say something,” Lyssa says, surprise coloring her voice. “More than Scarlett or I have done. Decent work.” The praise should feel like victory, but somehow feels hollow in the wake of Katy’s warning.

“I meant what I said in there—I want to come back and see her again. She just needs some time to get used to talking.” I wait, heart beating faster and faster, until Scarlett nods.

“I agree. Ariadne should come back.” My name sounds wrong in Scarlett’s mouth, lacking the recognition it carried in Katy’s voice, or the casual acceptance it had in Sunny’s. “At least Katy seems inclined to saysomethingto her. But right now—” she turns to me “—you need to come with us and tell us every damn thing you know about her.”

I barely know a thing. Katy was in a cohort well ahead of me—I remember her only because she was part of the regular beating crew in the beginning. Her hand striking

my face, her kick in my ribs, her voice whispering This is kindness, Ariadne. This is what prepares you for the world. Then she disappeared. One day there, the next gone without explanation.

I'd assumed she was dead.

But I nod eagerly, the perfect student, the perfect soldier. "Yes. Let's go and talk. I'll tell you everything I can remember."

But as we head back toward the main body of the house, I can't help replaying that thin laugh in my head.

If you think these people are doing anything but using you, you're a fool.

## CHAPTER 6

Sunny

I'm never late to training, but I'm frequently the last one in the room. It's like that today, so that when I jog toward the training room to grab my stuff from my locker, I'm only a few moments ahead of Lyssa and Scarlett.

I'm retying my shoelaces—bright yellow against my purple sneakers—when I hear them talking quietly, just outside the locker room door. The chattering of the recruits is loud and echoing in the large training area, which means they also have to raise their voices a little to be heard as they murmur their plans for the day to each other.

I pause and prick up my ears, because I'm wondering if I'll get another chance with Ariadne. When I catch Lyssa saying the word "sparring," those hopes rise even further, a flutter of anticipation warming my chest.

But then my heart stops dead as I hear a snatched phrase from Scarlett: "...trafficking ring operating out of the south side..."

For a split second, the words freeze me mid-motion, my fingers still tangled in my laces. Then I move silently to the open door and press up against it, listening as hard as I can. "...hired to shut them down. Hadria thinks it would be a good starter mission for?—"

There's a noise behind me—a clearing of the throat—and I jump about fifty fucking feet in the air, only to whirl around on landing to see Ariadne behind me.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her voice low and flat.

"What are you doing?" I demand right back, heart still racing—though now it's for a different reason. At this close distance, her scent is wafting into my nose, clean and sharp, like winter air.

She gives me a long, cool look. "I was refilling my water bottle," she says at last, holding it up in my face. I resist the urge to slap it away.

"I was eavesdropping," I tell her. Because it was pretty obvious what I was doing.

"Hear anything interesting?"

I think this is the longest conversation I've ever had with this woman. Her full attention is both exhilarating and unnerving, like standing too close to an electric fence. "No. Maybe. I don't know."

She just makes a small, contemplative noise—something between a hum and a sigh—and sweeps past me. A few seconds later, with a sigh of my own, I head out too.



Lyssa and Scarlett have moved away from the locker room now, but they're still conferring with each other, fair and dark heads close together. I feel a twinge of envy. Must be nice having someone like that in your life. Someone you can trust, who can take care of themselves as much as you can, but who's there for you if you need a soft place to land...

I shake off the weird mood building up in my gut and remind myself of what's at stake. If what I heard means what I think it means, then I need to quit coasting and start proving myself. Make sure I stand out as a viable option for this starter mission.

I smile and nod at the others as I jog over to a padded training bench and start stretching out my legs, bending slow and low to make sure they're nice and loose. And then I feel a prickling sensation at the back of my neck, the unmistakable feeling of being watched. I glance over my shoulder, scanning the room.

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I'm pretty sure it was Ariadne. Even though she's staring in the opposite direction when I find her at the edge of the crowd, her posture is too rigid, too deliberate. She's positioned herself away from the other recruits, maintaining that careful distance she always keeps, but I catch the slight turn of her head, the way her eyes flick away too quickly.

I smirk and bend low again, offering her the best view of my ass, if she's so inclined. I arch my back a little more than necessary, making the movement deliberate, inviting.

It's a pretty decent ass, I have to admit.

But I need to focus. I'm not the only one who knows something's up. The other recruits are muttering with excitement, too; this isn't a regularly scheduled training session—we've been gathered here for some special reason.

And then the main door opens once more and I stand up straight at once, come to attention like every other recruit.

Hadria Imperioli has entered the room.

She crosses to the far end, her boots practically silent on the polished floor, and she's wearing her usual black from head to toe. She takes a seat near the back of the room and watches us all with a calm, unreadable expression.

"Eyes here," Lyssa says sharply, as everyone turns to look at Hadria. "You're sparring again today."

My head turns inevitably to Ariadne. I can see by the way her fingers flicker that she's looking forward to taking out all of us again. She wants to prove herself to Hadria.

Just as much as I do.

"Pairs today," Lyssa adds, and I think Ariadne looks disappointed. Yet when Lyssa calls out the pairings, I'm unsurprised to hear our names connected. It seems that Ariadne feels the same way, based on the slight roll of her eyes. I bounce over to her, determined not to be ignored.

"This is going to be fun," I tell her. "Right?"

She rolls her head on her shoulders. "Just make sure you don't go down in the first five seconds. I'd like a chance to show Hadria what I can really do."

"Right back atcha," I snort, hiding the sting of her dismissal with a bright smile.

Unlike last time, she won't be taking us all on like some undefeated champion; we're all sparring at the same time. Ariadne's scowl suggests she's not happy about it—she doesn't have the chance to show off—but I'm just frustrated that Hadria doesn't even seem to be looking our way.

As we begin, I can tell by Ariadne's too-casual attacks that she doesn't really see me as a threat, her movements holding back, barely engaging. Her strikes come at half-speed, her kicks pulling short of their full power. It's insulting, like being patted on the head. So I spend most of my time ducking and weaving, refusing to engage, my footwork quick and unpredictable. If she won't take this seriously, why should I?

It's not long before Lyssa calls a halt and tells us, "We're done with the warm up. Next: two-on-two. You and your partner will spar with another couple."

Ariadne puts her hands on her hips and takes a step away from me.

“Problem?” Lyssa asks coolly. I didn’t even think she was looking our way. Which gives me hope that maybe Hadria is actually watching us, too...

But I’m also pretty mad at Ariadne right now, because I know exactly what she’s thinking. Her words confirm it.

“I don’t want my partner to get hurt if she gets in my way,” she says, in—for her—a sweet and considerate tone, aka just this side of glacial.

“You control your strikes, we won’t have a problem,” I tell her.

For a second, she looks taken aback. So does everyone else, for that matter. Usually I’d crack a joke about a comment like the one Ariadne just made, get everyone laughing, but right now I only have one goal.

Getting on this team.

“I simply prefer fighting alone,” Ariadne says, staring me down.

“What’s the name of our organization?” Scarlett’s voice rings out from the side of the room.

With a slightly puzzled wrinkling of her brow, Ariadne replies, “The Styx Syndicate.”

“Syndicate,” Scarlett repeats. “By definition, a group of individuals combining to work for a common goal. Ateam.”

“That’s right,” I say, my usual grin coming more easily now. I rock forward on the

balls of my feet. “We’re a team, Frostbite. I’m your backup.”

This is how I know I’m getting under Ariadne’s skin: normally, she would fall in line as soon as one of her superiors smacked her wrist. But she just glowers at me. “I don’t need backup.”

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“Okay, Frostbite,” I tell her, deliberately provocative, “then you can be mine, and I’ll take the front seat.” I cup my hands like I’m holding an imaginary steering wheel, hamming it up for the audience. There’s a ripple of laughter.

“Stop calling me that,” she snaps.

“None of this is up for debate.” Lyssa’s voice is loud and impatient. “And if you two don’t shut the fuck up, you’re both out.” It’s enough to silence us. “Okay. Clear the mats. We’re doing this in rounds, two-vee-two, so we can see what you’ve got.”

Ariadne and I move to help form the circle and watch the first two pairs square off in the middle. In the center, the four circle each other, testing defenses, looking for openings. The sounds of combat resume—the quick shuffle of feet, the sharp exhale of breath with each strike, the thud of bodies hitting the mats.

But my attention is focused on Ariadne. I can feel the tension in her body even as she stands next to me. She wants to be in there, is impatient to show what she can do.

Good. Because we need to kick some major ass today. Buttogether.

“You looking forward to this, Frostbite?” Enzo asks. He’s sidled up behind us, leaning down from his superior height to drawl into Ariadne’s ear.

“Don’t call me that,” Ariadne says calmly, not even looking at him.

Enzo starts humming Frosty the Snowman under his breath, and I have to clench my fists tight not to turn around and punch this motherfucker in the nose. “Can you not?”

I hiss. “Some of us are trying to focus.”

I’m irrationally pissed, even though I’m the one who started that stupid nickname. And now I feel like an asshole about it.

At least Enzo fucks off, still humming, back to his partner—Vanessa, who is twirling her hair and smiling up at him like he’s a comic genius. Her laugh, high and artificial, carries around the circle.

Unfortunately, when our names get called, the pair we’re sparring with is, of course, Enzo and Vanessa. “Don’t kill him,” I mutter at Ariadne as we head into the middle of the mats. “Not in front of Hadria, at least.” I spare a moment’s glance to where Hadria sits, her attention now fixed on our quartet.

“Try to keep out of my way,” is all she says back.

Lyssa calls a start, and Enzo rushes Ariadne at once, predictable and poorly judged. His bulk moves with surprising speed, but there’s no finesse to it, just raw aggression. Ariadne pulls into a defensive stance, precise and calculated like everything she does. Her weight shifts subtly, hands rising to guard position, her expression never changing.

Me? I move on instinct. I know my forms are shit, my technique sloppy, but it’s because I need to follow my gut. My body knows what to do before my mind can process it, my experience in street fighting and my survival instincts taking over. So with Enzo charging like a bull at a red rag, I spring forward just like him, diving low to trip him before he reaches Ariadne.

He falls hard, awkward, and rolls a few feet before staggering to his feet, dazed?—

Only to find Ariadne’s foot driving into his gut. He flies a few more feet, lands on his

back, and gives out a wheezing choke, winded.

“Nice one, partner,” I say brightly, springing back to my feet. Our eyes meet for a split second, and I swear I see something like surprise in hers, quickly masked.

We both turn on Vanessa. She’s been trying to flank Ariadne, but I’m already there, ready to meet her strike with my arm, so it goes glancing off. The impact vibrates up my forearm, but I barely feel it through the rush of combat high.

Enzo is up again, more cautious this time. He and Vanessa regroup, and all around me the recruits—who have been hollering and hooting the other matches—grow silent. Almost like they’re holding a collective breath.

The only sounds for the next few seconds are the strike of hand on flesh, foot to gut, pants and grunts as Ariadne and I figure out this deadly dance. Because that’s what it is: a dance. We’re not really fighting, the two of us. We’re dancing.

Flirting, even.

I duck, and without looking, I know she’ll be there to strike high. She blocks, and instinctively I’m moving to exploit the opening she’s created. She steps left, I step right, creating a perfect flanking maneuver that leaves our opponents confused.

We’re toying with our prey, both of us together. We might have started out trying to impress Hadria, but now?

Now we’re trying to impress each other.

Pretty soon Enzo is on the floor again, not getting up this time, and I have Vanessa in a hold on the mats with her arms pulled back.



“What was that about getting in your way?” I ask Ariadne with a grin. And I can see it in her eyes—the surprise.

The confusion.

We didn’t just move well together. We wereunstoppabletogether. And she knows it.

“Enough,” Lyssa says. “Next pairs.”

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I see a flash of irritation cross Ariadne's face, and I know how she feels. I'm not done yet. I want to keep going, keep fighting, take on the fucking world?—

But she retreats, stepping backward to rejoin the circle of recruits, and I follow her lead, just like I have the whole time we've been fighting. I just hope we've done enough to prove ourselves to Hadria Imperoli. But when I glance over toward where she was sitting, my heart drops.

The chair is empty and Hadria is nowhere to be seen.

Ariadne and I are the last ones in the changing rooms again, and I feel like we're both doing it on purpose, hanging around as an excuse to spend a little more time around each other, both of us trying to figure out why it was we were so damn good together as a team.

I'm on a high. The air is humid and fragrant after all the recruits have been running hot showers, using various shampoos and body washes. Ariadne and I are both still damp in the changing area, each wearing only a towel. Water droplets are clinging to her collarbone and her short blonde hair has soaked darker from the shower, smooth against her head in a sleek cap.

"Girl, we were incredible out there," I say at last. "The way you anticipated that?—"

"Don't," Ariadne says, still messing around with her toiletries. She's been packing and unpacking them in a small toiletries bag, almost as if she doesn't realize what she's doing.

“Don’t what?” I ask, genuinely confused. How can she not want to talk about what just happened? The chemistry between us—everyone saw it.

She zips up her toiletries bag so hard I think she might have broken off the tab. “Don’t pretend we’re friends. We fought well together. That’s all.”

Fuck this girl, seriously. No matter how much heat generates between us, she always finds a way to freeze me out again. “Oh, yeah?” I say. “I bet we’d do a whole lot of things well together, if you gave it a chance. But whatever you say, Frostbite.”

Her head swivels like she’s in that Exorcist movie and she glares at me. The look should intimidate me, but instead, it sends a thrill down my spine. Getting a reaction from her—any reaction—feels like victory.

And to counter, I just pull off my towel and let it drop on the bench seat, stretching, giving her my cheekiest smile. I don’t care about nudity. I lost any shame I had about my body a long time ago.

And then the weirdest thing happens.

Ariadne’s hands creep up to where she’s tucked her towel firmly over her breasts. Her blue eyes never leave mine, something like defiance flashing in their depths. She loosens it...

And lets it fall.

It drops to her feet, leaving her gloriously naked. My eyes drink in the map of silver traces across her skin, the faded scars...and the few newer ones, too, pink and still raised. She has fewer than I expected, but more than I’d like. They speak to a brutal past. But under them, her skin is smooth and tan over strong, lean muscle. Her breasts are small and perky where mine are larger, softer. She’s staring at mine, her gaze

almost hungry, and my nipples tighten up in response. She keeps her thatch trimmed and under control, just like every other aspect of her life, but the soft, light brown curls look so inviting, I?—

“Hope I’m not interrupting.” Lyssa’s voice is as dry as a desert, and for the first time I get to see Ariadne jump. But since I did too, I can’t enjoy the moment as much as I’d like. I scramble around for my clothes, just like she is, but Lyssa’s already moving on, completely unfazed by our state of undress. “You two—you’re coming out on a mission tonight for the Syndicate. Eat light at dinner and come to the war room at ten.”

Both of us nod, but Lyssa has already turned to leave. I pack up my things with a fast-beating heart, hands a little shaky as the reality of what just happened—both the nudity and the mission assignment—sinks in. I’m pretty sure I feel the same energy from Ariadne—but when I turn to her with a conspiratorial and congratulatory grin, she’s already pulled on her clothes and won’t look at me.

Well, if she refuses to be happy about this, I’m not going to let it stop me. “See you tonight, Frostbite,” I call after her.

“Call me that again and I will eviscerate you,” she tosses over her shoulder.

But there’s no real heat in the threat, and I just laugh, because I’m pretty sure I’m figuring her out now.

Death threats are her way of flirting.

## CHAPTER 7

Ariadne

The Styx Syndicate's war room was a legendary part of the old house. And according to stories I've heard, the new war room is the only room in the new mansion that has been recreated exactly like the old. The large, heavy double doors with the brass model of a three-headed Cerberus. The long table inside where full Syndicate members are allowed to sit, while recruits and those still proving themselves stand behind.

And Hadria Imperioli's throne at the head—a huge wooden beast of a thing that somehow still seems less intimidating than the occupant herself.

She's in it now as Sunny and I are ushered in by Lyssa and Scarlett. Hadria rises from her chair and comes down the few steps to look us over critically, walking around the two of us in a circle. Mario and Ricky, two other senior members, are at the table, watching on.

“You're sure about this, Boss?” Lyssa asks.

“I believe so. Yes. They have to learn sooner or later.” She stops in front of us. “You two work together well. And I need a couple of unknown faces to take on a mission tonight. I'll take your presence here as confirmation that you want to take this mission on.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Sunny says, nearly bouncing on her toes with enthusiasm.

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I just incline my head.

“Very well.” Hadria’s cool, silvery eyes are difficult to hold, and I find myself staring ahead, as though I’m a military recruit and she is my superior officer.

It’s not so different, I suppose.

Hadria explains our mission. The Syndicate has been hired to plant surveillance equipment in the private office of a nightclub owner. The point is surveillance, not bloodshed. No killing. Nofighting, even. We’ll be working undercover.

Disappointment makes me want to sigh, but I keep my face still. Beside me, I can feel energy bristling off Sunny. She’s pulled her hair into a thick French braid and tonight, for once, she’s wearing all-black like me. I suppose those things are her concessions to professionalism.

And then Hadria looks us head to toe and says, “You’ll have to change, of course. Something appropriate for two young women going out dancing. Make it loud and memorable—the more memorable the clothes, the less memorable the face. Understand?”

Sunny’s face has lit up with a grin. “Perfectly,” she says.

Once again, I just nod.

“Lyssa will take you to wardrobe. A car will be waiting for you downstairs in one hour. Make sure you’re ready by then. And let me be clear: this is a test for both of

you. You must work together as partners.” She stares at me, and I can’t help but stare back. “We have no lone wolves in the Styx Syndicate. Understood?”

“Understood,” I grit out. I can’t argue, though I want to. The Wolf has her own partner these days.

As we turn to follow that Wolf, Lyssa, to wardrobe, Sunny casually bumps my shoulder. “Hey, partner,” she murmurs, “I bet you’ll look incredible all dolled up.”

I stiffen at the contact, ignoring the flash of heat that runs through me at her comment. “Just remember we’ll be there to do a job, not have fun.”

“Sure. But if we have a little fun along the way, where’s the harm?”

This is going to be a fucking disaster.

“This is going to be fucking amazing!” Sunny whoops as she bounces out of the Syndicate town car and onto the sidewalk. I shuffle over to the car door more slowly, with one last glance at the driver, one of the Syndicate’s regulars, an older man with a fatherly air who smiles at me in the mirror. “Have fun,” he says, as though Sunny and I really are off for a night of dancing.

I just give him an up-nod and slide out after Sunny. She’s waiting for me and practically vibrating with excitement. And I have to admit, it’s hard to take my eyes off of her. She’s wearing a short, crimson dress that catches light with every movement, gold jewelry flashing at her neck and wrists. Her amber eyes are lined with bold kohl, making them seem even more luminous than usual. Her only concession to practicality are the sturdy boots at the end of her fishnet stocking-clad legs, but somehow she makes them work with the rest of the outfit.

She looks like she belongs here—like she was made for nights like this.

I went for something a little more practical: skintight, black pants that allow me to kick to my full extension (I tested), a black tank, and boots. Lyssa suggested a leather jacket, and made me slick my hair back with gel.

I kind of like the hair. I was relieved when they allowed me all-black, too.

“Those pants look so good on you,” Sunny gushes. “Sparkly!”

“They’re black,” I say flatly.

“And sparkly.”

I say nothing to that, because she’s right. I sure wasn’t going to wear anything girly tonight, but when Lyssa offered me a choice between leather pants and these, I took these. I said it was because they allowed more movement.

But really...it was the sparkles.

Sparkles were my only reward at Grandmother’s house. I was allowed to decorate my room as I saw fit, unlike the other assassins, and I still flush to think that Lyssa and Scarlett must have seen that room, an explosion of sparkly pink teen angst.

I’ve stuck with black for the whole time I’ve been with the Syndicate. Clothes. Room. Mood. But now and then, I catch myself wistfully thinking about the more colorful decor I used to have.

Maybe that’s why—occasionally—I find Sunny kind of attractive. Certainly tonight, in her crimson dress that catches the streetlights in ruby flashes, she looks...

Well...



Hot.

She slides her arm through mine and I pull away instinctively until she yanks me back. “Undercover lovers, remember?” she scolds me, but she grins afterward. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

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Yes. Let's focus on the mission, not her warm body pressing into my side.

But when we round the corner, my heart drops. There's a line reaching from the door to just about where we are. "Shit," I mutter. "How are we?—"

"Come on," Sunny says cheerfully, and then adds under her breath, "and for God's sake, smile." She glances at me. "Nix that last—no smiling for you. You look like you're in pain."

"I am," I snap back.

But we've reached the head of the line, where the bouncer is waiting in front of the velvet rope. Sunny winks at him, and he gives an appreciative smile.

I make a tiny movement, and Sunny clamps down on my arm as though she knows exactly what I'm thinking. But she can't. Because what I'm thinking is that I want to separate this bouncer's head from his thick neck for looking at her with such open desire.

"Come on in, ladies," he says, unclipping the rope for us. We ignore the boos and shouts from the people at the head of the line, who have been waiting there—no doubt—for a very long time.

Sunny pulls me in and we pay the cover charge before moving into the dance area, the music low and thumping, a thick bass that feels almost tactile. The beat is vibrating into me through my boots and I have to pause and take it all in. Voices fight to be heard over the music, creating a chaotic symphony of noise. The air is muggy

with perfume, sweat, and expensive liquor.

“What’s wrong?” Sunny bellows.

“I’ve never been in a nightclub before.”

“Huh?” she shouts. “Can’t hear you!”

I just jerk my head toward the other side of the dance floor, where the door to the private offices is located, according to the floor plans Lyssa showed us before we left. Sunny nods and I turn to begin skirting the dance floor, but stop dead when I feel her hand slip into mine.

When I stare at her over my shoulder, she wears a look of complete innocence. “We should dance over,” she shouts. “More cover in the crowd. And more direct, too.”

I guess she’s right. I let her lead me down the steps into the sunken dance floor, and then she spins on her heel and drapes her arms around my neck, her hips already moving in time to the music. The strobe lights fracture across her face—one moment illuminating her smile, the next casting her in shadow.

“What are you?—”

“Dance,” she hisses, grabbing one of my hands to put it on her waist.

I’m about to tell her that I don’t know how, but I’d be making a liar of myself. Because somehow, my body does know how to dance...or at least, it knows how to respond to Sunny Santiago’s moves.

She’s instinctive and natural, like her hips were made to sway. Within a few minutes, something melts inside me, just enough that my body betrays my mind. My hands

find her waist, firm beneath soft fabric. She bends back, exposing her throat in a way that would make any predator strike, and rolls her body against mine with a trust that makes my chest tighten.

I turn her roughly, pulling her ass tight against me—telling myself it's just for cover as we appraise the door marked Employees Only. But her body heat seeps through my clothes like a slow-acting poison, making my thoughts blur at the edges.

A drunk man sways too close to Sunny, eyes lingering on her body. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I've tightened my grip on her waist, pulling her closer to me with a possessiveness that startles us both. The man catches my glare and quickly moves away.

A security guard is standing by the door, and we'll have to handle him.

But first I need to handle Sunny, who is spinning again to face me, practically grinding against my thigh. For a second, my brain short-circuits as I feel her soft, warm thighs mount mine, her skirt hiking up, my hands sliding down to cup her ass and help her keep her balance as she rides me...

"You're pretty good at this," she says in my ear.

"Dancing?"

"Pretending to be into me," she laughs.

I pull her harder against me. "I'm a professional," I deadpan. "I do whatever it takes."

For the first time, I think I've got the upper hand. She's flushed and her eyes are gleaming as she looks into my face. "Sure you are," she breathes. We stay there a few seconds, her ass filling my hands, her crotch grinding down on me, and for one crazy

moment I want to kiss her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I've never lost my head like this before. Not over my boyfriend, that's for sure—the one who sold me off to Grandmother. I never felt anything like this with him. When he kissed me, when we had sex, it was just something I let my mind wander through. It was...tedious.

But I've never touched a woman like this before. Soft and intimate. The women I've touched before—well, it wasn't touching. It was punching, hitting, kicking, as I trained them to be killing machines.

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“How are we doing this?” Sunny murmurs in my ear, and all I can think of is that I want to find somewhere dark and private and taste her mouth. “The guard,” she adds, when I don’t answer. “Ariadne? How are we distracting the?—”

“We’ll start a fight,” I say, trying to push her back a little. She’s like a damn limpet. “Should be easy enough. There’s a group of very drunk frat boys over there. Once our mark is on the move, we’ll make ours.”

The club manager is due to head to a meeting after midnight. Lyssa told us he likes to walk through the club, make himself check out how the crowd is going, make sure he’s seen and admired.

“How are we going to start a fight?” Sunny asks.

“I figure you’re annoying enough to start a fight with anyone,” I tell her, but she just grins again, as though I’m complimenting her.

“Hell, yeah,” she says. “I think we should start laying the groundwork now. Meeting’s coming up soon.” I’m almost upset when she stops swaying up against me, but at least she grabs my hand again to lead me across the floor, up the steps, and in easy view of the frat boys.

It takes about three seconds for them to notice her—and me, to my consternation. We find ourselves chatting with them, accepting some of the expensive tequila they’ve bought a bottle of, even though neither of us is stupid enough to actually take a sip.

Even this, the distraction work, we’re doing as a team. I watch Sunny work the group,

all smiles and flirtation, while I scan for threats and exits. She notices connections, opportunities for conversation, while I catalog every potential weapon and escape route.

And then, about ten minutes after I feel like I could strangle each and every one of these morons myself just for something interesting to do, the Employee Only door opens, and our mark walks out. I give it another five minutes after he's cleared the floor before I catch Sunny's eye and give her the nod, and immediately, she starts putting on a show.

And what a show.

She slaps the guy she's sitting next to right across the face, and tells him not to get so handsy, finishing up with a torrent of Spanish. His look of complete confusion is almost amusing, and we've already attracted the attention of the security guard near the door.

"What the fuck is going on over here," he demands. This guy is serious, well trained, and he's not going to put up with any bullshit.

Thankfully, these frat guys stink of bullshit. "This bitch hit me for no reason," the guy says indignantly, but he's undermined by his buddies, who are all laughing and growing at his misfortune.

"Don't call her a bitch, you moronic little fuckboy," I snap.

"He tried to slip something in my drink," Sunny says, shoving her shot glass at the bouncer. "You don't believe me? Drink it yourself!"

Now the security guard is taking things even more seriously, looking over the group with a sharp eye—and they look guilty as hell, probably because they are trying to

drug women tonight. If nothing else, I think, at least we've done one good deed for the night, as Sunny and I slide away while the security guard calls for backup to have the party removed.

And then we're into the employee-only door and moving fast down a dimly lit hallway with a series of doors, some marked, some not. But the one we're looking for—around a corner and right at the end—is made obvious by the keypad next to it. There are cameras in the corridors, but Lyssa already arranged for them to be out for the night. A sizable bribe made sure of it, and looking at them now, I see no lights and no movement to indicate that they're even on.

Not that it will matter. My face is unknown in Chicago—and if anyone recognizes Sunny Santiago, they're welcome to try to come into the Syndicate after her. One of the things I like about the Syndicate is that we do take care of our own. That wasn't how it was under Grandmother, and as much as I prefer working alone, I understand the benefits of having someone at your back.

Even if that someone is Sunny Santiago.

Sunny keys in the code and the door opens. I stand watch in the hall, remaining precisely where I can monitor both approaches while Sunny works inside the office.

Then I hear a sharp clatter and Sunny's muttered curse.

"What's wrong?" I hiss.

"Nothing," she whispers back, but when I peek in, I see she's knocked over a crystal tumbler of whiskey that was sitting on the desk, and the amber liquid is spreading across important-looking papers.

"Sunny!"



“I’ve got it!” She’s desperately trying to mop up the spill with tissues from a box on the desk, but she’s only making it worse, pushing the liquid toward the edge where it will drip onto the carpet.

“Forget it, just plant the bugs,” I order. “We’ve got less than three minutes.”

She abandons the spill at once, and, despite the mess she’s made, she manages to place all the devices according to plan, in less than two minutes.

But just as she’s slipped back out of the office, we hear the main door into the club opening, the swell of the music winding around the corner. I pull Sunny three doors down and into a utility closet. It’s big enough to hide us—I checked it out while I was waiting for her—but still small, holding janitorial tools like mop and bucket, and the whole thing smells heavily of bleach.

With both of us in here, there’s barely enough room to breathe without inhaling each other. We’re pressed up together, our breathing shallow as we both try to calm it, keep quiet. Rough broom bristles scrape against my leg and a cold metal shelf digs into my back. But even through these discomforts, I’m hyperaware of Sunny’s body against mine—the closeness making it unbearably warm despite the cool night.

All I can think about is the smell of Sunny’s perfume cutting through the bleach. Did she have to wear perfume tonight? I know we’re undercover, but that seems to be laying it on pretty thick.

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We both hear the loud swearing as the newcomers realize something's wrong.

"You better fucking clean this up," one of them says. "If Danny comes back to find his office like this, he'll go off his head."

"I didn't make the mess," protests whoever is with him, another man.

"I don't give a fuck if you made the mess or not, you're cleaning it up. Go get a fucking rag before I beat your face in."

Shit. Heavy footsteps headed straight for this closet. I'm automatically moving into a defensive position, calculating how to neutralize two opponents in this confined space, when Sunny grabs me and...

Kisses me.

Time seems to slow as I process the feel of her mouth on mine, her desperate hands pulling me close, the taste of her lip gloss.

It tastes like raspberry and vanilla. Super sweet. Super addictive.

Just like Sunny herself...

## CHAPTER 8

Ariadne

“Hey! Who the fuck—”

Sunny’s lips tear away from mine, leaving a ghost of warmth that lingers like a burn. The security guard’s face contorts with confusion as he yanks us both from the supply closet, his meaty fingers digging into my arm.

“What the hell are you doing in there?” he demands, breath reeking of cigarettes.

“Omigod!” Sunny squeaks, her voice suddenly climbing two octaves higher. “I’m so sorry—we got lost, and then—” She giggles. She actually giggles. “Well, it’s our anniversary tonight and we figured we’d be a little naughty, you know, so...” She shrugs, her face transforming into a mask of tipsy innocence.

I must look genuinely shocked because the guard’s grip loosens slightly. The way Sunny plays this role—effortless, seamless—is almost as impressive as her combat skills.

“We didn’t realize...” I say, letting my voice trail off, forcing softness into my normally rigid posture.

“What the hell is going on out there?” calls the other guard from the office. He hasn’t seen us.

One guard distracted, one still unaware. I could break the first one’s windpipe, silence him before he could call out, then slide into the office and eliminate the second guard before he could reach for his weapon. Easy. Clean.

Except for our order not to kill anyone...

“Nothing!” the man holding us calls back. He drops his voice to a harsh whisper. “Get the fuck outta here,” he tells us, shoving us down the hallway. “You’re lucky

I'm the one who found you, you stupid fucking..." His words dissolve into muttered profanity as he pushes us around the corner.

"Omigod, like, we're really sorry," Sunny continues her performance, giggling again in that soft, girly whisper that's so unlike her normal confident tone. "Thank you so much for understanding!" She's doing a flawless impression of being drunk and horny.

And apparently I'm doing a convincing impression of being confused and aroused, because despite the fact that someone clearly knocked over that decanter in the office, and two strange women are the closest suspects, the guard merely scowls and lets us saunter right back down the hallway toward the thumping music of the club floor.

"Holy shit," Sunny breathes once we're back out, the bass vibrating through the walls around us. "That actually worked. Let's get out of here fast."

"Slow down," I snap. My adrenaline is spiking high, but it's not just from the near-miss with the guard. My lips still tingle from Sunny's kiss, a sensation I can't seem to shut down. It's distracting. Dangerous. "We don't run. We play this smart, and we don't get caught."

Sunny glances over her shoulder at the door, then laces her fingers through mine. "Gotcha."

Her palm is warm against mine. She pulls me down to the dance floor again, where we weave our way through gyrating bodies, trying to blend into the crowd as we move toward the exit.

My head spins, every nerve ending amplified. The strobing lights cast Sunny's face in alternating shadow and harsh illumination. The music pounds through my bones, matching the erratic rhythm of my pulse. Sweat and perfume hang thick in the air, but

all I can focus on is the lingering taste of...

Sunny.

And it's only made worse because we have to maintain our cover, her body pressed against mine as we dance toward the exit, her hips moving with practiced ease to the music.

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I haven't been this physically close to someone I'm not killing in a long, long time. And I've never felt this...dizzy.

Finally, I think we're in the clear. "Let's move," I tell her, my voice rough even to my own ears.

For a second, I think I see disappointment flash in her eyes. But she follows my lead as I guide our dance off the floor, past the bar, and finally through the exit doors.

The cool night air is a shock after the heat of the club and my ears are still ringing from the music. We walk casually to the next corner, then sprint a few blocks to our extraction point.

Our driver is waiting, reading the latest blockbuster thriller under the dim glow of the car's interior light—doesn't he get enough thrills driving around a bunch of mercenaries, I wonder?—and congratulates us as we slide into the back seat.

"Nice and quiet so far. All good inside, ladies?"

I'm no lady, I want to tell him. But I just nod. "All good."

He takes off, and I force myself to stare out the window. If I look at Sunny sitting there beside me in the confined darkness of the car, I might...

I might reach over and take her hand. I was holding it so long that my palm feels strangely empty now.

Sunny is uncharacteristically quiet, which only makes the tension worse. I can feel her energy, contained but vibrating, as surely as I feel the seat beneath me. The driver pulls off into a secluded alley and kills the engine.

“We’ll wait here for a few minutes. Make sure we lose any tails.”

We sit there for about thirty seconds before Sunny Santiago returns to form. “I gotta stretch my legs,” she announces, her voice too loud in the quiet car. “Seriously, I’m all keyed up and shit. How about we check the perimeter or something?”

The driver, already back to his novel, gives a shrug. “You suit yourselves. We have another three minutes according to protocol, then we leave.”

Sunny looks at me, her eyes catching the faint reflection of a streetlight outside. “You coming?” She waits a few seconds, shrugs, and gets out her door.

I count my heartbeats—one, two, three, four, five—trying to regain my composure. But my body betrays me, following her out into the night before I can convince myself to stay put.

The night air is crisp, carrying the scent of rain and distant exhaust. Sunny is stretching and twirling around like we just pulled off the heist of the century, her grin wide when she spots me emerging from the car.

“We fucking slayed that,” she announces. “Right?”

“We completed our mission. Despite your fuck up.”

But Sunny Santiago will not be quelled. Her grin only widens, her dark eyes dancing. “Admit it, Graves—you liked working with me. Maybe even playing a couple, huh?”

“It was a necessity, nothing more,” I tell her sharply.

Her grin somehow grows even more mischievous. “Uh-huh. Nothing more. Come on—you can at least admit you were impressed by my little distraction move in that closet back there.”

The memory of her lips on mine sends an unwelcome pang of longing right through me. I want to grab her and shut her up with another kiss. I want to push her away and never let her near me again. Both impulses war inside me, equally strong, equally terrifying.

I grope for a response. “I would have been more impressed if we hadn’t needed it in the first?—”

I stop abruptly as one of the car windows lowers. “That’s time, ladies. Let’s go.”

I climb back into the car, Sunny following, and we continue on our way, leaving the city behind, heading out to Elysium.

“Hey,” Sunny says softly after minutes of quiet, her usual bravado momentarily set aside. “Are you gonna tell the Boss I fucked up?”

I make sure I’m looking straight ahead. “I will give my full account of the mission in as much detail as Hadria requires.”

She’s looking at me. I can tell from the corner of my eye. But she says nothing more.

When we arrive back, Lyssa meets us at the doors of the mansion. “I hear it went smoothly,” she says. “Boss wants your report. Head on up to the war room.” We mount the stairs in the foyer before she calls after us, “And by the way—congratulations on your first gig.”



Sunny gives a bright smile. “Thanks!”

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I just give a nod of acknowledgment and bite back my first response. I've been doing this almost as long as you have, Wolf—and you know as well as I do that tonight was child's play.

Hadria is in the middle of something when we arrive at the war room, looking over plans that she's spread across the table. She glances up as we walk in. "Well?" is all she says.

"It's done, Boss," Sunny says, and then glances at me.

I let a beat pass as I consider my response, enough time passing that Hadria looks up from the plans again. "It's done," I agree quickly.

Why bother telling them about Sunny's mistake? It'll only hurt my own chances at getting ahead, and we covered it up well enough. Hadria moves to the side room, filled with monitors and computers, and motions us to follow her. We head in and she brings up a specific feed, switching through the view of the office at the club.

"And there we are," she says in satisfaction. "Thank you, both of you. You can go."

We back out, but Sunny pauses in the doorway. "Uh, Boss?"

"Yes?" Hadria sounds impatient, clearly wanting to get back to more important things.

"I kind of messed up," Sunny says in a rush. "I knocked over a glass in the office, and I?"

“Did anyone notice?”

“The guards cleaned it up.”

Hadria’s eyes narrow. “And how do you know that?”

Sunny pauses, and I can see she’s summoning up the courage to spill everything.

“We heard them coming,” I say, stepping in before I can analyze why I’m protecting her. “We hid, and they talked about cleaning it up. But one of them found us.”

Hadria’s face goes still. “Found you?”

“We convinced them it was an innocent mistake—that we’d walked into the back rooms without realizing. They didn’t suspect anything.”

Hadria regards me for a long moment. “Well,” she says at last, “I suppose if they’d made you, we wouldn’t be getting the feed at all. And no plan survives first contact with the enemy, as theysay.” She gives a dismissive nod and I grab Sunny’s arm and basically yank her out with me.

“Why did you do that?” she asks, as soon as we’re outside in the dim hallway.

“Because I don’t want your fuck up to affect me.” The lie comes easily, though I’m not sure I believe it myself. Something else made me step in.

Maybe I’m just getting into the spirit of teamwork.

She pulls her arm away from me and for the first time I think I see Sunny Santiago get angry. “I was about to take the blame. You didn’t have to?—”

“Take the win, Santiago.” I cut her off, needing this conversation to end before I say something I’ll regret.

She stares at me for a second, her dark eyes unreadable. “Eat me, Graves,” she says at last, and then stalks off down the hallway.

I stand there watching her go, feeling something unfamiliar twist in my chest. The memory of the kiss replays in my mind, unbidden and unwelcome. The taste of her lips, the heat of her body against mine, the softness of her hand in mine.

My fists clench at my sides. This is dangerous—more dangerous than any mission. Emotions are weaknesses that can be exploited. Attachments are vulnerabilities that can be used against you. Grandmother taught me that, beat it into me until I knew it in my bones.

I turn and head in the opposite direction, toward the training room. I need to work this out of my system, need to regain control.

But I can still feel the phantom pressure of Sunny’s lips against mine, still taste her on my tongue.

## CHAPTER 9

Sunny

I stomp just about all the way out of the main house, but once I’m out and walking through the night garden, my anger dies down a little. I don’t even know why I went off like that. What else was I expecting?

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That Ariadne was actually trying to protect me?

I scoff at myself and even give a small little smile at how dumb I'm being. Just because I jumped at her with my mouth in that closet and she didn't literally kill me, it doesn't mean a damn thing.

Ariadne is always about the mission.

Still...we really did work well together, and I was in this weird state of heightened arousal the whole damn time. I wonder if the other mercs feel that same way? If so, I can see why they stay in the game. And for the money, of course.

And maybe, for a few of them—like me—there's a personal stake.

That thought sobers me, and I slow my steps as I get closer to the dorms. I don't actually feel like sleeping. I'm wired still, and the idea of getting into bed like a good little girl after my first successful gig for the Styx Syndicate...well, it doesn't seem like I'd be honoring the night.

I guess I could absolutely rail myself with my vibrator. I consider that for a hot second, but the fact is, I need serious action to get rid of all this pent-up adrenaline.

And because I have a sneaking suspicion that my mind would go directly to one woman, and there's no way I'm gonna orgasm over that asshole.

I run upstairs, take off the clothes and makeup, and then I dress up in my sweats and head back toward the house. My best bet tonight is a workout, so I can blow off some

steam and clear my head. And at this time of night, when it's coming up to daylight, I know there are fewer people around than any other time. The Styxies tend to be night owls or early risers, no in-betweens. Four a.m. is the perfect time when you want to work out alone.

And normally I'd be right. But as soon as I walk into the gym, I hear the energetic punches of someone working out on the bag. They're hidden by the heavy swaying cylinder, but I already know who it is, because I know how shit my luck is. And when she dances around to the side, I confirm it.

Ariadne pauses for a microsecond when she sees me, and then goes right back to punching as though she wishes the bag was me.

For a second, I consider walking back out. But why should I let her scare me off? I'm not the asshole in this equation. So I don't say a word, I just head to the side where I start stretching and warming up.

But I find it hard to stay focused. I keep sneaking peeks at Ariadne, whose form is impeccable even just kickboxing at half-speed with the bag. She's wearing her usual black tank and leggings, and the sheen of sweat over her skin is making her glow and sparkle under the lights overhead.

And I get the impression that maybe she's watching me, too.

"What are you doing here?" she asks at last.

"Working off steam. What are you doing here?"

"The same." Her expression stays impassive but she doesn't look away.

An unspoken challenge. I like it.

“You feel like another dance?” I ask her, nodding toward the sparring mats stored up against the side of the room.

“If you want a beating, I’m happy to provide one.”

She sounds like one of those scary androids, totally calm, completely devoid of any expression. But I can see the look in her eyes.

And I want to make her crack. “Let’s go.”

I pull down a few mats and arrange them across the gym floor. Ariadne helps silently, and then we square off, her eyes never leaving mine. I bounce on the balls of my feet, feeling the springy give of the mat beneath me.

I throw the first combination—a jab-cross that cuts through the air fast. She blocks both with ease, her forearms solid as steel, and then counters with a low kick that grazes my thigh as I twist away.

She pivots smoothly to maintain the distance between us.

“I know that’s not the best you’ve got,” I say, low and challenging as we circle each other. “Come on and hurt me, Frostbite—if you can.”

Something flickers in her eyes—a crack in the ice—and her attacks sharpen. Her kicks aim for my ribs with more force, her fists find their marks in my gut. She ducks under to sweep at my legs. I barely leap out of the way.

And I laugh. I’m enjoying this. Whatever else we might be, we have fun doing this. Though it doesn’t look like fun right now for Ariadne, who is closing on me, grappling with me, hooking her leg behind mine. It’s a wicked move that takes my feet right out from under me.

I slam down to the mat. Before I can recover, she's on top of me, pinning my shoulders, her face inches from mine. Her weight presses me down, thighs straddling my hips.

I can feel the rapid rise and fall of her chest, see the flush creeping up her neck. Her pupils are blown wide, turning her blue eyes nearly black. Without thinking, I arch slightly against her hold.



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“Next time you want to throw me down, girl,” I say, my voice a breathless challenge, “buy me dinner first.”

She freezes for a split second and I see turmoil in her eyes—desire. Anger. That ice wall cracking...

And then Ariadne’s mouth crushes down on mine in a bruising kiss.

With raw need, I yank up her top, let her sweet little tits fall into my hands as she writhes on top of me. My hands are full of asoftness I never thought Ariadne had about her—but only for a second. Then she’s grabbing my wrists and pinning them down over my head.

Shit. I just went on in for the grope without even asking if she was?—

“If you want me to stop, tell me to stop,” she breathes harshly.

I’m panting just as hard. “Fuck you,” I tell her. “I don’t want to stop.”

And she kisses me again. Maybe “kisses” is the wrong word—Ariadne doesn’t kiss so much as consume, like my soul is leaving my body and getting sucked into hers. She slots her leg between mine and starts to grind on me.

I gasp as her thigh pushes hard into my pussy, and I wriggle to get a better position. And then her mouth is on my neck, biting, sucking, and I’m pushing back against her hands. Ariadne’s grip is tight, the kind of tight that is gonna leave a mark, and my blood sings at the thought. She bites the top of my shoulder and then runs her tongue

across my collarbone.

I'm going to fucking explode if she doesn't get a hand on my cunt right now.

As if she can read my mind, her hand lets go of one of my wrists, slides down between us, and her fingers press over my clit. "Holy shit," I hiss, and she pulls back.

"Is this?—"

"This is more than fucking okay," I gasp out. And then I grab her by the face and drag her mouth back to mine.

Her kiss is rough and urgent even as her fingers tease gentle circles around my clit. The pleasure builds, the muscles in my stomach tightening, my thighs quivering. I fight my other wrist free from her grip and yank at her pants, pulling them down so I can get my hand into her underwear.

"Can I—" I start, and she just shoves my hand down further as a response. She's wet, slick, and her whole body jolts as I slip two fingers alongside her clit, mimicking her movements on mine. Her breath quickens and she doesn't let up, her mouth hot against mine, our fingers echoing each other. I'm losing control of my words, my thoughts. Everything is centered on her, what her fingers are doing to me, what I'm doing to her, and the pleasure that's building inside me.

And then she stops, pulling her hand free just so she can suck on her fingers. I pull her down to kiss me after, tasting the faintest hint of me on her lips, and then her fingers slide down into my panties again and press right into my cunt.

I groan and arch my back at the delicious stretch as she fills me. Her movements are perfect but practiced, but fuck if I'm going to complain. She knows exactly what she's doing, curling her fingers inside me, finding that spot that makes my vision

blur. Her rhythm falters for just a second when I press deeper into her, and I can feel her clench around my fingers. It's intoxicating, having this effect on her when she's usually so composed.

"Sunny," she breathes, and it's the first time she's said my name like that—like it's being ripped from somewhere deep inside her.

We're moving together now, the mat squeaking beneath us. Anyone could walk in at any moment, but I don't care. Let the whole damn Syndicate hear us. Let them know I'm making the Ice Queen melt.

"Harder," I gasp out.

She obliges, adding another finger and driving deeper, her thumb circling my clit with ruthless precision. My own fingers are buried inside her, feeling her walls clench around me as I search for the rhythm that'll make her crack completely. When I find it, she makes this sound—half gasp, half moan—that sends electricity straight to my core. I finger-fuck her harder, watching her face as the control she prizes so much starts to slip.

"Come on, baby," I whisper, "let me see you come apart."

Ariadne's rhythm falters for just a moment before she doubles down, her fingers working with renewed vigor like she's determined not to be the first to break. But I'm just as determined, so I wiggle down a little, getting a better angle, and then I lean up to take one of her shaking, tempting nipples into my mouth. I suck hard, biting down just a little, and she gasps, her whole body trembling.

And then I feel it—her inner walls clamping down on my fingers as she comes, her body going rigid, the soft moan that she gives. She's fucking gorgeous like this, all that control shattered. Her fingers stutter inside me, but it doesn't matter, because I'm

already coming too, arching up off the mat as I ride her hand.

For a few moments, there's only the sound of our harsh breathing, then the slick slide as we pull away from each other. Ariadne collapses beside me on the mat, our bodies still touching from shoulder to hip. The air smells like sex and sweat and...something electric.

It's us. We were electric together.

"Well," I manage after a minute, "that's one way to work off steam."

She doesn't reply right away, and I turn my head to look at her. Her eyes are closed, chest still rising and falling rapidly.

Then—without a word—Ariadne begins to disentangle herself from me, yanking her clothes back in place.

I sit up, head still swimming with endorphins. "Wait," I say. "What are you..."

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But she's already walking away, leaving me in the puddle of our own mess that I guess I'll have to clean up alone. I flop back, frustrated, angry, and yeah, maybe a little hurt.

"What the fuck was that?" I mutter.

The empty gym gives no reply.

### CHAPTER 10

Ariadne

I have no idea where I'm going until I arrive there: my dorm room. I pace the length of the small room—exactly eight steps from wall to wall.

And I feel like a caged animal.

I have no idea what came over me. Sunny Santiago is a decent partner if I have to have one, but she's nothing more than that. What is wrong with me? She's just a temporary partner in the Syndicate. A decent one if I have to have one, but nothing more.

I stop at the small mirror mounted on the wall, catching my reflection in the harsh fluorescent light. My pupils are dilated, cheeks flushed. For a moment, I don't recognize the woman staring back at me—this isn't the face of Ariadne, Grandmother's perfect weapon. This is someone else.

Someone...compromised.

My head is still unclear. Sunny said something about having worked off steam, but I'm still buzzing. I need to get rid of this feeling before I do something stupid. Like try to kiss her again.

It's nearly dawn, and I'm pretty sure Scarlett Fletcher was on shift this morning. So after a thorough shower—scrubbing my skin nearly raw to wash away the lingering scent of Sunny Santiago—I dress in clean black clothing. Everything buttoned and zipped just so.

Control in all things.

I head back to the house, cautious to keep a lookout. But I don't see Sunny anywhere. I make my way to the war room, because usually there's at least one person there, and they might have seen Scarlett, but I'm lucky this morning: Scarlett herself is there, looking over the same plans Hadria was a few hours ago. She looks up when I come in, that always cautious look in her eye.

I'm not sure how she stands it sometimes, being in the same room with me. Surely she wishes she could kill me. I killed her precious brother after all.

"I want to talk to Katy again," I tell her without preamble.

Scarlett raises her eyebrows. "You don't get to give orders around here."

"Please," I add coldly.

Thankfully, she stops arguing about manners. "I hear you did well on the mission," she says. "I'm glad to hear it. I knew you and Sunny would make a good partnership."

My stomach tightens at the mention of Sunny's name. "She was adequate, but I could've done it alone."

Scarlett sighs. "That's the point," she says. "You shouldn't be doing it alone. The Syndicate is about teamwork?—"

"I get it," I say bluntly. "And in fact, that's why I want to see Katy. I want to be part of the team. I want to get whatever information she has so that the Syndicate will be safe."

Scarlett considers me for a moment and then shrugs. "She hasn't said another word since you last spoke to her. So maybe it will do some good if you could get her talking again."

What I said to Scarlett about getting information from Katy—it was a lie. But she doesn't seem to realize it. Or if she doesn't she doesn't care, because she wants Katy to talk.

The fact is, I have no idea myself why I want to see Katy so badly.

But when I get back into her cell, I think I know what it is. I just want to see someone locked up more tightly than I am. It calms me, somehow, knowing that someone in this place is worse off than I am.

The air is colder here, the lighting harsh and unforgiving. It feels familiar. It feels like where I belong. Katy is still lying on the ground, but Scarlett tells me that at least they've gotten her to eat recently.

I sit cross-legged across from her, like before, and I say, "You were right."

She turns her head, sees me, and sits up slowly. "Is that so?"

“This place is not where I belong. Maybe...not what I want.”



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“Do you even know what it is you want?” Katy asks. Her eyes are sharper than they were the last time I saw her, more focused.

The question snags something inside me. What do I want? The answer should be simple: survival. That’s all I’ve ever needed. But now I picture Sunny’s face in my mind, the way her body felt under mine...

“Does it matter?” I lean forward, elbows on my knees. “Listen, you’re not getting out of here any time soon. But neither am I. I asked to come and talk to you because I just wanted to talk to someone who understands what it was like.”

“Scarlett and Lyssa both know—why not talk to them?”

“Because they were never true believers. You and I...we really understood her. Grandmother.”

Katy tilts her head to one side. “Something’s happened. What happened to you?”

I keep my face neutral, though my pulse quickens. “I went on my first mission for the Syndicate.”

“You failed?”

“As if. A child could have completed the mission. It was so easy it was humiliating—and the woman they sent me with was so useless she nearly got us caught.” I feel a twinge of guilt as I throw Sunny under the bus, not least because I know Scarlett is listening in. “But I know I’m stuck here,” I go on. “I know they’ll

never let me prove myself because theyfearme—they know I’m better than all of them. But I have no other options.”

“And you say all of this quite openly?” she asks. She sounds curious. “They’re listening in. You must know that.”

“They already know what I think about all of this. But they believe they’ll change my mind—just like they think they’ll change yours.” I lean in, drop my voice. “You and I know better though, don’t we?”

Katy observes me for a long moment and then gives a little laugh. “You know,” she says, “you almost had me. And the funniest thing of all is that you’re still just doing what you’re trained to do. You don’t have a mind of your own any more than any of the other fools that work for the Syndicate.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look at you,” she says, gesturing vaguely. “You’re playing the role Grandmother designed for you. Cold. Calculating. Weapon, not woman. But something’s cracked in you—and you’re terrified.”

I stand abruptly. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? I know Grandmother’s work when I see it. She took whatever was left of you after her training and buried it under ‘Ariadne.’ And now you’re stuck between—neither one nor the other. A ghost with no purpose.”

With that, she lies down again and turns her back. As I leave the cell, Scarlett motions me aside. “Do you really think all that?” she asks. “What you said to Katy?”

“If you want information, you need to accept that I will play a role—even if it’s not

what you want to hear about your precious Syndicate.”

“You were sent on that job with Sunny Santiago for two reasons,” Scarlett tells me. “The first is because Lyssa and I thought you would make a good team—and you did.”

“And what was the second?” I ask when she pauses.

“To see if you could restrain yourself, Ariadne.”

As I look at her now, I see I have made a mistake with Scarlett Fletcher. She is not so easily fooled—she doesn’t trust me at all.

But still I hold her gaze, refusing to be the first to look away. “I’m not the weapon Grandmother tried to make me,” I say finally. “But I’m not whatever you’re trying to turn me into either.”

It’s breakfast time, but I still don’t want to see Sunny or any of the other recruits. I catch a glimpse of her through the dining room doorway as I pass—she’s animated, gesturing wildly as she tells some story to a group of junior members who are hanging on her every word, drawn into her orbit of chaotic energy. They’re laughing, relaxed. One young woman touches Sunny’s arm casually, familiar in a way no one would ever dare touch me.

Something unfamiliar twists in my chest. Not jealousy, obviously. Just something...uncomfortable.

I head to the gym, working out until I’m exhausted, until I think maybe I can finally sleep. Unfortunately, as I’m leaving, I run into another person I’d prefer not to see. “Sarah,” my mother says with a tremulous smile, running after me as I’m walking away from the dining hall. “I hear your mission went well last night.”

“Of course.”

She takes in my face, can no doubt see the exhaustion on my face. The worry in her eyes makes me want to run—or worse, to let her close the gap between us. Both impulses are equally dangerous.

“I thought perhaps getting in on the action would make you happy, my darling, but it doesn’t seem to have made you happy at all. I wish you would talk to me.”

“Why would I talk to you about a mission? It’s confidential.”

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“No, but there are other things that you could talk to me about. How’s therapy going, for example? How are you fitting in with?—”

“I’m sorry, I need to go to bed. We were out very late.” I walk away without a backward glance, ignoring the hurt I know is on her face.

I wish the woman would stop bothering me. She might have been my mother in another life, but whatever it was between us was irretrievably broken by Grandmother. When I was first reunited with her, I had a foolish hope that perhaps things would go back to the way they had been.

I see now that will never be. I don’t know how to be someone’s daughter. I only know how to be a weapon. And weapons don’t need mothers.

As I arrive back at my room, my feet slow in the corridor, because leaning against the wall outside is Sunny Santiago, looking fierce but almost as tired as I am.

“What do you want?” I ask her as I unlock the door. She pushes in after me, and for a second I consider physically removing her from the room—but why bother? She’ll storm out again on her own in a few minutes, I’m sure of it.

“You and me, we need to talk.” Her voice has none of the playful edge it had in the training room. She stands with her hands on her hips, her posture loose but ready—a street fighter’s stance, not a trained soldier’s.

And she’s looking for a battle.

“There’s really nothing to talk about.” I move to the window, putting some distance between us.

Sunny stares at me, and I can see the fury in her eyes. “You know what? You’re just a coward.”

I laugh. “One thing I’m not, Santiago, is a coward. I’ve killed men twice my size without breaking a sweat.” It’s not a boast, just a fact.

“Yeah, you can kill a man without blinking, but God forbid you admit you have feelings.”

The accusation hits too close to what Katy said. A strange panic rises in me—the feeling of losing control, of something cracking open inside me that I’ve spent years keeping sealed shut. “We were blowing off steam—you said it yourself. It meant nothing.”

The strange thing is, each harsh word feels like a lie at the moment it leaves my lips, but I have to push Sunny away. I don’t know what it is about her, but there’s something about her that makes me want to lose control.

And that would be fatal.

She stares at me a moment more, then raises both her fists. For a moment, I think she’ll strike me—and I brace myself not to defend, but to receive whatever she wants to give.

But then she just flips me a double bird.

“Fuck you,” she says. She swivels, wrenches open the door, and slams it behind her.

I sink onto the edge of my bed, suddenly exhausted in a way that has nothing to do with all the activity of the night. I'm thinking of Katy, of her taunts.

You don't have a mind of your own. You're still just doing what you're trained to do.

A weapon pretending to be a woman.

But if that's true—if I'm nothing beyond what I was made to be—then what is this feeling that Sunny stirs in me? This chaos, this heat, this...wanting.

I have no answer. So I do what I always do: I control what I can. I fold my clothes. I check the locks. I turn out the overheads, pull down the light-blocking blinds.

But despite my fatigue, sleep doesn't come easily. And when it does, I dream not of blood and fighting, but of warmth and laughter and hands that touch without intending to harm.

## CHAPTER 11

Sunny

The rose bush doesn't stand a chance against my frustration. I hack at another branch, sending petals flying in a crimson shower. And it's therapeutic, this destruction. Almost as satisfying as punching something would be.

Almost.

My knuckles throb beneath the gardening gloves—bruised from a previous training session. I flex my fingers, embracing the ache. At least pain is honest. Unlike certain Ice Queens who can't decide if they want to kiss me or kill me.

It meant nothing. Ariadne's words echo in my head as I snip another branch with more force than necessary.



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And my brilliant response?

Fuck you.

Real mature, Santiago. Real mature.

I've managed to avoid her most of today, except during group training. And even then, I stuck with Vanessa or Enzo if we were forced to pair up, even though those two are assholes.

This afternoon the weather is fine, and it feels way too damn cheerful for my mood. The rose garden is a riot of colors—vibrant purples, bold reds, happy yellows—wild and alive. I can see why Aurora loves it out here in the gardens. But right now it just feels like another reminder of things I can't have: sunshine and fucking roses.

That's why I grabbed up the pruning shears and started chopping.

I replay the other night for the millionth time. Ariadne's hands on my skin. Her mouth on mine. The way she moved against me like she was starving.

And then that wall slamming down, her eyes going distant, cold enough to give me...

Well. Frostbite.

The worst part isn't that she pushed me away. The worst part is that I care. I always care too much, wear my heart like a neon sign on my sleeve while everyone else keeps theirs locked away safely. I'm so tired of being the one who reaches out only to

grab fistfuls of air.

“I believe that rose bush has surrendered.”

The sudden voice startles me and I whirl around to find Aurora watching me, amusement in her eyes. Without asking, she gently takes the pruning shears from my death grip and demonstrates the proper technique on the mangled bush.

“Sorry,” I say automatically. “I wasn’t thinking...”

“Like this,” she says, making a clean cut. “You want to open the center, let it breathe. But really, this isn’t the best time of year to be cutting back.”

I grunt in acknowledgment. Aurora brings order to chaos, just like Ariadne tried to do with me. The difference is Aurora doesn’t act like emotions are a contagious disease.

“You know,” she continues, setting down the shears, “some flowers need careful cultivation. Others grow wild no matter what you do. The trick is knowing which is which.”

“Is this a metaphor? Because I’m not really in the mood.”

She smiles. “Bad morning?”

“Bad week,” I sigh.

“But the mission that went well, from what I hear.”

“The mission went great. It’s what happened after.” The words tumble out before I can stop them. “We...connected. Ariadne and me. And then she just shut down. It might never have fucking happened as far as she’s concerned.”

Aurora nods thoughtfully. “Ice melts in its own time. Ariadne’s under there, under all those ice layers. But she’s been frozen for so long she’s forgotten how to thaw.”

“So what, I’m supposed to wait around until she starts acting like a goddamn human being?” I grumble. I feel like a kid whining to mom, even though Aurora isn’t much older than me.

Aurora studies me. “You know, before you came to Elysium, no one ever laughed during training. You bring something special here, Sunny.”

Her words catch me off guard. I look around, suddenly conscious of the other people in the garden—Syndicate members wandering among the plants or just enjoying the morning. A few nod in my direction. One even smiles. I guess it’s true; people do seem to like me.

Except for one.

“Life’s too short to chase people who run away,” I say finally, more to myself than to Aurora. “Anyway, I better get going.” As I leave the garden, I stuff one of the cut roses into my pocket. Maybe I’ll put it in a vase or something.

I stab myself on the thorns of it later, forgetting it’s there at all when I shove my hand in. I bring it out, cursing at the deep prick in my thumb that’s drawn blood. The rose is still beautiful, even crumpled from my pocket and missing more than a few petals.

But it’s still dangerous, too.

Several nights later, I’m running up and down Elysium’s main staircase, training. My plan is simple: work until my muscles scream, then work some more. Physical pain is easier to deal with than emotional limbo. I’ll train until I’m too exhausted to think about Ariadne and her mixed signals. Maybe I’ll even?—

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“...more on this trafficking operation on Chicago’s north side...”

I freeze mid-step. The voice—Lyssa’s—drifts from the war room.

“We found where they’re keeping them,” Scarlett responds. “Young women. At least a dozen.”

My body reacts before my brain catches up—skin prickling, mouth dry, heart hammering against my ribs. The world narrows to just their voices discussing the mission details.

“Looks like they move the girls every few days,” Lyssa continues. “Keeps them disoriented, harder to escape.”

“Timeline?” Hadria asks.

“Next week. We’ll need a full team. We want to take some of the newbies, too. Strength in numbers, and they can see how we work.”

I lean closer, careful to stay hidden.

This is it. The reason I’m here. The reason I joined the Syndicate in the first place.

I’ve waited so long for this.

Ariadne, our unresolved tension, the garden conversation with Aurora—all of that fades to background noise. There’s only the mission now. I slip away when the

conversation changes, already forming my own plan. I need to train harder. I need to be better. I need to be on that team.

And Ariadne is going to help me whether she likes it or not.

As I jog back down the stairs and toward the training room, I catch my reflection in the front windows, made into black mirrors by the night outside. The woman looking back isn't the one who joined the Syndicate with a smile and a joke. She's harder. Colder.

More like Ariadne than I'd care to admit.

Ariadne is there in the training room, of course. She's always in the training room or the gym, which is why I resorted to running up and down the stairs tonight, so I didn't have to see her. Right now, she's working through her forms with mechanical precision. Her reflection multiplies across the mirrored walls—an army of ice queens, each move strong. Lethal.

I watch her for a moment, trying to ignore the flutter in my chest...and elsewhere. Even when I'm pissed at her, I can't help admiring how she moves—like water and steel combined.

And now I need her help. She spots me in the mirror but doesn't stop her sequence, just looks away again. I walk right up to her, lean against the wall, aiming for casual. "You know, I've been thinking."

She doesn't respond, continuing her routine.

"We make a good team," I push on. "But I need to be better if we're going to keep working together."

This gets her attention. She pauses, eyebrow raised.

“I want you to train me,” I tell her. “Every day. Tough as I need.”

Her eyes narrow suspiciously. “Why the sudden interest in improvement?”

“Because next time the Syndicate has a big mission, I want to be on it.” I approach the mat, rolling my shoulders. “And I nearly blew our cover at the club.”

Ariadne studies me, unconvinced. “This isn’t about our last mission.”

I shrug, beginning warm-up stretches. “Fine. You want the truth? I know how good you are. And I want what you have.”

Ariadne hesitates. “I’m not supposed to train other people.”

NotGo ask Scarlett or Lyssa. Just that she’s not supposed to. And I know why. We all know why. She used to train women for Grandmother. And by all accounts, she was fucking brutal.

But effective.

“No one has to know,” I tell her. “And if they’re going to keep putting us together, don’t you want to know you trained me yourself?”

I can see when I’ve got her. Her face changes, somehow, from cautious to concrete. “Fine. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

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Over the next hour, she puts me through increasingly difficult drills, testing my limits. I push myself harder than necessary, hungry to improve. Every time I falter, I think of my goal. It fuels me, drives me to get up no matter how many times Ariadne knocks me down.

I catch her watching me with something like concern, but I don't care. Let her wonder. Let her worry. As long as she keeps training me.

She only says one thing to me as we leave the training room. "No more smoking, Santiago. It's fucking up your lungs."

"Done."

Days pass in a blur of sweat and bruises as Ariadne and I meet secretly for extra training. And it's working. I'm becoming more focused, more driven, less like my usual self. During one particularly grueling session, I don't joke, don't smile—just get up again and again when knocked down.

"What's really going on with you, Sunny?" Ariadne finally asks, breaking the professional distance.

"Just dedicated to self-improvement," I deflect. "Isn't that what you want, Frostbite?"

She knocks me flat for that.

And I get right back up.

Several days later, with my knuckles raw from training, Hadria finally calls us to the war room. The long table is already taken by senior Syndicate members. Maps and surveillance photos cover the surface—the same ones I’ve seen Hadria poring over for the last few weeks. And next to the door, Lyssa stands with her arms crossed, eyes sharp as she evaluates each of the recruits filing in—including me.

I keep my expression neutral, but my heart pounds.

This is it.

“We’re moving on a trafficking ring,” Hadria announces without preamble. She gestures to the map. “Our intelligence confirms they’re holding girls at this warehouse on the north side. We are doing this by special request of a man some of you know: Johnny de Luca. The trafficking ring is run by an offshoot of the Mancini Family, which has been trying to get a foothold in Chicago. But this is our town. Right?”

There’s a murmur of assent. I dig my fingernails into my palms to keep from speaking up too loudly. I don’t want to make it obvious that I’m desperate for this gig.

“We move tomorrow night,” Hadria goes on. “And I’ll need a full team. That’s why Lyssa and Scarlett have been training you so hard these last few weeks. They have also given me her estimation of the most useful among you. Lyssa, if you would?”

I hold my breath as Lyssa moves behind us, giving the chosen ones a little push in the back to make them stand forward.

Matty. Enzo. Vanessa? Fucking Vanessa? There’s a pause, and then Zach and Elijah are pushed forward, too.



I hold my breath.

“You,” Lyssa says, and right next to me, Ariadne is pushed forward.

She gives the slightest hesitation, I think. Or maybe I imagine it.

Lyssa stops behind me. I think my heart is going to explode out of my chest like that scene in *Alien*. “And you, Santiago,” she says at last, her hand in the small of my back as she presses me forward.

Relief floods through me so intensely I almost trip instead of step forward. Beside me, I feel Ariadne stiffen.

“The rest of you will report to Ricky for support positions,” Hadria instructs those not chosen. “Briefing packets will be distributed on your way out. Study them. Memorize them. I expect precision, both from those on the ground and those providing support.”

As we begin to disperse, I catch Ariadne’s eyes on me. But I look away.

I grab my briefing packet and I’m halfway down the east corridor when a hand grabs my arm, pulling me into the nearest room.

“What the hell do you want?” I demand.

Ariadne’s face is inches from mine, her voice low and clipped. “You need to pull yourself from this mission.”

I shake free of her grip. “Not happening.”

Her eyes narrow, searching my face. “You have a personal stake in this, and it’s going to get you killed. Or worse—it will compromise the operation.”

My casual mask slips, just for a second, rage and pain flashing through. “You don’t know anything about me or what I can handle.”

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Ariadne steps closer, her tone shifting from professional to something more personal—almost concerned. “I know enough. And I know when someone’s hiding something.”

I laugh, bitter and sharp. “Like you’re so open and honest? That’s rich coming from you.”

Her jaw tightens, and for a moment I hope she might walk away. But she doesn’t. Instead, she leans in closer. “This isn’t about me.”

“Isn’t it?” I challenge, feeling reckless. “You push people away, then act surprised when they stop trying.”

“We’re talking about the mission,” she says firmly. “Not...whatever happened between us.”

I can feel the heat of her body, see the pulse jumping in her throat. And so I shift tactics, my voice dropping to something softer, more dangerous. “You want to be on this mission, too. You want to be out there, fighting. Killing.”

Ariadne doesn’t deny it, which surprises me. “The difference is I can separate personal feelings from the job.”

I laugh, the sound bitter even to my own ears. “Keep telling yourself that, Frostbite.” I step closer, deliberately invading her space until we’re almost touching. “Besides, if you try to get me pulled, I’ll tell Hadria you have just as much unhealthy interest in this mission as I do. Then neither of us goes.”

It's a bluff—a desperate one—but I deliver it with such conviction that Ariadne hesitates, uncertainty flickering across her normally impassive face. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"Even if that's true, it's my choice to make."

For a moment, genuine worry flashes across Ariadne's face—so quickly I almost miss it.

I soften slightly, letting her see just a fragment of truth. "Look, I need this. I can't explain why, exactly, but I do."

Ariadne studies my face for a long moment, searching for something. Whatever she sees there makes her exhale slowly. "Fine," she says at last. "But you follow every instruction, every protocol. No improvising, no heroics."

Relief floods through me. "Deal."

Her eyes still won't leave mine. "I mean it, Santiago. One wrong move and I'll drag you out myself. If you're a danger to yourself, you're a danger to others, too."

I nod, suddenly aware of how close we're still standing, of the way her gaze drops momentarily to my lips. The air between us changes, charged with something beyond anger or suspicion.

"I'll be careful," I promise, meaning it. Then I add, unable to help myself, "And hey, nice to know you care, Frostbite."

Before she can respond, I slip past her into the corridor, my heart racing for reasons that have nothing to do with the mission ahead.

## CHAPTER 12

Ariadne

I don't sleep much the long day before the mission. Instead, I review the operational files for the third time, checking each detail. The layout. Entry points. Known personnel. Potential victim locations.

I tell myself it's because I don't trust Santiago to follow protocol. I tell myself it's the mission that matters, not the way my chest tightens when I think about what could happen to her if something goes wrong.

The sky outside my window fades from pink to purple to navy as dark approaches. I skip the dinner crowd and eat a few crackers and some cold chicken breast in my room alone as I wait for the time to tick by. At last, I dress for the mission, selecting clothes that maximize movement while minimizing visibility. Black tactical gear, extra holsters, room for extra ammunition. I head to the armory, where I'm geared up with everything I request.

Tonight nothing is denied me. Tonight is the real deal.

And all the time I'm getting ready, I don't see a single hair on Sunny Santiago's head. I'm ready to accept that either she hasn't come, or Hadria or Lyssa or Scarlett found out whatever she's hiding and pulled her from the mission. I'm actually relieved, although I wish she could have had her chance. She's a good fighter. And she really wanted to be on this mission, for whatever reason.

But when I reach the garage complex, Santiago is already there, suited up, ready to go.

She's changed since she found out about this mission. Gone is the perpetual smile,

the easy jokes, the sunshine energy that irritates and fascinates me in equal measure. In her place stands someone I recognize all too well: a weapon. Primed and ready.

It's like looking into a mirror.

I don't like it.

But as I watch her from the shadows, I note the slight tremor in her hands. She's hiding something big. I've known it from the start, seen it in the way she studies the mission files with an intensity that goes beyond professional duty. Whatever her stake in this, it really is dangerous. Personal.

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Just like mine is starting to be.

She's struggling with a holster strap, her fingers less steady than usual. Before I can think better of it, I cross to her side.

"Here," I say, adjusting the equipment for her. Our fingers brush briefly, and I pull away quickly. This is not the time for whatever complicated thing exists between us.

"Check your comms twice," I tell her, keeping my voice neutral. "Reception gets spotty sometimes."

What I don't say: Be careful. Don't be reckless. Come back alive.

Sunny nods. And for a moment, something passes between us—maybe an acknowledgment of the truce we've established, fragile as it is.

Hadria's voice cuts through the night, dividing the team between vehicles. I'm assigned to ride with Lyssa in the second SUV, while Sunny goes with Scarlett in the lead vehicle. And I still feel uneasy about it all.

The garage doors roll open to reveal the gloomy predawn city. Rain falls steadily, pattering against the vehicles as we pull out. Through the windshield wipers' hypnotic rhythm, I track the lead SUV, knowing that Sunny Santiago sits inside, her mind likely racing with whatever agenda she's concealing.

"You've been training her," Lyssa notes, not looking away from the road. Not a question.

I don't respond.

"Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"Of course not. But she asked me—and I didn't make her do anything she didn't want to do."

"Uh-huh. Well, did you know she's got a personal stake in this?" Lyssa continues.

"I know," I say finally.

"And you didn't rat her out." Again, not a question.

I stare out at the rain-slick streets. "She would have found a way to come with us regardless. I just wanted to make sure she..."

"Stayed alive?"

"Didn't get anyone else killed," I snap.

But Lyssa was closer to the truth than feels comfortable.

Thunder cracks overhead as we approach the industrial district. Through sheets of rain, our target comes into view: a nondescript warehouse, carefully chosen for its anonymity. I run through the plan mentally, anticipating complications, calculating alternatives. But beneath the tactical assessment, more thoughts issue warnings.

Sunny is emotionally compromised. Dangerous.

So are you, whispers another voice.



My earpiece crackles to life and Scarlett says, “Pulling up now.”

Rain slams against the vehicles as we pull into position. Through the downpour, I watch Sunny in the other SUV, her face set with a determination I recognize all too well.

She’s not here for the mission. She’s here for vengeance. And I know better than most how dangerous that can be.

“You want some advice?” Lyssa asks me in a low voice.

I turn and stare at her. I want to say no. But I give a short nod.

“Watch her back, because she’s not going to—and watch your own, too. Because she’s not going to.” She pauses to watch me take that in. “Look, if you say the word, I’ll pull her. Right now.”

It’s the first time Lyssa has ever shown me professional courtesy as though she considers me on the same level. And I think it over. “She deserves her shot,” I say after a moment. “I’ll watch her. Switch me out with Elijah.”

Lyssa nods, and takes to the private comms channel to let Scarlett know about the switch. Then she gets out of the vehicle, and the rest of us pile out, too. Elijah moves over toward Lyssa and I line up with Scarlett.

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The rain beats down as we all approach the warehouse, moving in tight formation. Scarlett's voice comes through the comms, calm and measured.

"Alpha Team, east entrance. Beta Team, loading bay. Look alive, people."

I check my weapon one last time and then we start creeping forward. The warehouse looms ahead, dark and anonymous in the downpour. I make sure I take my place directly behind Sunny, where I can keep my eyes on her.

The Syndicate moves like a well-oiled machine—the loading bay is cleared silently and we slip inside. The warehouse is divided into an open area with several parked trucks, and then multiple corridors with rooms coming off of them. There's a mezzanine level as well, which is where Sunny and I will be searching. The air smells of mildew and fear.

"Clear," Scarlett murmurs into her comm. "Moving in."

We all split into twos as planned. I stay close to Sunny, watching her scan each doorway, each shadow, as we make our way down one of the corridors, checking each room. But the mission-focused mask she wears is slipping—her eyes dart frantically, searching and searching...

Sunny rounds a corner too quickly, nearly running into a guard. But before I can move, she has him in a choke hold, knife at his throat. Her eyes are wild.

"Where are they?" she hisses, pressing the blade deeper. "The women. Where?"

“Hey,” I whisper. “Protocol.”

She ignores me, and even the guard looks afraid at her intensity. When he points toward a large truck on the open floor of the warehouse, she slides the knife up through the soft underside of his chin and into his brain with brutal efficiency, then starts moving toward the nearest staircase—away from our assigned route.

“Santiago,” I hiss after her. “Return to the route.”

But without a backward glance, she starts to move quickly down the stairs.

Fuckinghell.

I move after her, keeping to the shadows as we hit the ground. I can hear Sunny’s footsteps, quick and purposeful—and that means the guards will all be able to hear her, too. But whatever ghost she’s chasing, she’s determined to find it.

I catch up to her just as she reaches the truck. It’s padlocked shut, but she’s working on the lock, fingers quick but trembling slightly as she works her lock-picking tool around in it.

“You’re compromising the entire operation,” I say, voice low. “We need to return?—”

The lock clicks open, and Sunny swings open the doors without acknowledging me. I raise my weapon, ready for whatever’s on the other side.

But nothing could have prepared me for what we find.

Women. Girls, really. At least a dozen of them, huddled together or sitting against the walls. Some look up at our entrance, eyes hollow with despair or glassy from drugs.

Others don't move at all.

"Oh my God," Sunny whispers, her voice breaking.

I've seen horrors before. I've caused horrors before. But this—the deliberate cruelty of it—hits me somewhere I thought had died long ago.

Sunny moves forward, speaking in soft Spanish to the closest woman, who only shrinks back in fear. I scan the interior, counting heads, assessing our exit options. We need to move these women quickly, but safely. Many look malnourished, some injured.

"We need backup," I say, reaching for my earpiece. "I'm calling in?—"

"Behind you!" one of the women suddenly cries out.

I spin, weapon raised, as five men run down the same staircase we just did—Mancini Family muscle. They weren't expecting us; their surprise is clear as they register our weapons, our tactical gear.

For a split second, nobody moves.

Then everything happens at once.

Sunny and I move in perfect synchronization, as if we've fought together for years instead of weeks. We both move well away from the truck, not wanting to endanger the women. I take the two on the left; she handles the two on the right. Sunny's movements show all the control and precision I taught her, but with an edge of savagery I recognize from my own darkest days. She shoots dead the first man with brutal efficiency, then engages the second in hand-to-hand combat, striking deep into his neck with her knife.

The fifth man, caught in the middle, hesitates just long enough between the two of us for me to put a bullet in his kneecap after dispatching my own targets. I run back to the truck to check on the women.

“What’s going on?” Lyssa’s voice is sharp in my ear, and I pull out the comms link, needing all my concentration.

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“Santiago,” I call, as she stalks toward the guy on the ground wailing and trying to crawl away. “Remember we need one alive.”

But either she can’t or won’t hear me. Her face has transformed, becoming something feral, consumed by rage. She’s no longer fighting tactically—she’s unleashed something primal and terrifying in herself.

It’s exactly the kind of thing Grandmother tried to evoke in all of her agents.

The man doesn’t stand a chance. I can only watch as Sunny drives her knife into him, striking again and again long after he stops moving. Blood sprays across her face, her hands, her chest.

“Sunny!” I hiss, moving toward her. “Sunny! He’s down. He’s dead.”

The women in the truck are screaming now, the sound echoing off the concrete walls, and I can hear people running. Syndicate? Or more Mancinis? I need to get these women out, get them safe, but I can’t leave Sunny like this.

I approach her carefully, the way you’d approach a wounded animal. “Sunny,” I repeat, gentler now. “It’s over. We need to move.”

She looks up at me, her face streaked with blood, eyes so lost it makes my chest ache. For a moment, she doesn’t seem to recognize me. Then clarity returns, horror dawning as she looks down at her blood-soaked hands.

“I—” she starts, but breaks off as new people arrive on the scene. I whirl on them,

gun raised, then drop it immediately as I see my fellow Syndicate members, led by Scarlett. She stands there, taking in the carnage. Her gaze moves from the brutalized bodies to Sunny, still crouched over her victim, to the terrified women in the truck.

“What the fuck happened here?” she demands, weapon still raised.

I make my decision in an instant. “I lost control,” I say, stepping forward. “Santiago tried to stop me.”

Scarlett looks skeptical. “You? Lost control?”

I wipe other men’s blood from my face, smearing it deliberately. “Old habits,” I say flatly. “Grandmother’s training...it comes back sometimes. Surely you of all people should understand that.”

Scarlett looks at me. And then at Sunny. And then she moves to the truck.

“These women need medical attention,” she says, all business. “And we need to clear the rest of the building, make sure there are no others.” She touches the comm in her ear. “We’ve secured a clutch of hostages, first floor. Extracting now.”

While she coordinates with the rest of the team, I move to Sunny, who hasn’t risen from her position on the floor. I crouch beside her, keeping my voice low.

“Get it together,” I tell her. “We’re not done yet.”

She looks up at me, confusion in her eyes. “Why?” she whispers. “Why did you?—”

“Right now, these women need you to be functional. Can you do that?”

Something shifts in her face—a return of the determined woman I’ve come to know.

She nods once, rising shakily to her feet.

“Good,” I say. “Let’s get them ready to move.”

As we begin helping them down from the truck, I feel Sunny’s eyes on me. I don’t look back at her. I don’t want to see the gratitude there, or worse, the understanding. I don’t want to examine why I stepped in, why I took the blame.

I tell myself it’s about the mission. About the Syndicate’s reputation. About keeping these women calm as we lead them to safety.

But even as I think it, I know it’s a lie.

I just couldn’t stand to see Sunny Santiago punished.

## CHAPTER 13

Sunny

The rain continues to fall as our convoy finally pulls back into Elysium. I’m soaked to the bone, my clothes filthy with blood that isn’t mine, and I can’t stop my hands from shaking.

I’ve killed before. That’s not new. But never like that. Never with that kind of... I don’t even know what to call it. Rage? Madness? Something darker that I didn’t know lived inside me until I saw those women—girls, some of them—huddled in that truck like animals.

I close my eyes as the SUV rolls to a stop, trying to breathe through the tightness in my chest. I should be proud. We saved lives tonight. But all I can think about is the look on Ariadne’s face when she pulled me off that man’s body.



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And the lie she told for me.

Why would she do that?

“Santiago.” Scarlett’s voice cuts through my thoughts. She made me ride with her again on the way back, taking shotgun. “We’re here. Let’s go.”

I nod numbly and climb out of the vehicle. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, but the sky is still thick with clouds, making dawn look more like dusk. The Syndicate’s medical personnel are already escorting the women we rescued into the mansion’s treatment area. Some of the women walk on their own, leaning on each other; others are carried on stretchers. All of them look afraid.

Especially when they look at me.

“You did good work tonight,” Scarlett says, appearing at my shoulder again. She studies me with sharp eyes. “Despite the complications.”

“Yeah,” I agree, trying to sound normal. “Glad we got there in time.”

“Must have been scary, seeing Ariadne lose it.”

“I...guess.”

She gives me a long look and I’m sure she can see right through me. But she just nods toward the training wing, where all the other recruits have gone for showers. “Go get cleaned up. Mission debrief in an hour.”

But I head toward the medical center instead of the showers, drawn by a need I can't quite name. The Syndicate's medical team works efficiently, checking vitals, treating wounds, offering blankets and water. The women's faces show varying degrees of shock, fear, and disbelief at their sudden freedom. And some are blank. Completely blank.

I scan their faces, an automatic response.

"Are you hurt?" a medic asks me, noticing my blood-soaked clothes.

"No," I say quickly. "Not my blood. I'm just checking on them."

She moves on to the next patient. I should leave, let these women recover in peace. But my feet are rooted to the floor as I watch them, wondering if any of them might know something, if any of them might remember a girl named?—

"Excuse me." A deep, cultured voice interrupts my thoughts.

I turn to find Johnny de Luca, known as "the Gentleman" in criminal circles, motioning to me from the corridor. He's impeccably dressed despite the early hour, his silver hair perfectly styled, his suit unwrinkled. I've only seen him a few times around Elysium, but I recognize him immediately.

Because once upon a time, he worked for the Mancini Family himself. Maybe that's why he's staying outside the treatment area. My first instinct is hostility, but I try to swallow it down. These days, Johnny the Gentleman is an adviser to the Bianchi Family—and he was the bank behind the operation tonight. So I step out of the room and follow him a few feet down the hallway.

"Yes, sir?" I say, trying to wipe some of the blood from my hands onto my already-ruined pants.

“You’re one of the team that brought these women in?” he asks, his voice low.

“That’s right, sir.” I straighten my spine a little. “Santiago. Sunny Santiago.”

“Then thank you for your services tonight, Ms. Santiago.” He gives me a warm smile. “My daughter and her partner run an extensive network for women escaping trafficking and abuse. We’ll make sure these women are well cared for.”

“That’s good.” My voice catches. “They deserve that.”

“Indeed they do.” He studies me for a moment, his eyes kind but penetrating. “This sort of work affects us all differently. Don’t be afraid to seek support if you need it.”

Before I can respond, he moves past me toward Hadria, who’s just entered the corridor at the other end. They smile and shake hands, and I hear him express his gratitude for the Syndicate’s intervention.

“It was the right thing to do,” Hadria says. “And besides, the Mancini Family has no business operating in our territory, especially not this kind of business.”

I slip away, suddenly desperate for a shower and clean clothes and most importantly, my own room. But the dormitory halls are buzzing with activity when I make my way back—recruits and full members alike discussing the mission, comparing notes, rehashing moments of danger and triumph.

When I enter the dorms’ common room, I hear a cheer go up from a group gathered around Enzo and Vanessa. Enzo’s face is flushed with pride as he recounts capturing one of the Mancini soldiers.

“He tried to run, but I tackled him so hard he pissed himself!” Enzo laughs, demonstrating the move with a flourish. “And then Nessa disarmed him before he

could even blink, got him cuffed up...”

The story continues and the other recruits hang on their every word. Matty claps Enzo on the back. “I bet Hadria’s gonna fast-track you both to full membership,” he says, a touch wistful.

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“The Boss is gonna squeeze that guy for every bit of intel on the Mancini operations in Chicago,” Vanessa adds, tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. “I bet we’ll find the rest of their trafficking spots.”

I slow my pace, watching from the edge of the group. Under normal circumstances, I’d be right in there, celebrating with them, cracking jokes. But nothing about tonight feels normal.

I scan the room and find Ariadne standing alone by the far wall, her posture rigid. She’s changed into fresh clothes, her hair still damp from a shower, but there’s a tension in her shoulders that I can see even from here. A few recruits glance her way, then quickly look away, their expressions uneasy.

One whispers to another, “They say she went full Grandmother psycho on those guys at the warehouse.”

“I heard she stabbed one of them, like, thirty fuckin’ times,” the other replies, voice lowered. “Just lost it completely.”

Something twists in my gut. That was me, not her. I’m the one who lost control. I’m the one who stabbed a man long after he was dead. I’m the one who couldn’t stop, who was freaking out and?—

“Hey, Sunny!” Enzo calls, noticing me hovering at the edge of the crowd. “Get over here! You hear about how Vanessa disarmed some big guy twice her size?”

I force a smile that feels like it might crack my face. “Sounds badass,” I agree,

moving closer to the group but keeping my distance from their celebratory energy.

“Damn straight,” Vanessa preens, clearly enjoying the attention. “But seriously, you did good work too, Santiago. Hadria said you were the one who found the women.”

“Well,” I say, my smile feeling more fragile by the second. “We all did our part.”

“Except Frostbite over there,” Matty says in a low voice, jerking his head toward Ariadne. “She went off-script. Heard Hadria’s thinking about putting her on lockdown with that other Grandmother psycho they brought back from Vegas.”

The others murmur agreement, but I can’t stand to hear any more. “I need a shower before the debrief,” I mumble, pushing past them toward the hallway.

As I pass Ariadne, our eyes meet briefly. Her gaze is unreadable, but something passes between us—an understanding, a shared secret—and I quickly look away, afraid of what my own eyes might reveal.

The hot water of the shower washes away the blood but not the memory of what I did. I scrub my skin until it’s raw, watching the reddish-brown water swirl down the drain. My mind keeps replaying the moment in that warehouse—the rage that overtook me, the surge of something primal and unstoppable.

I scared myself.

But I don’t think I scared Ariadne. And I don’t know how to feel about that.

When I finally emerge, dressed in clean sweatpants and a tank top, the dormitory sounds emptier. Probably most of them have gone early to the mansion for the debrief or to find food. I should join them, but I need a moment to pull myself together, to rebuild my façade before seeing all of them again.

I make it halfway to my room when a hand grabs my arm, pulling me into an empty side corridor. I react instinctively, twisting out of the grip and spinning into a defensive stance—only to find myself face-to-face with Ariadne.

Her eyes are intense, searching mine with a focus that pins me in place. “We need to talk,” she says, her voice low and urgent. “Now.”

“I don’t think?—”

“Not here.” She pulls me on toward my dorm room. I could resist, but something in her manner—not cold, not calculating, but genuinely concerned—makes me follow.

Once inside my small room, she closes the door and stands in front of it, arms crossed. I move to sit on the edge of my bed, suddenly exhausted.

“What is it?” I ask, though I already know.

“You know exactly what this is about.” She doesn’t raise her voice, but the intensity of her gaze increases. “What happened in that warehouse?”

“You were there,” I say, trying to sound casual. “You saw what happened: I eliminated a threat.”

“I saw you lose control.” Her words are cutting. “I saw you kill a man long after he was dead. I want to know why.”

“Does it matter? You already took the blame.” I can’t keep the bitterness from my voice. “Why would you do that? Why would you...protect me?”

“So you admit you needed protection?” I say nothing. “Answer the question, Santiago.” She steps closer, looming over me. “What was your stake in all this? And

don't lie to me. You're a shitty liar."

I stare up at her, at those blue eyes that see too much. Part of me wants to deflect, to throw up my walls and push her away with a joke or a smile. But I'm too tired, too raw from everything that's happened. I couldn't smile if my life depended on it.

"Fine," I say, standing up to face her. "You want to know? I'll tell you. But it doesn't leave this room."



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She gives a short nod, and I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words for a story I've never fully told anyone.

"I had a sister," I begin, and my voice already threatens to break on those simple words. "Marisol. She was two years older than me. We grew up in a...well, it wasn't a good situation. Dad was a low-level enforcer for a cartel. Mom was an addict. Mari and me...we took care of each other."

I pace to the small window, staring out at the rain-slick grounds of Elysium without really seeing them.

"When I was sixteen and she was eighteen, she tried to get us out. She had a plan, saved up some money from odd jobs, thought she could get us to my aunt's in San Diego." The memory of that night stings like a fresh wound. "But she got caught. My father..."

I stop, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. "He beat us both nearly to death. And then, to teach her a lesson, he said, he sold her to a trafficking ring. I never saw her again."

Ariadne is silent, watching me with that unreadable expression. I feel naked under her gaze, all my carefully constructed defenses stripped away.

"I've been looking for her ever since," I continue, my voice stronger now. "I tried everything—police, FBI, private investigators. Nothing. It's like she vanished. Then I heard rumors about the Syndicate, about their resources, their connections to the criminal world. I figured if anyone could help me find Mari, it would be them."

“So you joined to find your sister,” Ariadne says, not a question but a confirmation.

“Yes.” I meet her eyes steadily. “When I heard about this mission, targeting a trafficking ring...I thought she might be there. I thought maybe after all these years...”

“But she wasn’t. And those men, when they rushed us—you lost control,” Ariadne finishes for me.

“I pictured my father,” I admit quietly. “I pictured every man who’s ever bought and sold a girl like my sister. And I couldn’t stop myself.”

Ariadne’s expression shifts—almost imperceptibly—from interrogation to something more complex.

“Why did you take the blame?” I ask again, needing to understand. “You could have let me face the consequences. It would have been a lot simpler for you.”

She hesitates, looking uncomfortable for the first time since I’ve known her. “I’m already damaged goods. One more fuck-up won’t make a difference for me.”

“Bullshit,” I challenge, stepping closer to her. “That’s not why. Try again.”

“You’re in no position to demand answers from me, Santiago.” Her voice is soft. Warning.

But I don’t back down. “And yet here we are. You took a hit for me, Ariadne. I want to know why.”

“Because I—” She stops, seeming to struggle with the words. “Because I understand what it’s like to have a mission that consumes you. To be willing to do anything to

complete it.”

It’s the most personal thing she’s ever said to me. For a moment, we stand in silence, staring at each other.

“You need to tell Hadria,” she says finally, breaking the tension. “About your sister. About why you’re really here.”

Panic floods my system. “No! They’ll kick me out, and then I’ll never find Mari!”

“The Syndicate has resources you can’t access on your own,” she argues. “If you tell them the truth, tell them it’s connected to this Mancini ring, they might help you.”

“Or they might decide I’m a liability and throw me out!” My voice rises with desperation. “I can’t take that chance, Ariadne. I can’t let her down again.”

“You won’t be helping her by getting yourself killed,” she says sharply. “Next time, you might not have someone to cover for you. Next time, you might go too far and cross a line you can’t come back from.”

“Why do you care?” I demand, frustration breaking through my fear. “Why does it matter to you what happens to me? You made it clear you didn’t give a fuck about me beyond the fact that we fight well together.”

“Because I hate those people just as much as you do,” she says finally, her voice quiet but resolute. “Don’t forget who you’re talking to, Santiago. I was trafficked myself. A different ring, but just as damaging. And if Hadria kicks you out because of this, if she decides you’re too much of a risk, then I’ll go with you.”

I stare at her, sure I’ve misheard. “What?”

“If they kick you out,” she clarifies, her expression deadly serious, “I’ll go with you. And we’ll find your sister ourselves. I have...contacts outside the Syndicate. People who owe me favors. It won’t be as easy, but it’s not impossible.”

I’m speechless. Of all the things I expected from Ariadne, this offer—this promise—was the last thing I could have imagined. Not just protecting me, but committing to my cause, risking her own position for a mission that isn’t hers.

“But...why?” I ask, bewildered.

### CHAPTER 14

Ariadne

I've made a tactical error.

Sunny stares at me, her dark eyes wide with shock, and I realize I've gone too far. Her question hangs in the air between us. Why?

Why, indeed.

Maybe it was the look on her face when she spoke about her sister—the raw pain there, the fierce determination—maybe it triggered something in me that I thought Grandmother had burned out years ago. Recognition. Understanding. And something more dangerous: empathy.

“Ariadne?” Sunny's voice pulls me back to the present. She's watching me with a mixture of hope and suspicion. “Answer my question.”

I turn away from her, needing distance. Her dorm room is small, but I put what space I can between us, moving to lean against the wall near the window. The rain has stopped, but the sky outside remains gray and heavy.

“Maybe I'm just tired of being the Syndicate's bogeyman,” I say, the words coming out sharper than I intended. “Maybe I wanted to see what they'd do when faced with proof of what I am.”

“What are you?”

“A weapon,” I say simply. “That’s what Grandmother made me. That’s what the Syndicate pretends they can unmake.”

Sunny stands, moving toward me with that fearless directness that’s simultaneously irritating and compelling. “You’re not a weapon. You’re a person.”

“Tell that to the people I’ve killed.”

“You did what you were trained to do—but you broke away. That makes you a survivor.”

Her words hit closer to home than I’d like to admit. I meet her gaze, trying to maintain the emotional distance I’ve spent years perfecting. But something about Sunny Santiago makes all my defenses less effective.

“Why did you really take the blame for me?” she asks again, her voice softer now. “No deflections, no bullshit. Just tell me the truth.”

The truth. What a concept. As if I even know what that is anymore, after years of lies and manipulation by Grandmother, then more months of “reprogramming” by the Syndicate. What is the truth?

I stare at her, searching for the right words, for something that won’t reveal too much. But my usual precision fails me. “I don’t know,” I admit finally. “I just...I couldn’t let them punish you. I didn’t think about it. I just acted.”

She steps closer, close enough that I can see the flecks of amber in her dark eyes, the slight upward tilt at the corners of her mouth. “That’s a start,” she says. “Now tell me the rest.”

“There isn’t a rest.”

“I think there is.” She’s too close now, invading the carefully calibrated space I maintain around myself. “I think...you feel something for me. Something that made you risk your position here, that made you offer to leave with me if things go bad.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I snap, but my voice lacks conviction.

“I’m not,” she says. “I’m just stating facts. And I think it scares you.”

“I don’t get scared.”

“Everyone gets scared, Frostbite.” Her use of that ridiculous nickname should irritate me, but instead, it feels almost...intimate. “Even you.”

“Not of feelings,” I say. “I was trained out of those a long time ago.”

“Were you?” She tilts her head, studying me. “Or did you just learn to bury them so deep you forgot they were there? Because I’ve seen them, Ariadne. Little flashes. When you fought with me in training. When you pulled me off that man in the warehouse. When you told me you’d help find my sister.”

I should step away. I should shut this conversation down, reestablish boundaries, reassert control. Instead, I find myself rooted to the spot, caught in the gravity of her gaze.

“I feel...” I begin, then stop, the words unfamiliar in my mouth. How do I describe something I’ve spent years denying? “I feel something. When I’m around you. It’s...uncomfortable. But not always unpleasant.”

“Not always unpleasant,” she repeats, a small smile playing on her lips. “That’s a

start.”



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“It’s dangerous,” I counter. “Feelings are liabilities. They make you sloppy, make you miss things, make you vulnerable.”

“They also make you human.”

“Being human got me sold to Grandmother,” I say flatly. “Being a weapon got me out.”

The smile slips from Sunny’s face, replaced by something softer, more serious. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I don’t need your pity.”

“It’s not pity,” she says. “It’s understanding.”

Her words hit something deep inside me, some hidden, wounded place I’ve spent years pretending doesn’t exist. And suddenly, unexpectedly, I want her to understand—not everything, not yet, but at least something true.

“I feel like I might not hate you,” I say, the words awkward and stilted. “I think maybe I...care what happens to you. And that’s not something I’m used to feeling. For anyone.”

The confession was more revealing than I intended. I wait for her to mock me, to use this vulnerability against me.

Instead, she smiles—not her usual bright grin, but something softer, more genuine. “I

think that might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Don't make me regret it," I warn, but there's no real threat in my voice.

She steps closer still, and my body tenses, anticipating—what? An attack? A retreat? Neither seems right.

"I feel something too," she admits quietly. "Something that makes me want to break through all those walls you've built up. Something that makes me want to see the real you."

"This is the real me," I tell her. "There's nothing under the ice, Santiago. Just more ice—and then darkness."

"I don't believe that," she says, and then her hand is on my arm, warm against my skin. "And I don't think you believe it either."

The touch is electric, sending a current through me that I can't control. I should pull away. I should reestablish distance. I should remember everything Grandmother taught me about the dangers of human connection.

Instead, I find myself moving toward her, drawn into her orbit. She's irresistible.

"Sunny," I say, and her name in my mouth feels like surrender.

She leans in, her breath warm against my lips. "Still not unpleasant?" she whispers.

And then we're kissing, a collision rather than a gentle meeting, all the tension of the past weeks igniting in a single moment of contact. Her lips are soft against mine, a stark contrast to the intensity of her grip on my arms, pulling me closer.

Sex was always just another tool for me, a way to control or manipulate a target. But this—this feels different. This feels like chaos, like surrender, like falling.

I don't like it.

I love it.

And I'm terrified.

## CHAPTER 15

Ariadne

My hands find Sunny's waist, the curve of her back, the weight of her long hair. She makes a small sound against my mouth that invokes something primal inside me. I back her against the wall, my body pressing against hers, seeking more contact, more heat.

"Are you sure about this?" I manage to ask, pulling back just enough to see her face.

Her eyes are dark with desire, her smile fierce and hungry. "Are you?"

I'm not sure of anything anymore, except that I want this—want her—in a way that defies all my training, all my defenses, all my carefully constructed rules.

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“Yes,” I tell her, and it feels like stepping off a cliff.

She rises to meet me, matching my intensity with her own. Sunny kisses like she does everything else—with absolute commitment, holding nothing back. Her hands slide under my shirt, her touch burning against my skin, leaving trails of fire wherever her fingers explore.

“I’ve thought about this,” she confesses against my neck, her teeth grazing sensitive skin. “So many times.”

“Me too,” I admit, surprising myself with the truth.

I capture her mouth again, hungry for her taste. I’ve kissed countless marks before, played countless roles, but I’ve never felt this desperate need, this honest desire. It scares me how much I want her, how quickly she’s dismantling everything I thought I knew about myself.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging just hard enough to send a jolt of pleasure down my spine. I respond by sliding my thigh between her legs, pressing upward. She gasps into my mouth, her hips rocking against me instinctively.

I’ve killed men with my bare hands. I’ve survived torture that would break most people. I’ve faced down Grandmother’s wrath without flinching. But nothing—nothing—has ever made me feel as powerful as the sound Sunny makes when I slide my hand under her shirt, fingers tracing the warm skin of her stomach.

I give myself over to the sensation, letting instinct guide me instead of calculation.

She lets me pull her top up and off. She's braless underneath, her full breasts swaying as she moves until I take them into my hands. They're soft. Perfect. Warm.

Just like her.

"I've wanted you," she breathes against my neck as her lips trail down, "since our very first day in training when you knocked me on my ass."

I laugh, the sound strange and unfamiliar. "That's twisted, Santiago."

"Maybe. But I bet you wanted it too."

I don't answer with words. Instead, I lift my arms, letting her pull the shirt over my head. The cool air hits my skin, but I'm burning up inside, my body responding to her touch in ways I can't control. Her eyes travel over me and I take her face in my hands to kiss her again, taste her sweet mouth. She pushes me back a little, murmuring, "Bed," and I follow her lead, unwilling to break contact for more than a second.

We tumble onto her narrow dorm bed and the mattress creaks in protest beneath us, but I don't care. Nothing matters except the feel of her body against mine, the heat of her skin, the taste of her tongue in my mouth.

"God, you're beautiful," she whispers, her eyes traveling over my exposed skin. Her fingertips trace the scars that map my history—the knife wounds, bullet scars, the burn marks that Grandmother left on me as punishment for failure.

I've always hated these marks, these permanent reminders of weakness. But Sunny touches them with something like reverence.

And I let her.

“You don’t have to be gentle,” I tell her after a moment, my voice rougher than I intended. “I won’t break.”

Her eyes meet mine. “Maybe I want to be gentle. Maybe you deserve that.”

No one’s ever said that to me before. No one’s ever looked at my scars and seen anything but weakness or a weapon honed through pain. Something shifts inside me, a crack in foundations I thought were solid.

“I don’t—” I start, but she silences me with another kiss, deeper this time, her tongue sliding against mine.

“Let me,” she whispers against my lips. “Just let me.”

And I do. I surrender to her touch as her mouth trails down my neck, across my collarbone, to my breast. When her lips close around my nipple, I arch against her, a sound escaping me that I’ve never made before. I’ve always been in control during sex, even when I played at submission for a mark. But with Sunny, I’m losing that control, surrendering to sensation in a way that should terrify me.

Instead, it feels like liberation.

Her mouth continues its journey downward, trailing kisses across my stomach. My muscles tense and release under her touch, my body responding without my permission. She hooks her fingers into the waistband of my pants, looking up at me with a question in her eyes.

“Yes,” I breathe, lifting my hips to help her.

She slides them down, taking my underwear with them, leaving me naked and desperate. Sunny’s dark eyes hold mine as she settles between my legs, her warm

breath ghosting over my most sensitive skin. I've never felt this exposed, this vulnerable. My breath catches in my throat as her hands slide under my thighs, lifting slightly.

"I've thought about this," she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh. "What you'd taste like. What sounds you'd make."

Another time, I might have had a sharp retort ready. Now, I can only watch, transfixed, as she lowers her head. At the first touch of her tongue, I jerk, a shock of pleasure coursing through me. She makes a sound of approval, her hands tightening on my thighs as she licks again, more deliberately this time.

I give in completely, let my head fall back against the pillow as she explores every inch of me with her mouth. Her technique is confident, assured—she knows exactly what she's doing, alternating between broad strokes and a focus on my clit that has me gasping, hands fisting in the sheets. My hips rock against her face, seeking more pressure, more friction. She responds by sliding a finger inside me, then another, curling them upward as her tongue continues its merciless assault.

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I've never been loud during sex—another habit drilled into me by Grandmother, who considered any loss of control a weakness—but I can't hold back the sounds that tear from my throat as Sunny drives me higher. She's relentless, reading my body's responses and adjusting accordingly, pushing me toward a precipice I've never truly fallen from before.

“Let go,” she murmurs against me, her words vibrating through my core. “I've got you.”

And for the first time in my life, I believe those words. I let go, surrendering completely as pleasure crashes over me in waves. I cry out, back arching off the bed, thighs trembling around her head. She stays with me through it all, gentling her touch but not stopping completely, drawing out my orgasm until I'm shaking, oversensitive, desperate.

“Sunny,” I gasp, tugging at her shoulders. “Come here.”

She crawls up my body, her expression triumphant and hungry. Her lips are slick with my own pleasure, eyes dark with desire. I pull her down into a kiss, tasting myself on her tongue, and something primal surges through me. I flip our positions, pinning her beneath me, savoring her look of surprise and delight.

“My turn,” I growl against her mouth.

I'm done being gentle. Done being careful. I want to consume her, to mark her, to make her feel what she's just done to me. I strip her with efficient movements, revealing smooth brown skin that I immediately taste with my tongue, my teeth. She



arches beneath me, responsive and unafraid, meeting my intensity with her own.

“Fuck,” she gasps as I bite down on the sensitive skin where her neck meets her shoulder. Not hard enough to break skin, but enough to leave a mark. My mark.  
“Ariadne?—”

I silence her with another kiss, fierce and possessive. My hand slides between her legs, finding her wet and ready. She moans into my mouth as I touch her, exploring the slick heat of her. I memorize her reactions—what makes her gasp, what makes her writhe. But it’s not enough. I want more. I want to taste her, just like she tasted me.

I slide down her body, trailing open-mouthed kisses across her skin. Her breathing quickens as I move lower, settling between her thighs. For a moment, I just look at her—the slick, swollen flesh, the evidence of how much she wants this. Wants me.

“Please,” she whispers, hands fisting in the sheets.

I lower my mouth to her, my first taste making us both moan. She’s sweet and tangy, perfect. I explore her with long, deliberate strokes of my tongue, savoring every gasp, every twitch of her hips. My hands grip her thighs, spreading her wider, exposing more of her to my hungry mouth. When I focus on her clit, her hips buck wildly, a desperate sound escaping her throat. I slide two fingers inside her, feeling her walls clench around them as I establish a steady rhythm. The angle is perfect—I can curl my fingers to hit that spot inside her while my tongue continues its merciless assault on her clit.

“Fuck, yes,” she gasps, hands flying to my head, holding me against her. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

I have no intention of stopping. I’m addicted to her taste, to the sounds she makes, to

the way her body responds to my touch. I increase the pace of my fingers, let my tongue lash relentlessly across her clit. Her thighs begin to tremble on either side of my head, her breathing becoming more ragged. The sound of it sends a fresh wave of desire through me. I don't stop, don't slow down, continuing the relentless rhythm until she breaks, a cry tearing from her lips as her orgasm overtakes her. Her back arches off the bed, grinding against my face, and I drink her down.

Afterward, we lie facing each other, her leg thrown over mine, her fingers tracing patterns on my skin. I should feel exposed, vulnerable, but instead I feel...calm. Present in a way I rarely am.

“Was this a tactical error, too?” she asks, a slight smile on her lips.

I blink, surprised by the echo of my earlier thought. “How did you?—”

“You have a very specific look on your face when you think you’ve miscalculated,” she says. “I noticed it the first time we sparred.”

“You’re more observant than I gave you credit for.”

“And you’re more human than you want to admit.” She traces a finger along my collarbone, down to a scar just above my breast. “How did you get this one?”

I tense slightly. My scars are my history written on my skin, a record of lessons learned, punishments survived, missions completed. They’re not something I share.

But something in Sunny’s expression—open, curious, without judgment—makes me answer.

“Training accident,” I say. “Grandmother liked to use real knives.”

Sunny's fingers pause, then continue their gentle exploration. "And this one?" she asks, touching a small, round scar on my shoulder.

"Cigarette burn. I failed a language test."

Her expression darkens. "She burned you over a test?"

"Punishment had to be memorable to be effective," I say, repeating one of Grandmother's favorite phrases. "Pain is clarity."

"That's fucked up," Sunny says bluntly. "You know that, right?"

I shrug. "It was effective. I speak six languages fluently now."

Sunny props herself up on one elbow, looking down at me with an intensity that makes me want to look away. "Tell me something about your life before Grandmother. When you lived with Mrs. G."

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The question catches me off guard. “What? Why?”

“Because I want to know you,” she says simply. “The real you, not just what she made you into.”

I stare up at the ceiling, sifting through fragments of memory from before—hazy images, disconnected feelings, a life that sometimes seems like it belonged to someone else.

“I had a teddy bear,” I say finally. “His name was Mr. Fluffikins.” Sunny smiles. “Tell me more about your sister,” I say, wanting to shift the focus away from my past.

Sunny sighs, settling back against me. “Marisol was...the only bright thing in life. Always laughing, always singing. Even when things were bad at home, she could find something to be happy about.” She pauses, her voice catching. “She used to make up these elaborate stories about how we’d escape someday, live in a castle by the sea. And I...believed her.”

“You were young,” I point out. “And you were up against someone evil. Someone who should have protected you both, and didn’t.”

“I was old enough to know better,” she says. “I should have helped her plan, shaken off the fantasy—helped her save?—”

I recognize the spiral of self-blame, the endless loop of “should haves” that can consume you if you let them. Without thinking, I find myself reaching for her hand,

lacing our fingers together.

“We’ll find her,” I say, surprising myself with how much I mean it. “Or we’ll find out what happened to her. I promise.”

Sunny looks at me, her expression vulnerable in a way I haven’t seen before. And then she leans in to kiss me again. I lose myself in her—in the warmth of her mouth, the press of her body against mine, the way she sighs my name. Time becomes meaningless, the world outside this room ceasing to exist.

Until a sharp bang at the door shatters the moment.

“Santiago! War room, now!” Lyssa’s voice cuts into our private world as keenly as one of her knives. “And if you see Graves, tell her the fucking same.”

We freeze, staring at each other. Sunny’s eyes are wide with alarm.

“On my way!” she calls back, then lowers her voice to a whisper. “Shit, shit, shit.”

We scramble off the bed, gathering scattered clothes with frantic efficiency. Sunny pulls on her pants, almost falling over in her haste. “What exactly do we tell them? About why I lost control?”

I pause, considering. “Let me handle it,” I say finally. “I’ll stick to my story. You don’t need to say anything.”

“I can’t let you take the fall alone,” she argues, tying her shoes. “Not when it was my fault.”

“Yes, you can.” I move to her, grasping her shoulders firmly. “Listen to me, Sunny. Your mission is to find your sister. You can’t do that if they kick you out of the

Syndicate. Let me handle this. I'm already a monster in their eyes. This won't change anything for me."

What I don't say, what I barely admit to myself, is that I'm afraid—not for myself, but for her. Afraid of what might happen if she loses herself again like she did in that warehouse, if her bright light is dimmed by the same darkness that's consumed me.

I'm afraid because, for the first time in longer than I can remember, I care about someone else's fate more than my own.

## CHAPTER 16

Sunny

I follow Ariadne into the foyer and up the stairs to the war room. Even though we're walking at a normal pace, it feels like we're marching to an execution. Part of me wants to reach out and grab her hand, but we're in the open now and anyone could see. I want to keep whatever is happening between us just for us, for now, and besides, we have business to deal with first. So I keep my hands to myself and try to ignore the lingering warmth on my skin where her fingers touched me just minutes ago.

"Let me do the talking," Ariadne says without turning around, her voice low and flat. "Just follow my lead."

"I really can't let you take the fall for this," I reply, matching my stride to hers as we climb the stairs.

She stops abruptly on the landing, turning to face me with those ice-blue eyes that somehow seem warmer now. "Your mission is to find your sister. My mission is to survive. Let me do what I do best."

Before I can argue again, she continues toward the heavy double doors marked with the brass Cerberus. The three-headed dog of Greek mythology—guardian of the Underworld, and a fitting watcher over the entrance to the Styx Syndicate's inner sanctum.

The doors swing open at Ariadne's push, and I steel myself. Inside, Hadria sits at the head of the long table, flanked by Lyssa and Scarlett on either side. But...no one else is present—not Vanessa or Enzo or any of the recruits, not the other senior members who usually attend briefings. Just these three, waiting for us with expressions that make my stomach drop to my feet.

Hadria's face is a perfect blank, her silvery eyes cold and unreadable. Lyssa looks like she's been carved from stone, her usual intensity dialed up to eleven. And Scarlett—Scarlett's watching us with an expression that mixes disappointment with something I can't quite read. Pity, maybe. Or resignation.

None of this bodes well.

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“Sit,” Hadria commands, gesturing to the two chairs positioned directly next to Scarlett and Lyssa.

We comply, separating to walk up the long table on either side, the heavy wooden chairs scraping against the floor as we take our seats. I try not to fidget, try to project a calm I don't feel. Opposite me, Ariadne sits perfectly still, her back straight, hands folded on the table in front of her. I wonder if she's as nervous as I am.

Doesn't seem like it.

“Do you know why you're here?” Hadria asks, her voice neutral.

“I assume it's about what happened in the warehouse,” Ariadne answers before I can open my mouth.

Hadria nods. “Explain what happened.”

Ariadne doesn't hesitate. “I lost control,” she says simply. “When we found the women in that truck, something in me...snapped. I didn't even realize what I was doing until Santiago pulled me off a very dead body.”

I stare at her profile, caught between admiration for her convincing delivery and frustration that she's still protecting me. I open my mouth to interject, but Hadria raises a hand, silencing me.

“Continue,” she says to Ariadne.



“There’s not much more to tell. I should have maintained better control. It won’t happen again.”

Hadria exchanges a glance with Scarlett, who leans forward, her eyes hard as she focuses on Ariadne. “Dr. Khatri tells me you’ve been skipping your therapy sessions,” Scarlett says.

“I’ve been busy.”

“And you’ve been training Santiago privately, without authorization,” Lyssa adds, her gaze flicking briefly to me. “Breaking protocol.”

I can’t stay silent any longer. “That was my fault,” I interject. “I asked her to train me. She was just?—”

“Quiet, Santiago,” Hadria cuts me off. “We’ll get to you in a moment.”

I clamp my mouth shut, my leg bouncing nervously under the table. This is all wrong. They’re building a case against Ariadne when I’m the one who fucked up. I have to say something, have to make them understand.

“How many more incidents like this should we expect, Ariadne?” Hadria asks, her tone almost conversational. “How many more times will your programming override your judgment?”

“It won’t happen again,” Ariadne repeats.

“You seem very certain of that,” Scarlett says. “Yet you’ve been avoiding the very therapy designed to help you overcome that programming.”

“And cultivating a training relationship outside official channels,” Lyssa adds.

“Creating attachments we can’t monitor or control. And you know why we need to control your training, Sarah.”

The way she said “relationship” and “attachments” makes me wonder if they know about what just happened in my room. But that’s impossible—we left right after, and no one saw us. Still, I feel heat creeping up my neck.

“I’ve followed every other protocol,” Ariadne responds, a hint of tension finally showing in her voice. “I’ve proven my loyalty to the Syndicate at every turn.”

“Yet you remain a danger to yourself and others,” Hadria states. It’s not a question, but a conclusion. “Your actions in the warehouse demonstrate that your conditioning runs deeper than we thought.”

I can’t take it anymore. “That’s not what happened!” The words burst out of me before I can stop them. “Ariadne didn’t lose control. I did.”

All eyes turn to me. Ariadne kicks my ankle under the table, a clear warning to shut up, but I ignore her.

“I’m the one who stabbed that Mancini guard,” I continue, my voice shaking slightly. “Over and over, long after he was dead. Ariadne pulled me off him, not the other way around. She’s covering for me.”

Hadria’s expression doesn’t change, but Lyssa raises an eyebrow. “And why, exactly, would she do that?”

“Because—” I hesitate, glancing at Ariadne, whose face has gone rigid. “Because I have a personal stake in this mission, and she knew I’d be in trouble if you found out.”

“A personal stake,” Hadria repeats. “Elaborate.”

I take a deep breath. This is it—my one chance to tell the truth, to clear Ariadne’s name, to explain why I lost control. Even if it means getting kicked out of the Syndicate, I can’t let her take the fall for my actions.

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“My older sister, Marisol, was trafficked when I was sixteen,” I say, the words coming faster now. “My father sold her to a Chicago ring—and I think it was connected to the one we busted last night. I’ve been looking for her ever since. That’s why I joined the Syndicate. To find her.”

The three women exchange looks I can’t interpret. Ariadne sits motionless opposite me, her jaw tight.

“When we found those women in the warehouse,” I continue, “and none of them was my sister, I just...I lost it. I couldn’t stop.” My voice cracks, but I push on. “Ariadne pulled me off him. She took the blame to protect me, to keep me from getting kicked out before I could find Mari.”

Silence falls over the room. I look between the three senior members, trying to gauge their reactions. Hadria’s expression remains inscrutable. Lyssa’s brow is furrowed slightly, and Scarlett is watching me with what might be sympathy—or might be calculation.

“I understand if you want to kick me out,” I finish, my hands clenched into fists under the table. “But don’t punish Ariadne for something she didn’t do. She was just trying to help me.”

“That’s very noble of you, Santiago,” Hadria says finally. “Taking the blame at the eleventh hour.”

“It’s not a gesture,” I insist. “It’s the truth.”

“It’s a lie,” Ariadne counters firmly. “Santiago is merely trying to protect me, but the responsibility is mine.”

“Well,” Hadria says, leaning back in her chair, “we have a situation where both of you claim to be responsible. How interesting.”

Scarlett and Lyssa exchange glances, and I get the distinct impression they’re communicating something without words.

Ariadne straightens her spine, her expression hardening. “I am prepared to accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate.”

A hint of something—perhaps amusement—crosses Hadria’s face. “Yes, I’m sure you are. And I have decided on your punishment.” She pauses, and my stomach drops. “I think you’ll find it particularly difficult to bear.”

Ariadne’s face betrays nothing, but I see her knuckles whiten where her hands are clasped on the table.

“Group therapy,” Hadria announces. “Led by Dr. Khatri. And you’ll be joined by Scarlett...” She pauses, letting the moment stretch. “And the woman who calls herself Katy.”

My breath catches. Katy—the woman from Grandmother’s organization who’s been held in the secure wing since Lyssa and Scarlett brought her back from Vegas.

“Do you accept your punishment, Ariadne?” Hadria asks.

The silence that follows is deafening. I look at Ariadne, watching the tiny muscle jumping in her jaw, the tightening around her eyes. For a terrifying moment, I think she’s going to refuse.

Scarlett leans forward, her voice softer than I've ever heard it. "Listen, you're still caught up in ideas of punishments and rewards. But that was Grandmother's game. You know it's not how the Syndicate operates."

Ariadne's eyes close briefly, a soft sigh escaping her. When she opens them again, there's a resignation in her gaze. "I accept," she says quietly.

Relief floods through me, but it's short-lived as Hadria turns her steely gaze in my direction.

"As for you, Santiago," she says, "don't think you're getting off scot-free."

I straighten, bracing myself. "I understand."

"You will also be required to undertake personal therapy with Dr. Khatri," Hadria continues. "However, you will remain on the team going forward—provided you can demonstrate that you will not be a danger to yourself or others. Do you accept these terms?"

For a moment, I'm too stunned to speak. They're not kicking me out. They're not even removing me from active duty. I nod, speechless, then find my voice. "Yes. Yes, of course I accept." I hesitate, then add, "Did...did you hear anything at all about more trafficking victims? About...my sister?"

Something softens minutely in Hadria's expression. "We'll look into it. Johnny de Luca wants us to keep going, to dismantle the Mancini network here in Chicago completely—and the Syndicate has extensive resources, as you know. If she's alive, we'll find her."

"Thank you," I whisper, overwhelmed by the unexpected leniency.

“You’re both free to go,” Hadria says, rising from her chair, signaling the end of the meeting. “But please remember—the Syndicate is meant to be a community, not a place of rivalry or secrecy.”

I stand, legs a little shaky with relief, and see Ariadne doing the same across the table. But before we can turn to leave, she speaks up.

“If all of Grandmother’s protégés are supposed to have group therapy together,” Ariadne asks, a hint of her usual defiance returning, “why won’t Lyssa be attending?”

Lyssa’s face splits into a wolfish grin. “Why the hell would I need therapy?”

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The tension in the room suddenly breaks, a surprised laugh escaping Scarlett. Even Hadria's mouth twitches with what might almost be amusement.

"You're dismissed," she says.

As we turn to leave, I can't help but think that the real reason Lyssa isn't joining the therapy sessions is that she's already accepted her demons—and besides, even Hadria couldn't make the Wolf do something she doesn't want to do.

We exit the war room in silence, the heavy doors closing behind us with a solid thud that feels both final and somehow like a beginning. Ariadne walks ahead of me, her back straight, and I hurry to catch up.

"What just happened in there?" I whisper once we're far enough down the corridor.

Ariadne glances at me, something unreadable in her eyes. "They're giving us both a second chance." She pauses, pulls me in so that my forehead is pressed against hers and adds quietly, "Let's not waste it."

"We won't," I agree, fierce and strong, and I'm rewarded with a genuine smile from Ariadne...and a kiss.

## CHAPTER 17

Sunny

The dining hall at Elysium is busiest in the mornings—the night shift coming off duty,



the day shift fueling up, and those of us caught somewhere in between. The air is thick with the smell of coffee, bacon, and conversations that drop to whispers when certain people walk by.

People like Ariadne and me.

The morning after our second chance, which we celebrated loudly with more orgasms in Ariadne's dorm room last night, I slide into the seat across from her, setting down my tray loaded with pancakes, fruit, and enough syrup to drown a small village. Ariadne has her usual—protein-heavy, no carbs, nothing that could slow her down in a fight. I tried to get her to live a little, but she's still treating her body like it's a weapon that needs constant maintenance.

"You're staring," she says without looking up from her eggs.

"Yeah," I admit, grinning. "I like the view."

A tiny furrow appears between her brows, but the corners of her mouth twitch upward ever so slightly. It's barely a smile by normal standards, but for Ariadne? It's practically a declaration of joy.

I dig into my pancakes, savoring the sweetness. After everything that's happened—the warehouse, the meeting with Hadria, the night with Ariadne—I've learned to appreciate the small pleasures more than ever.

Vanessa and Enzo walk by our table, their whispers barely audible but their side-eyes unmistakable.

"...kept everyone up, fucking all night like a couple of..."

"...can't believe she'd go for that crazy..."

I see Ariadne's shoulders tense fractionally, the only sign that she's heard them too. A wave of protectiveness washes over me. Here we all are, all of us recruits—survivors of unimaginable trauma, trying to figure out how to be human again, and yet these assholes think they have the right to judge.

I lean across the table, close enough to smell the clean scent of Ariadne's soap. "Let's give them something to really blow their minds, huh?" I murmur. "Kiss me."

Ariadne freezes, her fork halfway to her mouth. "Right here and now?"

I nod, holding her gaze. "Why not? Unless you're scared..."

Something flickers in her eyes—challenge accepted. She sets down her fork deliberately, a tiny smile playing at the corner of her mouth, and gives me a slight nod.

I reach for her, my fingers finding the fabric of her t-shirt, and pull her toward me. Her lips meet mine halfway, cool and soft and tasting faintly of coffee. The kiss is brief—just enough to make a point—and there's a gentleness to it that makes my heart skip.

When we pull apart, the dining hall has gone silent. I can feel dozens of eyes on us, but the only ones I care about are Ariadne's, watching me with a mixture of surprise and...something warmer.

Then Elijah, bless him, lets out a whoop and starts clapping from where he's sitting a little further down on our table. Laughter ripples through the room, and just like that, the moment of tension breaks. Conversations resume, people return to their food, and the world continues spinning.

"Well," Ariadne says, picking up her fork again with composure, "that was

effective.”

I laugh, the sound bubbling up from somewhere light and giddy inside me. “Told you. Nothing like giving them what they want to take all the fun out of their gossip.”

She takes a bite of eggs, chewing thoughtfully. “Is that your strategy for everything? Lean into it until it loses power?”

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“Pretty much.” I shrug, oddly pleased that she’s analyzing my actions. “Works for most things. Fear. Pain. Jerks.”

“Hmm.” Her expression turns contemplative. “Not a bad approach.”

“Just so we’re clear,” I say, lowering my voice so only she can hear, “I don’t plan on pretending not to be really into you.” I hold her gaze, making sure she understands. “If that’s going to be a problem...”

“It’s not,” she interrupts, and I think there’s an actual faint blush coloring her cheeks. It’s so unexpected, so human, that I want to reach across the table and kiss her again. “I’m just...not used to this.”

“What, public displays of affection?”

“Any displays of affection,” she corrects, but there’s no bite to her words.

I finish the last of my pancakes, swiping a finger through the remaining syrup. “Well, get used to it, babe. I’m a very affectionate person.” I suck my finger clean of syrup and wink at her.

“I’ve noticed,” she says dryly, but her eyes are bright with amusement.

We finish our breakfast in companionable silence. Around us, the dining hall buzzes with the usual morning activity, but it feels different somehow. Like we’ve claimed our own little bubble in the chaos.

“At least one nice thing will have happened to me today,” Ariadne says as she stacks her plates neatly on her tray. “Since group therapy starts later this morning.” Her voice is flat, but I can see the tension returning to her shoulders. “With Scarlett and Katy. And Dr. Khatri has decided to hold this charade outside, of all places.” She shakes her head slightly. “As if fresh air will magically cure everything.”

“Mine starts after breakfast,” I tell her, trying to keep my tone encouraging. “But Dr. Khatri told me to report to the therapy room.”

Ariadne meets my eyes, and for a moment, I see a flash of concern there. “You’ll be okay?” It’s half statement, half question.

I’m actually looking forward to it. Kind of. I need someone to talk to, someone who isn’t Ariadne. Because a lot of what I want to talk about is Ariadne. How she makes me feel. Whether we can figure things out like I hope we can?—

I cut off that thought. “Always am,” I say with more conviction than I feel. “Anyway, I better get moving. What about you? Going to the gym?”

She nods. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

We stand together, and for a moment, I hesitate. Then I lean in and press a quick kiss to her cheek. “Good luck with your session later.”

She doesn’t pull away, doesn’t flinch. Progress. “You, too.”

We part ways at the dining hall exit—Ariadne heading toward the training wing, me toward the administrative section where Dr. Khatri’s office is located. My stomach churns with nervous energy as I walk, and I find myself wishing I’d gone lighter on the syrup.

The hallway leading to the therapy room is quiet, the soft carpet muffling my footsteps. When I reach Dr. Khatri's door, I pause, taking a deep breath before knocking.

"Come in," calls a voice that isn't Dr. Khatri's.

I push open the door to find not only Dr. Khatri waiting for me but Hadria Imperioli as well. The Boss is standing by the window, her tall figure silhouetted against the morning light. Dr. Khatri sits in her usual chair, clipboard in hand, expression professionally neutral.

"Santiago," Hadria greets me with a slight nod. "Apologies for the unannounced intrusion."

"Boss," I acknowledge, fighting the urge to stand at attention. My heart hammers against my ribs. What is this? Why are they both here?

Dr. Khatri stands, smoothing down her tailored pants. "I'll wait outside to give you two a moment," she says, offering me a reassuring smile that does nothing to calm my nerves. She slips out, closing the door softly behind her.

I stare at Hadria, fear clutching at my throat. "Have you changed your mind?" I ask, hating how small my voice sounds. "Are you kicking me out after all?"

"No," Hadria says, her voice gentler than I've ever heard it. "No, it's nothing like that. Please, sit down."

I sink into one of the armchairs, perching on the edge like I might need to flee at any moment. Hadria takes the seat opposite me, her posture perfect as always, but there's something in her gray eyes that looks almost...human.

“Sunny,” she says, and the use of my first name sends a fresh wave of unease through me. “We’ve been looking into your sister, Marisol.”

Hope and dread war in my chest. “You found something?”

Hadria takes a breath, and I know. I know before she says the words.

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“According to evidence we found at the warehouse, and information extracted from the Mancini soldier we captured...it’s likely that Marisol is no longer alive.”

The world seems to tilt beneath me. I’ve spent so much time searching, hoping, keeping the flame of her memory alive. The possibility of her death has always existed in some dark corner of my mind, but I’ve refused to give it space, refused to believe.

“How?” I manage to ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“The records indicate she was supposed to be transported from Chicago to New York after the initial sale,” Hadria says, each word measured and careful. “There was an incident during transport of her and some other women—an attempted escape. The guards responded with excessive force, and as far as we can tell...well, it seems that the entire group was killed.”

My vision blurs.

“I’m so sorry, Sunny.”

I don’t hear her. All that time when I was still desperately searching. While I was beating myself up for not looking hard enough, for not being smart enough to find her.

She was already gone.

A sound escapes me—not quite a sob, more a gasp of pain. I curl forward, arms



wrapping around my middle as if I could hold myself together through sheer force.

“I should have been there,” I whisper. “I should have helped her. I should have?—”

“No,” Hadria cuts me off, her voice firmer now. “What happened to your sister was not your fault. The blame lies with the men who took her, who hurt her.”

I look up at her through tear-blurred eyes. “But she died alone, thinking I abandoned her.”

“You don’t know that.” Hadria leans forward, her gaze intense. “And if Marisol knew you like we know you, Sunny, then her last thoughts of you would have been nothing but happy. That counts for something.”

I wipe my eyes roughly with the back of my hand. “Does it, though?”

“Yes,” Hadria says with such conviction that I almost believe her. “But Sunny, I’ll understand if you don’t want to continue working on this operation. If you need time, or if you want a different assignment?—”

“No,” I interrupt, straightening my spine. The initial shock is hardening into something colder, something sharper. “I want to stay on this. I need to see it through.”

Grief is a heavy thing, but the desire for justice? It’s lighter. And it will give me wings.

“I need to honor her,” I continue, my voice steadier now. “I couldn’t save her. But maybe I can save someone else’s sister.”

Hadria studies me for a moment. Then she reaches out and places a hand on my

shoulder—a gesture so unexpected that I nearly flinch.

“The Styx Syndicate is incredibly proud to have you,” she says quietly. “And I’m proud of you, too.”

Despite my grief, I feel a warmth spreading through my chest at her words. “Thank you,” I manage.

She nods once, then withdraws her hand. “Do you want me to ask Dr. Khatri to come in? Or would you prefer to reschedule?”

The thought of talking about this now, of analyzing my feelings and processing my grief under the sympathetic gaze of Dr. Khatri, makes my skin crawl. What I need is space. Air. Room to breathe around this new reality.

“I...think I need some time,” I say. “Can I reschedule?”

“Of course.” Hadria stands. “Take whatever time you need. I’ll let the doctor know your decision.”

I rise too, suddenly desperate to be outside. I think of Ariadne mentioning that her therapy session would be held in the gardens, and something in me yearns for that—for open sky, for growing things, for the reminder that life continues even in the face of death.

“I might take a walk in the gardens,” I say. “Clear my head.”

Hadria nods. “Nature can be...therapeutic, in its way.” There’s the faintest hint of irony in her voice, as if she’s quoting someone else’s opinion rather than expressing her own.

She moves toward the door, then pauses, turning back to me. “One more thing. Regardless of how this operation proceeds, and whether or not you choose to become a full member, you will always have a home here. I want you to know that.”

That catches me off guard, makes my throat close up dangerously. “Thank you,” I choke out.

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She gives me another slight nod, then slips out of the room, leaving me alone with the weight of this new truth.

Marisol is gone. My big sister, my protector, my hero. Dead. And I've been chasing ghosts.

I sink back into the chair, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes as if I could physically hold back the tears. But they come anyway, hot and fast, streaming down my face as I finally, finally let myself believe what part of me suspected all along.

I'm not sure how long I sit there, letting the grief wash over me in waves. Eventually, though, the tears slow, and I'm left feeling hollow, wrung out, but somehow lighter.

I stand on shaky legs, moving to the small washroom adjacent to the therapy office to splash cold water on my face. In the mirror, my reflection stares back at me—red-eyed, pale, but still standing. Still here.

For her. For Mari. For the girl I was, and the woman I'm trying to become.

I take a deep breath, straighten my shoulders, and head out of the office. I make my way through the mansion, avoiding the busier areas, slipping out a side door into the gardens. The morning air is crisp, the sky a clear, endless blue. I follow the winding paths, letting my feet take me where they will.

Eventually, I find myself in the night garden—the beautiful space Aurora created, with its night-blooming flowers and peaceful atmosphere. It's different in the daytime—quieter, more subdued, the flowers closed tight, waiting for darkness to

reveal their beauty.

I sit on a bench beneath a large tree, letting the dappled sunlight warm my skin. The breeze carries the distant sounds of training exercises, vehicles coming and going, the steady heartbeat of Elysium.

“I’m sorry, Mari,” I whisper to the empty air. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t find you in time.”

A small bird lands on the path near my feet, pecking at something in the gravel. It glances up at me, unafraid, before continuing its search.

Life goes on. Even after loss, even after heartbreak, the world keeps turning. Birds keep singing. Flowers keep growing, opening and closing with the rhythm of day and night.

And I’m still here. I survived. And I owe it to Mari to make that survival mean something. I have a purpose now—not just finding Mari, but honoring her memory by continuing the work to dismantle the trafficking ring. By making sure what happened to her doesn’t happen to others.

I have people here, too. Ariadne, complicated and fierce and proud. And the rest of the Syndicate, too. Hadria offered me a place, resources, a chance to be part of something bigger than my own pain.

It’s not the life I fantasized about when I was a kid. But maybe it’s a life worth living anyway.

I close my eyes, turning my face up as I lean back against the tree, and let myself imagine Mari watching over me, finally at peace.

But the peace is broken a few moments later by a shout of warning, and I get to my feet, startled. It comes again. Something's going on—something is wrong.

Instinct takes over and I run toward the sounds of fear.

## CHAPTER 18

Ariadne

The rhythmic thud of my fists against the heavy bag echoes through the empty gym. Left, right, left—each impact sends a satisfying jolt up my arms. Sweat trickles down my spine, soaking the back of my sports bra. My muscles burn, but I push harder. Physical pain has always been easier to process than the emotional kind.

Especially the kind of emotions Sunny Santiago has stirred up in me.

Sex was just another weapon in Grandmother's arsenal, another way to control and manipulate. A skill to be mastered, like knife work or hand-to-hand combat. Clinical. Calculated.

With Sunny, it's anything but. And it's not just a physical thing, either. With her, I feel everything. The gentleness of her touch. The fire in her eyes. The way she gasps and pants...

And I keep thinking I'll ruin it, say the wrong thing or let my darkness seep out and poison what little light she's managed to coax into my life. I've never had anything worth keeping before. I don't know how to hold something without breaking it.

But Sunny doesn't seem to mind. She's taking me in stride, even kissing me in full view just before at breakfast.

I wish I could have her approach to life, because this first session of group therapy is fast approaching. My punishment, Hadria called it.

And she wasn't wrong. It will feel like punishment.

I deliver a vicious kick to the bag, making it swing wildly on its chain. Pain shoots through my ankle—I've been at this too long, pushing too hard. But I can't stop. If I stop, I'll have to think, and thinking only leads to?—

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Someone's watching me.

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I don't need to turn around to know who it is. Her presence has a weight to it, an energy I've been attuned to since our days in Grandmother's house.

"Scarlett," I say, steadying the bag and turning to face the doorway.

Scarlett leans against the frame, arms crossed over her chest. Her hazel eyes track my movements with the assessment of a fellow predator. "Mind if I come in?" she asks, though she's already stepping into the gym.

I shrug, reaching for my water bottle. But I don't relax my stance. Old habits die hard, and I'm not stupid enough to forget about the time she nearly beat me to death. My ribs remember, even if we're supposed to be on the same side now.

And we're alone in the room. "What do you want?" I ask, taking a swig of water.

Scarlett gestures to the bench at the side. "To talk."

"We'll be talking plenty soon enough."

"Please," she says firmly.

I hesitate, then follow her to the bench. We sit with enough space between us for another person to fit—a neutral zone. Up close, I can see the changes in her. The wild rage that once consumed her has been tamed, channeled into something more controlled. More dangerous, perhaps.

I wonder if she sees changes in me too.



“So,” I say when the silence stretches too long. “Talk.”

Scarlett meets my gaze directly. “I’m hoping group therapy might actually work.”

“In what sense?”

Scarlett takes a breath. “Healing. For both of us.”

A memory flashes—a young man with Scarlett’s eyes, pleading. The wet sound his body made when my knife sank in. The way his blood felt, sticky and warm on my hands.

“You think therapy will make it all better?” I keep my voice neutral, though my heart pounds against my ribs like it wants to escape.

“I think nothing will make it all better,” Scarlett says quietly. “My brother is gone. You took him from me.” Her words are factual, not accusatory, which somehow makes them worse. “But we’re still here. And I’ve done terrible things since then. I nearly killed you with my bare hands. But we both have to live with what we’ve done—and I’m tired of carrying all these heavy memories between us.”

I look away, unable to hold her gaze. For years, Adam Fletcher had been nothing more than a mission to me. A name crossed off a list. I’d never allowed myself to think of him as someone’s brother, someone’s everything. The shame of it burns in my gut.

“But what about Katy?” I ask, desperate to change the subject. “You really think she can change?”

“I think if you and I can change, anyone can,” she says. “And in Katy, I see someone capable of more than what Grandmother made her. I have to. The violence and hatred

has to stop,” Scarlett says softly. “Or it will just go round and round, endless and pointless.”

I swallow, finding my throat unexpectedly tight. “And you really think Dr. Khatri and her fucking therapy circle is going to accomplish that?”

“I think it’s a start.” Scarlett shifts on the bench, turning more fully toward me. “Look, I didn’t come here to reopen old wounds. I just wanted you to understand that the therapy wasn’t actually Hadria’s idea. It was mine. My hope for moving forward. It’s my hope for Katy, too. And besides, Lyssa thinks she might actually be useful, if she can get past it.”

“Whatever. I mean, I have to be there, right?” But it’s not a dismissal. It’s acceptance.

We sit in silence for a moment. “It was the way you look at Santiago that made us realize things were turning around for you,” Scarlett says finally.

I stiffen. “What the hell does that mean?”

Scarlett gives a half-smile. “You broke protocol to train her. You covered for her after the warehouse incident. And then...we saw the way you looked at her in that meeting.”

Heat flushes my cheeks. “I was protecting a promising recruit.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” Scarlett’s tone is teasing, but her eyes are serious. “It’s a good thing, you know. The ability to form bonds, to care about someone besides yourself. It’s one of the reasons Hadria agreed to the group therapy suggestion.” Scarlett’s expression softens slightly. “Whatever’s between you and Sunny is your business. But for what it’s worth...I hope you don’t push her away out of fear.”

“Fear?” I echo, an edge creeping into my voice.

“Fear that you don’t deserve happiness. Fear that everything you touch turns to ash.”  
Scarlett’s gaze is knowing, too knowing. “I lived in that fear for a very long time.”

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I think of Sunny—her relentless optimism, her determination to see the good in everything. The way she looks at me like I’m something more than I see in myself. “It’s complicated,” I say at last.

Scarlett actually laughs at that. “You’re telling me. Try falling for the woman who saved your life after you tried to kill each other—multiple times. Now that’s complicated.”

I can’t help the small smile that tugs at my lips. “You and Lyssa do have a unique relationship.”

“That’s one word for it.” Scarlett’s expression grows serious again. “I won’t pretend it’s been easy here for me. Some days the past is so heavy I can barely breathe. But I’ve learned there can be joy in between the hard moments. Pride in becoming something more than what was done to us.”

Her words stir something in me—not hope, exactly, but perhaps a distant relation to it.

“I’m not sure I know how to be anything else,” I admit quietly.

“Neither did I, at first,” Scarlett says. “But you’ll figure it out, one day at a time. Sometimes one minute at a time.” She stands, signaling the end of our conversation. “Just...think about it, okay? About giving the therapy a real chance.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

Scarlett hesitates at the door. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry. For what I did to you that day at Grandmother’s house.”

“I’m sorry too,” I say, the words foreign on my tongue. “For Adam.”

She nods, a complicated mix of emotions crossing her face as she looks down for a moment, then up again. “I’ll see you in therapy, then.”

I watch her leave, still marveling at the transformation. This calm, measured woman bears little resemblance to the fury-driven wreck who showed up at Grandmother’s doorstep, hell-bent on vengeance. It’s hard to believe we’re the same people who once circled each other like wolves, waiting for the kill.

If she can change so dramatically...

Maybe I can, too.

I return to the heavy bag, but my rhythm is way off. My thoughts keep drifting to Sunny—her laughing eyes, the warmth of her skin, the way she sees through all my defenses like they’re made of glass. I’ve been so confused, so worried that I’ll only bring her pain in the end. But what if Scarlett is right? And what if Sunny is, too?

What if there’s something other than just darkness inside me?

I deliver one final punch to the bag, my decision crystallizing with the impact. I don’t know if I’m capable of the kind of transformation Scarlett has undergone. I don’t know if I deserve the way Sunny looks at me. But I want to find out.

The ghosts of my past aren’t going anywhere. It’s time I stopped letting them decide my future. I’ll do this group therapy, really do it. Open the fuck up. And then...

Then we'll see what happens.

I stand in the grounds of Elysium, my body tense as I watch Dr. Khatri arrange four chairs in a small circle beneath the shade of a towering elm. The therapy session hasn't even started yet, and I'm already thinking about escape routes.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter.

Scarlett, who arrived moments before me, crosses her arms. "Outdoor therapy is actually backed by scientific research. Something about nature reducing stress hormones. I agreed with Dr. Khatri that it might help."

"I'm sure it works wonders for suburban housewives with anxiety," I snap. "Less effective for brainwashed assassins."

Scarlett's mouth quirks up slightly. "I guess we'll find out. We figured Katy doesn't have much more chance of escaping from the grounds than she does from her cell. Not with the two of us right here—not to mention the rest of the Syndicate."

She has a point. "And Khatri?" I ask skeptically. "If she grabs her?—"

Dr. Khatri, who has apparently been eavesdropping, looks up with a smile. "I am well versed in self-defense, Sarah. In fact, I was trained in it by Lyssa herself."

"It's Ariadne," I say automatically, and then I hesitate. Is it? Am I still Ariadne? "I guess Sarah is also fine," I add grudgingly.

Dr. Khatri just nods. "Well, now we're just waiting for—ah, here she is."

Two guards escort Katy across the lawn, each holding one of her arms. She's not restrained, another seeming concession to the "healing environment." Katy's face is

blank, her movements mechanical, but her eyes are alert, constantly scanning.

I recognize that look. I've worn it myself.

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Scarlett is looking alert, too.

Katy is sat in the chair next to Dr. Khatri. Scarlett takes the seat opposite Katy, which leaves me directly across from the therapist. Just perfect.

“Before we begin,” Dr. Khatri says, “I want to thank you all for agreeing to this session. I know it wasn’t entirely voluntary—” a wry smile touches her lips “—but I believe we can make real progress together.”

Katy stares at a point just past Dr. Khatri’s shoulder. “Is this where we hold hands and sing kumbaya?” Her voice is flat, empty of even the sarcasm her words suggest.

“That comes later,” Scarlett says dryly. “After the trust falls.”

I have to fight the urge to snort, but something about the exchange loosens a knot in my chest. This isn’t just me against Dr. Khatri anymore. We’re all in this discomfort together.

“We’ll start simply,” Dr. Khatri says. “I’d like each of you to share one memory of your time with Grandmother. It doesn’t have to be significant or traumatic—just something that comes to mind.”

Silence falls over our small circle. A light breeze rustles the garden’s night-blooming flowers, carrying their sweet scent. In the distance, I can hear the faint sounds of training from the outdoor course.

“I’ll go first,” Scarlett says suddenly. “When I first arrived at Grandmother’s house,



she gave me a room that was...nice. Clean sheets, a window, even books on a shelf. I thought maybe I'd be safe there." Her voice hardens. "The next morning, she took it all away. Said I hadn't earned comfort yet."

Dr. Khatri nods. "Thank you for sharing, Scarlett. Katy?"

Katy's eyes drift to me, then back to some middle distance. "She used to test us on languages at breakfast," she says finally. "If you got a word wrong, you didn't eat that day."

Another memory surfaces: standing at attention beside the breakfast table, stomach clenching with hunger, watching others eat while Grandmother sipped her tea and observed us like specimens.

"Sarah?" Dr. Khatri prompts gently.

"My bedroom," I say before I can stop myself. "She let me have anything I asked for, once I'd proved myself. But I couldn't bear to think about my bedroom at home. So I asked for everything to be pink. Pink and...girly. Even though that's—that's not me. It's not who I am."

Dr. Khatri opens her mouth to respond, but movement at the edge of the garden catches my attention. My mother approaches, carrying a tray with plastic cups of water.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but the kitchen only just received the request for water to be brought out," she says, her voice gentle.

My jaw tightens, suspicious at once. Of course she would insert herself into this. Of course she would find a way to remind me of our connection, to force her way into my life.

“Thank you, Mrs. Graves,” Dr. Khatri says. “That’s very thoughtful—and I’m sorry my request was so late.”

My mother just nods, and sets the tray on a small table beside our circle. But then her eyes find mine, hopeful, tentative. It’s the same look she always has—like she’s waiting for me to suddenly transform back into the daughter she lost.

But in that moment, something shifts. I see not just the irritating woman who won’t leave me alone, but someone who has been waiting for me to come home for years. Someone who never stopped looking, never stopped hoping. Someone who loved me enough to keep a teddy bear for a daughter who might never want it again.

And if I want to heal, to truly move forward, I need to stop pushing her away. She’s not just a reminder of what I lost—she’s a bridge to what I could be.

“Thank you,” I say softly, taking one of the cups.

My mother gives me her usual warm smile, and for once I smile back.

But Katy is looking between my mother and me with dawning understanding. Before I can speak, before I can take even the smallest movement, she pounces.

It happens in a blur. One moment she’s seated, the next she’s behind my mother, strong fingers encircling her throat. My mother’s eyes widen in shock and fear.

“Nobody move,” Katy says, her voice suddenly clear and cold. Gone is the listless prisoner; in her place stands Grandmother’s perfect creation. “Or I snap her neck.”

Dr. Khatri freezes, clipboard slipping from her fingers. Scarlett and I are both on our feet, bodies tense, eyes locked on Katy.

“What are you doing?” Scarlett asks, her voice carefully controlled.

“Getting out of here,” Katy replies. “You and Ariadne are going to escort me to the garage. You’re going to give me a motorcycle. Then you’re going to let me ride out of here.” Her fingers tighten slightly, making my mother gasp. “Or this bitch dies.”

I keep my face blank, my breathing even. I could reach her in two seconds. Scarlett would move at the same time. But Katy’s hands are positioned perfectly—one quick twist and my mother’s neck would break before either of us could stop her.

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“Let her go,” Scarlett says. “Take one of us instead.”

Katy’s laugh is hollow. “How noble. But no. She’s perfect leverage—and I can see how much you all care about her. Now back up,” Katy snaps. “Both of you.”

Scarlett and I look at each other. And then her face hardens, and I feel mine do the same.

My mother’s eyes find mine, her face pale but surprisingly calm. There’s something in her gaze I’ve never seen before—or perhaps never allowed myself to see. Not just love, but strength. Trust.

“It’s alright, Sarah,” she whispers, and I realize she’s speaking to me. Even now, with death’s fingers around her throat, she’s trying to comfort me.

And suddenly, with perfect clarity, I know what I have to do.

## CHAPTER 19

Ariadne

My muscles are coiled tight, ready to spring. Time seems to slow as I take a step forward.

I keep my face expressionless. Showing fear will only make things worse.

“Back up!” Katy snaps.

I let my muscles relax, dropping the ready stance that Katy would instantly recognize as a threat. I modify my expression—not completely blank as Grandmother taught me, but with a hint of boredom, of frustration.

“Listen, Katy, not only will I help you get out of here,” I say, infusing my voice with casual dismissal, “I want to come with you.”

Katy’s eyes narrow, suspicion flashing across her face. “What game are you playing?”

“No game,” I reply with a casual shrug. “You think I’m happy here? Everyone treats me like I’m some kind of freak.” I gesture to the arranged chairs with open contempt. “This was the last straw. Group therapy? As if talking about our feelings will change anything.”

Scarlett catches on immediately. I see the shift in her posture, the contempt and anger crossing her face as she turns to me. “You’re turning traitor?” she demands. “After all we’ve done for you?” She’s good—Grandmother would have been proud of her performance. Just as she would have been proud of mine.

“I don’t believe you,” Katy says, but I can see the first hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

“You should. I’ve got nothing left to lose,” I answer, letting bitterness creep into my voice. “They’ll never trust me here. Not really. I’m just someone they keep around because I’m useful. But the moment I’m not...” I draw a finger across my throat.

Scarlett’s face twists with perfectly orchestrated disgust. “I should have killed you long ago,” she spits. “Always knew you were still Grandmother’s creature.”

I laugh, channeling the coldness I’ve worked so hard to leave behind. “You’re probably right,” I agree, my voice light and deadly. “But you didn’t, and now here we

are.” I turn back to Katy, moving a fraction closer. “So what do you say? The two of us could do some real damage out there.”

She’s wavering. I can see it in the way her eyes dart between us, calculating the odds. She wants to believe me—needs to believe me, really, if she wants any chance of making it out of here alive.

“Clear the way to the garage,” I bark at Scarlett, who glares daggers at me before stalking toward the main house.

I take another careful step toward Katy and my mother. “Don’t try anything,” Katy warns.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I reply.

And that’s when I feel it—that prickling sensation at the back of my neck. Someone is watching us.

I glance over my shoulder and my blood freezes.

Sunny.

She stands at the edge of the garden, her face a mask of shocked disbelief. My heart stutters in my chest. This wasn’t part of the plan. She wasn’t supposed to be here, wasn’t supposed to see this, to hear the terrible things I’m saying.

For a split second, panic threatens to overwhelm me. If Sunny gives us away, if she reacts with anything but absolute belief in this fiction we’re spinning, my mother is dead.

I need to bring her into the performance without missing a beat.

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I sneer at her, praying Sunny will understand. “Well, look who’s here,” I drawl. “The Syndicate’s number two recruit. Pity you’re nowhere near my level. You might actually be able to do something if you were.” I infuse my voice with as much derision as I can muster, hating myself for the flash of hurt that crosses her face. “This one can stay,” I tell Katy in a quieter voice, as though Sunny isn’t even worth addressing. “She can help us find the right key for the bikes at the garage.”

I glance back at Sunny, willing her to see past the cruelty of my words to the desperation beneath. Play along. Please.

She swallows hard, and for a terrible moment, I think she’s going to challenge me. “I don’t think—” she begins.

“That’s right, you don’t,” I cut her off, harsher than I intend. “For once in your life, just do as you’re told.”

She ducks her head, and I hate myself for putting that defeated look on her face. “Fine,” she mutters. But then she looks up at me through her lashes, just for a second, and relief floods through me. She’s understood. She’s playing her part.

My mother’s eyes flick between us, and I see comprehension in her eyes. She relaxes slightly in Katy’s grip—a minuscule tell that I’m sure only I notice.

“Let me handle this, Dr. Khatri,” Scarlett tells the psychologist, who nods after only a brief pause.

“Let’s move,” Katy orders, dragging my mother along with her. “And if anyone tries

anything, she dies. Understood?”

We all nod, and our strange procession begins to move toward the mansion, leaving Dr. Khatri behind us. Scarlett and I lead the way, Sunny behind us, and Katy and my mother bringing up the rear. Every step feels like walking through a minefield. One wrong move, and it all ends in blood.

As we enter the mansion, Scarlett bellows at anyone we encounter. “Clear the way! Now!”

People scatter like startled birds. I keep close to Katy, waiting for an opportunity. But her grip on my mother never wavers, and her attention never fully leaves me. She may be buying my act, but she’s not stupid.

The garage is dimly lit and cavernous, the ceiling low enough to create a sense of claustrophobia. Rows of vehicles wait in orderly lines—the Syndicate’s transportation fleet. Scarlett leads us to where the motorcycles are kept and then stops.

“You can let Mrs. Graves go now,” she says calmly. “You’ve got what you wanted.”

Katy tightens her grip, making my mother wince. White-hot rage pulses through me, but I force it down. Not yet. Not yet.

“The keys first,” Katy demands.

“I’ll get them,” Sunny says, moving toward the lockbox mounted on the wall.

This is it. My hand inches toward the knife concealed at my lower back, fingers wrapping around the familiar handle. Scarlett meets my eyes, and I give her the slightest nod. We’ve worked together before, trained together. She knows what I’m



capable of. And right now, that's exactly what I need.

Sunny holds up a key, letting it dangle from her fingers. "This one'll get you to the state line before you need to refuel."

I watch Katy's eyes track the keys, and then she gives me the split-second opening I've been waiting for. Sunny throws the keys in a high arc and Katy's gaze follows them instinctively, her attention shifting just enough.

Now.

I slice my knife down Katy's forearm, causing her left hand to release as she gives a howl of pain. At the same time, Scarlett's knife is spinning fast, catching and yanking the sleeve of her other arm, pulling her right hand away and freeing my mother completely.

My mother stumbles forward and Sunny darts in to pull her clear. Relief floods through me—she's safe, she's unharmed—but there's no time to dwell on it. I close the distance to Katy.

"Your mistake," I say, my voice deadly quiet as I sink my blade into her chest, "was threatening my mother."

Katy gasps, blood bubbling at the corner of her mouth. Confusion clouds her eyes as she stares at me. "Grandmother?" she says. And then the light fades from her eyes. Her body slumps, moving only when I pull free the knife.

It's over. She's dead. My mother is safe.

So why can't I stop shaking?

I stare down at my hands, covered in Katy's blood, and watch with detached fascination as they tremble uncontrollably and I drop the knife with a clatter. The tremors travel up my arms, into my shoulders, down my spine. I can't make them stop.

I've killed so many times I've lost count. This shouldn't be affecting me like this. But suddenly all I can see is the blood, all I can feel is the warm stickiness coating my skin.

"Sarah!" My mother has broken away from Sunny, is heading toward me.

I move forward instinctively, raising up my hands as though to push her away. "No—the blood—" I begin, unable to tear my gaze away from the crimson coating my fingers.

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She wraps her arms around me, heedless of the blood. “As if I care about that,” she says fiercely. “You’re my daughter.”

For months, I’ve pushed her away. I’ve rejected her attempts to reach me, to mother me, to love me. I convinced myself I didn’t need her, didn’t want her, couldn’t bear the reminder of what I’d lost.

But she never stopped trying. Never stopped believing. Never stopped loving the daughter that Grandmother tried to erase.

Something breaks inside me—a dam holding back years of grief and rage and loss. Tears burn my eyes, spill down my cheeks. My arms come around her of their own accord, clinging to her like a lifeline as sobs tear themselves from my throat.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, the words inadequate for the magnitude of what I feel. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

Sorry for pushing her away. Sorry for the daughter she lost. Sorry for the blood on my hands and the ice in my veins and the darkness in my soul.

We sink to the ground together, my legs no longer able to support me. My mother cradles me against her, one hand stroking my hair, murmuring soft words of comfort that I don’t deserve but desperately need.

“It’s alright, sweetheart. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

Through a blur of tears, I see Sunny and Scarlett draping a car cover over Katy’s

body. I register the arrival of Hadria and Lyssa, the quiet efficiency of their damage control.

But all of it feels distant, secondary to the storm raging out of me.

My mother holds me through it all, solid and warm and real. She doesn't flinch from my tears, doesn't pull away from my bloodstained hands, doesn't try to shush my broken apologies.

She just holds me, anchoring me as I shatter and begin, slowly, to reassemble into something new.

At last, through the chaos in my mind, I become aware of movement at the edge of my vision. The others are backing away, giving us space. My eyes find Sunny's across the garage. There's no judgment in her gaze, no fear, no revulsion. Only understanding and something softer that makes my heart contract painfully in my chest. I manage a tremulous nod of thanks, not trusting my voice. She nods back, those expressive eyes telling me everything she's not saying out loud.

My mother shifts, adjusting her position on the hard concrete floor, but her arms never loosen their hold on me. I rest my head against her shoulder, feeling the steady rhythm of her heartbeat against my ear.

For the first time since Grandmother took me, I let myself be a daughter again.

## CHAPTER 20

Sunny

Later that day, I've finally stopped shaking long enough to shower and pull on fresh clothes—just sweatpants and an old tank top—and the sky outside has darkened to

the deep indigo of early evening. My hair is still damp, laying heavy down my back as I sit on the edge of the bed in my room, not sure what to do with myself.

I was debriefed shortly after...well, everything that happened. And then Dr. Khatri spoke to me for a while, making sure I was—in her words—not in crisis mode. The truth is, I was too dazed to feel much of anything except worried for Ariadne.

And I haven't seen her since I left the garage.

A soft knock at my door startles me. My nerves are still raw, I guess. But I force myself to relax. This is Elysium. I'm safe here. This is myhome.

And when I open the door, Ariadne stands on the threshold.

She looks...different. Her short hair is still slightly wet from what must have been her own recent shower. She's dressed simply in black jeans and a dark gray henley, the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. But it's her face that catches me off guard. The rigid control that usually defines her features has softened, the permanent tension around her eyes eased. She looks younger. More human.

"Hey," I say, suddenly aware of my own disheveled appearance.

"Hey." Her voice is quiet, a little rough around the edges. "Can I come in?"

I step aside, gesturing her in. "Of course."

She enters and stands in the center of my small room, hands shoved into her pockets. For a moment, neither of us speaks. I'm not sure what to say. So many questions crowd my mind, but I don't want to push her, not after what she's been through today.

“I spent the day with my mother,” she says finally, breaking the silence. “Talking. About...well, everything.”

I sink onto the edge of my bed. “That’s good, right?”

A small smile touches the corner of her mouth. “Yeah. It’s good. Hard, but good.” She runs a hand through her damp hair. “Dr. Khatri was there for some of it. She mentioned she’d talk to you, too.” I give a nod. “I wanted to come see you. To say thank you.”

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“For what?”

“For playing along today. For understanding what I was doing with Katy without me having to explain. For—” She hesitates, then continues, “For not believing the things I said to make it convincing.”

The memory of her coldness during that performance sends a chill through me, even though I know it wasn’t real. “You were pretty convincing.”

“I learned from the best,” she says, and something dark flickers across her face. Then she shakes her head as if to clear it. “I’m so sorry for the things I said. The way I spoke to you.”

“I knew you didn’t mean it.”

Her eyes meet mine, searching. “Did you?”

“Oh, yes,” I say firmly. “I know you now, Ariadne. The real you.”

She swallows, clearly moved by my certainty. “Would you...would you take a walk with me? I’d like to clear my head.”

“Lead the way,” I say, grabbing a hoodie and slipping on my shoes.

We walk in companionable silence through the corridors of the dorms, nodding to the few recruits we pass. News of what happened with Katy has clearly spread—I can see it in the way people look at Ariadne: respect and wariness.

When we step outside, the twilight air is cool but not cold, carrying the scent of dew-dampened grass and the night-blooming flowers of Aurora's garden as they begin to open. We follow the winding path automatically, neither of us suggesting a destination but both heading for the night garden as if by unspoken agreement.

It's just peaceful here. The white jasmine glows softly in the dusk, its sweet perfume carried on the gentle breeze. The garden is empty at this hour, everyone else at dinner or occupied with evening tasks.

We find a bench and sit, close but not touching. Ariadne leans forward, elbows on her knees, staring at a point in the middle distance.

"My mother called me Sarah," she says suddenly. "And for the first time, I didn't correct her."

I glance at her, surprised. "Does that mean you're...?"

"I don't know. With her, it feels right. With everyone else..." She shakes her head. "I've been Ariadne for so long. I'm not sure if I know how to be Sarah again."

"You don't have to choose right away. You can be both for a while. Figure it out as you go."

She nods, considering this. "Maybe." After a pause, she adds, "I told her about you."

My heart skips a beat. "Oh? What did you tell her?"

She looks down. "That you're...important to me. That you see past all the walls I put up."

"I like what I see when I look past those walls."



Ariadne turns to face me fully. “Sunny...Hadria told me about your sister. That they found evidence she was...” She doesn’t finish the sentence, but I know what she’s trying to say.

The grief rises in me again, a wave I’ve been fighting to keep at bay since Hadria broke the news. “Yeah,” I manage. “Mari’s gone. Has been for a while.”

“I’m so sorry.” Her hand creeps across the bench to cover mine.

“Me too.” I take a shaky breath. “All this time, I’ve been searching, hoping...and she was already gone. I just didn’t want to believe it.”

“Will you tell me about her?” Ariadne asks softly. “If it helps,” she adds.

I think it will, and so I do. I tell her about Mari’s laugh, about how she used to sing me to sleep when our parents were fighting. About the way she stood up to our father, even when it meant taking a beating meant for me. About the dreams she had—college, a career, a home with a garden where we could both live in peace.

“She was my whole world,” I say, voice thick with unshed tears. “And when our father sold her, it felt like...like someone had ripped out everything that mattered.”

Ariadne doesn’t offer empty platitudes or meaningless comfort. Instead, she reaches out and pulls me into a tight embrace. Her arms are strong around me, solid and real. I press my face into the crook of her neck, breathing her in, letting her warmth seep into me.

We stay like that for a long moment, holding each other in the quiet of the garden. When we finally pull apart, I feel lighter somehow, as if sharing the weight of my grief has made it more bearable.

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“Do you think it ever goes away?” I ask. “The pain?”

Ariadne considers this. “No,” she says honestly. “But I think maybe we learn to build around it. Create new connections, new memories. Not to replace what we lost, but to make room for joy alongside the grief.”

The wisdom in her words surprises me—not because I doubt her intelligence, but because it’s so human, so emotionally intuitive. This is the woman beneath the ice, the one Grandmother tried to bury beneath layers of conditioning and control.

“Is that what you’re doing with your mom? Building something new?”

She nods. “I guess I’m trying to. It’s not easy. There’s so much lost time between us, so many years we can’t get back. But she...she never stopped loving me. Even when she thought I was dead. And even when I came back and pushed her away.” Her voice catches slightly. “I don’t know if I deserve that kind of love, but I’m starting to think maybe I should try to be worthy of it.”

“You are worthy of it,” I say fiercely.

A small smile touches her lips. “You always see the best in people.”

“Not all people. But you, definitely.”

Our eyes meet, and that electric thing passes between us. Ariadne stands suddenly, restless energy emanating from her. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s go to the training room.”

“You want to train? Now?” I laugh.

“I need to move. To process some of this energy.”

I understand that feeling all too well. There’s something about physical exertion that helps clear the mind, makes emotional turmoil more manageable. So I follow her into the mansion and down to the training room, which is blissfully empty at this dinner hour.

We don’t speak as we warm up, stretching muscles still tense from the day’s events. Then we move to the mats, circling each other in a familiar dance. There’s no real aggression in our movements—this isn’t about dominance or proving a point. It’s about communication, about speaking in a language all our own, a language that feels safer than words.

Ariadne strikes first, a testing jab that I easily block. I counter with a low kick that she sidesteps with fluid grace. We build a rhythm, movements growing more complex but never losing that sense of controlled conversation.

“You’re getting better,” she says, dodging a combination I throw at her.

“I had a good teacher.”

A smile flickers across her face as she feints left, then sweeps my legs out from under me. I go down but roll immediately back to my feet, laughing despite myself.

“Still got some tricks up your sleeve, I see.”

“Always.”

We continue like this, trading blows that never quite connect with full force, testing

and challenging each other without truly trying to win. It's different from our previous sparring sessions—no audience to perform for, no point to prove. Just the two of us, moving together in a dance that feels increasingly intimate.

At some point, the dynamic shifts. A block turns into a touch that lingers. A grip softens from restraint to caress. Our breathing quickens, but not just from exertion. When Ariadne pins me against the wall, her forearm across my collarbone, neither of us moves to break the hold.

“You’re the only person who sees me,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “The real me. Not the weapon Grandmother created. Not the broken girl my mother lost. Just...me.”

“I do,” I tell her truthfully. “And you’re the only one who saw the pain underneath all my jokes and laughter.”

Her eyes search mine, and whatever she finds there seems to satisfy her. She leans in slowly, giving me time to pull away if I want to. But of course I don’t want to. I meet her halfway, capturing her lips with mine in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly deepens into something hungrier, more desperate.

My hands find her waist, pulling her closer until there’s no space left between us. Her body is warm and solid against mine, anchoring me in the present when my thoughts want to scatter like leaves in the wind.

“We should...” I begin, but lose my train of thought as her mouth moves to my neck, tracing a path of fire along my pulse point.

“Shower,” she suggests against my skin. “We’re both sweaty. We could get clean...and dirty, too.”

I laugh breathlessly. “Is that your best line?”

She pulls back enough to look me in the eyes, a rare playfulness dancing in her gaze.  
“Is it working?”

“Uh, yes,” I tell her, tugging her toward the locker rooms. “Hell-fucking-yes.”

### CHAPTER 21

Sunny

The locker room has private shower stalls and I pull Ariadne into the largest one at the end, locking the door behind us.

For a moment, we just look at each other, the reality of what we're about to do hanging between us. This isn't like before—quick, desperate couplings born of adrenaline. This feels deliberate. Meaningful.

“Are you sure?” I ask, needing to hear her say it.

She answers by pulling her henley over her head in one smooth motion, revealing the lean muscle beneath. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

I follow her lead, stripping off my tank top and sweatpants until we're both standing in just our underwear. The vulnerability of the moment makes my heart race. I've never been shy about my body, but there's something different about being seen by Ariadne—really seen, with everything on display.

But when I look at her, I see only desire in her eyes, a hunger that matches my own. She reaches behind her to turn on the shower, and then we're both shedding what little remains of our clothing as steam begins to fill the small space.

The water cascades over our bodies as I press her against the cool tile wall. Her skin is slick beneath my hands, and I can't get enough of touching her, of tracing every

curve and dip of her body that I've only glimpsed before now.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I breathe against her neck, and I feel her shiver despite the heat of the shower.

She doesn't say anything in response—typical Ariadne—but her hands grip my hips, pulling me closer until our bodies are flush against each other. The sensation of her wet skin sliding against mine makes me dizzy with want. I trail my fingers down her stomach, feeling the muscles tense beneath my touch.

"Let me wash you," she says, and the words are more commanding than I expect, raising goosebumps all over me, even though the water is warm. I nod, turning around, expecting her to reach for the shower gel, but instead I feel her hands sliding over my wet skin, massaging my shoulders, working down my back.

"You carry a lot of tension here," she murmurs, her thumbs pressing into knots I didn't even know I had.

I groan, dropping my head forward. "Occupational hazard."

Her hands continue their journey downward, cupping my ass, squeezing gently. Then I hear the snap of a bottle opening, and the scent of vanilla fills the steamy air as she pours shower gel into her palm. Her slick hands return to my shoulders, working the soap into a lather. Then she presses her front against my back and reaches around to soap up my tits.

"Fuck," I whisper as her slippery hands massage my nipples, working them into tight peaks.

"I'll get there," she promises. "But first I'm going to clean every inch of you."

Her hands travel down my stomach, across my hips, and then she's kneeling behind me, her fingers sliding soap along my thighs, my calves. The sensation of her hands working their way back up makes my knees weak. She pays particular attention to the curve where my ass meets my thighs, her soapy hands kneading the flesh with a hunger that makes me gasp. She spreads me open, her slick fingers sliding between my cheeks, circling my asshole with a deliberate pressure that makes my breath catch.

"Is this okay?" she asks, her voice low and husky.

"God, yes," I moan back, bracing my hands against the shower wall.

I melt into her touch, pushing back against her hand. She takes her time, cleaning me thoroughly, and then directs the shower spray all over me to rinse away the soap. I expect her to stand up, but instead I feel her hands on my ass again, spreading me open. The warm water runs down my crack, and I shiver as I feel her breath against my wet skin.

"I want to taste you here," she whispers, and before I can even process what she's saying, her tongue flicks against my asshole.

"Holy fuck," I gasp, my fingers clawing at the tile wall. No one has ever done this to me before, and the sensation is so intense I almost buckle.

Ariadne steadies me with her hands on my hips. "Relax," she says, sounding amused, and then her tongue is circling my rim again, slow and deliberate.

I'm trembling now, caught between embarrassment and overwhelming pleasure. Her tongue is relentless, tracing patterns around my hole before pressing against it more firmly. When she points her tongue and pushes it inside me, I let out a sound I've never heard myself make before—a high, desperate whine that echoes off the shower



walls.

Her tongue pushes deeper, fucking into me with a rhythm that has me panting. I've never felt anything like this—the taboo nature of it, the intensity, the way she's claiming every part of me. Her hands spread my cheeks wider, her thumbs pulling at my asshole to open me up more for her probing tongue.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, my voice breaking. “Oh my God,fuck?—”

She hums against me, the vibration sending shockwaves through my body. Then she pulls back just enough to speak, her breath hot against my sensitive skin.

“You taste so good here,” she says, her voice thick with desire. “So clean, so tight.” Then she's diving back in, her tongue circling my rim before pushing inside again. She lets go of my ass and then I feel her hand sliding up between my thighs, her fingers sliding into my soaking pussy as her tongue continues its assault on my asshole.

I cry out, my hips bucking back against her face and then forward into her hand as she slides two fingers deep inside me. The dual sensation is overwhelming—her tongue circling and probing my tight rim while her fingers fuck my cunt. I'm caught between two points of pleasure, not knowing whether to pushback against her tongue or forward onto her fingers. She solves this dilemma by reaching around with her other hand to find my clit, rubbing tight circles against the swollen bud.

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I whine and moan as she increases her pace, her fingers pumping into me faster as her fingers press against my clit. Her mouth is relentless, her tongue swirling and licking and thrusting into me. The pleasure builds until I'm shaking, my legs barely holding me up—and then I cry out as the orgasm washes over me.

My knees give out, and I slump forward, catching myself against the shower wall. Ariadne stands, her hands stroking my back, and then she pulls me close, holding me while the aftershocks of my orgasm ripple through me. She takes my hand and guides it to her warm, slick pussy, helping me find the spot where she wants to be touched. “Come on, Santiago. Give a little.” She sounds amused. I turn around to watch her as I finger her, let her grind down on the heel of my hand, and her fingers find their way back to my clit again. We stand there with the water thundering around us, staring into each other's eyes as she coaxes another orgasm from me before she finally gives in to her own pleasure, like a shock running through her as she grabs my hand, holding it in place as she rocks through a long, intense climax.

When we finally step out and dry off, I feel both exhausted and exhilarated, wrung out in the best possible way. We dress in companionable silence, stealing glances and small touches as if to reassure ourselves that what happened was real.

“That was...” Ariadne—Sarah?—begins, then shakes her head, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I don't have words for what that was.”

“Really fucking hot?” I suggest, grinning.

She laughs, a sound so rare and precious it makes my heart swell. “That's an understatement.” She finishes lacing up her sneakers, then looks up at me. “And talk

about a workout. I'm starving. We should grab dinner."

"Yeah we should." As we leave the training area, I reach out and take her hand.

She looks down at our intertwined fingers.

"Is...this okay?" I ask.

She nods. "I'm just not...I'm not good at this. But I want to try. With you." She takes a deep breath. "Look, I'm afraid of feeling this much. It goes against everything I was trained to be. But I'm more afraid of not feeling it."

I lace our fingers more firmly together. "We'll figure it out together. One day at a time."

"One day at a time," she echoes, squeezing my hand. She smiles again, and the sight of it fills me with a fierce joy.

But we've barely made it halfway down the corridor when Enzo comes running toward us, his expression urgent.

"Hey!" he calls. "Hadria's called everyone to the war room, right now. Something big's happening."

Ariadne and I exchange a glance, our momentary peace shattered by the intrusion of reality. Without another word, we follow Enzo, our fingers still intertwined as we make our way there. The war room is already packed when we arrive, Hadria sitting on her throne and every other member having taken their seats at the table. The recruits mill around, finding places to stand, and we join them.

"Now that we're all here," Hadria begins, her voice cutting through the murmurs, "I

have an announcement. Thanks to Johnny de Luca's intelligence networks, we've located the final trafficking operation in the Mancini network. The last piece of the puzzle."

A ripple of excitement runs through the room. This is what we've been working toward—the culmination of weeks of effort, of blood and sacrifice.

"They're operating out of a large lakeside estate," Hadria elaborates, her voice carrying easily. "Our sources indicate they're planning a transfer tomorrow night—moving their 'merchandise' to New York."

The clinical way she describes it makes my stomach turn, but I understand the necessity of emotional distance. These kinds of operations require clear heads, not righteous fury—no matter how justified that fury might be.

"So we move tomorrow night," Hadria continues. "Teams will be assigned in the morning briefing. I want everyone rested and prepared. This is our chance to shut down this operation for good."

As the room begins to empty, Hadria catches my eye. "Santiago and Graves—stay behind."

Ariadne and I exchange a glance but remain behind as the others filter out. When the room is empty save for Hadria, Lyssa, Scarlett, and us, Hadria gestures for us to approach.

"Given what happened today to both of you," she says, her voice softer than it was during the briefing, "I'd understand if either of you wanted to sit this one out."

I shake my head immediately. "No. I want to be there. For Mari."

Hadria turns her gaze to Ariadne. “And you?”

Ariadne straightens her spine, her expression resolute. “I’ll be there. Sunny and I...well, we’ll have each other’s backs.”

“And the team’s,” I add quickly. “And I won’t let personal feelings compromise the mission. I won’t...lose control.”

Hadria studies us for a long moment, her gaze moving from our faces to our still-clasped hands and back. Then she nods, seemingly satisfied with what she sees.

“Alright.” She turns to Lyssa. “Add them to Delta. I want our best on point for this.”

Lyssa nods. “Already planned on it, Boss.”

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As we turn to leave, Scarlett steps forward. “Get some rest,” she advises us, her voice gentle. “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

As we leave the war room, I take Ariadne’s hand again. It feels so natural, like we should always have been like this: lovers instead of rivals.

“Are you really okay with this?” Ariadne asks quietly as we head downstairs. “I’ll believe you if you tell me you are—but I want to make sure.”

I squeeze her hand. “I’ve never been more certain of anything. This is what I came here to do. And now, I have something Mari never had—backup.” I stop and look into her eyes. “We do this together. Right? No matter what happens, we face it side by side.”

She nods, her expression softening. “Side by side.”

## CHAPTER 22

Ariadne

The armored SUV carries us through Chicago’s North Shore, and I check my weapons methodically—primary, backup, blades. The familiar ritual centers me, brings clarity.

“Five minutes to target,” our driver announces.

Beside me, Sunny is still, focused, but I can feel the tension radiating from her. She’s been different since Hadria told her about her sister—grief is there, obviously, but

also a new kind of resolve. I've watched her channel her pain into purpose. It's a transformation I understand all too well, and I'm going to make sure it makes her stronger instead of...

Well. What happened to me.

My pinky finger brushes against hers on the seat between us. Not quite holding hands—we're professionals on a mission—but I hope it's enough to remind her I'm here. That she's not alone.

"You good?" I ask quietly.

"I'm good," she replies, and I can tell she means it. Mostly.

The vehicle slows as we approach our staging area, concealed from the main road by dense foliage. Zach and Elijah sit across from us, while Mario drives and Lyssa rides shotgun, dividing her attention between the tactical overlay and our surroundings. The other vehicles arrive shortly after, and Hadria emerges from the lead vehicle, gathering us for the final briefing. Twenty-eight heat signatures, ten likely victims, the rest security. Delta team—Lyssa, Zach, Elijah, Sunny and me—will enter through the pool area, secure the women, clear the path for extraction. The other teams have their assignments to take out security.

"Rules of engagement as briefed," Hadria concludes. "Kill on sight. And make no mistake—these are dangerous people who will kill you without hesitation."

As the group disperses, I catch Sunny's arm. "Remember."

"I remember," she assures me. "I'm your anchor, you're mine."

My mouth twitches in what might almost be a smile. "And no heroics."

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

For a brief moment, we’re just us—two broken people who somehow fit together. Then Lyssa calls for Delta team to go, and we slip into our tactical mindset.

We approach from the west, using the landscaping as cover. Zach disables the security sensors on the perimeter wall, and we scale it silently, dropping into the trimmed shrubbery on the other side.

The pool area is elaborate—infinity edge so that the pool seems to merge into the lake beyond, expensive loungers, fully stocked bar. Nothing but the best for these monsters.

“Two targets, northwest corner,” Lyssa whispers.

I spot them—low-level muscle, not particularly alert. Lyssa signals with two fingers. Sunny and I move in perfect synchronization. I take the guard on the right, quickly putting a silenced bullet in his brain before helping him fall quietly to the ground as Sunny does exactly the same with her target.

The back entrance yields to Zach’s tech and Lyssa’s expertise. We enter through the kitchen—industrial appliances gleaming in the darkness, faint smells of cooking lingering in the air. Elijah stays in the shadows by the glass sliding doors, watching to make sure we have no one sneaking up on us.

“Delta team, status?” Hadria’s voice in our comms.

“We’re in,” Lyssa reports. “Proceed.”

We move methodically through the first floor—dining room, living area, study. All the trappings of legitimacy, meant to disguise what happens upstairs.



“Heat signatures still concentrated on the second floor,” Zach confirms. “East wing.”

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We ascend the main staircase slowly, weapons ready. The second floor shows signs of life—clothes hanging to dry, a forgotten hairbrush, the scent of perfume mixed with disinfectant.

“Contact,” I whisper, as a door opens at the end of the hall. A man emerges, rubbing his eyes. He spots us immediately, reaching too late for a weapon. Lyssa’s silenced pistol fires once, and he drops.

“Engage!” she hisses.

Because more doors are opening along the corridor—shouts sounding as guards respond too late to what they see—and the air fills with the muffled sound of silenced weapons. I move with practiced efficiency, no hesitation in my movements, no doubt, no fear. This is what I was trained for.

But it’s different now. I’m not Grandmother’s creation anymore. I’m not killing because I was ordered to or because I need an outlet for my rage. I’m here by choice, protecting the innocent, fighting alongside people I’ve chosen to trust.

Fighting alongside Sunny, who moves right beside me. We’ve trained enough that I can anticipate her movements, covering her blind spots as she covers mine.

“Three more coming from the west corridor,” Zach warns.

“We’ve got them,” Sunny responds, and we break off from the group. There are three guards at the other end of the hallway, just as Zach said, and they haven’t seen us yet. We make quick work of them and then regroup with Lyssa and Zach, who have

secured the rest of the section.

“Beta team reports perimeter secure,” Lyssa informs us. “Alpha has joined them to handle extraction preparations.”

“The women?” Sunny asks, urgency in her voice.

“Heat signatures suggest they’re behind that door,” Zach says, indicating a set of double doors at the end of the hall.

The door has a heavy-duty electronic lock with a keypad—more security than the others we’ve encountered. Zach works on bypassing it while the rest of us take up defensive positions. “Got it,” Zach announces as the lock disengages.

We stack up on either side of the door—Lyssa and Zach on one side, Sunny and me on the other, while Elijah watches our six.

Lyssa gives the signal, and we breach.

The room beyond is large and open—once a ballroom or entertainment area, now converted into a communal living space. Mattresses line the walls. Tables and chairs cluster in the center. In the dim light, I make out figures moving toward the far side of the room.

Women—nine or ten of them—huddle together, fear evident in their posture. They’re dressed in a strange mix of lingerie and casual clothing, some clutching blankets or small personal items. They’re moving in an organized evacuation toward a door at the far end of the room, guided by one woman in particular.

“We’re here to help,” Lyssa announces, dropping her gun down in a clear indication that she won’t fire. “We’re getting you out of here.”

But the women hesitate, wary of any promises. The woman by the door continues ushering them through—it looks like she’s shepherding them into a panic room. When she turns to face us, placing herself between us and the others who are uncertain where to go—with her or us—it’s a clear protective gesture. She has a hardened look about her. Her dark hair is pulled back, her face thin but strong. And there’s something in her stance, in the determined look on her face, that feels familiar.

“That’s far enough,” she calls, her voice steady. “Who are you people?”

I lower my weapon slightly, too, so that she doesn’t feel threatened. “We’re here to help,” I echo. “We’re going to get you to safety.”

The woman studies us skeptically, takes a breath to answer, but before she can, Sunny is moving forward with her gun dropped to her side, her eyes wide and shocked.

One name escapes her in a whisper. “Mari?”

## CHAPTER 23

Sunny

The name catches in my throat as I stare at the woman standing protectively in front of the other captives.

Am I going crazy? Am I losing control again, seeing what I want to see instead of...

The woman stares back, focus sharpening as she really looks at me. Recognition dawns on her face—the slight parting of her lips, the widening of her eyes.

“Sunny?”

Time freezes. The mission, the room, everything falls away as we stare at each other across a chasm of years and trauma and impossible odds.

“It’s me,” I say, my voice breaking. “Yeah. It’s me, Sunny.”

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“But they—” She breaks off, but she takes a half-step forward, hope warring with disbelief on her face. “They told me you were dead.”

“I heard the same about you,” I manage, followed by a laugh that’s more of a sob.

She moves then, crossing the space between us in quick, uncertain steps. I meet her halfway, and when our bodies collide in a desperate embrace, I know it—she’s real. Solid. Alive. The feel of her arms around me—thinner than I remember but strong—breaks something open inside me.

“I looked for you,” I choke out against her shoulder. “For years.”

“I never stopped thinking about you,” she replies, her voice thick with emotion.

I pull back just enough to see her face, drinking in details I never thought I’d see again—older, harder, scarred in ways both visible and invisible, but undeniably my big sister.

“I need to get these women to safety,” she says urgently, though her hands still clutch my arms as if afraid I’ll disappear. “They’re my responsibility.”

That’s when I remember where we are, what we’re doing. The mission. I turn to Lyssa, who’s been standing back with the rest of the team, giving us space while maintaining security.

“This is my sister,” I tell her, the words still feeling surreal on my tongue. “Mari, this is?—”

The sudden burst of gunfire cuts me off. From the corridor outside comes the sound of shouting and heavy footsteps—more guards, more resistance.

“Contact!” Lyssa barks into her comm, and runs right back into the hallway, followed by Elijah and Zach.

Ariadne moves immediately after them to the door, weapon raised. “Multiple hostiles,” she reports tersely. “Heavily armed.”

The moment of reunion shatters, reality crashing back with brutal force. We’re still in the middle of a trafficking den, surrounded by enemies. Mari steps back, her expression hardening into something familiar yet strange—the look of someone who’s survived hell and will do whatever it takes to keep surviving. “All of you,” she says urgently to the other women, “get in the safe room.”

They continue to stream into it, but I push her to go with them. “You get in there, too,” I tell her, already shifting back into mission mode. “We’re getting you all out of here, but I have to help secure our exit first.”

Mari stares at me, seeing something in my face that makes her pause. “But Sunny?—”

“Please, trust me, and get in the safe room. Close it up behind you. We’ll let you know when it’s clear. But in case they past us—” I press my backup handgun into her palm.

She doesn’t even look down at it, clearly torn between following me and protecting the women in her care.

“I promise,” I tell her. “I’m coming back for you. I won’t lose you again. But you need to get in that safe room and let us do what we do best.”

Something in my voice must convince her, because she nods once, sharply. “Be careful. They won’t hesitate to kill.”

“Neither will I.” My voice is hard, but Mari seems almost relieved. She backs toward the safe room, our eyes locked until the last possible moment before she slips in. The heavy door closes with a definitivethunk, and I turn to face the battle that stands between me and keeping my promise.

I join Ariadne at the doorway. “The women are secure,” I tell her, pushing down all the emotions threatening to overwhelm me. “I’ve got left flank.”

Ariadne gives me a quick nod, and I feel a surge of gratitude for her calm efficiency. But we’re out of time. Lyssa and the others have already taken out a number of the Mancinis swarming toward the doors, but the heavy fire has forced them into a side room. I watch Ariadne execute the closest guy to us before he can even raise his weapon. The second manages to fire a burst that splinters the doorframe near her head, but she doesn’t flinch, returning fire with mechanical precision.

“Converging on your position,” Scarlett’s voice comes through our comms. “Ten seconds out.”

“Copy that,” Ariadne replies. “Lyssa and friends pinned down in a room, center of the corridor.”

And now the remaining enemies press their advantage, laying down suppressive fire that forces us back from the doorway. We pull back into the room to find cover, and then work in seamless coordination as the Mancinis push into the room, creating crossfire that leaves the remaining hostiles with nowhere to hide. When Scarlett’s team arrive seconds later, they quickly get rid of the rest.

As our backup secures the prisoner and confirms the area is clear, Ariadne turns to



me. Her eyes scan over me quickly, assessing.

“You okay?” she asks quietly.

“Never better,” I reply, and it’s true. Despite the battle, I feel lighter than I have in years—like a burden I’ve carried for years has suddenly lifted.

Because it has.

I move immediately toward the safe room door, holstering my weapon. “Mari?” I call. “It’s Sunny. It’s clear now.”

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There's a moment of silence, then the sound of heavy bolts zipping back. The door opens slowly, and Mari steps out, still tense and wary until she confirms the threat is gone.

"We need to move quickly," Ariadne says, all business. "The Mancinis will send more backup, and they could arrive any minute."

Mari nods, turning back to the women behind her. "It's okay," she tells them. "These people are here to help us. We're getting out."

There's disbelief on many of their faces—hope is dangerous when you've been captive so long. But they follow Mari's lead, filing out of the safe room.

"Extraction route secure," Hadria reports over the comms. "Medical team on alert at Elysium."

"Copy that," Lyssa responds. "We have ten civilians. Beginning evacuation now."

The journey through the mansion and back to our convoy is blessedly uneventful. But I stay close to Mari the entire time, afraid that if I look away, she might vanish like a mirage. And in the transport vehicle heading back toward Elysium, Mari and I sit side by side, shoulders touching. Ariadne sits across from us, but I keep glancing at Mari, still making sure she's real, that she's here beside me after all this time.

"I still can't believe it," Mari says softly, echoing my thoughts. "After I tried to escape the third time, they told me you'd been killed—punishment for my disobedience. That's when I... Well, I gave up."

I squeeze her hand tight. “I never stopped looking for you,” I reply, my throat tight. “But just recently, the information we found...it suggested you were dead. But I couldn’t give up, not when I knew there were others...” I trail off.

Mari squeezes my hand back. “How did you find us?”

“The Styx Syndicate found you. I joined them because I was looking for you.”

Mari looks at me and then across at Ariadne curiously. “The Styx Syndicate...that’s your organization? I thought maybe you were law enforcement.”

“Oh, no,” Ariadne answers with a grim smile. “We aren’t law enforcement. Though I suppose you could say we like to enforce a law of our own in and around Chicago.”

Mari studies her with the discerning gaze I remember from childhood, then turns back to me, asking me a wordless question. I guess she must have seen the way Ariadne and I look at each other. I give Mari a little nod, and she actually smiles. “I’m glad,” she murmurs.

“Ariadne helped train me,” I tell her, because I can’t tell her everything else that Ariadne means to me right now, not in the back of this vehicle with all these other people listening.

Mari nods slowly, processing this. Then, to my surprise, she reaches across and touches Ariadne’s knee briefly. “Thank you.”

I see the surprise flash across Ariadne’s face, though she hides it quickly. We ride the rest of the way in silence, and I lay my head on Mari’s shoulder as I watch Ariadne across from us. She gives me a tiny smile, and I give one back.

We get back to Elysium and get all of the women into what Scarlett says is trauma-

informed medical care. Mari insists on overseeing all of it before she'll submit to any checkups of her own, and I stay with her. Ariadne stays close, too, and I'm grateful for her presence, though she makes sure to give us some room.

And after we've settled all the other women, and wait for Mari herself to be seen, we talk some more. "What happened to you?" I ask the question that's been burning inside me. "The Syndicate had intelligence saying you were...that you died soon after being taken."

Mari's face darkens, her gaze dropping to her hands. "Some of us fought back at first. But they killed the most vulnerable among us when we did—to punish us, break our spirit. It didn't take long to realize that if I didn't behave, they would make others suffer for it. And I just couldn't stand to think that I was causing that suffering."

My hand tightens around hers. I haven't let go of her since we got into the car, and now my rage simmering just beneath my skin. I want to hurt everyone who touched my sister, everyone who tried to erase her.

"But after a while," Mari continues, "they realized I was more valuable alive than dead. I was good with the new girls—could calm them down, get them to cooperate without as much violence or drugs. So I...became a handler of sorts. I..." She trails off, and disgust crosses her face.

"You protected them," Ariadne tells her, understanding in her voice.

Mari looks up at her. "I guess. As much as I could. I couldn't save them, but I could...make it less terrible than what happened to me."

"You survived," I say fiercely. "That's what matters."

“Not just survived,” Ariadne adds unexpectedly. “You found a way to help others even in the worst circumstances. That takes extraordinary strength.”

Mari looks at Ariadne with surprise. “Maybe,” is all she says, and then she glances at me. “What about you?” she asks me. “After I was gone?”

I hesitate, wondering how to condense those years of grief, searching, and hardship into words my sister can handle right now.

“I was angry for a long time,” I say finally. “I wanted to kill our father for what he’d done.”

“Did you?” Mari asks, her tone neutral.

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“I didn’t have to. The cartel did it for me just six months after he sold you to them.”

Mari absorbs this without visible reaction, then simply nods. “Good.”

“After that, I left home. I was on my own,” I continue. “I did whatever it took to survive on the streets while I looked for you. Eventually, I found my way to the Syndicate.”

“And to Ariadne,” Mari adds, glancing between us.

“That was...more complicated,” I say with a small smile toward the woman who’s become my anchor.

Mari looks at Ariadne again. “You don’t strike me as someone who makes connections easily,” she says.

“I don’t,” Ariadne replies with unexpected honesty. “Because I was trained for years to be a weapon, not a person.”

Mari’s eyebrows raise slightly and she drops her voice, looking around warily. “By the Syndicate?”

“No. By a woman we called Grandmother. The Syndicate helped me escape her influence. I was sold to her, abused, trained until I had no thoughts of my own anymore. But now I am free,” Ariadne says simply. “And your sister has been a large part of that.”

“Can I ask...” Mari hesitates, then continues. “Did you manage to forget?”

I stay quiet, curious about Ariadne’s answer. This is something I’ve wondered about too, but never asked.

“No,” Ariadne says carefully. “I can’t forget. I want to, and I even pretended I had for a while—but that just made things worse. I know now that I’ll always carry what happened, but eventually, it will become just one part of my story, not the whole thing.”

“What helped you the most?” Mari asks quietly.

I watch Ariadne consider this, her face softening slightly as she thinks.

“Time. Learning to trust my own judgment again.” Her eyes meet mine as she adds, “And having people around me who see who I really am beneath the trauma.”

My heart swells at her words.

“It won’t necessarily be the same for you,” Ariadne continues, and I’ve never heard her sound so gentle as she comes forward to crouch down in front of Mari. “Everyone’s path is different. But there is a path.”

Mari contemplates this, then nods slowly. “I don’t know who I am without the fear anymore. It’s been so long.”

“You’ll figure it out,” I tell her with absolute conviction. “And we’ll be there, whatever you need.”

“We will,” Ariadne confirms simply. “All of us.”

The doctor finally comes to check Mari, who is by now visibly exhausted. But as she's led away to a private room for her evaluation, she looks back at me with a flash of panic.

"I'll be right here," I promise. "I'm not going anywhere."

Once Mari is out of earshot, I turn to Ariadne, the walls I've maintained during the mission finally crumbling. Without a word, she pulls me into an embrace, and I let the tears come, my body shaking with relief and disbelief.

"She's alive," I whisper against her shoulder. "All this time, she was alive."

"And you found her," she says simply, holding me tighter. "I'm so happy for you, Sunny."

I pull back just enough to look at her. "We found her. I couldn't have done this without you—or the Syndicate."

Before Ariadne can respond, Hadria approaches, her expression as close to relaxed as it ever gets. "Well done, both of you. The operation was a complete success. All women accounted for, minimal casualties, and we've captured three Mancini lieutenants for interrogation."

"What will happen to the women we pulled out of there?" I ask anxiously.

"That's up to them," she says. "They will be able to make their own choices—and the de Luca network will be able to get them wherever they want to go, and support them when they get there."

"But Mari..." I say. "She—I can't let her—" I break off, anxiety flooding me.



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Hadria puts a hand on my arm. “Like I told you, Sunny, you have a home here with us—and that extends to your sister, too.”

The word ‘us’ sends warmth through me despite my exhaustion. “Thank you,” I say, because I can’t find the words that might get anywhere near expressing my relief.

“You were part of this victory,” Hadria says. “And I’m the one who should be thanking you.” She actually gives a tiny smile before leaving us alone again. As we wait for Mari, I find myself filled with hope. Real, substantial hope, not the desperate kind that kept me searching when logic said to give up. Hope for Mari’s healing, for my future with Ariadne, for the possibility that broken things can be mended, that lost things can be found.

Ariadne is quiet beside me, lost in thought. I catch her looking at me with an expression I’m still learning to read.

“Just thinking,” she says when I raise a questioning eyebrow.

“About?”

She pauses, and I see her considering, then choosing honesty. “About how far we’ve both come. And how far we still have to go.”

I take her hand, fingers intertwining with hers in a gesture that still feels new and precious. “Like you said, we’ll figure it out together.”

A new path for both of us. Forallof us.

## CHAPTER 24

Sunny

### SIX MONTHS LATER

The war room of Elysium looks different tonight. The overhead lights have been dimmed, and the space is lit instead by the glow of string lights someone (Aurora, probably) draped liberally along the walls. The massive table where life-or-death decisions are usually made is now covered with platters of food and bottles of champagne. Music plays from hidden speakers—something with a good beat, not too intrusive. It's still the war room, but tonight it feels almost...normal. Like a place where people celebrate instead of plan assassinations.

And tonight we're celebrating our initiation into the Styx Syndicate.

"Never thought I'd see Hadria approve party decorations in here," I say, accepting the glass of champagne Ariadne hands me.

"She didn't," Ariadne replies with that slight quirk of her lips that I've come to recognize as her smile. "Aurora did. Hadria just... didn't veto it."

I clink my glass against hers. "To us," I say. "Full members of the Styx Syndicate. Who would've thought?"

"Not me," she admits.

I watch her as she takes a sip, still marveling at the changes I see in her. She's still Ariadne—still carries herself with that deadly grace, still scans every room automatically for threats. But there's a softness to her now that wasn't there before. The ice hasn't melted away completely, but it lets glimpses of warmth shine through.

Across the room, I spot Mrs. Graves chatting with Scarlett and Lyssa. Ariadne's mom is wearing a pretty blue dress instead of her usual black, and she looks years younger when she laughs at something Lyssa says.

Ariadne follows my gaze, her expression softening. "Mom looks really nice tonight," she says. "She told me this morning she's never been happier."

The casual way she says "Mom" these days makes my heart expand. That transition wasn't easy—it took months of careful steps, therapy sessions, and tearful conversations. But seeing them together now, anyone would find it hard to believe they spent years apart.

"Congratulations, bitches!" Vanessa's voice breaks into my thoughts as she approaches, arms outstretched for a hug that I return enthusiastically. She turns to Ariadne next, who actually allows a brief embrace.

"Back at you," Ariadne says. "I hear you nailed your final assessment. Lyssa mentioned something about your headshot score."

Vanessa beams with pride. "Ninety-three percent. Not quite your level, but I'm working on it."

"You'll get there," Ariadne tells her, and I can tell she means it.

Enzo and Matty B join us, both holding plates piled high with food. Enzo looks good—he's grown up a lot since our early training days. Less swagger, more substance.

"The woman of the hour," Enzo says, raising his drink toward Ariadne. "Still can't believe that flip move you pulled during the final physical. I swear you were floating."

“Years of practice,” Ariadne replies.

“You’ll have to teach me some time,” he says.

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“Anytime you need to brush up on your skills, Rittoli,” Ariadne says, “I’d be happy to knock you on your ass again for old times’ sake.”

Everyone laughs, including Enzo, who clutches his heart dramatically. “Wounded! But fair.” Elijah and Zach wander over, completing the members of our recruit cohort who have been admitted to full membership. Some of the others quit partway through, and a few more have been told they need another six months before they try again. So it strikes me then, looking at all of us together, how far we’ve come, and in such a short time. From wary strangers to snippy rivals to a tight-knit team who’d die for each other.

“The gang’s all here,” Zach says, raising his glass. “To survival.”

“To survival,” we echo.

Ricky and Mario appear, the latter carrying a tray of shots.

“Special occasion calls for special drinks,” Mario announces, distributing the small glasses. “Lyssa’s private stock. Don’t tell her I took it.”

“Too late,” comes Lyssa’s dry voice as she materializes behind him. “But I’ll let it slide. Tonight’s worth celebrating.”

I take the shot—it burns pleasantly down my throat, warming me from the inside out.

“More reasons to celebrate, too,” Ricky says. “We got confirmation from Johnny the Gentleman today. The last Mancini safe house in Illinois has closed down. Their

entire state network is officially dismantled.”

A cheer goes up from our little group.

“And eighty-seven women freed,” Mario adds proudly.

I feel a swell of satisfaction at those numbers. Eighty-seven women who will get a chance at a new life, just like Mari. It won’t erase what happened to them, but they’ll have the opportunity to heal, to build something new.

“The de Luca network has already placed most of them,” Lyssa adds. “Jobs, housing, therapy—whatever they need.”

“And the Mancinis?” I ask.

“Running scared,” Lyssa says with obvious satisfaction. “They’re pulling back entirely, heading back to New York. Word on the street is they think we’ve got some kind of personal vendetta.”

“Imagine that,” Ariadne murmurs, her hand finding mine and squeezing gently.

Mrs. Graves joins our circle, carrying a plate of food. “Sarah, darling, you need to eat something,” she says, offering the plate to Ariadne. “You barely touched breakfast this morning.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Ariadne says, accepting the plate. “I was a little nervous about today.”

“You had nothing to be nervous about,” her mother says with obvious pride, patting Ariadne’s cheek in a gesture so maternal it makes my heart ache. “You were magnificent, as always.”

I watch them together, marveling at the transformation in their relationship. After that day in the garage with Katy, something broke open in Ariadne. The walls she'd built around herself began to crumble, and Mrs. Graves—with infinite patience and unconditional love—was there to welcome her daughter home. Now they have dinner together twice a week, and I've even seen them laughing together over old photos and shared memories.

And Mr. Fluffikins now rests on Ariadne's bed in her dorm room—though soon we'll be able to move into the mansion, and I guess he'll migrate with her. I hope we'll get rooms near each other. Maybe with an adjoining door...or maybe we should just give in and get a room together, based on how often we end up in each other's beds these days.

Ariadne catches me smirking and raises an eyebrow. I just grin and shake my head.

The party continues around us. At some point, Aurora joins us, bringing Hadria with her. The Boss is as intimidating as ever in her tailored black suit, but even she seems relaxed tonight, one arm draped casually around Aurora's waist.

"Santiago. Graves," Hadria acknowledges us with a nod. "Impressive work these past months."

"Thank you," we say almost in unison.

"I hear Mari is settling in well at Mrs. Graves's cottage," Aurora says to me.

I nod, warmth spreading through me at the mention of my sister. "She is. Mrs. G has been good for her—and I think Mari really loves it here at Elysium."

"And the therapy is helping?" Aurora asks.

“It seems to be. She told me Dr. Khatri says she’s making progress.” I smile, thinking of Mari’s determined face during our morning walks around the grounds. “She wants to join Johnny de Luca’s network eventually, help other women who’ve been trafficked. But for now, she’s focusing on her own healing.”

“And on reconnecting with you,” Ariadne adds softly.



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“That too,” I agree. “We have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Aurora says sincerely. “Everyone deserves a second chance at family.”

Hadria clears her throat. “Santiago, before I forget—Lyssa mentioned you had some thoughts about operations beyond Chicago.”

“Yes,” I say, standing a little straighter. Even as a full member, Hadria still intimidates me. “I’ve been researching trafficking networks in Detroit and Indianapolis. They’re not as established as the Mancinis were, but they’re growing. If we hit them now?—”

“Bring the data to the planning meeting on Tuesday,” Hadria says. “We’ll discuss it.”

“I will,” I promise, trying not to sound too eager.

“And Graves,” Hadria continues, “Lyssa tells me you’ve shown interest in helping train the recruits.”

Ariadne nods. “I have. If you’ll approve it.”

I hold my breath, because this is something I know Ariadne really wants—but has been convinced would never happen, because of her past.

“Consider it approved.” Hadria’s tone is businesslike, but I detect a hint of approval.

“Your experience makes you uniquely qualified.”

“Th-thank you,” Ariadne says in surprise, and I know what this means to her—trust, purpose, recognition of her skills beyond killing. And a way to make up for some of the things she’s done.

Hadria is pulled away by Ricky to discuss something, but Aurora lingers.

“I have something for you both,” she says, reaching into her pocket and pulling out two small boxes. “These are something new we’re trying out, and I wanted to be the one to give them to each new member personally.”

She hands us each a small black box. Inside each is a simple silver pendant—the three-headed Cerberus that guards the entrance to the war room, the symbol of the Styx Syndicate.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, genuinely touched.

Ariadne stares at her pendant with an unreadable expression. When she finally looks up, her eyes are suspiciously bright. “Thank you,” she says simply.

Aurora just smiles and moves away, leaving us to our moment.

Ariadne slips her pendant around her neck, then helps me with mine. Her fingers are warm against the back of my neck, and I catch her hand before she can pull away.

“Want to get some air?” I ask.

She nods, and we slip away from the party, across to one of the rooms that has a balcony overlooking Aurora’s night garden. The flowers are in full bloom, their sweet scent drifting up to us on the cool evening breeze. The sky above is clear, stars scattered like diamonds against black velvet.

“Think they’ll miss us if we stay out here a while?” I ask, leaning against the railing.

“Let them miss us,” Ariadne says, coming to stand beside me. Our shoulders touch, a casual intimacy that still makes my heart flutter.

We stand in comfortable silence for a while, watching the garden below. Ariadne’s hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining automatically.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says at last.

“Dangerous,” I tease.

She rolls her eyes but continues. “About Ariadne. And the myth.”

“The one with the labyrinth and the string?” I remember looking it up when I first heard her name.

She nods. “Ariadne gave Theseus a thread so he could find his way out of the maze after killing the Minotaur.” She pauses, gathering her thoughts. “I used to think Grandmother named me that because she saw me as a guide for her other girls—the one who would lead them through the maze of her twisted training.”

I squeeze her hand, encouraging her to continue.

“But when I got to Elysium I felt more like Theseus—lost in the maze, fighting my own monsters.” Her voice softens. “And you were the one holding the thread at the other end, even when I didn’t want to see it.”

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My heart swells at her words. “You found your way out,” I say quietly.

“Because of you.” She turns to face me fully, her eyes serious in the moonlight. “You never gave up on me, even when I pushed you away. You kept holding the thread.”

I reach up to touch her face, tracing the line of her jaw with my fingertips. “And I always will.”

She takes a deep breath, looking suddenly vulnerable. “Sunny, I need to tell you something.”

“Anything,” I say, my pulse quickening.

Her eyes lock with mine, intense and searching. “I love you.”

I feel like the world has stopped spinning. I’ve been waiting to hear those words, hoping for them, but never pushing. Because I know what those words cost her—how many times Grandmother punished her for showing any emotion at all, how deeply she fears attachment. I’ve felt the same confession building in my own chest for months now, but I’ve held them back, afraid they would scare her away.

“I know I’ve taken too long to say it,” she continues, her voice low and earnest. “I’ve been afraid. Terrified, actually. After Grandmother...after everything, I didn’t think I was capable of this. Of feeling this much for someone. And then when I started to realize what was happening with you, I was even more scared.”

“Why?” I ask softly, though I think I know.

“Because loving someone makes you vulnerable. It gives them power over you.” Her hands tighten on mine. “And I spent so much of my life trying to ensure that no one ever had that kind of power over me again.”

I nod, understanding completely. “I know. That’s why I haven’t said it either, even though I’ve felt it for a long time. I didn’t want to push you before you were ready.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “You’ve been waiting for me?”

“Yeah,” I tell her with a smile. “I knew it had to be your choice. Your timeline.”

“And now?”

“And now I can finally tell you that I love you too. With everything I am.”

Something breaks open in her expression—wonder and hope and a vulnerability so raw it takes my breath away. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” she whispers.

“You don’t have to deserve love,” I tell her, repeating something Dr. Khatri has told us both in our sessions. “It’s not earned. It just is.”

She lets out a shaky breath. “I love you,” she says again, like she’s trying the words out, finding that they fit. “I love you, Sunny Santiago.”

I laugh, joy bubbling up inside me like champagne. “I love you too, Sarah Graves, or Ariadne, or Theseus, or whoever you want to be—because whoever that is, I’ll love you still. I love you so much it scares me sometimes.”

“We can be scared together,” she says, and then she pulls me close, her mouth finding mine. Her lips are soft, her hands gentle as they frame my face. I pour everything I feel into the kiss—all the love I’ve been holding back, all the promises I want to

make.

When we finally break apart, both a little breathless, I rest my forehead against hers. “And you know what? We’ll pull that thread all the way out of the labyrinth and use it to bind us together. Forever.”

Ariadne’s eyes soften, and she kisses me again—deeper this time, with a hunger that makes my knees weak. Her arms wrap around my waist, holding me like she never wants to let go.

“Forever,” she echoes when we finally break apart. “I like the sound of that.”

We stay on the balcony a while longer, talking softly about everything and nothing. Plans for the future, memories of the past three months, silly jokes that make Ariadne’s rare laugh bubble up.

“We should probably go back inside,” I say eventually. “It is supposed to be our party, after all.”

“I suppose,” she sighs dramatically, making me grin.

“Hey,” I say, struck by a thought. “What are you doing tomorrow morning?”

“Nothing special. Why?”

“I was thinking maybe we could sleep in, then I could make breakfast.”

Ariadne raises an eyebrow. “Or I could make waffles,” she suggests with unexpected enthusiasm.

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I bite back a smile. Ever since I taught her how to use the waffle iron at the breakfast buffet a few weeks ago, she's been obsessed. Every Sunday morning, without fail: waffles with different toppings, each attempt more elaborate than the last. It's her way of reclaiming something from her past, I think—the girl who loved pink and sparkles and sweetness, before Grandmother tried to crush those parts of her.

“Deal,” I agree, squeezing her hand. “Waffles it is.”

She smiles—a real, full smile that still takes my breath away when I see it—and pulls me back toward the party. As we rejoin our friends, our new family, I'm struck by how far we've all come.

We still have our demons. We all still wake up from nightmares sometimes, still carry the weight of our pasts. But we're not alone anymore. We have each other. We have family—the one we've chosen, the one we've found, the one we're building together day by day.

And that, I think as I look around at my brothers and sisters in the Styx Syndicate, is the most powerful thing of all.

Later that night, after the celebration winds down, Ariadne walks me back to my dorm room. But the room suddenly feels too small for us, too temporary for what we've become.

“You know,” I say as we linger outside my door, “full members get rooms in the mansion.” Of course she knows. But I'm feeling weirdly shy all of a sudden.

Ariadne nods. “Lyssa mentioned we’d be relocating next week.”

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. “What would you think about us sharing a space? Together?”

Her eyebrows raise slightly, and for a moment I worry I’ve pushed too far, too fast. But then I see it—that soft warmth in her eyes that she reserves only for me.

“You want to live together?” she asks, her voice careful but hopeful.

“I do,” I tell her, taking her hands in mine. “I love falling asleep next to you, and I love waking up with you even more. And honestly, I’m tired of sneaking between our rooms or trying to be quiet when your neighbors are around.”

Ariadne laughs softly. “You are terrible at being quiet.”

“That’s your fault,” I counter, grinning.

She studies me for a long moment, then nods. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Let’s do it,” she says, more firmly this time. “Let’s share quarters.”

My heart soars. Another step forward, another piece of our life together falling into place. “Really?”

Instead of answering, she leans in and kisses me—slow and deep and full of promise. When we finally break apart, she rests her forehead against mine.

“I love you,” she whispers. “And I want to build a home with you.”



“Even though I’ll mess up your perfect organization system?”

“Even though,” she agrees with a smile.

I look up at her—this incredible woman who’s fought through so much darkness to find her way to me. Our story isn’t perfect. We both carry scars that will never fully heal. But we’ve found something rare and precious in each other—a love that strengthens and heals.

“This is our beginning,” I tell her, feeling the promise of our future stretching before us. “We have so much more of our story to write.”

“Together,” she says, and in that single word is everything I’ve ever wanted—commitment, partnership, love.

“Together,” I echo, rising on my tiptoes to seal the promise with a kiss. From lost girls to found family. From broken weapons to whole women. From rivals to something real, something neither of us thought we’d ever have.

And whatever comes next—danger, adventure, missions in far-off cities—we’ll face it side by side, bound by a thread that neither time nor distance can break.